Expanding Experimentalism: Art and Popular Music at the Kitchen in New York City, 1971-1985

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Expanding Experimentalism:  
Art and Popular Music at the Kitchen in New York City, 1971-1985  
By Sarah Anne Cooper

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Art History, Hunter College  
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Thesis Sponsor:

December 14, 2018  Joachim Pissarro  
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I. Introduction

In March of 1961, a 74 year old Marcel Duchamp addressed a symposium on the future of art held at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and delivered a now-famous speech titled “Where Do We Go from Here?”¹ He predicted that the “young artist of tomorrow” would turn away from the purely formal and visual essentialism inherent to the rapid succession of “–isms” that defined the last century, and instead travel “like Alice in Wonderland,” through the looking-glass of the eye into the “phenomena of the brain.”² This artist, “tired of the cult of oils,” would abandon painting for new tools that, “just as the invention of new musical instruments changes the whole sensibility of an era,” “scientific progress” would “bring to light startling new values which are and always will be the basis of artistic revolutions.”³ But his prophecy came with a warning: this liberation could result in an “enormous output” leading to commodification and ultimately an equally “enormous dilution… accompanied by a leveling down of present taste and its immediate result will be to shroud the near future in mediocrity.” To this, Duchamp offered a hope—that this temporary mediocrity would bring about a revolution, but that this time it would be developed by “only a few initiates… on the fringe of the world,” concluding, “The great artist of tomorrow will go underground.”⁴

The two decades following Duchamp’s predictions will see this pendulum-swing play out across a multiplicity of scenarios, where art goes through not one coherent revolution, but perhaps several contemporaneous “fringe” transformations, at times confounding critics and

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² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
historians who wish to define a unifying paradigm for the post-modern era. Interestingly, Duchamp singled out “the invention of new musical instruments” as evidence of the new mediums becoming available to artists capable of changing “the sensibility of an entire era.”\(^5\) Perhaps he had in mind one of the few figures of the twentieth century who would rise to be his peer as a catalytic influence, John Cage. When Cage asserted, most notably through his radically taciturn piano composition 4’33” of 1952, that any sound could be music, he mirrored Duchamp’s Fountain of 1917, which declared that any object, even a lowly urinal, could be art.\(^6\) The combined impact of these moments rendered the boundaries between music and art indecipherable, and ushered in a period that saw the two forms drawn closer together than in any other point in history. By specifically implicating not just any thing, but the utterly common, the refuse and waste of everyday life, Duchamp and Cage’s provocations prefigured the assimilation of popular culture into the artistic activity of the porous period to come.

Despite this calibration, art institutions, where music in general has had, at most, a marginalized presence, have struggled in fits and starts to present both experimental and popular music as part of the fabric of art history. Popular music—rock, punk, disco, or hip hop—perhaps to an even more extreme degree than both experimental music and other new art forms, such as video or performance art, challenges not only institutional bureaucracies, but also their entrenched hierarchies. Yet popular music is an inextricable part of avant-garde activities of the second half of the twentieth century, as both a strain of activity undertaken by key artists and a symptom of an expanded artistic field. As scholars, curators, and critics further research and grapple with this period, they will continually be confronted with performances, records, posters,

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\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) Cage’s 4’33” was first performed by David Tudor in Woodstock, New York, on August 29, 1952. “John Cage, 4’33”” The Museum of Modern Art, Accessed December 1, 2018 at https://www.moma.org/collection/works/163616.
magazines, photographs, and the wider apparatus of music-making as a producer of both consequential artistic output, art dialogues, and cultural impact to be reckoned with.

This thesis isolates popular music as a specific tendency within the expanded field established by Duchamp’s and Cage’s legacies, and in turn, investigates effective strategies for navigating the notoriously diffuse arena they produced and that challenges traditional institutions. To do so, I make the subject of my study an alternative institution, New York City’s the Kitchen, an artist-initiated and specifically interdisciplinary space—made evident by its laundry-list of an official name: The Kitchen Center for Art, Video, Music, Dance, Performance, Film and Literature. I will argue that the period from 1971, when the Kitchen first opened its doors in the Mercer Arts Center, to 1985, when it moved out of the gentrifying artists’ enclave of SoHo, witnessed a profound proliferation of artistic activity and intellectual cross-pollination that closed the gaps between visual art, performance, and music. Within the Kitchen’s institutional history, I will trace a thematic genealogy of certain experimental art forms, born out of a reflexive confluence of a set of stimuli: conceptual art, video art, performance art, and avant-garde music with popular culture. This selective narrative will reveal that the Kitchen nurtured a practice of experimentalism, a term expanded from musicology.\(^7\) It includes engagements with rock and other forms of music, but their instances have more in common with art in the aforementioned set of stimuli, than with its counterparts in mainstream pop music. That bond is manifested by their common enemies—the commodity culture, mass conformity, and mediocrity described by Duchamp in his cautionary tale.\(^8\)

\(^7\) The term experimentalism refers to a specific genre within musicology: a Post-Cagean canon of composers, who coalesced into a tangible network when Michael Nyman published *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* in 1974.

