

08/08/08: An Interview with Project 8 Founder Julie Sargosa

I began an email dialogue with Julie Saragosa about the past, present and future of Project 8 about one month after we celebrated the program's third anniversary on August 8, 2008 (08/08/08) ... Very auspicious. Saragosa is an interdisciplinary artist, curator and media arts educator who has been making experimental DIY Super 8 films for ten years. She relocated to Vancouver from Toronto in 2005 to complete a Master of Fine Arts degree at Simon Fraser University. At that time she founded Project 8: a free mentorship program for people who are interested in learning how to make a Super 8 film, but have limited access to the necessary resources. Participants of the Project 8 boot camp receive workshop instruction, access to equipment and mentorship from filmmakers in the community (many of whom learned to make Super 8 films through similar programs). Participants' films are then screened at the Project 8 Film Festival. Project 8 is sponsored by the Purple Thistle Centre, VIVO Media Arts Centre and Cineworks Independent Filmmakers Society.

In November 2008 Sargosa left Vancouver on an adventure that has taken her down the West Coast, and into Mexico and Argentina—screening Project 8 films along the way. We hope she gets sick of warm beaches, Latin food and music and comes home to our cold, damp winters.

The following email conversation was inspired by our in person conversations (over a bottle of wine) about the future of Project 8, the power of personal storytelling and the social value of accessibility in the arts.

From: amylynn

Subject: Let's get it started!

Date: September 13, 2008 11:06:47 PM PDT

To: flamingcreature

Hi Julie,

We should have started documenting our conversations a long time ago, but no time like the present.

How did you come to make your first Super 8 film? What were the circumstances? What was it about? Who did you make it with? What was the experience like?

From: flamingcreature

Subject: Let's get it started!

Date: September 21 2008 09:21:35 PM PDT

To: amylynn

The first film I ever made was on 16 mm when I was about eight years old. I made a cutout animation and learned how to shoot it frame by frame with a small 16 mm camera (Bolex? Scoopic? I don't know).

The first Super 8 film I shot was for a class in college. I made a music video for one of my boyfriend's songs. I had to try to direct him and he was being uncooperative and didn't practice his lip-synching. That part was on video, but I shot this amazing Super 8 footage of friends walking along Bathurst Street [in Toronto] past the Honest Ed's store lights and in a playground nearby. Then a friend gave me his Dad's old Super 8 camera and I was set. So I shot more for my projects in film school, where we didn't actually learn Super 8 (we did a lot of video and television and then in the upper years we shot sync-sound 16 mm). I loved the grain of Super 8 and it seemed to suit the work I wanted to do: music videos and experimental documentaries. Most importantly, it didn't need large crews like 16 mm does, which—as I learned in film school—

usually requires a hierarchy of art or tech geniuses. Girls didn't seem to be included in those categories. I just wanted to make my own films, my own way. So I kept on shooting with Super 8. Most of my best stuff is on Super 8. I love it.

From: amylynn

Subject: Throw Like a Girl

Date: September 22, 2008 12:05:10 PM PDT

To: flamingcreature

Hi Julie,

You wrote: "Most importantly, it [Super 8] didn't need large crews like 16 mm does, which—as I learned in film school—usually requires a hierarchy of art or tech geniuses. Girls didn't seem to be included in those categories."

Can you tell me more about your thoughts on this hierarchy? For example:

Where does it come from?

How is it maintained?

Why aren't women included?

Who else is excluded?

What alternative filmmaking structure/community have you created to counter this phenomenon?

What role do women play in this alternative?

From: flamingcreature

Subject: Throw Like a Girl

Date: September 23, 2008 2:30:09 PM PDT

To: amylynn

Well, this goes back to the whole issue of how women are viewed in general in our world: not as smart as men when it comes to technical things, artistic thought, philosophy, etc. The film industry is built on a hierarchical structure that goes back to the 1940s and favors big budget productions with men traditionally in the roles of director, cinematographer, production designer, writer, etc. Experimental film from the 1960s on is a reaction against Hollywood-style filmmaking and is considered more of an art form ... but it is still rooted in the art world notion that artistic genius exists only in men. Carolee Schneemann was one feminist artist in the 1970s who tried to rally against this idea and got shot down and criticized—like most women who attempt to overstep the rigid roles set for them.

Feminist video art of 1980s was an attempt to reclaim moving images on new terms. It was a brand new format with no set institution to say what could or could not be done. I do, however, feel that contemporary filmmakers are still trying to fight this notion of film as a male medium. Experimental film especially is rooted in the outdated notion of man as artistic genius.

There are, of course, others who are included in this. I use the term “male” to refer to the elite of our society: usually white, usually upper or upper middle class, usually educated. Those not included in that category tend to be allies of my version of feminist politics: non-white, less educated, lower-income, marginalized, dispossessed, colonized, queer, communist, anarchist, etc. We struggle to have our voices heard. And we don't have the privileges of class to make it easier. We have to find our own way to represent ourselves without the structures or tools of the privileged.

