

PUNK PLANET

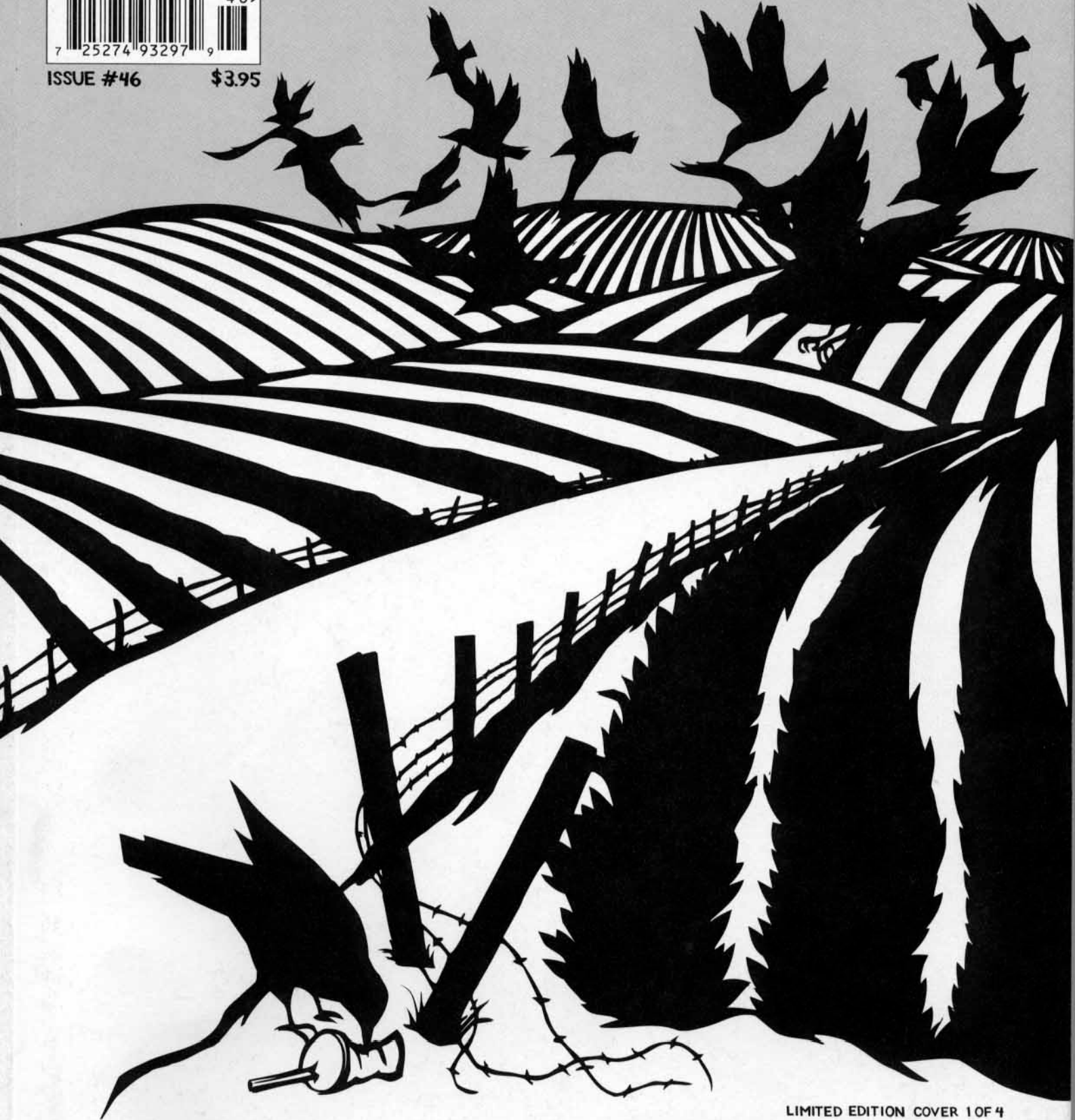
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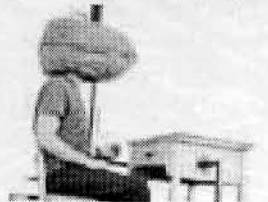
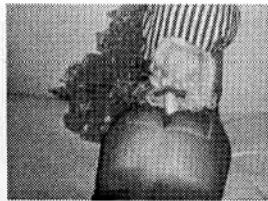


