



Emily Eddy

## ***This Must Be the Space: A Video Conversation on Artist-Run and Artist-Inhabited Spaces***

In 2008, my hometown, Portland, Oregon, was on the precipice of becoming Portlandia – about to fall off a steep cliff and tumble into high rise condos, tech bros with new money, double-wide strollers, rampant gentrification and rent hikes. I wasn't aware of any of this, or my complicity towards this change. I was 17, and probably at a house show, escaping my suburban childhood to taste the delicacies of urban adulthood.

2008 was a good year for me. A fine vintage. Economic crash who? I was riding high in my forest green Subaru Outback, diving into piles of wolf t-shirts at thrift stores, foraging for feathers to problematically weave into my hair, listening to Animal Collective's *Strawberry Jam* on vinyl, completely unaware that I was the hipster trash everyone was talking about. I had more unabashed fun than I've ever had in my life in 2008. In 2008, my friends in college could still get a room in a beautiful house near Laurelhurst Park with 5 friends for \$300 a month. You could live off of coffee, vegan burritos and Franzia—American Spirit Blues were \$4.75. Weed wasn't legal yet, so it didn't



*Bad Grrrls*, Glenn Belverio, 1993

feel capitalist to be a stoner. I often think about this period of my teens with a nostalgic lens, in the way people talk about the 1960s—but, before you vomit—I don't mean it like *that*. I mean it in the way it's so easy to remember all the good parts. It's so easy to remember how cheap everything was and how free you felt; to forget the rape, the racism, the homophobia, the teenagers on heroin, the way I truly felt like an object for some guy in a band to declare valuable or not. I remember the glitter and the queer dance parties and running around a city with my friends. I forget the noise musicians with mullets in cut-off short shorts and highlighter green tank tops guzzling PBR and talking about fucking underage girls. It's so important to remember them.

Regardless of these problems, I fell in love, and hard, with DIY spaces in 2008 Portland. Going to music shows sometimes four nights a week, I realized you could cultivate culture, experiences, community, if

you just had access to a room for bodies to fill. Little did I know my future would include serving as the director of a Chicago microcinema founded in 2008. Christy LeMaster founded Nightingale Cinema the same year that I received my Portland DIY education, a space in which I would occupy, curate, make friends, and watch endless movies that would change my life from 2013-2022.

Here in 2022, I've just had to say goodbye to the Nightingale in its carnate form. We closed our doors with our last screenings in late April, and we began the emotionally and physically exhausting task of moving out of the space that we occupied for fourteen years. It was like an archeological dig—just when I thought I had found everything I would find another sedimentary layer: letters, tickets, films, each artifact with a memory attached, both good and bad. From outside the space, I can see the Nightingale as part of the lineage of artist-run spaces; our family

tree including both Anthology Film Archives and the house show venue I can't remember the name of in 2008 Portland alike. Through this program, I hope to bring light to this lineage, and discuss artist-run spaces, putting my rose-colored glasses on and off again as I write, working towards what artist-run futurity might look like, or if it's possible at this point in history.

The Nightingale in many ways was the fusion of my two great loves: community and video art. I fell in love with video art in college, mostly when my professor and friend, Eric Fleischauer, showed me a bootleg DVD of Steve Reinke's *The Hundred Videos*. Although Steve's work does not appear in the program for which this essay accompanies, it is important to mention as it has ingrained itself into my art subconscious, his monotone voice-over marking a pathway in my young, sponge-like brain. Steve's work didn't only make me want to experience video art, it made me want to *think* about video art, it taught me to read theory and be critical of my art-world surroundings, and to never, ever, take myself too seriously.

I'm a very social person, and always have been. I love a chat. I was always the kid who got in trouble for talking to her friends during class in grade school. Nothing makes me happier than everyone I love being in a room together, and that is how I always wanted the Nightingale to feel, like a space of support and excitement—a good time. I often find myself confused in cinema spaces that feel unfriendly. Why, especially when showing work that is difficult to enter intellectually, would you make it difficult and daunting to physically enter the cinema? I firmly believe in creating a cinematic environment where people who have never

seen an experimental film can feel comfortable, where their experience of the work is valid, whatever it might be. Anyone can have a reaction to an experimental film in the same way that anyone can have a reaction to a painting. To me, curation is 20% research and 80% event planning.

My desire to create comfortable, inviting art spaces is probably due to my own insecurities existing in art world environments. The Nightingale provided me a space where I felt invited in exactly as I was. When I started volunteering at the Nightingale, I had just graduated from art school, and I was having trouble navigating how to work and socialize in art spaces without the comfort and support of being a student. I felt not smart enough, not old enough, not hot enough, too loud, too annoying. Christy LeMaster, and the rest of the Nightingale community, made me feel embraced where other spaces made me feel ostracized.

