

Liz Pelly on redefining the language of D.I.Y.

June 21, 2017 - Liz Pelly is a writer, editor, and collective member at Silent Barn. [Silent Barn](#) is a collectively directed art space in Brooklyn, New York that functions as a round-the-clock center of multidisciplinary experimentation. In 2013, Pelly co-founded the bi-weekly ad-free web paper, [The Media](#), which covers alternative music, culture, activism, and D.I.Y. communities, with an emphasis on making space for stories, ideas, and voices overlooked in the mainstream media. Pelly sees rethinking the language we use to “talk about D.I.Y. spaces as a good place to start reimagining what these spaces can be.”

As told to Charlotte Zoller, 1700 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Music](#), [Art](#), [Culture](#), [Independence](#), [Collaboration](#), [Politics](#).

How is being a writer related to being part of a D.I.Y. (“Do It Yourself”) art space?

There are a lot of ways that the words we use to talk about “D.I.Y. spaces” can help us better understand these spaces. Rethinking the language we use when we talk about D.I.Y. spaces is a good place to start in reimagining what spaces can be. One of the things we really need to think about is using different words to more precisely explain what we mean when we say “D.I.Y.”

Lately whenever I go to use the phrase “D.I.Y.,” I try to catch myself and use something more specific instead. Instead of saying “D.I.Y.,” depending on what space or situation you’re talking about, there are other words you can use, like artist-run, collective-run, collaboratively-run, or collaboratively-curated.

There are bigger questions that we can be asking about spaces. If you’re collective run, what does that actually mean to your space? How does your collective run? What are the processes? Is it a space where the members have agency? If you’re saying you’re a community arts space, well, what community and what types of art? Is your space against sponsorship? If it’s an anti-capitalist space, to what extent does the generation of capital play into how your space runs? How are decisions made? Is it a legitimately accessible space? Is it participatory? Does it exist explicitly outside of the music club industrial complex? How is power distributed within the space? What does the space support, politically and socially? These are all important things to think about when describing space, instead of saying “D.I.Y. venue.” If you stop and ask yourself these questions about whatever space you are trying to describe, you’ll probably come up with a lot of words and phrases more appropriate than “D.I.Y.”

We’re in this moment where a lot of people want to have conversations about the “state of D.I.Y.” in New York City. A lot of spaces have closed, and people want to talk about the legalization of D.I.Y. spaces and the future of the D.I.Y. community in New York. These are a really important conversations, but they’re constantly framed as the “state of D.I.Y.” I feel like that’s such a hollow term at this point. It’s something that has been completely commodified to the point of being meaningless, not unlike words like “independent.” Plus it gets us into these situations of finger pointing about what is “D.I.Y.” and what is “not D.I.Y.”

Independence is another difficult term because we’re in a moment where the entire world around us is so mediated by corporate platforms that nearly every decision we make is one about whether or not to engage with a platform that is at odds with our values. Trying to put spaces, platforms, bands, and labels under these umbrella terms is kind of a waste of time. What’s really more productive is to have more nuanced conversations about how they work, how power and money are distributed throughout them and to what ends, why they matter, and why we need to protect and support them.

There are no “D.I.Y.” spaces that are the result of one person’s work by themselves. These are largely collaboratively run projects. I think a lot of people think of “D.I.Y.” as doing things on your own terms, not waiting for things to be handed to you, and making stuff happen with whatever limited resources you have. You’re not relying on someone with a lot of money to come along and tell you that you can do something. People are saying, “We want to do this. We’re going to do it regardless of whether we have enough money to bring the space fully up to code or if we have enough money to have hired staff, or whatever. We’re just going to do it.” Obviously that’s something that people should continue doing. It’s important for people to feel that sense of agency and feel like if they want something to happen in the world, they should be able to do it on their own terms—whether or not someone gives them permission to. But that is only one of the many approaches that you can take when doing something on your own terms. It would be cool if we could come up with a whole new vocabulary to describe these types of spaces.

How else does language shape arts organizations?

