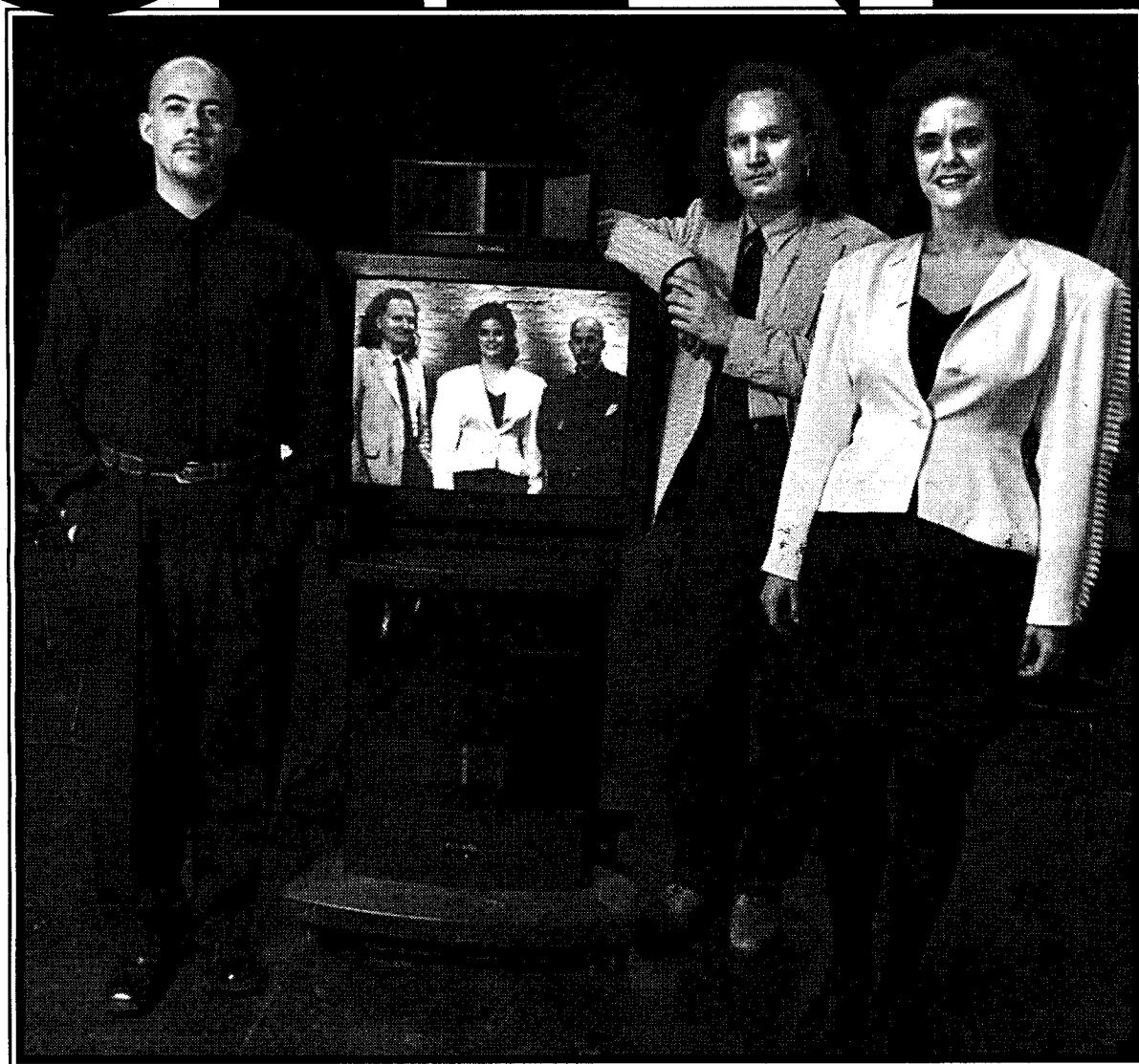



Will the Kitchen SINK?



The New Deal: Kitchen administrators Eric Latzsky (left), John Hobbs, and Lauren Amazeen

The City's Premier Showcase for Experimental Art Is Caught in a Crisis of Its Own Making *By C.CARR*

