

May 12, 2017 - Faye Orlove runs a nonprofit arts and education space called Junior High in Los Angeles. The space aims to amplify marginalized voices and keeps a transparent record of its finances. Orlove, who is an artist as well, speaks about setting up Junior High as a non-profit for the first time and the importance of receiving criticism from her community.



As told to Charlotte Zoller, 2006 words.

Tags: Culture, Curation, Beginnings, Identity, Adversity.

Faye Orlove on creating a nonprofit art space

You're very open about the costs associated with running your space, Junior High. On the website you've itemized your monthly expenses, clearly laid out your payment structure for shows, as well as the reasons behind them. What was the impetus for being so transparent?

Well, the transparency is kind of two-fold. I want to be very clear about what goes into running a space so that other people feel empowered to do the same thing. That's my ultimate dream with running this space—what if a bunch of other ones popped up?

Transparency is also a safety net for me because I do my pay outs the same way for every event, unless we talk about it beforehand. Generally I make the first \$200, which is not that much, and then pay out the artist(s) with the rest. I've gotten criticism... and when I say I've gotten criticism, it's like one person. [laughs] I get one piece of criticism and it affects me so much that it feels like 900 people were just like, "You're a monster!" But I got criticism that I did not pay out artists of color for an event. When you say it like that, it's really fucked up. It's like, "Yeah, I kept money and refused to pay artists who are continually not paid for their work," and all this stuff. But the fact of the matter is, a lot of times, artists don't get paid because 10 people come out to an event someone booked and I can't afford to be open and not make that 50 bucks or whatever it is.

So it's kind of like, yeah that's true if you say it that way, but also a lot of other artists haven't gotten paid, too. No one books an event with me not being very clear about the money stuff. Most people don't care; they just want the space to showcase something they're doing. Even if they do get a pay out, sometimes they'll donate it. Which is cool, but ideally, I'd get to pay every single person. Maybe one day if I have grant money or funding like that, I could.

Was there ever a time when the criticism got to be too much and you started to question things?

Oh my god, still today. Every moment, I'm like, "Am I doing enough? Am I doing good? Is what I'm doing helping more than it's hurting?" I've made mistakes. There's been merch that I've stocked or programming that I planned that was not inclusive to trans women. There've been times when I didn't get to pay an artist of color as much as I would like to.

There are some nights that I can't sleep after receiving really bad criticism. A lot of the time, I have to remember that criticism is mostly a good thing. When I do end up hurting or ostracizing people—advertently of course—I always make myself available to talk or email or meet up or make changes. There's not much more I can do than try my best, be open minded, be really transparent about how I book, what I'm trying to do with the money that comes in, and make myself open to some really uncomfortable criticism.

How do you bounce back after making an inadvertent-but hurtful-mistake?

It depends. What I've been doing is trying to create content for the space that directly addresses the critiques that I've received. People have wondered, since it's just me running and curating Junior High, how is this space really giving a voice to communities of color and trans communities, when I don't identify as either? I'm like, "Okay, that's a really valid point. If it is just me curating, that's not a fair assessment to say this is really a community space".

I'm hoping to give other people opportunities to curate and do more booking in the future. I created an artist residency program where four artists will each get a week to themselves to book whatever content they want in the space. I'm giving priority to artists of color, young people, and trans folks. I made an application form online. I think maybe 30 people have applied already, and it's up for two more weeks.

That's a very tangible response to criticism.

I'm really trying, because I don't sit well with people being upset with me. I had some criticism that the

stuff sold in the front (shop) part of the space is too femme or vagina-centric. I had merch at the beginning that said, "Proud owner of a vagina." They were just these stickers made by this really cute teen, and people called me out for that being trans-exclusive. At first I was defensive, and I hate that I did this, but I was like, "Anyone with a vagina could buy that. It could be men, it could be..." But it's true—for a trans woman to walk into a space that's focused on genitalia at all is ostracizing. I removed that and I make sure that my "girl power" stuff is not centered around vaginas or anything that might be limiting. I had to realize there's so much that I don't know, and if people are giving me tips, that's awesome. I'll find a way to adhere to them or at the least, make improvements.

How do you source the merch in Junior High's store?

Most of it is made by people I know. Some of it's mine, but not all of it. People always walk in and they're like, "Did you make all this?" And I'm like, "I wish... There wouldn't be enough hours in the day!" At first it was all people I knew. Now I get a bunch of emails that are like, "Consider having my stuff." I like to at least order one thing when people have the courage to reach out.