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LIMITED EDITION COVER 1 OF 4



the

POND

gallery

The turning of the new year in San Francisco was a strange moment in the city's history. Exhilarated by the prospect of a seemingly endless period of economic growth, and giddy at the development of what seemed, at the time, like a tool that would revolutionize the world, Internet businesses city-wide were celebrating their first few months or years in operation. Outrageously decadent office parties were building to a climax throughout Soma and along the newly developed live-work spaces in the Mission District. The city was still riding the perennial wave of a full-fledged dot-com revolution. And people were ready to continue parting like they did when the boom first hit in 1999. Limos rolling along the few remaining seedy areas on Valencia Street on their way to the trendier bars down the way might have noticed, just briefly, a small gaggle of artists, punks, activists and other assorted misfits loitering on the corner of Valencia and Duboce Streets, drinking, talking and celebrating what was a truly peculiar event in *fin de siècle* San Francisco: the official opening party for a non-profit gallery, performance space, and activist enclave in the heart of the city's bloodiest real estate warzone.

In the preceding year, the closing of art spaces and the eviction of the city's artists had become so familiar it was beyond cliché. From the death of the Epicenter record store to the domino closings of well-respected art spaces including ESP, the Victoria Room, and Four Walls; from the de facto eviction of non-profits throughout the city, to the exodus of artists, activists, and entire working class neighborhoods; the city was rapidly changing to accommodate the new vanguard of young, mainly white, middle class Internet entrepreneurs. Art spaces closing or relocating to greener (read: cheaper) pastures had become a common occurrence. The idea of a new gallery opening—and a non-profit one at that—was just ridiculous.

Of course, ridiculous ideas were the rule at the time. Sell pet food directly though the Web? Sure. Start your own for-profit baby food distribution network via the almighty Internet? In a market like this, you'd be crazy not to! But the idea of a non-profit, experimental art space and community meeting place in the middle of a dying working class neighborhood? That was just a little too hopelessly idealistic, thank you very much.

Nine months later, most of the dot-com companies that created such havoc for the

area's residents have folded or fled, leaving large sections of city a vacant desert of relatively cheap workspace. The Pond space—now far more than a gallery—continues to grow. Intent on displaying art that is at the crux of aesthetically unique and politically subversive thinking, It's quickly developed a reputation as an essential neighborhood meeting place and cultural center. In addition to its monthly gallery shows, and its acting as a meeting space for a wide range of community groups, Pond has since developed a fledgling zine resource center, a lecture series, and its own publishing imprint, Pondscum Press. And, judging by the turnout for their last collaborative show opening, the community surrounding Pond continues to grow ever wider—spilling out of the doorway, off the sidewalk into the middle of Valencia Street.

For a space that started out as a crumbling storefront with a front window displaying one installation at a time, this is no small feat. I sat down with the two co-founders, Steve Shada and Marisa Jahn, a week before their most recent opening to ask them what they see in the future for the ever-deepening project that is Pond.

Interview by **Eric Zass**



Where did the idea for Pond come from?

Steve: We were traveling through the US at the time, hopping freight trains from Portland heading east, before Marisa was going to be speaking in London. We came back to San Francisco before she left. We'd already given up our apartment, and we didn't have any place to stay, or really much to do. We weren't sure if we were going to remain in San Francisco for much longer. There was really no reason for us to stay.

Marisa: We thought we were going to live in a boat.

Steve: We were considering living in a houseboat actually. I was going to build on this houseboat, and we were thinking about living there while we were building it. A friend of mine owned it. We came back and had two weeks before Marisa was going to be presenting a paper at the University of East London. We happened to be over at her brother's house one day, looking on his computer for possible alternatives, and saw this place listed.

Marisa: It should be said that when we came back from the trip, there was a less than one percent vacancy rate in San Francisco.

Steve: There were *no* spaces available.

Marisa: We were sure we weren't going to find anything. I told Steve not to even bother looking.

Steve: When I saw this place, Marisa didn't even want to come down and look at it. We called the guy and he said he was only going to be showing it for 30 minutes. He had just posted it five minutes before I checked. It was the first place we contacted. One thing led to another and we ended up getting the space pretty much that day.

Marisa: It also should be said that we were looking for a space that my brother could run his business out of. I came down here, and I realized when I was talking to the landlord that he was kind of into the arts. He wanted to know how we were going to use the space. There were a couple of people who were interested already, but he hadn't leased it out to them because he wanted someone to do something interesting with it. So I said, "Well, we could section off the window and show our own work in the window." And I started to describe this installation piece I had been thinking about doing for awhile. He was really into it.

