

Mutual Aid and the Limits of Community in DIY Music Organizing



David Farrow

“I am free because I have ties, because I am linked to a reality greater than me.” -Anonymous

“Ask a freak”

“Ask a punk”

“Ask a weirdo”

Ask around and someone will get back to you with the address. It may be troubling to realize you need someone else to tell you. Scroll through concert flyers for do-it-yourself venues on Instagram or Facebook and the need to ask someone becomes apparent. With DIY venues lacking public addresses, the immediacy of Google Maps fails you. A venue’s name sans address might elicit anxiety.

“Do I know any punks?”

“Do I belong here?”

“Why am I being kept out?”

Momentarily, tumbling off the map, wondering,

“Would I rather be found than lost?”

In New York City, most find it more comfortable to pull up a map than ask for directions. But, in New York’s do-it-yourself music scene, artists and curators refuse to put DIY venues’ addresses on a map. As defined by former Silent Barn collective member and writer Liz Pelly, a DIY venue is “a self-organized venue run by artists, on a formal or informal collective basis, to house non-commercial music, art, and community organizing projects.” DIY venues exist outside of the formal club and bar scene, often lacking liquor

licenses, building code compliances, and approval by city agencies. The absence of public addresses insulates venues from police and health and safety monitoring. At the same time, the necessity of asking someone for the address serves as a screening process. Organizers filter potential artists and attendees to create “autonomous and safe(r) spaces” while simultaneously making “assessments about who to program at their shows and accept into their spaces.”

Why leave a venue’s address off of a map? As Philosopher Steven Shaviro notes, “maps are not static representations, but tools for negotiating, and intervening in, social space.”¹ Asking a punk, freak, or weirdo requires a momentary intimacy. Whether through a direct message to an artist on Instagram or a question posed to the eccentric dresser at the bar, asking for the address acknowledges, as Judith Butler puts it, that “we are moved by something that affects us from the outside, from elsewhere, from the lives of others.” The moment demands intimacy in the exploration of someone else’s depth.

Asking for an address and receiving it places you within a new map. Whereas the grid lines of roads and subway routes populate Google Maps, the addresses of DIY venues are interconnected lines tracing, to quote Anna Tsing, “the always-moving trajectories of lively activities” of punks, freaks, and weirdos. More than stumbled steps, these trajectories outline circulations of material resources and emotional support within political and moral economies imagined as distinct from commercial nightlife and its

entanglements with urban capitalism. As musician and visual artist Zoe Burke puts it, “The alternative to DIY is bleak ad-driven platform capitalism and overpriced, culturally barren bars that rob you and your friends while appropriating your energy.” Burke signals the economic and cultural dimensions of DIY spaces as productive of an invigorating sociality absent within commercial performance spaces.

In 2022, DIY venues are scarcer and scarcer. At the same time, there is a voracious desire for performance space, particularly performance space that is enlivened by social life and artistic community untouched by commercialization. This zine seeks to ask three questions:

- How do music venues shape the social and artistic experience with them?
- What type of politics is embedded within nightlife?
- How do our intimate relations within nightlife reflect our political commitments?

Before reading ahead, reflect either alone or with friends on these questions. Think back to a particularly invigorating night out and try to trace the community building efforts that animated your experienced.

Consider what relationships you have with venues and artists. What would it mean to stop thinking of nightlife as a commodity to be consumed—an experience to pay for—and begin thinking of it as place to build coalitions and solidarities? How can we both dance together and change the world together?

Intimacy as Mutual Aid in DIY

Partial Definitions

- Intimacy is a closeness generating an awareness of needs and distributing material support in the form of ticket revenue, drink sales, volunteer labor, drugs, friendship, and aesthetic inspiration.
- Mutual aid is circulation of resources as structured by how people within particular spaces relate to one another. Mutual aid is the response to the failure of City government to care for citizens.