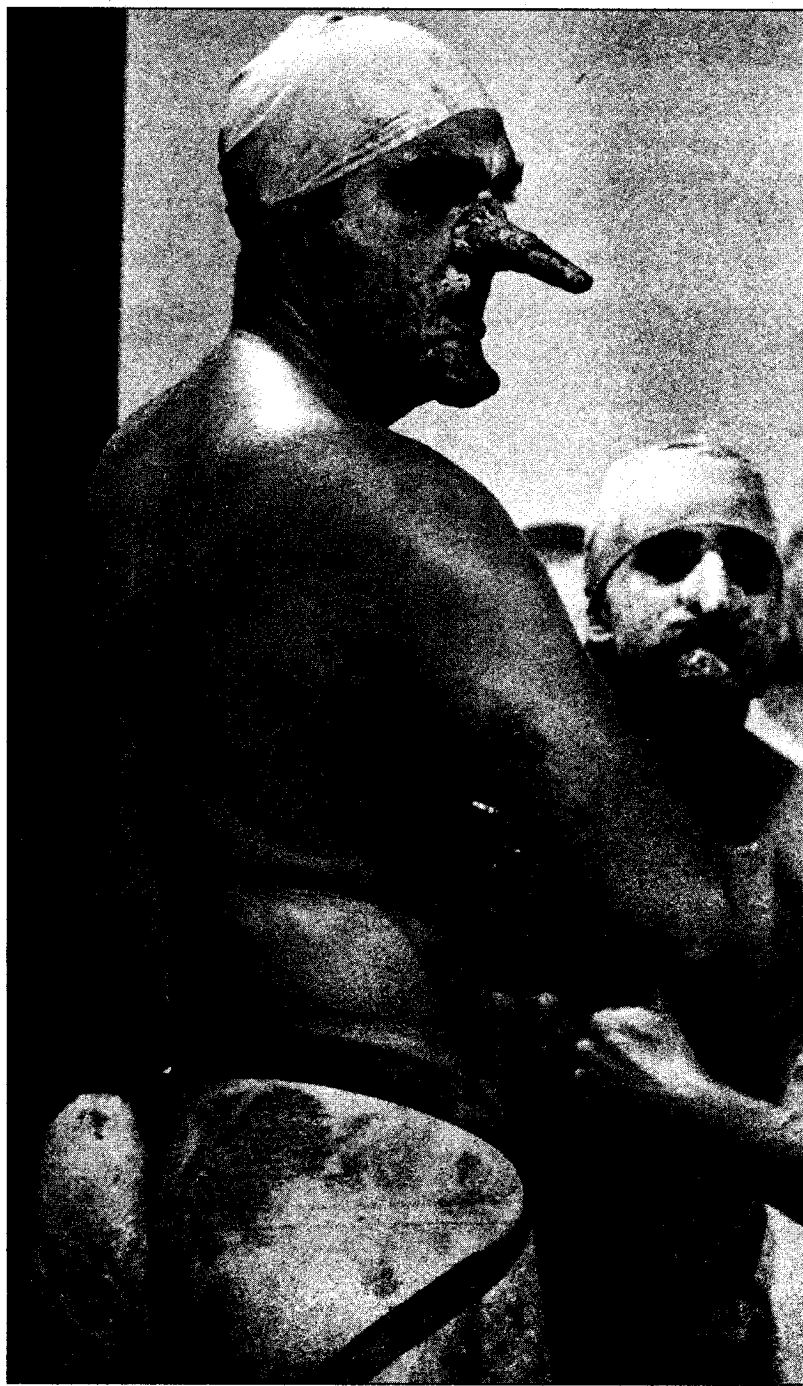
The Kitchen is pushing the envelope once again. But inside out. Once the city's foremost venue for experimental art, it has become the first alternative space to lose sight of why the alternative even exists. Artists are often victimized by the Kitchen rather than served. And making art seems less important than making money there. 

Some artists have already given up on the Kitchen. Many more are angry and alienated. Diamanda Galas will not appear there this year—she'd hoped to workshop her collaboration with former Led Zeppelin bassist John Paul Jones—because of “inappropriate” discussions a Kitchen administrator had with her management. Karen Finley will not perform again at the Kitchen “under the current management.” Nor will dancer-choreographer Ann Carlson “under the current management.” After his performance there last season, Stuart Sherman didn't even want to go back into the building—“into that atmosphere”—to pick up his check. An administrator with Urban Bush Women characterized their run at the Kitchen in 1993 as “one of the most difficult we've ever had in New York.” And after last year's experience at the Kitchen—“difficult at every turn”—a codirector of the Gay and Lesbian Experimental Film Festival says, “We would never go back there under the current management.”

Nonprofits are often riven with internal conflicts. And artists are notorious for being “difficult.” But when so many say they won't perform again in what is arguably Downtown's best nonproscenium space—one of the few options performers even have—something is drastically wrong.

In 10 years of covering the art margins, I'd never heard anything like this outcry. It came from artists who don't necessarily communicate with one another, and their concern was palpable. I decided to follow up on what I was hearing, spending the better part of five months interviewing more than 60 performers, presenters, former employees, and observers of the scene. Everyone was worried; no one wants to see this organization fail.

Last April, I sat in on a meeting convened by the Kitchen's performance curator, David Leslie, with artists who've performed there recently. I listened to them discuss what could be done to save the place. When Leslie called me last spring, citing mismanagement, mistreatment of artists, and “infractions against the mis-



The Kipper Kids



Karen Finley

sion,” he'd stressed that he wasn't anti-institution, that he wanted to preserve “the integrity” of the Kitchen.

After the meeting, I contacted other current and former Kitchen staffers. Leslie's complaints were just the tip of the iceberg. They painted a picture of an administration seeing-sawing between incompetence and abuse, radiating contempt for artists, even allowing shows to fail when they could have succeeded.

The triumvirate running the Kitchen—Lauren Amazeen, John Hobbs, and Eric Latzky—know there's been talk. They say people are jealous. People are spreading rumors. People are afraid of change. Latzky, the director of communications, says Amazeen has created a delicate balance among disciplines. “But every once in awhile, the renegade artist or curator comes in and seeks to mine the Kitchen's limited resources. When that happens, it disturbs this balance.”