Steve: He's kind of crazy. Also, the place was totally fucked up. There were huge pieces of the ceiling missing; there were leaks all over the place. The place was totally destroyed. There were tons of mice and rats and cockroaches and dust and dirt and garbage. He didn't want to put *any* money into the thing. "Well," I said, "I'm a carpenter." We told him that we would be willing fix the place up for rent credit. That and the fact that he was into Marisa's idea, along with the fact that Marisa's brother was willing to front the money because he needed office space so badly, got us the space.

What about the idea of the gallery?

Marisa: We had no intention of starting a gallery at all.

Steve: We were going to live in the space, and occasionally put our own installations in the storefront window. We had never intended to start an organization at all. But after we moved in and started fixing up the place, we realized that it would be kind of fucked to try to live here, but that it *would* be possible to make the entire front part a really nice gallery. We thought that it would be a really casual little space at first. But as we started talking to people while we were fixing it up, one thing led to another and it just grew and grew and grew. ¶ It was at a time when a lot of alternative spaces were closing. Within a few months before we opened, several major galleries that were really important in terms of alternative art spaces in San Francisco shut down. It was at the height

of when people were getting evicted and everyone's rent was doubling. Artists were getting evicted and everyone was moving to Oakland or Emeryville. ¶ When people found out we were starting a new space and started asking us about it, we were really vague in terms of what it was going to be. The truth is, we didn't know ourselves! The ideas and concepts that formed Pond were formed by other people telling us how cool it would be if we did this and that, combined with our original idea of having a really down-to-earth, accessible place to show work we liked. ¶ We didn't want it to be *just* a gallery. We were interested more in breaking down the barriers between a gallery and a community space and making it available to people living in the community, not just transporting a bunch of art students and art critics into someone else's neighborhood. We were also interested in making politics and political activism an important part of that space. This evolved more and more into a definite idea of what we wanted. It sort of kept building—it still *is* building.

Marisa: In the first month or two that we were building it, people would inquire about Pond as if it were this already existing entity. We thought, "Well, OK. I guess it's real."

Steve: I've always been intimidated by the idea of starting my own space. Being a dropout from college, I was always intimidated by the art crowd and the idea of a gallery as this thing you had to know about. It felt like you had to know the *right* things about art before you even entered a gallery, let alone before you create one. I've always thought that it was really fucked that so many people are excluded from the art scene because they didn't know the

right names to drop. I've always thought that there was no real sense of community there. At the same time, I've always done art. I've always been closely attached to art—whether it's appreciating it as a viewer or actually making my own.

Marisa: In San Francisco, I feel that there are two main "alternative spaces" that show and support local artists, but you have to have a full set of slides in order to be shown in either of them, which I don't have. After I finished school, I thought, "What am I supposed to do now? I'm not really interested in those established spaces so much." They cater to a middle class, 30-something sort of crowd. Also, there are a number of institutionalized "youth outreach" art programs around primarily for teens, but for people who aren't that young, there's not really a great community space.

How do you think Pond differs from a conventional gallery?

Steve: One thing that I've always felt has been the demise of a lot of great, interesting ideas is the fact that people who are doing them have to pay rent. It's a fact of life. You have to pay for the space that you're doing your work in. One of the big differences between Pond and most other galleries is that we take zero percent commission. We don't sell any work. The salability of a particular piece doesn't influence the type of work we show. We show the type of stuff we want to show—that is, generally, under-represented, or experimental art—which can be any number of different styles, from graffiti to really weird stuff that no one else will show. Whatever we show, we're not influenced by anything other than the quality and importance of the work. We're not making

any money on the show. The shows are all free to get into and if an artist does happen to sell some of their work, they receive all of the money from it. For that reason, it's not important to us to have to make rent every month by selling artwork. Other spaces take a commission so that they can their pay rent. Inevitably that means economic factors will dictate what you show, in some regard. Eventually, it will affect what kind of work you show. By not taking commission, we're able to show whatever we want based purely on the merit of the work. I think that's an important difference. ¶ The other difference is that we don't have the same requirements many other spaces do. Anybody who we feel does good work to show can show it here. Our decisions are not based on what school you went to or who you know or how well you're doing. They're based on what your work says to us when we see it. It's not like we're looking to be crowd-pleasers. If we think it's good work, we'll show it. We don't show work based on how many people it will draw in. We base it on how it touches us personally.

Marisa: One of the problems with other non-profits is that there's a discrepancy between the audience who they want to work with and who their supporters actually are. Sometimes it will be an economic discrepancy. It's far easier to make money by catering to people who are wealthy. It's easier to fund things through auctions where you can charge \$50 for people at the door, and then have silent bidding starting at \$1000. That has always been slightly irritating to me, because I could never pay that kind of money. We're trying not to have that kind of economic discrepancy determine who we cater to. We're trying to do more grassroots fundraising.