I love George Kuchar's video *Vermin of the Vortex* because it speaks to this idea of feeling ostracized and embraced,

sometimes simultaneously. In this video, Kuchar travels to two different cinema spaces home to two different communities, and two different reactions to his work. The first space we see is Chicago Underground Film Festival. We see conversations with Kuchar and Sarah Jacobsen, director of *Mary Jane's Not A Virgin Anymore*, a cameo by Chicago's own Jennifer Reeder, and many more friendly passings-by. This environment feels charged with excitement, old friends excited to see each other again, viewers ready to find new and important cinematic connections. Kuchar then travels to present his work at the well-known and well-loved Flaherty Film Seminar, which in the video is shown as a much more critical environment. During Q&A, Kuchar says the following:

"People come to see a movie because they want to see your view, and if I'm going to be dictated to by a group, then let the group pay me, I'll be, you know, promotional. I'm not going to do that. I didn't buy a camera to follow all these rules. If I had to follow all



*Vermin of the Vortex*, George Kuchar, 1996



*Me's and Youse, Videofreex, 1971*

these rules, I wouldn't be making pictures."

With this statement, Kuchar is defending himself to be able to make films in his own style, without rules imposed by a cinematic community. We don't hear exactly what the audience has said to him to elicit this response, but we can assume that the audience is calling his subject matter, and filmic execution into question. Kuchar not only defends his own work, but a filmmaker's right to make work as they want to, not to define his own style to fit within film history for a particular audience. In his catty yet highly intelligent way, Kuchar is saying that he doesn't want to make films that he feels were prescribed for him to make. If the film community is telling him what to make, then he might as well be paid to make advertisements.

I strongly believe in academic spaces supporting artistic play. Art is intellectual play. Video art is intellectual play with a camera. I don't think that any one type of space, organization, collective, or community is inherently "bad" or "good", but all should offer artists the consideration of allowing their

experimentation, to maintain a level of playfulness, to give artists a platform to engage with an audience in conversation. Not to be biased, but I feel that artist-run spaces are especially made for this type of play. It's not a major museum show where your work will be critiqued on its level of perfection, artist-run spaces are places to share your work with your community and have honest, and fun, conversations.

The Videofreex, arguably the first video art collective, was not a "space" per se, but the community built through the act of their collective is very similar to the community of a DIY or artist-run space. The Videofreex made two works that I found important to include in this program to discuss both play and community—*Lanesville TV News Buggy* and *Me's and Youse*. The first piece that appears in the program, *Me's and Youse*, embodies the idea of play on camera. In the piece, the members of the Videofreex take turns appearing on camera, cutting between each other's faces, pushing the limits of what the medium of video was capable of at the time. The result is a short

experimental joke, but it becomes a statement on friendship through art making. You hear them laugh together, you can imagine the room they are in, the drinks they're having, the shitty early 70s weed they're probably smoking. The Videofreex, like any other space or collective, was not a group without problems—we've heard stories, especially from two of their women members Mary Curtis Ratcliff and Nancy Cain, that the group struggled with internal sexism. However, the moment captured in *Me's and Youse*, captures a moment of bliss, with rose colored glasses, we can envision ourselves in that time with them, enjoying the childlike excitement of playing with a new toy: the video camera.

We are introduced to a similar playful community—in a nearly theatrical sense—in Anne McGuire's 1999 video *All Smiles and Sadness*. The video encircles a nonsensical performance by a group of actors and artists, culminating in a spellbinding absurdist monologue by McGuire's longtime friend, and fellow artist in this program, George Kuchar. Through the silly and irreverent seven minutes of *All Smiles and Sadness*, the viewer is reminded of so many forms of making: the soap opera, daytime TV, theater, film noir, and old Hollywood. This piece is meaningful to me for many reasons, one being nepotism, as Nightingale Cinema's own longtime contributor Eddy Crouse appears as one of the captivating actors in the video. Eddy's performance makes our networks of artists collectives and communities tangible for me—like 6 degrees of Kevin Bacon, but for underground filmmakers. Witnessing this piece is to witness friendship in the making; you can truly feel how much fun the actors and artists had creating this together.



*All Smiles and Sadness*, Anne McGuire, 1999

Circling back to the Videofreex, in *Lanesville TV News Buggy*, we see the Freex take the idea of play outside their comfort zone. They take their camera on the road, literally, in a baby buggy, to capture the goings on of their small town, Lanesville, New York. I'm interested in how this piece discusses the concept of importance: they use the man on the street news format to show the audience hyper-local news, going from farms to small businesses, interviewing locals about what their day to day experiences are like. It's both a time capsule and a new way to look at the world—the medium of video opening up opportunities to not only capture “important” news, canned and sent to Americans through nightly television—they can stay with a subject for a long period of time without the cost of film encumbering their stories. This DIY news aesthetic becomes an important tool to show how community can be built through, and around, a video camera.