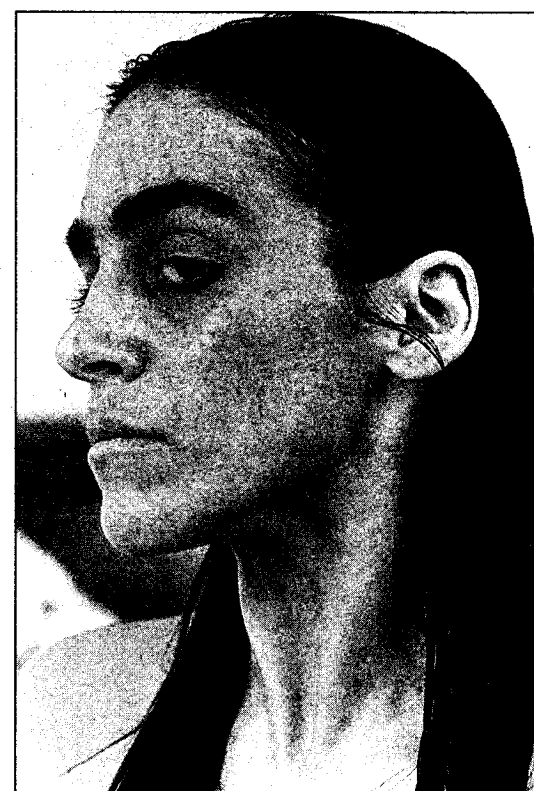
Latzky credits Amazeen with developing “a new model for the '90s,” an arts institution negotiating the cusp between profit and non-profit. “We're not going to stop producing art, obviously. There's a

term going around here that might be a way to identify what we believe in, and that's ‘avant-preneur.’”

That term isn't necessarily unseemly. The nonprofit art world, which the Kitchen helped to create in the '70s, is hurting for money, reeling from the censorship wars, decimated by AIDS. In this crisis of funding and confidence, arts organizations will have to fight for

survival together or hunker down by themselves. The Kitchen has definitely chosen the latter course. ☞

For more than two decades, the Kitchen has defined the edge in experimental art. The performances done there have become part of our history. Shown at left are some of the artists who called the Kitchen home.



Diamanda Galas

Leslie and others who've worked there talk about the administration's attempt to distance the Kitchen from "lesser" venues, such as Dance Theater Workshop and P.S.122. Controlling that big black box where performers love to work has produced a certain arrogance. As the Kitchen's former dance curator, Steve Gross, put it, "They think they can shoot the first line of artists and they'll just keep coming."

The Kitchen is sinking under the weight of its own dysfunction. "It's just a shell of its former self," says Ira Silverberg, who recently resigned as the literature curator. "It's being run by people who are not part of the community. And they are slowly dismantling everything that was built over the past 21 years, for reasons no one is quite sure of."

Back in 1971, a group of video artists began meeting informally to screen their work in the kitchen of the Mercer Arts Center. Two years later, the Kitchen opened officially in a Soho loft. It quickly developed an international reputation, as emerging artists like Laurie Anderson, Philip Glass, Molissa Fenley, Bill T. Jones, and Bill Viola broke new aesthetic ground there.

The Kitchen was always more than just a facility. Back in the Soho days, it functioned as an unofficial community center and think tank at the heart of a burgeoning gallery-café scene. Artists would drop in, watch videotapes, hang out. There was an emphasis on spontaneity and process; people would sleep in the space to figure out how to use it. Interdisciplinary work came naturally. And, unlike other artists' organizations in New York, the Kitchen had curators who did the programming and embodied that link between the space and the artists' community.

Late in 1986, the Kitchen moved to its present address on 19th Street, west of Tenth Avenue. Set in Chelsea's Rust Belt on the Hudson, the Kitchen became too inconvenient to function as a hangout. But here artists worked in the kind of space they couldn't find anywhere else. There was a greater emphasis on producing a finished piece that audiences would cross town to see.

Shortly after the move from Soho, the board of directors hired Barbara (Bobbi) Tsumagari as executive director. She came to the Kitchen from the National Endowment for the Arts, where she'd worked for seven years as a program specialist in Interarts, a now-defunct program funding "new forms" and interdisciplinary work.

Even as it attained a new level of professionalism, the Kitchen was headed for hot water. First, the organization decided to buy the 19th Street building, taking on the fiscal stress of a mortgage payment and a \$2.5 million capital campaign. Then, in 1990, at the height of the attacks on the NEA, the Kitchen became a favorite right-wing target after presenting performance artist and ex-porn star Annie Sprinkle. At the request of Senator Jesse Helms, the General Accounting Office even tried to initiate an investigation (later dropped) into the Kitchen's use of federal funds.

The place had developed a reputation for presenting edgy work. That might mean Karen Finley or David Wojnarowicz, who'd also been targeted by the right. It might mean Survival Research Laboratories or La Fura Dels Baus, whose performances were so physically dangerous for audiences that everyone had to sign consent forms before entering the space.

Karen Finley talked about the way the Kitchen supported her through the fiercest moments of the censorship wars. "I remember going upstairs when everything was coming down on me," she says, "and Bobbi and [programming director] Scott Macaulay were saying, 'You can work here,' and that year carried me over."

In the summer of 1991, the Kitchen's board of directors abruptly replaced Tsumagari. First, the board had asked her to work exclusively on fundraising while control of day-to-day operations went to Amazeen, whom she had hired as an administrator. When Tsumagari declined to accept this demotion and resigned, Amazeen became executive director.

"The board wanted to go conservative,"

Silverberg declares. "They were not happy with Annie Sprinkle. There was a feeling that too much of Karen Finley's work was being presented. I was also left with the impression—from conversations with Lauren, primarily—that the board was now interested in supporting an older generation of artists because it was safer and easier. The institution was going to survive on its reputation as a pioneer rather than actually being a pioneer."

Tsumagari qualified Silverberg's assessment. While agreeing that "the board wanted to recall their own generational experience with the Kitchen," she insisted that they had supported her throughout the censorship crisis. "It's not that anyone opposed Annie during the controversy," she explained. "It's more that, in retrospect, they wanted to move away from a type of programming that kept the institution 'out there.' I think they were tired." If so, what we're seeing now is a casualty of the censorship wars.