Through DIY musical community, we organize emotional and material support to keep one another live within a crumbling world. To develop this point, I examine volunteer labor and the communal circulation of resources within the DIY venue The Glove. Willingness to volunteer to clean, to work the door, or to do handiwork at the Glove circulated value as expressions of what Tsing calls “the social relationships and reputations of which they are part.” When interviewing Lily, an artist and organizer at the Glove, we discuss how the venue was a product of people volunteering to help with various tasks:

DF: Even in that example, how would you find someone who would do the electricity for free?

LC: They show up—they’re at a show and that’s it!

DF: They’re at the show and just—

LC: They just say, “Do you need help? I can do these kinds of things.” People will offer. People want to be involved in things. And, I think that’s pretty political in itself. People will absolutely offer free labor for things that they care about, or things that they want to be involved with. People want community, that’s the thing.

Community, felt through a sense of belonging and intimacy, reorganizes the social character of labor. The labor necessary to build community becomes known through intimate encounters, enacting a form of mutual aid. As value existing in circulation with others, the social character of labor requires communal reciprocity in order to reproduce itself.¹ When asked about the lessons learned from venue, Lily is quick to identify this reciprocal labor as sustaining any DIY space:

Everyone was like, how do I do this? Let's talk! I'll tell you how we did it. It's *really* not that hard—that's the one thing I want to say over and over again: it is so fucking easy. All you need is to have a space—and it can be the smallest space—and then just do something, perform something, tell three friends that you want them to perform, they'll be thrilled to be asked to perform, other people will be thrilled that there's a show at all, and people will come. And then you do it again, and then you do it again, and then you do it again, and then you get people going, "How can I help? How can I help? How can I help?"

Asking others to perform, help build the space, promote the shows, and attend the performances creates social entanglements of value and expectations of reciprocity. These activities, which in other spaces are treated as economic practices, exist in DIY spaces as social obligations constitutive of intimate community. The sum total of these activities is the horizon of mutual aid.



Politics of Mutual Aid in DIY

A Partial Definition and a Question

- As structured by intimate relations, mutual aid's political foundations lie in an ethics of care. Within DIY music scenes, mutual aid is an alternative to the alienation and commodification of capitalist nightlife. Simultaneously, liberal capitalism structures communities as the locus of politics, cultivating ethical obligations of care as the state withdraws from caring for the population.
- How can artistic communities organize through mutual aid to confront the withdrawal of state support?

To fall in love is to take a risk, to tumble towards the other, locked in a fleeting embrace where the space between us dissolves, rising changed by the moment we shared. Resource circulation is itself an intimate act, potentially an act of love. As anthropologist Annette Weiner notes, “One’s self, one’s position, and one’s potential as a reproductive agent depend upon relations with ‘others,’ because the reproductive process depends upon the circulation of possessions from ‘others.’” The ten dollars in your pocket is an artist’s lunch; the beer from The Glove’s bar is the rent; the volunteer time is the condition for community and intimacy. Small expenditures of time and money serve as mutual aid through encountering the other’s needs.

But situating mutual aid within intimate community, circumscribing it to those who feel enlivened by a particular night out, may build, in Dean

Spade's words, "a new way of life only for the few who can access such projects disconnected from frontline struggles." When intimacy conditions community, defining modes of inclusion and exclusion, we are left asking Gilles Deleuze's incisive question, "How can a being take another being into its world, but while preserving or respecting the other's own relations and world?"

Is mutual aid within DIY spaces a means of connecting worlds? Intimacy and mutual aid exist in-tension, the former presupposing a closed social life and the latter imagining open-ended, unfolding relationships. On the noisy dance-floor, am I unable or unwilling to dance with a stranger? As the noise cascades past a DIY venue's soundproofing, does it invite the other in or compel them to stay away?