Steve: We're not doing this purely out of idealism either. Every other gallery is making their money that way. Everyone else is doing the fundraiser and silent auction or whatever. It's working to allow them to pay their rent. At least for now, we're more than willing to use our day jobs to pay for this space until we can find grant money and raise a larger membership. Maybe in the future we'll have to do

that, but right now we're more than willing to support it ourselves. In the long run, hopefully it's going to mean that we'll be better able to receive grant money and more support from philanthropists and people who have money to support the arts. Because we're committed to a strong set of ideals, we feel we'll be far more favorable to receive grants.

Marisa: I actually disagree. I don't think grant-makers care. They're really more concerned with track history. I don't think they necessarily do care about your idealism. They care if you're able to meet your intended goals. Part of it is that they want you to be financially viable. Of course with a non-profit, silent auctions are one of the ways you raise funds—if not the foremost way.

How has that sort of DIY mentality influenced the way Pond is run?

Steve: Punk music first introduced me to the concept of DIY, the idea of being able to create your own environment, and being able to dictate and control how you live your life. One of the reasons I moved to San Francisco was because, when I was living in the shithole Sacramento foothills, I heard about Gilman Street and the Epicenter. I really liked the concept and ideals that those spaces were founded on. They definitely influenced the way this space is run. It's one of the reasons we do things the way we do, I think. ¶ One interesting thing about our space is that, because we're based in a pretty strong set of ideals, we see the same people at every show. I don't think any other gallery around has such a loyal crowd. We're not for everybody, but the people who like what we're doing really do support us. We just sent out our first solicitation for

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membership, which is one way we're hoping to raise money for Pond, and we got . . .

Marisa: . . . about 70 percent returned.

Steve: And that's within the first two weeks after sending it out. ¶ Not only that, but we've been keeping track of the people who've been coming through. I would say that we still have the people who came to our first show coming to every other show, every month. We're stilling getting 100 to 200 new people signing onto our mailing list per month.

Do you think that's you because you have a similar aesthetic to all of your shows?

Steve: I think it's for a couple of reasons. I would say that maybe 80 percent of the people on our mailing list live within a five block radius of here. It's also important that we're on the ground level of this building. Unlike other galleries, we're not behind some curtain. You don't have to go up any stairs; you don't have to go through some corridor or take an elevator to get to our space. We're right on the fucking sidewalk with a huge window displaying the entire space. I think for a lot

of our members, this is the only space they ever go to. A lot of people on our mailing list are not art crowd people at all, they're people that live around here. This is the only art thing that they ever do. We're definitely more accessible than most other places.

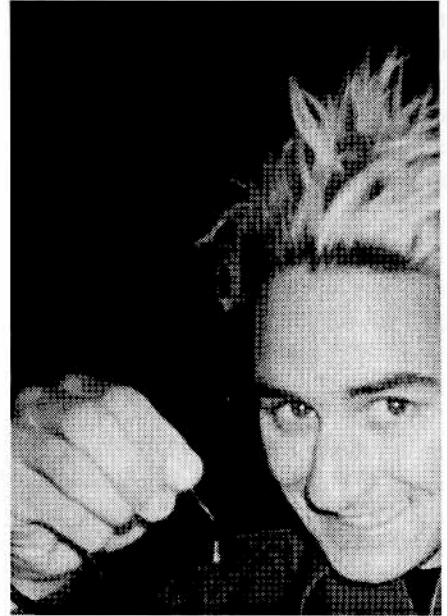
To what extent do you think that the community influences your decisions on what you show and to what extent is it your own choice?

Steve: We found the people who were part of our first show through people who we knew in common. Since then, those people have turned us on to other artists. We were sort of looking for Rubber O Cement, who were our first show. In the midst of our looking for them, Grux, who is one of the people in Rubber O Cement, happened to knock on our door and hand us a flyer for one of his shows. I said, "We've been looking for you. We've been looking to show your work." He lives right down the street. ¶ The next two people whose work we showed were people who happened to stop by the gallery. Everyone who has walked through the door has talked to one of us, either Marisa or myself. We usually say hello and talk to them, ask them questions, because it is a small, intimate space. Through our conversations we realized that they were doing stuff that we're into. Every show we've done has been influenced by the community. One way or another, they've been directly influenced by somebody introducing us to somebody else, or somebody coming in and wanting to see the work we're showing and us wanting to show their work.