"Conservative was never the issue," board member Caroline Stone insists. "We never even talked about it." In an earlier conversation, Stone explained, "If you look at the Kitchen's history, there have been six directors and each has developed his or her own concept. The Kitchen's been through a lot of permutation."

Indeed, no one can look at the Kitchen's fall lineup and say that the avant-opera of Ridge Theater is safe or that video artist Doris Chase is commercial. And Finley was invited back, but declined: "You'd think I'd be loyal, but after my experience with this administration, I can't work there."

THE MISMANAGEMENT AND MISTREATMENT SEND A MESSAGE THAT THE KITCHEN HAS LOST ITS COMMITMENT TO ARTISTS. AND ARTISTS HAVE LOST FAITH IN THE PLACE.

Steve Gallagher had been the Kitchen's codirector of video distribution for just a couple of months when Tsumagari left in 1991. "When Lauren was first hired," he recalls, "we were all very alarmed." Amazeen had worked for the Vermont Governor's Institute on the Arts and at Composer's Forum in New York before joining the Kitchen. One thing that concerned several staffers was that they'd never been able to figure out what Amazeen did under Tsumagari—except handle commercial rentals and deal with the board. (Amazeen says she "helped with general management" and worked on the annual spring benefit.)

Despite their doubts, the staff supported Amazeen at first. But then they began to hear about her behavior at meetings with funders. "She'd have no idea about budgets, the capital campaign, our future plans, different problems in the community," said a staffer who accompanied Amazeen to these meetings. "She'd crumble and start talking about things that had nothing to do with the question." Amazeen objects: "There was never an instance when I did not have an answer for a funder. I was to attract funders we normally wouldn't have." The senior staff—except for Amazeen, Hobbs, and Latzky—began meeting privately to try to figure out what to do. "We tried to give Lauren an idea of what issues we had with her style," says Steve Gross, who was dance curator at the time. "Lack of follow-up, lack of decisiveness. The most difficult thing was that through her omissions, staff people would be pitted

against each other. The space would be double-booked. I never understood if she was being deliberate about omissions, about saying, 'I'll get back to you,' and then not doing it, or if things just kept sliding off the desk. Lauren had a habit of writing notes on pieces of scrap paper, and overnight they'd all disappear. All the things you had talked about and come to some agreement over would be lost." (Says Amazeen, "I can't remember anything like that happening.")

Several staffers went to the board, specifically to its chair, Paula Cooper. "The place was a madhouse, and artists were freaking out," says one of them, who asked for anonymity. "But when I tried to talk to Paula, her response was, 'Do you know how I see the Kitchen? I see it as a huge playpen, and all you people need to stop crying, wipe your noses, and get back to work.'"

Paula Cooper objects: "I would never say anything like that. I don't think like that, and the Kitchen means too much to me." After Tsumagari left, the board initiated "a little search" to find a new director, Cooper says. But "we had such a good person right there. Lauren was so great with the staff. All of a sudden, there was harmony and the place got cleaned up. You can tell immediately when things are functioning well."

Aside from its belief that Amazeen brought order to the Kitchen, the board was impressed for another reason. Caroline Stone told me that when Amazeen took over there was a large projected deficit. But she ended her first year with a surplus.

When programming director Scott Macaulay resigned after Amazeen's first season, in 1992, he recommended that David Leslie take his place. Leslie is a performance artist who staged elaborate daredevilish stunts as the Impact Addict. He once leapt off the roof of P.S. 122.

Leslie began the job optimistically. Then he programmed his first show, *S/Heroes*, an evening of short pieces by women performance artists. A nonprofit booking agency called Leslie to say they wanted to tour it. Leslie told Amazeen he thought the Kitchen should ask for neither creative control nor money, just a credit on the program. But he didn't accompany her to meet with the agency. John Hobbs did.

During the course of my reporting, I was told many times that Hobbs seems to be running the Kitchen—or that Amazeen and Hobbs run it together, as a "good cop/bad cop" team. Hobbs is a former freelance techie who'd studied theater and tried stand-up. He told me he began working at the Kitchen "about 1986," and was put on staff by Tsumagari in '89 or '90. But former Kitchen production manager John Gernand told me that he began bringing Hobbs in on a day-labor basis at the end of the 1990 season, and that Amazeen put him on staff in 1991.

Hobbs's title was facilities manager, with duties that included cleaning the graffiti off the Kitchen's facade. In his new role negotiating the *S/Heroes* tour, Hobbs demanded a percentage of the gross, along with creative control of the tour, and insisted that, legally, the agency could not use the name *S/Heroes*. Hobbs explains: "The *S/Heroes* piece was the intellectual property of the Kitchen and David Leslie." In any event, the project died. "It was really a depressing response," says a source at the agency. "I guess the Kitchen thought there was some money to be had, when the truth is there wouldn't have been." The agency, a nonprofit, had hoped merely to break even. They couldn't understand the resistance coming from one nonprofit to another.

When the *S/Heroes* tour fell through, Leslie confronted Amazeen, demanding to know why "the janitor" was representing the Kitchen. "He's your pit bull," Leslie told her, "keep him on a short leash. Because he's going to end up biting the wrong person, and you're the one who's going to have to answer for it."

But the more power Hobbs got, the more out of control his behavior became. "He'd come to production meetings, and he would yell Lauren down in front of all of us, and she would laugh it off," says Leslie. "He would walk around through the space at-

tacking people, screaming at the top of his lungs. It created a very, very grim feeling." (Hobbs says this is "a statement that could be applied to 99 per cent of the people who've ever worked at the Kitchen.")