Glenn Belvario uses a similar DIY news aesthetic in his series, *Glennnda and Friends*. The *Glennnda and Friends* show, of which the

video *Bad Grrrls* is one episode of many, combines the concept of journalistic reporting, late night TV, and most importantly, camp. The show brings into question who is allowed to delineate information to the public, and in their case, it's two drag queens in New York. In *Bad Grrrls*, Glennnda and Fonda LaBruce (Bruce LaBruce) are stationed outside a riot grrrl music show, talking to attendees about their association with the riot grrrl movement. Glennnda and Fonda offer this punk femme community a platform to talk about their art and music as a means to discuss feminism. I'm not as interested in exactly what is said in each interview throughout the video, but I'm very interested in the punk community that is documented here. Even video artist and musician Sadie Benning makes a cameo in the tape—they talk about Sadie's ideas on riot grrrl and show a clip of one of their early video works in the segment.

I'm obsessed with Glennnda and Fonda just running into Sadie Benning on the street. It encapsulates something that we lose when looking back at history—

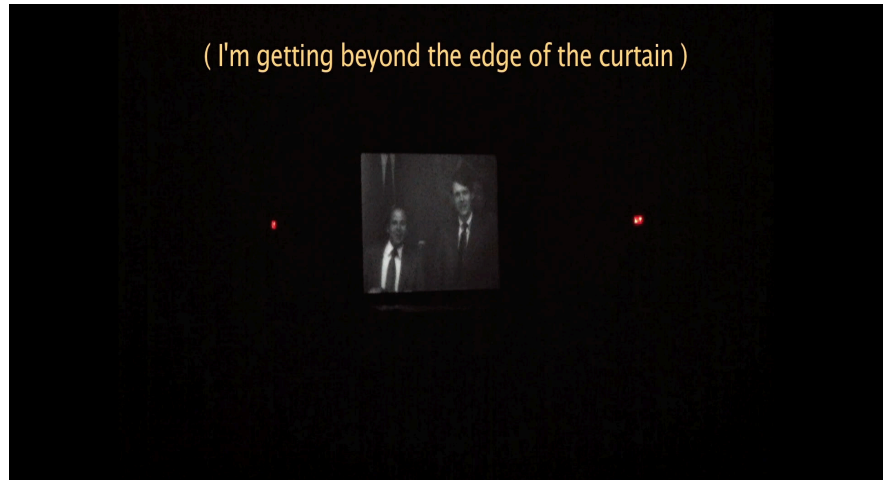
how small these communities really are. Of course, we all know that Andy Warhol and Lou Reed all hung out in their \$3 a month apartment on the upper east side or whatever, but outside that particular collection of found footage, it's a rare thing to hear about the spaces that artists, especially queer underground artists, found each other in. I know I'm dating myself as young here, but it's fascinating and inspiring to me to know that artists like Sadie Benning, Glenn Belverio, and Bruce LaBruce were all hanging out at the riot grrrl show in 1993. It's hard to envision artists who feel like famous giants meeting on the street. You forget that they aren't actually celebrities, they are people. I was 2 in 1993, and not in New York, but we have the tapes, so I can access this world in some way. One day I hope I can think of the Nightingale in the same light, as a space inhabited by a special community.

I'm feeling a little gushy about it all, and I think now would be a good time to backtrack from the hope and nostalgia, and feel a little bit of pain and insecurity. I don't think the Nightingale is, or was, always a place with completely open arms. A big issue in artist-run spaces is that it's basically impossible for things not to become a little cliquey. Artist-run spaces can feel from the outside a bit like a member's only club. I think it is ethically important for curators and organizers at spaces like the Nightingale to attempt to reach wider audiences, for us not to get caught in only one social web. I think we did do our best to reach others, through including a group of programmers with diverse interests and programmatic agendas, but I'm sure there were plenty of people for whom it felt like a daunting task to walk through our doors, simply because they didn't know us, and we all seemed like friends. I felt

embraced and secure in the space, but I am one person, with one bodily and emotional experience, and everyone has a different perspective.

Did we actively make decisions in order to make our space safer for individuals than 2008 Portland Music House #39? Yes. Did it work 100% of the time? I hope so, but I really have no way of knowing, and my guess is probably not. There are pros and cons of becoming a “legal” space for this reason. I don’t believe that having legal processes to deal with workplace and environmental trauma necessarily make environments safer, but in some ways, the structures of non-profits and other institutions have some form of a safety net for their guests and employees. At a DIY space, we can see or hear someone do something shitty and kick them out, or hold them accountable in some way for their actions, but beyond that, there isn’t much that can be done within the institution. Especially when the space you are occupying is your home, it can be frightening to invite the public in. Luckily, we never had anything truly dangerous happen at the Nightingale, but there was always that level of risk. I would often joke about this insecurity. My address is on the internet, you wanna steal my identity? Sure, just please give it a better home than I did.