Marisa: One problem that we've had is that guys are more inclined to come in or to send proposals than women are. Since we've taken a passive approach to curating, we need to, start seeking out women artists that we like. There are plenty of women who do interesting work, they just haven't walked in with their work on them.

Were you ever afraid that one element of Pond, the political or artistic focus, would eclipse the other?

Marisa: Well, we definitely want to make it more political.



Steve: It's difficult to find political work that doesn't suck.

Art and politics don't usually mix very well.

Steve: It's hard to make political artwork that isn't didactic. There are a few people who can pull it off well, but they're already fairly well known. They're not really under-represented. I think Eric Drooker and Winston Smith have pretty much gotten the props that they deserve for doing political artwork. I think both of their work is awesome, but they're also huge figures in the art world that show a lot of work around. It's also hard to combine politics and art in an experimental way. It's really very difficult to do.

Marisa: I feel like, for me, the context and the conditions in which it's shown and its audience are what politicizes artwork, too. Hans Haacke is a political artist. He talks about issues like the Holocaust. As soon as work like that is shown in the MOMA, it



becomes less political, *less* immediate. Whereas if it's shown in an art squat or on the street, that changes things a lot.

Steve: It depends on your perimeters of political, too. Issues of race, ethnicity, class, and culture are political issues. We've been pretty successful at showing work that represents those sorts of themes. Some types of work become political in the very act of showing it, because of the genre or style of work that it is. Graffiti is an example of a very commodifiable art form right now that used to be a revolutionary form of aesthetic destruction and vandalism. It's become accepted more into the mainstream of the art world now, but when you take graffiti and do something different with it, or have a different message to go with it, it becomes a political issue. When you have an artist who isn't a white straight male using that art form, it also changes the context. Issues of power are issues of pol-

itics—whether it's race, class, gender or sexual orientation, they are political issues. I think it's not as hard to find good artwork that falls into those kinds of perimeters as it is to find artwork that is, you know, the statue of liberty flipping everybody off instead of raising the torch. It's not something so blatant and obviously "political." It definitely is hard to combine the two, and sometimes we don't show work that is totally political. We try to offset that by having special events, and providing our space for community groups to meet in.

How many community groups meet here?

Steve: Not as many as we'd like so far. We've been so preoccupied with other things—like starting our publication and laying the foundation for the public art program, and also doing the routine, daily things that are necessary to running a non-profit—that it's been difficult to do any outreach to other groups. The October 22nd Coalition Against Police Brutality is one of the groups that we will probably be in contact with in the future. The Free Radical Collective is another we've been in contact with, though we haven't actually done anything with them yet. They've already got their nonprofit status, but don't have a home yet. There are a lot of groups that we want to do more work with, but it's been hard to organize it. We're still open-ended as far as community groups. I think we're going to be doing an event with La Casa de las Madres, which is a women's shelter. They're going to do a fundraiser here in the next couple months.

What advice would you give to someone starting up a similar space?

Marisa: Having a financial structure in place is important—which is kind of related to what we were talking about before. On one hand, we don't have art auctions, but as a younger space, it's hard to find grants. It also takes a lot of capital—both time and cash—before you can get to a position of writing grants. Our space isn't big enough to rent out or have music events or throw the occasional rave to raise money.

OUR SUCCESS SO FAR HAS BEEN BASED AROUND THE FACT THAT WE ARE SO ACCESSIBLE AND ARE REALLY MAKING AN EFFORT TO BECOME PART OF THE COMMUNITY, AND NOT JUST BEING INCLUSIVE AND REMAINING PART OF THE ART COMMUNITY, OR PART OF THE PUNK COMMUNITY, OR PART OF THAT SORT OF ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY, BUT BECOMING PART OF THE *GEOGRAPHICAL* COMMUNITY IN WHICH WE LIVE, AND TRYING TO DO SOME OUTREACH FOR THAT COMMUNITY.

Steve: With the amount of money that we're paying, we could get a larger space that would allow us to rent it out and have events we charge for. ¶ One of the things that has allowed us to keep going is that we had zero expectations starting; our expectations were founded by other people's wants and the realization that there was a need for a space like ours. Letting those needs formulate the concept for the space was important. We've always wanted a space like this. Only, we never thought we'd be running it. Even though we both wanted to start a space, we just never thought it would be possible. Our success so far has been based around the fact that we are so accessible and are really making an effort to become part of the community, and not just being inclusive and remaining part of the art community, or part of the punk community, or part of that sort of alternative community, but becoming part of the *geographical* community in which we live, and trying to do some outreach for that community. ©