In the summer of 1993, Amazeen and Hobbs began to share an office. "For me, that was the real turning point," says one staff member who was hired by Amazeen. "He went from literally washing out toilets and sweeping the stage to sitting up in the director's office and basically running the whole show. He had no idea what he was doing, Lauren deferred to him constantly, and he was a bully."

In its new home far from Soho, the Kitchen had to work hard to stay connected to the community. Now, a fortress mentality developed, which compounded the problem. "It became sort of one camp against another," says the staffer. "You were either on the administrative side or the artistic side, and the two never met."

Ann Carlson's experience at the Kitchen emblemized the problems that developed as Hobbs began asserting his authority. Carlson wanted to do a large piece there—*White*—which would have involved children, nuns, blind people, "and a big community of the differently abled." While the Kitchen didn't have the money to produce this event, Carlson was grateful when Ama-

zeen offered rehearsal space. Once she began using it, though, she had to contend with Hobbs.

She remembers him screaming on the phone that there was confetti on the sidewalk. Carlson admits that she had dropped about a handful of confetti while entering the building, but "there was so much other shit on the sidewalk—it was nutty. Utterly nutty." Hobbs also screamed about her dancers making the bathrooms dirty. Carlson remembers that her dancers had been "grossed out" by them. Hobbs says the problem was "equipment" left in the space and "a large number of items of trash" in front of the building. He denies Carlson's contention that he ordered her to clean the bathrooms and sweep the sidewalk. But she remembers doing both: "At that moment, I said, no way. I'm not performing here. I was concerned about bringing people I cared about into that environment."

There were other such incidents. Amazeen may have been unaware of them when she created a new and more powerful post for Hobbs last year. He became the operations manager. When I asked why the Kitchen needed an operations manager, when it's never had one before, Amazeen said it was because of his skills in both production and administration. "Basically, he's my facilitator. He takes my vision and makes it happen."

Last fall, Ron Vawter remounted his Obie-winning show, *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith* so it could finally be filmed. The Kitchen had given Vawter, Greg Mehrten, and Marianne Weems residencies to work together on *Cohn/Smith* as well as a new play, *Queer and Alone*. A source within the production says the artists were constantly battling with Hobbs "over things that would be a given at any other space. They're just ranged against you from the minute you step in the door. There was no give, no sense of 'we're in this together—this is why we're in the nonprofit art world.'"

Kevin Cunningham, a freelance techie at the Kitchen who worked on both productions, has seen such conflicts before. "For anybody who's a production manager there, one of your main jobs becomes shielding the talent from Hobbs's wrath," he observes. "But when I say Hobbs, Lauren goes along with him and backs him up. The administration has an us/them attitude towards artists."

The night Vawter opened in *Cohn/Smith*, Hobbs came in while they were setting up to say there wouldn't be much of a crowd, so he wanted the first row of chairs taken down. Someone connected with the production decided to leave them up. When Hobbs returned at 8:15, there was chaos in the lobby because he hadn't scheduled ticket-takers or ushers. "He flew into a rage in

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the lobby and was just yelling and cursing," Cunningham recalls. (Hobbs can't remember the incident.) Once the audience was seated—and the house was nearly full—Vawter began his curtain speech, introducing the characters and explaining that he, too, was a person living with AIDS. Suddenly, says Cunningham, "Hobbs came flying into the theater and started throwing chairs off the first row from house left into the side aisle, and Ron just looked at him and said, 'Would you like to have a seat?'" ("That never happened," says Hobbs.)

Several days later, Vawter (who died last April) did his last performance of *Cohn/Smith* as a benefit for the Kitchen. They'd been filming all day, and they were behind schedule. But Cunningham estimates that, at 8:15, all they had to do was vacuum the stage before they could open the house. As someone working with Vawter described it, Hobbs came in "and had a major grand mal seizure and started ripping brooms out of interns' hands and screaming at a producer and the assistant director to open the doors." (Hobbs insists that Amazeen was the "heavy" who ordered the doors open. She backs him up.)

"When Hobbs threw the temper tantrum at the filming," says Cunningham, "I went out into the lobby to Lauren and just said, 'Look, I have to complain. This is just unnecessary rudeness.' I ended up getting called on the carpet for that. She and John just double-teamed me. What they basically said was 'we thought you were on our side,' and I said, 'I didn't think there were sides.'"

The isolation of Amazeen and her deputies from the community of artists went hand in hand with what Ira Silverberg calls "a two-tier class system that the current administration very slowly put into place. They effectively divided the institution into a hierarchy of cocktail-party-going buffoons and the rest of us who kind of work in the trenches." The alienation extended to the Kitchen's influential staff of curators, who had always made most of the decisions about programming. Under Amazeen, many of them began to feel undermined.

Back in the summer of '92, Amazeen told Media Curator Steve Gallagher that she'd asked a friend, Warren Neidich, to do an installation in the Kitchen's elevator—because the board thought the lift was ugly. It would be temporary and unpublicized, she said. A wallpaper job, he figured. Then another curator alerted Gallagher that press releases were going out. This was to be a permanent media installation, it was definitely being publicized, and the same artist was having a show at the Kitchen.

"It was all news to me," says Gallagher. "I've turned down so many other installations, and for someone like that to come in simply because he was going to put up his own money . . ." That was what Amazeen had told him when Gallagher confronted her about booking a media artist without consulting him: The artist was paying for it. Amazeen doesn't remember the conversation. "That's more about Steve than it is about the Kitchen," she maintains. "He had a difficult time with boundaries."

There was another reason the installation distressed Gallagher. It had happened behind his back. Occasionally, Gallagher would see Amazeen meeting with some media curator from Europe or someone representing a film festival, and she would not even introduce him. (Amazeen insists, "I was always introducing him to people.") Several other curators who have resigned report that she began to circumvent their authority by meeting with artists and sometimes booking events on her own. "I felt she was overstepping," Gallagher says. "She really wanted to be involved in programming."

