

1-1-2000

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Recommended Citation

Malone, Sheila A. (2000) "Interview with the Kitchen, NYC," *SWITCH*: Vol. 15 : No. 1 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/switch/vol15/iss1/5>

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SOCIAL NETWORKS 1

Interview with the Kitchen, NYC

Sheila A. Malone on Jan 1 2000

issue 15

In this interview Sheila Malone talked with Elise Bernhardt and Christina Yang at the Kitchen in regard to questions such as what the Kitchen's role is in continuing to foster ground-breaking work; what the nature of the Kitchen is as an institution; what drives the selling/marketing of work performed/created at the Kitchen; what role regionalism plays in art making.

Switch talks with Elise Bernhardt, Executive Director of the Kitchen, and Christina Yang, Director of Media Arts at the Kitchen.

SWITCH: Most innovative, ground breaking arts organizations begin as very naive but truly empassioned brain children of artists seeking to infiltrate tradition with this in mind and with the amazing beginnings of the Kitchen, how do you see the Kitchen's role in continuing to foster ground-breaking work?

THE KITCHEN: In some ways, things are the same in that the original impulse of these artists was to have a place where they could share their cross-disciplinary, sometimes technology-pushing experiments with their peers (and sometimes the larger public). The Kitchen continues to nurture cross-disciplinary collaborations, giving space and resources to artists to explore and push the boundaries of their media (digital and otherwise).

SWITCH: With most artist created organizations, the success of the organization creates the need for administration, the creation of administration creates the need for more funding, the creation and receipt of more funding usually results in an institutionalizing of an organization. Can you describe the nature of the Kitchen as an institution?

THE KITCHEN: Hmmm. The Kitchen as an institution is perhaps more of a perception than a reality. The Kitchen certainly has a legacy of extraordinary artistic events to live up to, continues to present an ambitious program of cultural offerings, and sets itself a large role to fulfill in the support of contemporary art. However it still runs close to the bone financially, raising money year to year without an endowment or any long term stability which I feel characterizes an "institution." There are many more staff positions in operations, finance, marketing, etc. than there were at the outset of the organization which does indeed require additional fundraising for funds not directly given to the artists, but which are essential to the presentation of the work (ie publicizing the work, paying for the technical crew and equipment, costs of documentation, etc). The Kitchen's new initiatives include the restoration and public access of its video archives and the Board trying to find a way to secure the current building for future generations. Thus, The Kitchen is working towards a process of institutionalization but it has only just begun.

SWITCH: How do you see the Kitchen in the typical model of an arts organization? Is it a place where artists have control/power? What is the role of administrators? Is the artist an administrator? Is the administrator an artist?

THE KITCHEN: The Kitchen is certainly a model unto itself - not quite museum and

not quite a presenting model but with some elements of both kinds of organizations. There are artist curators which does change the "power dynamic" to some extent. Many people on staff are performers or artists but it is not an artist driven administration as it once was. The mission is to identify, support and present artists and the job of the administration is to implement that mission. The artist has control in the realm of making the work here the Kitchen does not intervene on any level except to offer support. What seems most valid in terms of what an administration committed to creativity can do, at a place like The Kitchen, is to nurture a place where experimentation, collaboration, and risk-taking are allowed to exist and that both the public and artistic communities can experience that unique phenomenon.

SWITCH: What drives the selling/marketing of work performed/created at the Kitchen?

THE KITCHEN: The sale of tickets and the promotion of an artist's work are two different activities. We often present emerging or lesser-known artists and the imprimatur of The Kitchen is certainly helpful in helping to publicize those artists and encourage ticket sales. In that The Kitchen houses multi-disciplinary programs as well as family/youth/community offerings, marketing is often targeted to press that covers certain disciplines (music, dance, kids, etc.) as well as regularly read listings (Village Voice, NY Times, etc.) The Kitchen also presents better known (at least within the experimental world) artists and they drive a certain amount of traffic here by their reputation. While box office success is an issue for The Kitchen, its spaces are intimate and being a receptive environment to experience avant-garde work is also central to its mission.

SWITCH: With the creation/execution of 4 symposia addressing the many issues/ideas surrounding art and technology, what prompted the scale of this project? (In terms of time- - geography- and topics)

THE KITCHEN: The scale was determined in part by our interest and that of our funder, The Ford Foundation. We all wanted to examine issues globally and nationally and wanted to get a sense of the pipeline of creation and dissemination for technology-based/driven work in the visual and performing arts.

SWITCH: It includes international/national artists/ theoreticians/curators/authors, how and why are all 4 symposia located in the U.S. or more specifically why Minneapolis, and Silicon Valley?

THE KITCHEN: We were asked by The Ford Foundation to do at least one of the four conferences in between the coasts and one on the west coast, though not necessarily an art-based metropolis like San Francisco. The Walker was already organizing a conference looking at new media so it made sense to collaborate with them. We learned about GroundZero at the Walker and they became the most outstanding of the range of possible partnerships we had available because of their mission and their connection to both the new technologies and contemporary art communities.

SWITCH: What role does regionalism play in art making?