\(^8\) The artists profiled in this thesis are bound together not by medium but by their experimentalism and position against mainstream and commodity culture—links that persist into the 1980s, where it becomes a central concern for contemporary art. This shared sensibility is explored in the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in
After defining an expanded understanding of experimentalism—one that reaches beyond its connotations as a specific genre within musicology to a term for practices that include experimental strategies in diverse artistic mediums—this thesis will take shape across three differently structured sections exploring popular music’s influence and presence at the Kitchen. The first presents an origin story of the Kitchen told chronologically, with a special emphasis on the musical affinities of founders Steina and Woody Vasulka, who have largely been characterized as purely video-centric artists. Even though the Vasulkas’ themselves credit their artistic awakening to witnessing the seminal exhibition of video art, *TV as a Creative Medium*, at the Howard Wise Gallery in 1969, this study asserts Andy Warhol’s 1966 intermedia concert the *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, featuring the Velvet Underground & Nico, as a key spiritual parent of the Kitchen. Furthermore, this narrative reaches back to 1965 to look at what significant encounters the Vasulkas had with concerts, exhibitions, and festivals, and draws together marginal details from the eclectic *milieu* in their orbit, to contextualize their understanding of video as a *performing image*, and the Kitchen as a theater for video’s interaction with underground music. This section ends with an account of “Video-Rock,” a concert by the New York Dolls at the Kitchen in 1973, at the start of their influential residency at the Mercer Arts Center, just before the building met its dramatic end in a total structural collapse. I argue that the presence of the New York Dolls in the Kitchen’s foundational years leaves an inedible mark on Washington, D.C. in their 2018 exhibition “Brand New: Art and Commodity in the 1980s” organized by Gianni Jetzer. Where I will demonstrated that artists of the seventies turned toward the rock band as an appropriation from mainstream popular culture as a tool of critique on commercial society, the artists of the eighties—including many of the same figures like Robert Longo, Barbara Kruger, Matt Mullican, Mike Smith, and Dara Birnbaum, and Andy Warhol who engage who make appearances here—are shown to hone in on the world of advertising, as Jetzer writes, “both advertising and art came to rely more on concepts and ideas,” and “the two fields converged to an unprecedented degree.” Jetzer traces a path from the readymade to the “contingent object,” where “the origin of an object no longer mattered—that was crucial was what it signified, to whom, and for what reason,” including a discussion of the “Artists as Entertainers,” among his thematic analysis. Gianni Jetzer, ed. *Brand New: Art and Commodity in the 1980s* (Washington, D.C: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and Rizzoli Electa, 2018), 22.
its wider community, elucidated through a discussion of trash aesthetics and a centering on personality that aligns with Rosalind Krauss’ reading of video as narcissism—one of many instances throughout this paper that situates rock and roll as video’s strange bedfellow.

