

The Kitchen

For those who know the Kitchen from its current space, we would like to add a few notes on its origin, location and operation from spring 1971 to fall 1973. The "old Kitchen" was located at the Mercer Street entrance of the "Broadway Central Hotel" in the "Mercer Art Center", a conglomerate of theaters adapted from the catering and ball-rooms of the hotel. Our space was a former (satellite) kitchen (?), (pantry). The termination of the Mercer Arts Center was the total collapse of the Broadway Central hotel in august of '73. Shortly before this catastrophe, the directorship had formally been transferred to Jim Burton and eventually fell into hands of Bob Stearns, after the "new Kitchen" moved to its next location on Wooster Street.

The operation of the "old Kitchen" was formulated and run by the contribution of many people, namely Andy Mannik, Sia and Michael Tschudin, Rhys Chatham, Shridhar Bapat, Dimitri Devyatkin and later by Jim Burton and Bob Stearns, all of whom helped run the daily operations and programming. A particular credit for the three annual festivals: the Video festival, the Computer festival and the Women's video festival, should be given to Shridhar, Dimitri and Susan Milano respectively. Howard Wise through "Electronic Arts Intermix" provided for us the administrative umbrella, without which we could not have existed. Eventually, the funding by the State Council on the Arts helped to secure the rent, and a further continuation.

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Ever since we started working with video we knew, we had an audience. People would gather in our home. Friends, and friends of friends would come almost daily. The transition became inevitable. we had to go from a private place, our loft, to a public one.

In many ways, we liked the Mercer Arts Center. It was culturally and artistically a polluted place. It could deal with high art and it could produce average trash. We were interested in certain decadent aspects of America, the phenomena of the time; rock and roll, homosexual theater, and (?) the rest of that illegitimate culture. In the same way we were curious about more puritanical concepts of art inspired by McLuhan and Buckminster Fuller. It seemed a strange and united front of the Counter-Culture.

The music in particular carried a similar kind of schism; on the one hand it was technological, represented by people working with synthesizers or certain textures of sound, generated by machines. On the other hand, it was an almost theatrical rejection of established musical conventions of performing. It was difficult to separate these tendencies within new music. our personal interest was performing video. Very soon we understood the generic relationship of video to other electronic arts, and this realization became our guiding policy.

To us it was difficult to become establishment. we did not want to administer, or have an office, or even a phone. There was a pay phone by the door. Our idea of programming was not to select or curate, but to mediate and accommodate. No one was auditioned, turned down or doubted and no one was served either, since there was no staff. People around were creative artists, colleagues. The performers would bring their own crew, their own equipment and their own audience. At the end of the evening the audience would help stack chairs, and sweep the floor. Some artists insisted on showing for free, but if there was a donation, the artist had a choice to collect it, split it or leave it to us. Almost everybody let us keep the box, which paid for the monthly calendar and petty cash.

It was this loose administrative arrangement that let people participate spiritually in the directorship. So, if there was any virtue in our arrangement, it was the participation. Once a place is well-administered it becomes a victim of its own well-working. It includes or excludes, seeks its hierarchy of qualities and eventually becomes an established idea, not always in harmony with the needs of time. There is a self-preserving instinct within every creative person; preferring the sense of creative freedom to being bound to a successful institution (model). Every instinct within the daily operation is superbly important. The kitchen was only as successful as the artist of that particular day. It was reborn every 24 hours. Of course there were catastrophes. Only an environment creatively secure can afford them. We would not have had a telepathic concert from Boston, if the event were advertised months in advance, and the artist getting a fee.

The impulse to create a concept such as the Kitchen should not be perceived as an administrative fundraising initiative. Looking back, we lived in a unique situation when a generation under a flag of alternate culture arrived to formulating its own manifesto. Suddenly it was ready and eager to express it. We went into this venture with a simple and innocent belief that

this activity, so relevant to us, also was of an interest to others. As two newcomers, we were lucky to observe and participate so closely and intensely in the bizarre culture of that time.

In Buffalo, NY Fall 1978,

Steina and Woody Vasulka