Within punk music, noise is both political metaphor and artistic impulse, constituting community and aesthetics through disorientation. Philosopher Robin James theorizes this disorientation as "epistemic noise" in which "one's 'concept' of something 'may not be reconciled' with 'the lived' phenomenal experience of it" such that a distance exists between experience and understanding. Disorientation structures the initial social barriers to entry in the form of "asking a punk" for the address: one must disorient themselves from their concept of self through questioning whether they know any punks and whether they are a punk. To be punk is to disorient oneself from established patterns of socializing by not only relying on a

stranger to provide the address but trusting that the stranger will do no harm.

What are the political stakes of changing how we socialize?

I Want More Than Bliss on the Dance Floor

DIY community is filled with excessive desires and needs that fail to be recognized by the state or civil society. These excessive desires and needs find a home within the intimacy of DIY. Asking a punk disorients the self and its relationship to the assumed world the self-inhabits. When we demand more, we become entangled in overlapping social, emotional, and material networks of support. We claim something beyond what has been provided by the commercial nightlife economy and City governance: the need to rely on others who, despite being strangers to oneself, are necessary for self-fulfillment and flourishing. At a certain point, everyone in The Glove had to ask a punk, acknowledging that their needs expanded beyond what the public sphere offers.

DIY is oppositional to the status quo through enacting mutual aid. Attention to needs and distributions of resources take places within the social domain of DIY as opposed to the political domain of the public sphere. As such, the reworking of social relations facilitates mutual aid. Mutual aid is the language we give to social systems that fill for the absence of politics.

I do not mean to naively celebrate DIY venues. At the end of the day, DIY venues inherently restrict the community that could benefit from its mutual aid. This restriction follows from the linkage of an intimate

sociality with access to community. When I ask Lily about the term DIY, she offered a defense:

“Do It Yourself” is a bit more aggressive and I think people should be thinking that way. After doing it myself for so long, then it’s just like, “Now it’s your turn, buddy.” And it’s also like someone can say like, “Artist run spaces are over.” But, you can’t really say DIY is over. As long as you can do stuff, you *can* still do stuff.

Lily’s sense that DIY never ends as participants always have a latent capacity to do-it-themselves suggest DIY’s potential for the continued multiplication of mutual aid. At the same time, we must always ask who is the beneficiary of mutual aid? Which groups benefit from the circulation of resources and emotional support?

Against The Club

To be less philosophical for a moment, my concern with the current state of nightlife is that we are abandoning our political commitments through blindly accepting the dominance of commercial club culture. DIY is not perfect, but it represents an oppositional politics founded in egalitarian commitments. I do not want a nightlife scene filled with prohibitively expensive tickets, artists more invested in clout than community building, clubs more concerned with sponsorships than giving opportunities to budding artists. I am tired of chasing cool; I am bored of hedonism; I am disappointed by how those with money have decided to spend it. It is not enough to write a safe space policy, to donate some of the proceeds to charity, or to declare that we find utopia on the dancefloor. These are passive responses to a white supremacist culture, to the capitalist economy, and to

