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Saving DIY Spaces

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Fight for DIY
Katherine Lavacca

Synopsis/ Treatment

Saving DIY Spaces explores the importance of DIY spaces— places for artists to express themselves and connect to their communities— as well as the threat they face from the city’s MARCH task force. Integral performance spaces like Shea Stadium, Market Hotel, Palisades and many more have been shuttered by the city’s MARCH taskforce, a collection of city agencies (department of buildings, NYPD, FDNY, liquor authorities, etc.) within the last decade. According to a study conducted by the Mayor’s Office of Media and Entertainment, 20% of small venues have closed within the last 15 years putting pressure on spaces that are still opened. Silent Barn was a thriving DIY space in the mid-2000’s operating as a performance space and an illegal dwelling in Queens. In 2011 Silent Barn was MARCHed leaving residents without a home and employees without work. Now the collective operates out of a new space in Bushwick where it continues to serve the artist community as well as the neighborhood they now call home. Rafael Espinal, the city council member representing Bushwick, has proposed a nightlife office in hopes it will help protect DIY spaces and establish a dialogue between city agencies and these communities that depend on these spaces.

The owners of Silent Barn rallied community support through crowdfunding and gathered enough money to pay off fines and began the process of looking for a new space. A year later Silent Barn reopened in Brooklyn and is now a fully legal music venue, art collective and dwelling space. Now the team behind Silent Barn helps other venue owners by hosting informational panels about the process of becoming a legal space and how to fund such a project.

In mid- October the NYC Artist Coalition hosted the first town hall meeting for artists and influential members of the community to voice their concerns to the developing Nightlife Mayor’s office. Council members and city officials attended in an effort to start an open dialogue with the artist community.

Saving DIY Spaces will focus on the art collective Silent Barn as an example of a thriving space that exists legally with cooperation from the city and the new approach the city will take with the creation of a nightlife mayor office.

ACT 1

The film opens with shots of Bushwick— the elevated M train clanking along in the morning, people walking past shops on Knickerbocker and detailed shots of the art and graffiti throughout the neighborhood. Audio from the first town hall meeting for the Night Life Mayor’s office play— Rachel Nelson, the owner of Secret Project Robot, is calling on council members and city officials to protect art collectives and DIY spaces where artists thrive.

Viewers will then see the town hall meeting and hear Jamie, a member of the NYC artist coalition, ask the audience: “Who’s been to a show that was shut down?” to which almost every hand raises. Jamie goes on to list ten venues that closed recently, which will be shown through archival footage and photos. As Jamie wraps up music swells we see more clips from the closed venues. Both Rachel Nelson and Jamie’s speeches establish the importance of these spaces, while the footage from the shows provides viewers an idea of what these spaces look like and add an emotive element to the film.

ACT 2

Reopen at the new Silent Barn in Bushwick, where employees attempt to define what the space is: “It’s like the room of requirement, anything you need or could need is there.” Joe Ahearn, a co-founder of the space, gives Silent Barn’s backstory. While Joe explains footage of an evening show at Silent Barn rolls giving the audience a feel for the space.

Mike Lawrence, Silent Barn’s attorney, and Rafael Espinal, the city council member representing Bushwick explain the issues with the MARCH task force and the functionality of the new nightlife mayor. Footage from the nightlife town hall will play and we’ll see Espinal explain what drew him to propose the office of nightlife. This act will establish the issues these spaces face with a particular focus on MARCH.

ACT 3

In the final act we hear from Rachel Nelson again this time calling on the city to recognize the importance of DIY spaces and the cultural capital that comes with them. She’ll point to the loss of CBGB’s– the birthplace of punk rock– and the push artist’s feel when gentrification takes away their spaces. Rachel’s sound bite will set up the nightlife office as a potential answer to the shuttering of these spaces.

The last person to speak in the documentary is Kurtis Blow, who says without the spaces he had growing up, like the Renaissance Ballroom, he would’ve been on the streets. Kurtis Blow, one of the first hip-hop legends, solidifies the importance of these spaces and adds some emphasis to the film. Archival footage of Kurtis performing mixed with footage of the Bronx in the 80’s illustrate Kurtis Blow’s statement about hip-hop keeping him out of trouble and off the streets.