Other executive directors at the Kitchen occasionally exercised a programming prerogative. But Amazeen's decisions often struck her subordinates as arbitrary. Currently, the Kitchen has no performance, media, or literary curators. Presumably, Amazeen is making many of these decisions. ("I don't program, per se," she says. "I suggest things. We're a team.")

The team now includes only two perma-

nent curators. They don't report any of the problems described by so many others. "I've gotten very positive feedback from people about their experiences at the Kitchen," says Music Curator Ben Neill, a composer and musician in the tradition of predecessors like Rhys Chatham. Dance Curator JoAnn Jansen acknowledges that "until the whole staff got reorganized, it was difficult. There were a lot of problems and sometimes the artists felt the brunt of it. Now that the Kitchen's been reorganized, that won't happen."

Perhaps. But a number of artists told me they felt like intruders at the Kitchen, as if the space were private and they shouldn't be there. Former curator Steve Gross recalls his attempts to book rehearsal space for dancers, only to be told no by Hobbs. "At every step I wanted to take to share our resources with artists, he was just standing there saying, 'Forget it.'"

Silverberg recalled that this past season he booked a sold-out Nan Goldin slide show and they "gave her heartache" over the slide projector. Goldin had dropped by the Kitchen at 1 p.m. to check the setup and ended up staying till show time because nothing worked. "They wanted me to wing it," Goldin says. She can't remember names, only that "it was the people in the office who were the problem," not the crew. When no one at the Kitchen would help her, Goldin's studio assistant finally called Silverberg at work. Hobbs informed him that if the Kitchen had to rent anything for Goldin, it would come out of her pocket. In the end, the Kitchen covered the cost, and the show went well—but the day had been upsetting to Goldin. Says Silverberg: "Artists are made to feel the Kitchen is doing them a favor just by letting them be there."

Last winter, the Kitchen hosted an Improv Festival. According to its organizer, Sondra Loring, the dance curator had been very upfront about saying the Kitchen would do nothing for them, and Loring had agreed. But then she found out what nothing really meant. According to Mary Ellen Strom, who participated in the festival with her lesbian and gay youth group, they weren't allowed to use "any extension cords, any video cables, any monitors, any lights, any headsets, any anything." Usually, nonprofits go out of their way to help artists, especially when they can't pay them. So, says Strom, "I went and borrowed almost everything from Dance Theater Workshop and pulled it down the street and put it into the Kitchen where all these things like extension cords and video cables were locked in a closet a foot away from me."

When choreographer Margarita Guergué performed at the Kitchen last winter, she was made to feel guilty about asking for the most basic services, like a clean dressing room. And it wasn't just the artist who felt unwelcome, but her audience. "Even some of my friends didn't come, because they were treated so badly on the phone when they tried to make reservations."

I went to the Kitchen early in June, having never met Amazeen or Hobbs. They and Latzky squired me through a building I've visited countless times. The physical plant looked better than I'd ever seen it. Hobbs had found new, more comfortable theater seats for the first floor. The old dressing room had become a newly painted and carpeted video-distribution office, while there were two new dressing rooms off the mezzanine. A colorful video rolled on the monitor in the empty editing suite. I said it looked like they were working to upgrade the space, and Amazeen replied that, yes, it was time for the Kitchen to "consider a profile." This was one of her visions.

Last season, they had actually opened a second-floor theater, which many associated with the Kitchen had dreamed of for years. And they had made the sensible decision to open a video viewing room called Kitchenette at Thread Waxing Space, which brought the tapes back to Soho.

Amazeen and Latzky sat down with me in the office she shares with Hobbs. She told me about their "nondogmatic philosophy" and the way they kept "that Kitchen feeling, which is the intimacy." Everyone

communicated, and curators no longer had to deal with administrative details. Artists came in and dealt directly with Latzky, Hobbs, and herself. That made them feel secure, "because they know what's going to happen. I want them to be able to put their energy into the work—and to make them feel safe. Because suddenly, there's this large press machine, a larger audience. They feel this huge pressure, which is, 'I'm at the Kitchen.'"

Hobbs joined us to discuss the New York affiliate of the Electronic Cafe International, which will open on the second floor this November. He will be the cafe's director because of his technical expertise. Founded 10 years ago in Santa Monica, the Cafe makes global collaborations possible through multimedia teleconferencing. For example, a performer in New York could dance with a partner in Paris, or the two could dance as a single, merged body in cyberspace. A concert could feature five musicians in five cities playing together, a virtual supergroup.

A New York node on this network is long overdue since there are already more than 40 affiliates, from Phoenix to Managua to Copenhagen. Cafe cofounders Kit Galloway and Sherri Rabinowitz thought the Kitchen a perfect fit for the project: a preeminent avant-garde showcase, a pioneer in new music, a venue known for interdisciplinary work. "The Kitchen will be one of the high-end cafes," says Rabinowitz, "able to handle color-motion video across oceans as

A NUMBER OF ARTISTS TOLD ME THEY FELT LIKE INTRUDERS AT THE KITCHEN, AS IF THE SPACE WERE PRIVATE AND THEY SHOULDN'T BE THERE.

well as the little black-and-white videophone, which is the common denominator."