THE KITCHEN: It is difficult to address that well in this context. There are lots of issues about artists in the regions but a critical mass of artists seems to be an obvious magnet to artists in making work. They look for a community and a base of support. Symposium making? How does regionalism affect topics, artists involved, panelists involved, and participants? We had a reasonable budget for traveling artists and panelists from multiple locations. Topics were certainly affected by where we were and who was available. However the outline for the four conferences from the outset (before sites had been determined) was technology and its impact on : the performing arts, the visual arts, and global collaboration. The fourth conference was originally planned as a kind of wrap up of the prior 3.

SWITCH: Did/Do the demographics of the symposia lead to any interesting discussions on art and technology and its intersection?

THE KITCHEN: We were able to bring in a far bigger part of the tech industry by locating one of the conferences in Palo Alto (people could leave their job for a few hours to participate not have to make a commitment of several days across the country) and therefore some substantial conversations between people in the tech industry and artists could logistically happen. In many ways the location and access made the final conference go far beyond simply a culmination. We were able to broach questions and discuss issues that had been raised primarily by artists and arts institutions during the prior 3 conferences with our counterparts in industry.

SWITCH: How is the cultural landscape different in each of these locations and how does it relate to the Kitchen's mission as an art organization based in New York City?

THE KITCHEN: The Kitchen has always had an international profile and is in some ways better known outside NYC than in it. While The Kitchen's, the Walker's and GroundZero's physical plant rests in New York, Minneapolis, and Ailicon Valley, respectfully, many of their staff is well-travelled and have professional relations all over the country and world. Part of the process of facing our future together, with the possibility of technology playing a role, is in creating greater common ground for new work. Cultural landscapes for each of the conferences were quite different. Is it simply the world is so small and artists are no longer bound by provincial needs to reach local audiences? What was interesting was how the same names kept being recommended no matter where the conference was taking place. We had to work with our local partners to diversify the pool of panelists. I think the world of new media is still pretty tight.

SWITCH: How does/did funding happen for this project, and the collaboration with the Walker and Ground Zero?

THE KITCHEN: The Kitchen had funds from FORD to organize the four conferences and make a report at the end. The Walker and GroundZero brought matching (and sometimes more than matching) funds generated from their own efforts to make possible the local conferences. France Telecom North America came on via The Kitchen as a sponsor of the final conference.

SWITCH: What has been the response in New York to the 2 symposia?

THE KITCHEN: There were very favorable responses, especially to the March one which focused on the performing arts. Performances were scheduled concurrently with each conference which kept the conversations lively and focused. Meaty discussions with broad perspectives and a very engaged audience also contributed. There has been interest to recap the two non-New York conferences in NYC. The topics were quite different, and did one or the other address more pertinent or unique issues behind art and artists of the new millennium? The first conference was possibly the most practical (ie what institutions need to provide to artists) and the fourth sought to bring collaborators in art-making and technical research together, given how specialized professional training has become in the 21st century. Recurring current issues that came up were artistic/intellectual property rights, institutional technical capacity, and how new technologies might assist greater democracy -- cultural, political, economic and otherwise.

SWITCH: Were there any surprises in any of the discussions?

THE KITCHEN: The confluence between industry and arts -- or the degree to which industry seems to want to work with artists. From the outset, it became clear how much need there is for continued open discussion forums as many of these pertinent issues need the combined talents and perspectives of many people.

SWITCH: Are other arts organizations in New York doing similar work in terms of embracing/exploring and deploying technology based art/performance?

THE KITCHEN: Quite a few others are -- large and small including BAM, Franklin Furnace, Location One, BRIC, Tonic, Engine 27 -- and more and more looking at how to best support these programs. While technology seems to be in any mix of artistic offerings going on today, the challenge remains how to identify and support the best artists.

SWITCH: How has technology changed the nature of performance?

THE KITCHEN: It depends so much on the artist. For some it really is a tool for creating imagery or new layers of meaning, for others, it is both means and end. Technology whether to create visual, oral, or even sensual experience, provides more possibilities for creating an environment outside of the body but nonetheless, a great performative event remains in the hands of human being who has crafted his/her own expressive vocabulary be it with sound, image, text, or movement.

SWITCH: How does the Kitchen define New Media?

THE KITCHEN: I can't say we have really DEFINED it but we consider many different levels of digital manipulation of image, sound, and sensual experience. This can take "retro" forms as well as "futuristic". The interesting part is to see how artists are defining new media for themselves.

SWITCH: Where is the Kitchen heading in terms of this definition?

THE KITCHEN: We are trying to increase our capacity to serve artists with new means of expression. We look for artists who use technology to expand their powers of

expression, to better express their personal vision. We support that vision by providing the setting for an audience to experience the work, educating that audience about the work thru interpretive programs, commission/produce projects that would otherwise not happen without "institutional" support, and serve as a node through which artists successfully pass on the way to creating never before experienced work.

For more information about the Kitchen please visit <http://www.thekitchen.org>

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Sheila A. Malone is a current graduate student at the Cadre laboratory for Digital Media Arts.



::CrossReference

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