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Cooking in the Kitchen, 1971-1985

CULTURE | By WILLIAM VAN METER | JUNE 28, 2011, 9:00 AM



The Talking Heads perform at The Kitchen, 1976. *Kathy Landman*

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FULL SCREEN



Marina Abramovic performing 'Imponderabilia', 1975. *Kathy Landman*



A Group of Artists performing 'Piano Players', 1982. *Photo Court*



Rock Steady Crew, 1981. *Photo Court*

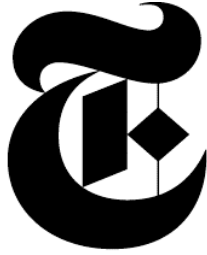


Laurie Anderson performing at Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, 1974. *Kathy Landman*



Performance with Matt Green, 1981. *Photo Court*

Last year, Marina Abramovic held court at MoMA to blockbuster crowds, but when the Kitchen first opened its doors in SoHo, back in 1971, video and experimental performance were still considered outlaw mediums with no real place to play in New York City. Woody and Steina Vasulka's "art collective" was aptly named, connoting an atmosphere of intimacy and experimentation for which the space would become legendary. Countless artists made their debut at the Kitchen, and many more showed there, including Vito Acconci, Laurie Anderson, Karole Armitage, Eric Bogosian, Christian Marclay, Tony Oursler and Cindy Sherman.



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The Kitchen evolved hand-in-hand with various burgeoning music scenes — from punk to no wave, to hip-hop, and everything in between. The Talking Heads made their first appearance there as a trio, and the Beastie Boys rocked out there when they were still a hard-core group.

To celebrate its 40th anniversary, the Kitchen revisits its SoHo era, which lasted through 1985, when it decamped to Chelsea. [“The View From a Volcano”](#) traces a cutting-edge journey of video, dance and performance art against the arc of SoHo’s transition from a wild artistic frontier to the epicenter of art commerce.

The Moment caught up with Debra Singer, the Kitchen’s executive director and chief curator, about this impressive show.

Q. How was it to revisit the most famous epoch of the Kitchen’s history?

A. When I started at the Kitchen, I was well aware of its history, these golden years of SoHo. The artists running it didn’t know they were making history at the moment. It was founded by video artists and people inspired to use video at a time when this was a radical thing. Video as an art form was a completely new idea. Part of why the kitchen was founded was that there was a bunch of video makers and experimental musicians who didn’t have a place to show their work. Video art wasn’t considered legitimate. And musicians coming out of minimal traditions didn’t have a place; the uptown concert halls and the downtown clubs weren’t presenting their music. They didn’t fit in and had to make their own scene. It was a kinship based on their obstacles and problems that led to the founding of the kitchen. If it doesn’t exist, make it for yourself, it was a D.I.Y. aesthetic of let’s get together and do it. It had two homes in SoHo. The very first spot was in the back, unwanted room of the Mercer Arts Center in the old Broadway Hotel that burned down, and then in a second-floor loft on Wooster and Broome.

Tell me about the title “The View From the Volcano.”

It is a very insider reference. The Kitchen started as an art collective by Woody Vesulka for a few years, and after that it incorporated as a nonprofit. When they went to file, the Kitchen was not seen as an acceptable name. Maybe there were too many — I don’t know what the bureaucratic regulations are for an acceptable name. The director at the time submitted different random names and the government picked out of that five “Haleakala,” so the Kitchen’s real name is “Haleakala.” Haleakala is the biggest volcano on Maui and means “house of the rising sun.” It is a special place — you climb up on top at sunrise and the whole world looks differently.

Through the videos, you see the progression of the Kitchen collective, but also the technology itself, from grainy and black and white to the sharp color clarity of Eric Bogosian’s incisive monologues.

The archive parallels the history of video technology. We were wondering: What aspect do we want to look at for this archive show because we have so much material? The cutoff of 1985 is when the kitchen moved to Chelsea. The kitchen in SoHo is paradigmatic of what downtown loft culture was like, this vibrant intersection of artists experimenting in different disciplines in close proximity to one another. It wasn’t this huge scene all over the place like it is today.

So how did you go about curating this immense body of work?



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We recently completed a decade-long conservation project to essentially transfer all of our tapes. They were so fragile they would be destroyed. And because of the culture back then, there is a wonderful set of posters and print ephemera. For instance, Robert Longo, was a former Kitchen curator and designed posters; and Christian Marclay designed the poster for the Karole Armitage performance. It was friends helping out, and that is conveyed on micro-levels that are interesting. And these calendars they printed — in any week there would be a Vito Acconci installation and Dara Birnbaum and Alvin Lucier. You want to go to every program and that is just one month in 1977! The Kitchen is best known for its performance history, but the visual art will be surprising.

How are you going to be able to cram in 15 years of experimental videos into one show?

There will be monitors where you can choose like a video jukebox. We will have channeled works of key figures like Gary Hill and Bill Viola, and video documentation of the performances of people like Eric Bogosian. There were some amazing performances — the recordings were just too grainy, and they would only interest Ph.D. students.

“The View From a Volcano: The Kitchen’s Soho Years, 1971-1985” will be on view from June 30 to August 27 at 512 West 19th Street. Call (212) 255-5793 or go to thekitchen.org.

Link: <http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/06/28/cooking-in-the-kitchen-1971-1985/>