Galloway and Rabinowitz work constantly against the elitism inherent in all this technology, reaching out to local communities that would never have access to such equipment. But Amazeen and her deputies see the Cafe as a moneymaker. "We can rent it out to corporations or consulates," Amazeen says. Latzky added that "the companies who produced [and donated] the equipment want to participate in seeing what it can do, and I think there's a financial aspect to that. That's a little undetermined at this point, but the Kitchen doesn't exist and artists certainly don't exist to offer free services to industry."

The dollars aren't where they used to be for nonprofits, and the Kitchen has taken a bigger hit than many when it comes to public support. The cuts, says Amazeen, have left this institution "scrambling for pennies."

Amazeen discussed the Kitchen's precipitous drop in NEA support during her tenure, from \$65,000 to \$10,000. She had several, conflicting explanations for this: "It's almost as if it was a setup. Maybe on the panel level, it was fear of change at the Kitchen." Amazeen had another theory as well: "The government may have said, in order to allay the anger on the right, we'll throw them a bone. And we may have been the bone that was thrown."

Representative Sid Yates, a longtime champion of the NEA, had addressed the National Council on the Arts last fall while the Kitchen's grant was on the table. The council, made up of art-world luminaries appointed by the president, meets four times a year, to approve decisions, of the

NEA's peer panels. Once known for rubber-stamping panel recommendations, the council's question to Yates indicates how politicized it has become.

Should artistic merit continue to guide funding judgments? the Council wanted to know. Yes, said Yates, but he cautioned the group: "As you take your risks and approach the cliff, try not to jump over the cliff. . . . There's no way of containing the wave of criticism for the Mapplethorpe and for the Serrano, and later for the Kitchen in New York and Annie Sprinkle and the others, I guess, who are over the cliff, in my opinion."

Latzky thought Yates's remarks were an attempt to influence the council on the Kitchen's grant. The glitch in this theory is that the peer panel met in August and decided to award the Kitchen a mere \$5000. That's what was on the table when Yates spoke in November. At some point after his speech, the numbers were readjusted so the Kitchen ended up with \$10,000.

There was one more theory. When Latzky xeroxed material for me related to their NEA grant, he pointed to a name on one of the panels, indicating that here, perhaps, was the real reason for the cut. The name was that of Tim McClimon, Bobbi Tsumagari's former fiance. The problem with this theory is that McClimon served on the panel for fiscal year '93, which had awarded the Kitchen \$50,000. The panel that cut them to \$5000 in fiscal year '94 did not include a single New Yorker.

The NEA sent the Kitchen a summary of the peer panel's comments, spelling out the reasons for the cut: "The overall approach [to programming] was not particularly innovative." It had "lacked clarity in its curatorial vision." Panelists agreed that the Kitchen had presented many excellent artists, but wondered whether this might be a "spotlight series" focusing on artists of stature, but without evidence of any curatorial direction. The panel expressed concern over the fact that Amazeen can veto a curator's decisions. (This sentence was underlined in the report.) The panel also cited inadequate educational activity and outreach, as well as audiences that "did not appear broad-based." Given these concerns, there had never been significant support to fund the Kitchen at a higher level.

In the nonprofit art world, institutions exist to funnel money into the production of culture. But the Kitchen has changed the rules of the game. Under Amazeen, art exists to funnel money into the institution.

Consider the saga of *We Interrupt This Program*. This live TV broadcast addressing the AIDS epidemic, featuring performers like Bill T. Jones, Karen Finley, and John Kelly, first aired on Day Without Art, 1991. The project had been initiated at the Kitchen by staffer Mary Ellen Strom and Executive Director Bobbi Tsumagari. But a general paranoia about Tsumagari developed at the Kitchen after she left. When Tsumagari stayed with the project, Strom says, "This caused a huge strain with Lauren—that I would have any association with Bobbi or that Bobbi would have any association with the Kitchen. I was even told she was not allowed in the building."

Steve Gallagher recalls that merely renting tapes to Tsumagari was "a nightmare. If she came into the building, Lauren had to know." Another former staffer mentioned that "on days when Lauren was home sick, she would call up to find out if Bobbi was there—very weird stuff." Amazeen denies all of this, adding, "I stood very strong about the fact that Bobbi should be in that project, and that it should stay at the Kitchen." But staffer Michelle Rosenshein, who applied for a grant from the Geffen Foundation to fund *We Interrupt This Program*, remembers the Kitchen as "a hostile environment" for the project. "When I worked on it, I was seen as not doing my job."

On December 1, *We Interrupt This Program* was broadcast from the television studio at the Borough of Manhattan Community College. "The Kitchen was dark that week," recalls Rosenshein, "and Lauren refused to even let us borrow lights. The whole community was coming out to make this happen, while the Kitchen was distanc-

ing itself."

Strom asked Amazeen if they should take the project to another organization to produce again in 1992. At that point, "I didn't make waves," Amazeen says. "I let it go." Then, in January, a \$10,000 check arrived from the Geffen Foundation. In the spring, the project moved to Creative Time, and Amazeen promised to give up the Geffen money. But several months later, Amazeen announced that the money would pay for AIDS-related video programming at the Kitchen. Then she said it was for various video projects, "and then," says Rosen-shein, "God knows what became of it."

It's not unusual for nonprofits with cash-flow problems to scoot money around. What is unusual is to solicit money for a project and then apply none of it to the project. But Amazeen insists, "That was Kitchen money," adding that she had called the Geffen Foundation to clarify the point. Andy Spahn, president of the Geffen Foundation, says it is possible that Amazeen got permission to use the money for something else. No one currently at the foundation was there in 1992. "Once we make a decision to support an organization, we generally feel they know best what to do with the support, so it wouldn't be inconsistent. But we were solicited specifically for this broadcast," says Spahn.