At Silent Barn, people have really employed language as a way of self-defining. I also can’t speak to that all too much about because the roots of it are from before I was involved in the space. But I think the idea is that, there really hasn’t ever been a project distinctly organized in the way this one has, so one way it’s owning that sense of self definition has been through the use of these bizarre words. At worst, this type of hyper specific language can be weird, confusing, and alienating to someone who comes into a space and doesn’t know what anyone’s talking about. But at its best, it can help the space feel like its own world.

For instance, the name of the collective is the Kitchen. Everybody here is a Chef and part of working groups. Every working group has an Octopus, which is the person who facilitates a working group. When all the Octopi get together, it’s called Octopus Garden. There’s someone who is the Ghost Hunter, who basically looks at the collective infrastructure and tries to find areas where people are doing work that they’re not being recognized for, or gaps in the collective infrastructure that need to be filled.

Every organization needs a Ghost Hunter!

It’s true. Everything’s always changing, so something that I tell you about Silent Barn in this interview, by the time this goes to print, could be totally different and wrong. An ongoing joke people make about the Silent Barn is that you can take five different people who are involved in the project and put them all next to each other and ask them all to explain what Silent Barn is and all their definitions would be completely different. Anything I say about Silent Barn is from my perspective. If you really want to know about Silent Barn as a project, I’d encourage people to talk to others involved in the project as well.

I like to think that the ability to be really precise with your words and put time into careful communication can be seen as a resource within any space, one that could be used to support other people’s ideas and help other people within the space.

Lately, I've been thinking about the different types of resistance organizing that's been happening in 2017. There are many different ways folks can support that organizing outside of just donating money. Every movement needs writers, people to help write copy, and write emails, and fill out paperwork, take notes, and edit notes in ways that are clear and understandable. There are a lot of ways writers can support activism.

Another important thing to think about with language and spaces is that New York City is a place where half of the city speaks a language that is not English, so if you're thinking about trying to be inclusive, being run entirely by people who only speak English is a huge weakness. This subject actually came up earlier in the year. The Department of Cultural Affairs hosted a meeting on D.I.Y. spaces that a lot of people from galleries and spaces across the city attended. Someone from Silent Barn brought up a really good point that nothing had been done to reach out to people that spoke a language other than English. It's certainly something everyone in "D.I.Y." needs to work on.

How has being involved with a collective changed your editorial work?

Being involved at Silent Barn has definitely inspired me to want to keep working on [The Media](#), even at times when that project has slowed down or felt unsustainable. People have worked really hard to keep the Barn going for over 10 years in various capacities. It's hard, exhausting, and thankless, but from that work you also get this really crucial shared institutional knowledge. I think it's made me aware of the importance of long-lasting projects and how they become these sort of counter-institutions that can be hubs of cross-generational knowledge and resources other than money.

How have your views of outside institutions changed?

I think being part of a collectively or cooperatively organized project, you start thinking about how energy and power are transferred within a space. It has made me think about alternative economies and generally more hyper aware of the exploitative economies on which media companies are often based. I'm really fascinated by people who are thinking about the ways the values of collective and cooperatives can inform something as amorphous as the internet, or "media" or "platforms."

There is this movement called "platform cooperativism" that I think is inspiring. It's a movement to think about who owns the internet and how digital space could be more fair for workers and users. One of the first times I really started thinking about this was working on the [Immaterial Digital Labor issue](#) of the Media in 2015, which I edited with Chris Lee and Dorothy Howard. Working on that issue was really inspiring, as was [the interview](#) I did with Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst for The Media later that same year on some related topics.

Thinking about the politics of platforms connects some dots in my mind. To me it feels very much at the intersections of being a writer who edits an online publication and also being involved in a collective-run venue. Maybe on the surface it doesn't seem like there is a lot in common, but it's kind of all about space.

Liz Pelly recommends independent media:

[Democracy Now!](#)
[In These Times](#)
[Maximumrocknroll](#)
[CASH Music](#) / [WATT](#)
[She Shreds](#)
[Spark Mag](#)

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photo by Jenn Pelly