That is why I make DIY work, and that is why I mentor others in making DIY work: so that we can learn how to make our voices heard on our own terms. Project 8 targets participants who don't have the means or experience to make their voices heard, and trains them to do it their own way.

Julie

From: amylynn

Subject: The Heart of the Work

Date: September 23, 2008 7:29:27 PM PDT

To: flamingcreature

Julie,

I find that people refer to experience of making art as “having one’s voice heard.” I’ve always found this fascinating on many levels. I always wonder: Who hears it? Who do I expect to hear it? Why is it important for other people to hear what I have to say? What is so essential about expressing oneself beyond just talking with friends and family or writing in a journal?

I’m prodding you about this because I find we speak so freely in social justice/community art/engagement communities about the importance of marginalized people’s stories being told, of youth telling their own stories for the first time and of empowering everyone to share their own experiences, without ever critically discussing why (past the reality that some people are privileged enough to tell all their own stories and others aren’t). What is happening on an internal level and a social level when stories are shared? What’s the importance of sharing one’s ideas, visions and stories?

From: flamingcreature

Subject: The Heart of the Work

Date: September 26, 2008 3:26:55 PM PDT

To: amylynn

Identification.

My thought is that when someone shares their ideas with other people (a small group of friends, an international audience or something in between) audience members have an opportunity to

connect or relate to the work. Mainstream media is so pervasive that it is easy for the majority to connect to it and blindly follow its lead. When work made by people with ideas or experiences that are outside the norm is shown, audience members who have similar ideas, thoughts or experiences have a better chance of relating. For example, (a very speculative example) a person who grows up in a working-class community goes to see movies at their local theatre where all the movies are about middle- or upper-class people with exciting and dramatic lives. This person, say, works at the local grocery store and makes enough to cover basic living expenses, has never traveled and does not have Internet access (or even a computer) because she can't afford it. This person may feel that her whole life will be lived in this town, pushing the same buttons on the cash register and seeing the same movies about other people's lives. Then one day a touring filmmaker comes to town, offers a DIY Super 8 workshop and shows some films. This person goes to the screening and, by seeing that others who may have had similar class experiences can make films, is encouraged to make a film. This person makes a film that gets shown at the next town and the next, etc. down the line.

This might be too simplistic and idealistic of an example ... but my point is that audiences want to relate their lives to what they see. When movies are too focused on Paris Hilton types, people without money or privilege can't relate. When art is too convolutedly academic, people without access to higher education can't relate.

People on the margins of society need something to relate to in order to know that their lives and experiences are important and that they are not alone. We already have tons of movies and art about the experiences of rich and privileged people ... what about those of us who aren't rich or privileged? Aren't we just as human? Don't we deserve to relate? I would even argue that we need to even more ... *because* our stories aren't told, we might feel that there is nobody out there like us and we are alone. But if our stories are told then we might have a better idea that there are others like us who are suffering alone and silent, and that we should get together and fight for our inclusion, privileges, rights and acceptance ... rebel and overthrow the ruling class! And maybe, just maybe, those people who chose to blindly follow the mainstream media will start thinking for

themselves.

I actually think that the Internet as a medium of expression has made a lot of headway in that respect ... all the blogs, Flickr and MySpace accounts, etc. just need more people to pay attention. But it's hard to get individualized attention on the Internet.

From: amylynn

Subject: The Medium, and the Stories You Tell

Date: September 26, 2008 3:46:38 PM PDT

To: flamingcreature

Hi Julie,

That answer makes me want to head in two different directions, so I'm going to ask two questions at once.

But first, background questions about accessibility and the Internet:

The Internet is the most accessible form of information sharing: true or false?

Digital photography and video making is more accessible than 35mm still photography or Super 8 and 16mm filmmaking: true or false?

Question 1: Why do you work with Super 8, live screenings and touring as your forms for broadening accessibility to storytelling?

Question 2: Tell me about the stories you tell in your films and the responses you get from people who identify with them?

From: flamingcreature

Subject: The Medium, and the Stories You Tell

Date: September 26, 2008 4:04:47 PM PDT

To: amylynn

For both of the background questions: FALSE.

I think it depends on the individual and what they have access to. Some people don't have access to computers, so making video is impossible. Super 8 is impossible in places where they don't make the film (you could order it online, but still). Pen and paper—voice—is probably the most accessible medium around the world.

As for information sharing, the Internet reaches more people than a lot of things, but may not be able to reach some people.