In the months before the second broadcast, Strom, Tsumagari, and Cee Brown, Creative Time's director, made several attempts to contact Amazeen by phone and registered mail. When Brown finally got her on the phone, Amazeen told him that since the project had left the Kitchen, she'd decided to keep the money and use it for the media program. Amazeen confirms that that's where it ended up. But Gallagher, who was still running the media program at that time, has no idea how the money was used.

The easiest way to make money at a performing-arts venue is to sell tickets. But the Kitchen's attempts to control how their events were sold sometimes backfired, and the artists suffered for it.

As last season began, in September, the Kitchen began refusing to take reservations over the phone. This forced patrons to either call Ticketmaster or come to this remote location during business hours to purchase a ticket. Amazeen and Hobbs told me that this policy was only in effect for one week, but Leslie says that after he saw what the policy had done to both Melissa Fenley and Ron Vawter, he pleaded with his colleagues to change it. And that was in November, during Kyle DeCamp's run.

DeCamp remembers very clearly how difficult it was for people to buy a ticket to her show, *Ladyland*. "People who called Ticketmaster were told *Ladyland* wasn't on the list," she says. "People who went to the Kitchen during the day were asked to wait for, like, 20 minutes before they could buy a ticket from someone on the third floor." So DeCamp spent a lot of time at the beginning of her run arranging ticket purchases, often buying them for people herself and getting reimbursed. She says the policy changed by her third week. Amazeen says she was never aware that anyone had had any trouble buying tickets.

DeCamp insists that doing *Ladyland* at the Kitchen was "ultimately a very positive experience. But along the way it became a battleground for administrative issues which had nothing to do with the work or with me." Leslie says the problems were "the beginning of breaking me down." Both he and DeCamp describe a major struggle over the poster she had made—fuss and bother over things like the placement of the Ticketmaster logo, the typeface for the words *The Kitchen*, and a final cataclysmic battle over the words presented on the second floor.

Such micromanaging was new to the Kitchen. It ranged from Hobbs's control over the building to Amazeen's enhanced role in programming to Eric Latzky's lock on publicity. Latzky had created a standard look for all Kitchen mailings and posters. DeCamp remembers, "We got into a lot of little snags and evasions with him" during the design process, and then, with the post-

er already late for the printer, Latzky demanded that the words about the second floor be added. (Hobbs insists the poster hadn't even mentioned the Kitchen's name.) Ultimately, the poster was reshot—at a cost to DeCamp of \$200. Leslie felt so bad about it that he sold ad space in the program to cover the extra cost.

Initially, the Kitchen seemed excited about *Ladyland*, a performance piece about women who'd been involved with Jimi Hendrix. The administration thought the work could appeal to an audience beyond the art world. But they did little to make that cross-over dream a reality. *Ladyland* didn't get any of this press and wasn't even listed in the *Times* and the *Voice*.

Leslie asked Amazeen if he could extend *Ladyland* for a third week, since nothing else was scheduled for the space. But according to Leslie, Latzky recommended that they not extend the show, because he didn't see how it was going to get any press. (Latzky says that, on the contrary, he loved the show and wanted it extended.) Amazeen approved a third week, and Leslie and DeCamp started making their own media calls. (Latzky says all they did was follow up on his own efforts.) The show got listed, and by then, the Kitchen had also dropped its "no phone reservation" policy. Suddenly, they had big houses.

The artist who followed DeCamp, Dudley Saunders, borrowed money to hire his own publicist, over Latzky's objections. "He definitely told me to my face that they did not want me to get press," says Saunders. He says Latzky asked him to fire his publicist immediately. Latzky says he merely asked Saunders "to handle things differently," because he thought the publicist who'd been hired was into hyping people. "If I have one rule, it's to avoid hyperbole at all cost," Latzky says of his approach to publicity. "People are ready for different amounts of attention at different points in their career."

Saunders's publicist, William McLaughlin, says he has often worked with Downtown artists and performance spaces (he manages Danny Hoch, among others). But he had never encountered anything like this: "Open hostility—from Eric. It was quite baffling. I finally said, 'What am I doing wrong, and how can we resolve it?' His response was, 'I don't have to resolve it.'" (Latzky denies he ever said that, adding that he had invited McLaughlin to the Kitchen to talk things over.)

Saunders's piece, *Birdbones*, ended up with a good review in the *Times*, which cited the show's "hallucinatory power" and "poetic richness." Of the drama unfolding offstage, however, Saunders says, "I tried to get David [Leslie] to field as much as he could. It seemed odd that most of what David had to do was run around protecting me. I had hoped I could have David hold my hand about the work, not about whether I'm going to be attacked when I come in every day."

It should be a glittering evening. Lauren Hutton is expected, as is Camille Paglia. Susan Faludi will arrive via fiber optics, along with a Parisian woman who spent \$55,000 on plastic surgery to become doll-like. The evening celebrates the publication of M. G. Lord's *Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll*, and the Kitchen is billing the event as a "living book." A dollop of gender theory leavened with fun.

This is the inaugural event at the Electronic Cafe, where the avant-preneurs will introduce their new model. "They're in showbiz over there," Leslie observes. It's not just that the work is slick, but that it's safe—something that could find a place on PBS. There is nothing about it to get Jesse Helms's dander up. And nothing to delineate the edge.

Not that the *Barbie* soiree is all there is to the Kitchen. But it conforms to the community's deepest fears about the direction of the place. The mismanagement, the mistreatment, the maladroitness—all send a message that the Kitchen has lost its commitment to artists. And artists, in turn, have lost faith in the place. It's like a marriage gone bad. And, as David Leslie says, "it's a heartbreaker." ■