Do you have any deal-breakers or self imposed rules when it comes to booking the space?

No real "rules." I don't know if there are necessarily any deal breakers that aren't obvious. Obviously, no misogyny, no fundraisers for the KKK, like duh. I go with my gut. I don't really book stuff with men. The one exception was a guy wanted to curate an art show where all the pieces sold were going to benefit Planned Parenthood. When he pitched it to me, he chose really diverse artists—a lot of people I've never worked with before. We met before I said yes to anything and he was a cool guy. So that was the one exception. But the idea is to have this well rounded calendar where every month I hope that everyone can find some way they're represented in the programming. I hope people also feel like it's easy to come forward and send me an email to book something themselves.

How did you learn the more administrative side of running an art space?

When I was setting up the company, a non-profit 501(c)(3), I bought a book that was literally just "non-profits for dummies." I read the whole thing and followed it. Honestly, if I can do this, anyone can. It's just a learning process. I didn't know I needed a seller's permit, I had to buy that, but I didn't know I had to. Also the things posted about fair pay for minimum wage and stuff. I have those posters upstairs. I don't know if I have to have those, but I do. There are still weird letters I get in the mail that are like, "The tax board certified yearly fee is due," and I'm like, I have no idea what this is. I'm just gonna pay it. But a lot of them I'll ignore, and hope that I can talk myself out of some fee because it's such a tiny little endeavor. It's also just about making lists and asking for help. A lot of help.

Who do you ask for help?

When I was first setting up the business, I had some friends that were good at real estate stuff. They helped me find a retail space; they knew how to bargain with the landlord. Just things I don't understand.

I have about 10 volunteers that I can call when I can't be in the space. Last night that happened. I was exhausted, so I had someone come and cover the event that was going on. That's been a game changer for year two—just having people around who are eager to help, because I'm there day and night.

But even with my own art stuff or getting a job I'm not qualified for, I just Google everything. There's a YouTube tutorial for *literally everything*. I have said yes to so much stuff I'm not qualified for and just figured it out later. That's always my advice for people and all the teenagers: Everyone is as confused as you are. No one knows what they're doing. Just look up a tutorial and pretend you're confident.

What were the most important priorities when choosing a space for Junior High?

Accessibility was really crucial for me, because L.A. is such a driving city. I wanted it to be space for teenagers, so it was important to be on a bus line, close to the metro, and in a well lit, safe spot. It's funny because I don't drive, so all those things were factors for me when I was looking for my own apartment in L.A. Junior High is right across the street from my apartment; I love our neighborhood. In terms of creating the actual atmosphere... I kind of just trusted myself. The space is exactly like my bedroom... and every bedroom I've ever had. [laughs] My mom was the first person to see it. She walked in and was just like, "Oh, this is just you. This is just your room".

What unanticipated struggles have you run into?

Honestly, the struggle I was most worried about was money. It turned out that the struggle I should've really prepared for is my own energy. I really, really burnt myself out the first year. I was pretty miserable. I hated going into the space. You know what people say about freelancers? Like they work 80 hours to keep themselves from working 40 hours? People are like, "Oh, it's so nice you work from home, you make your own hours." I'm like, you don't even know the struggle of keeping up.

In the first year, it was really hard to be there, because I'd book these events and be like, "Oh, I have to be there for that." Then I'm also there all day for the store hours... I'm screen printing, answering emails, and yeah. That was a really unexpected burden, me being so tired. This year has been amazing because I have so many more helpers.

How have you been able to conquer that burnout?

Honestly, it really was just asking for help. I'm an introverted person who created a really extroverted life for myself. It's hard for me to be social—to be "on" for that long. Personally, setting aside so much time to be by myself and watch SVU. Just do nothing. Even working from home helps. I'll be working on my own illustrations and stuff, but it's just the fact being alone is so crucial for me to not have this façade on and be really cheery for two hours. That helps me so much.

Yeah, that sounds great right now.

I know. Mondays are my off days, my favorite days. Everyone's like, "Oh, I have to go back to work," and I'm just quiet in the corner like, muahahaha! Monday!

5 best SVU cameos by Faye Orlove:

Martin Short as the world's creepiest "psychic"

Hilary Duff buying a shovel

Carol Burnett as. a. serial. killer.

Kathy Griffin as a really aggressive lesbian crusader

Cynthia Nixon with multiple personality who shows up in stabler's home (He's ok)

Name

Faye Orlove

Vocation

Artist, Curator

Fact

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Photo: Grace Pickering

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