Beyond the important question of safety and security, there is the question of compensation for labor. We always paid our artists what we could out of the door, but in the future, I hope to find a sustainable way to pay our volunteers. The volunteer culture in arts administrative jobs is as dangerous in my mind as the unpaid internship culture in the workplace. It makes it difficult for people from lower income



*Untitled*, Nazli Dinçel, 2016

backgrounds to gain experience working for organizations. There has been a widespread movement for years now to pay artists what they deserve, as they absolutely should be, but I wish I saw that kind of energy directed at all positions of labor within the art world. Not paying interns, administrators, and volunteers breeds a culture that only rich people can sustain themselves in the arts. If you can’t get in at the ground floor because you need to spend your precious time at a paying job instead of a volunteer position, how can you get in?

In watching Nazli Dinçel’s *Untitled*, I’m interested in discussing artists’ need for capital, and the common reliance on art institutions for artists to make money. The Nightingale is an institution in and of itself, as any organization becomes institutionalized, however it has never been a source of income for anyone who has worked as a part of it. We pay artists from the profits made by ticket sales, but as the Nightingale has always remained an artist-run space, and we haven’t become a non-profit or business, we’ve never been able to pay ourselves for the labor of running the space. This is the case for many artists who are not independently wealthy—in order to financially support your own practice, you need to rely on jobs, often

through teaching at institutions or working for an arts organization. It’s important to remember that working in the arts was created for the rich. The culture of arts work was originally intended as a hobby for wealthy ladies who lunch while their husbands created the nuclear bomb or eugenics or whatever.

In *Untitled*, we see a glimpse inside the work environment at an unnamed film festival. We hear problematic and insulting conversations, we see the artist undermined by colleagues, and treated without much regard as though their knowledge is insignificant. Dinçel gives their viewers a comical presentation of the often problematic and stressful work environments artists require to live. Although Dinçel’s piece is hilarious, it points to the fact that we often need humor to mask our own daily traumas in the world of work.

The Nightingale has never become a place that is sustainable for workers, both because we personally have never had the money to fund such an endeavor, but also because we have always had some level of fear for what the space would become if we were able to make money. The act of “legalizing” is a problematic one as an organization or artist collective is forced to work within



*From the Files of the Pyramid Cocktail Lounge, Tom Rubnitz, 1983*

the boundaries of legal business practices, and we have been lucky to subvert these boundaries for the 14 years we have been in operation, yet it leaves us with the difficult decision to seek financially supportive work elsewhere. On the other hand, when you have the resources of a non-profit or legal business, you can reach a wider community, and offer a wider array of services to that community.

I have this horrible fear that artist-run spaces can't exist in the current climate. The only way we were able to keep the Nightingale running for so long is because we lived there, as so many others have throughout the years. It's hard to go anywhere without running into an ex-Nightingaler. Our roommate for six of the fourteen years, who helped us pack up and close down the space, Alea Hennessy, had an Apple genius who used to live in her room. People would walk up to us while we were sitting on the porch and tell us they used to live in the building. It's a never ending network from bedroom dweller to bedroom dweller. In order to live there, we had to give up a lot, but mostly, we had to give up personal time and space.

I have a lot of guilt about losing the space and not immediately finding a new Nightingale brick and mortar address, but the truth is, I desperately wanted my own space; my own refrigerator, my own thermostat, my own dust, my own home. Renting in any major American city is untenable as it is, there is no way I could afford another space for the Nightingale to exist that didn't also serve as my place to live with the current DIY financial structure of the cinema.

Without forgetting their flaws, it would be deeply tragic to the arts community to see artist-run spaces die. I wish (rich) people would be more interested in investing in each other, in our own pre-existing communities, than investing in corporations and businesses, but sadly, that is not the world that we live in. I don't know what the future of the Nightingale holds, it could be the path of the non-profit, a co-op, even an LLC—maybe we just curate screenings here and there at other organizations' spaces, or any combination of the above. I know that the Nightingale, and the network we've built over these years won't dissipate completely, but it's both a gift and a burden to

hold onto such a special thing.

I look at a video document like *From the Files of the Pyramid Club*, and I feel hopeful about how our space could be remembered by our community of artists without a physical building. Our new mantra is: the people make the space, the people make the space, the people make the space. If the artists from the Pyramid Club could go on to do many more monumental things, at unique places, with brilliant people, even within the landscape of 1980s and 90s homophobia, even through AIDS, even through a Bush and a Raegan, we can surely get past something as idiotic as money. Queer communities like the one pictured at the Pyramid Club built the foundation for spaces like the Nightingale to exist. For these spaces, I will always be grateful, and as I work towards what the Nightingale can become, I will keep them, always, at the front of my mind.