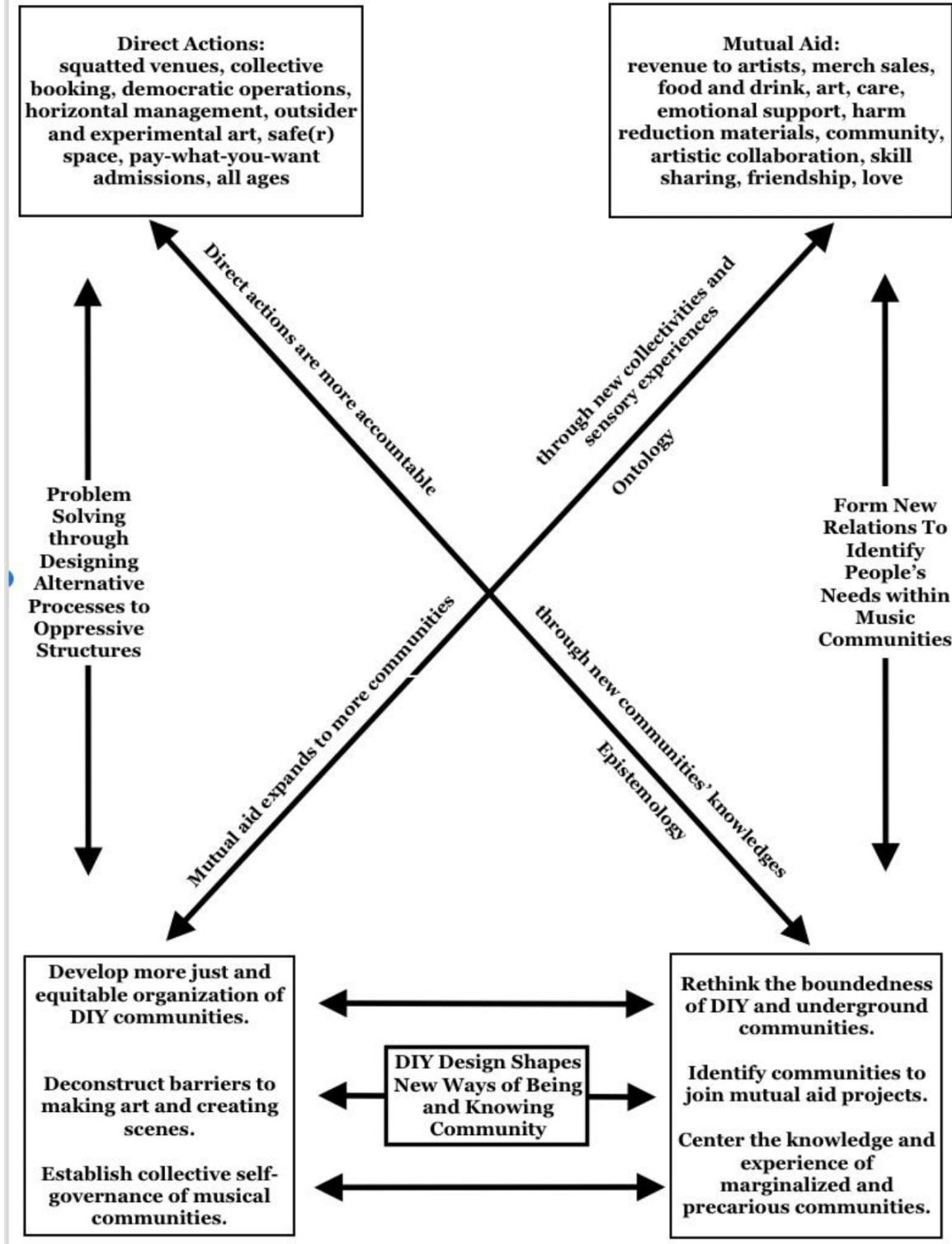
the state that wants to see black and brown people dead. Fighting for the right to party has outlived its usefulness. We must now fight for the right to exist by dismantling the state, prisons, police, and the capitalist economy.

A felt sense of aesthetic freedom orients participants towards a faith in political freedom found in artistic community. This orientation structures intimate community as supportive and enabling while heading little consideration of the types of difference that are excluded from said community. Within alternative communities like DIY or punk more generally, we confront the problem of autonomy: is it enough to pursue autonomy from oppressive structures like capitalism and white supremacy—to open enclaves and maroons—(is this even possible?) or must we confront and change the structures eroding others' worlds?

Love's indeterminacy, being simultaneously of one and many, teases the question apart. Mutual aid exists in the same indeterminacy, leveraging the individualized act of care for an expansive social imagination. But enfolded in love are conflicts, tensions, and violence. So, these questions are less teased apart than teasing us. In that moment where desire is suspended in jest and longing, teasing pulls us back to the intimate, to being the plaything of someone else, to wanting to be your dog. And like the other freaks, weirdos, and punks, maybe I like the collar as much as the treat.

Where will your pleasure take you? Who will you care about when the night comes to an end?

Direct Action and Mutual Aid in DIY Music: How to Change Social Relations through Culture



Contact: certainlives@gmail.com

@certain_lives