Question 1:

I work with Super 8 film because I love film and it's the easiest and cheapest film format. Film has an entrancing quality that can hypnotize and seduce people with its lucidity. Video is a good format for teaching people how to tell stories, share ideas, but it can also be complicated for those with a limited understanding of computer technology. Editing with Super 8 film can be easier for some because you can visually see what you're doing as you hand-manipulate the film. And, learning to shoot with it gives people a better understanding of light, focus, frame, etc. than video does. Anyone can pick up a video camera (if they have access to one) and wave it around and get an image. It's almost *too* easy, as it doesn't teach the user what to look for when they aim the camera and how to capture images the way they want.

Question 2:

Tough one, Amy Lynn.

Lately, I mostly make films about gender and queerness. I showed one film to a friend who commented afterwards that it felt like I was talking about her own gender expression ... it was a good feeling to know that someone (even one person) identified and related to my own variable and fluid gender. I often even feel I don't fit in with the gender-queers in my own community because the gender rules are too rigid.

From: amylynn

Subject: A Big Secret

Date: September 26, 2008 4:26:59 PM PDT

To: flamingcreature

Julie,

Is that your way of avoiding talking about your own work?

Ok. So tell me about the films that are made through Project 8 then? What are they about? Who is telling the stories? How are people responding?

Amy

From: flamingcreature

Subject: Dialogue

Date: September 27, 2008 12:21:54 PM PDT

To: amylynn

Perhaps. But I didn't know you wanted specifics.

Ok. One film made through Project 8 this year by Kathleen Gowman was about poverty, drug addiction and sex-work in Vancouver's downtown east side. The text was a voice-over by three people reading spoken word/poetry commenting on the the inherent class hierarchy in our culture and mainstream society's views of sex-workers. After the screening, several people (one a former sex-worker) came up to me and commented that they were glad to have seen it, and that they felt it was important to them. This film was one of the few that people directly came up to me afterwards to say something about.

I feel that the Project 8 films connect to people. Perhaps it's also because the films are being made and shown within the same community ... I'd like to see the audience responses to the films outside of this community ... hence, the going on tour.

From: amylynn

Subject: The Next Step

Date: October 2, 2008 6:24:08 PM PDT

To: flaming creature

Tell us about your next steps for Project 8 and the tour you have planned? How do you think touring the work will expand the scope of the project? What do you foresee for Project 8 in Vancouver?

From: flamingcreature

Subject: The Next Step

Date: October 2, 2008 6:24:08 PM PDT

To: amylynn

We need to regroup and figure out our plan. It looks like there will be some changes with how the program is run; perhaps finding a permanent space will be next. My involvement now will be to

disseminate and tour the films that are already made. I am going on a trip along the Pacific coast, and will be stopping at several cities where I hope to have small screenings in order to generate interest in the collective. After that we'll apply for a touring grant to get the work shown internationally. I think the films so far are really good and deserve to be seen by a wider audience. I hope it would encourage artists around the world to come visit and perhaps do workshops or show films through Project 8. Perhaps more recognition for Project 8 would mean more funding and therefore the ability to expand the program.

What do you think, Amy?

From: flamingcreature

Subject: In My Mind

Date: October 2, 2008 6:24:08 PM PDT

To: amylynn

I definitely agree about expanding the audience for the films. I think distribution and touring is a logical next step for the work—especially since there's such a significant body of work after three years. I think the benefits of touring are twofold: one, to expand the visibility of Super 8 films being made in Vancouver, and to give the work a life and let it express itself, and two, to introduce Project 8 to communities and inspire them to develop similar DIY programs. In communities that have similar programs it's important to develop a dialogue about doing this kind of work, create a support network and share skills.

As far as the program in Vancouver goes, I would like to see Project 8 offer more ongoing workshops and year-round mentorship opportunities. I think this could include screenings of Super 8 work from other cities. It could mean bringing in guests. It could mean having experimental labs where people just fuck around and figure shit out. I'd personally like to see the program run through the winter, when things slow down a bit here and there's not much else to

do. I would also really love to broaden the community that accesses the project, and maybe even do the project in rural communities in BC. I'd really like to get the people who have already made their first film making a second and a third and building their skills to pass on to other people. In the case of Kathleen Gowman's film, for example, I'd like to see those specific people who were moved by her work come back next year and make their own work, with Gowman as their mentor. I'd also be curious about Cineworks or VIVO opening up a permanent Super 8 lab for Project 8 (hint hint). But that may be lofty. I suppose we'll see. At the very least we could sit around all summer and pontificate about whether film is dead, and place bets on when Kodak is going to stop making Super 8 film ... Just kidding.

Amy Lynn Kazymierchyk, 2008

Amy Lynn Kazymierchyk is a filmmaker and independent curator. She is interested in the physical, tactile and collaborative aspects of experimental filmmaking. She loves film culture, throwing parties, and building community around art. She currently programs a monthly evening of contemporary moving images and cinematic collaborations at the Pacific Cinematheque called DIM and is working on a an analog video about isolation and estrangement in pre-Olympic Vancouver. For Project 8 this year, Kazymierchyk made a film called *The Cat Whisperer* with Aili Meutzner.