After the Mercer Art Center’s demise in 1973, the Kitchen was reborn in a loft space on the second floor of 59 Wooster Street in the heart of the alternative space movement that thrived in SoHo in the 1970s. Section two will track the intersecting journeys of presentation strategies of art and music, whose individual trends pushed them both in and out of the white cube in different directions. Discussed in context of Brian O’Doherty’s influential 1976 essay “Inside the White Cube,” I will explore the varying advantages and disadvantages of the art gallery aesthetic, which the Kitchen adopts under its first executive director Robert Stearns, a protégé of gallerist Paula Cooper, to both art and music. Physically and ideologically, as a not-quite white cube, or perhaps “grey cube,” the loft-setting of the Kitchen offered opportunities for recontextualization and supported—largely thanks to O’Doherty’s own efforts as the administrator of grants for the National Endowment for the Arts—experimental practices that enabled new forms of popular music. This section will track these activities in three categories: bands in the art space, artists’ bands, and the avant-garde in concert. In 1975, Kitchen music director, and border-crossing composer Arthur Russell officially introduced popular music to the Kitchen with a performance by the Modern Lovers, breaking from the program’s firm “new music” focus. Other instances of bands finding new context in the art space are summarized, including events featuring the Talking Heads, bands of the No Wave movement, and early punk and hip-hop artists that had highly-limited venues elsewhere. Like the Rhode Island School of Design-educated Talking Heads, these bands were largely formed by visual artists, and while never turning into a club or traditional rock venue, the Kitchen became a platform for artists to
create performances that appropriated the format of the rock band. Not unlike an artists’ book, or alternative magazine, the rock band becomes an “alternative space” for art, a form of mass media infiltrated by artists, as a form of resistance and critique. The result is a new experimental form of popular music, one that takes hold of the format, including its wider apparatus of language-play, sound-making, performance, recordings, and the distribution of those actions and materials, and pushes it to its limits. DISBAND is offered as a prime example—a band of women including Franklin Furnace founder Martha Wilson, *Artforum* editor-in-chief Ingrid Sischy, and artist (serving as lyricist) Barbara Kruger, who, perhaps in responding to the oft-heard jibe that women in rock can’t play their instruments, play no instruments at all. Where some artists’ bands exploit the popular medium to seek accessible vernaculars, others create popular music that is decidedly unpopular. The presentation strategies of the rock concert spilled over to the other activities at the Kitchen, which staged several festival-like events that featured large line-ups of artists from multiple disciplines. Key examples include 1974’s Soup & Tart that asked over thirty artists to create two-minute performances, Edit deAk’s 1983 clubby feminist-inflected festival *Dubbed in Glamour*, and 1981’s ten-year anniversary events staged in a large-scale Times Square ballroom, *Aluminum Nights*. By commandeering the dynamics of the club concert, the Kitchen brought larger audiences to avant-garde art that otherwise had highly niche communities, a strategy that was advantageous for press and fundraising efforts. This section illustrates that while the presentation of art and music journey through the white cube they are bound at the crossover point by a shared conversation about popular culture—one that is both a celebration and a critique. While O’Doherty’s effect both gave birth to and funded the alternative space movement, it also brought on its inevitable institutionalization, resulting in a professionalization of the artist that ultimately pushed the Kitchen into the black box it finds itself in today.
By the time the Kitchen was forced to decamp for Chelsea in 1985, the official name of the institution, which had been incrementally expanded over the years to live up to its interdisciplinary program, was the Kitchen Center for Video, Music, Dance, and Performance. Taking a cue from this long-form name, section three will explore case studies of the experimental uses of popular music within each of the institution’s namesake categories. Dara Birnbaum’s month-long live-editing and performance project Pop Pop Video inhabited the Kitchen for March of 1980, during which she recut current broadcast television and incorporated secondary recorded and live-performed popular music to question the manipulative dynamics of television. Music, which by-and-large referred to compositional “new music” at the Kitchen, experienced its own popular infiltration through Rhys Chatham’s discovery of already-minimal rock, inspiring his performance of Guitar Trio of 1978. Moreover, incorporation of popular techniques was first evident at the Kitchen in Julius Eastman’s 1975 performance of Femenine with the S.E.M. Ensemble. As new music increasingly absorbed popular music techniques into their compositions, choreographers, who largely drew their music from within this community, in turn, infused their dances with attitudes that mirrored contemporaneous trends in popular music, demonstrated by Karole Armitage’s Drastic Classicism, a 1981 collaboration with Rhys Chatham. Laurie Anderson straddles and transcends the roles of the visual artist and the rock star through intermedia performance art that became the hallmark of the Kitchen’s SoHo era. Her 1980 performance United States, Part II exemplified the impact of popular music on performance art at the Kitchen.

This study draws from a body of literature that has approached either popular music’s relationship to art, popular music within musicology, or addressed the alternative space movement, and in considering their contributions, I will arrive at a definition of experimentalism.
Starting with the latter, Julie Ault’s *Alternative Art New York: 1965-1985* is the first text to critically investigate the alternative space movements of which the Kitchen was a key player. Ault begins her introduction to this comprehensive volume of essays on the rise (and decline) of artist-run art spaces in New York by noting the “fragmentary nature of available information” and the “lack of examination of the underlying philosophies” pertaining to the often “ad-hoc, time-based, or anti-institutional” initiatives, which places them at risk of being “written out of cultural histories of the recent past.” In addition to her chronology of alternative organizations in New York from 1965-1985, Ault’s volume seeks to remedy this lack of critical writing by publishing several essays that look at the shaping forces of the era, from the political, practical, social, and institutional contexts. This book establishes a critical context of record for the world around the Kitchen, and in particular, Brian Wallis’ essay “Public Funding and Alternative Spaces,” elucidated revelatory insights into the effect of public funding on the institution and the artist that helped shape the conceptualization of my argument for the second section of this study by discussing the practical impact of power dynamics. This book and Exit Art’s 2012 richly annotated index of New York’s alternative spaces, *Alternative Histories: New York Art Spaces 1960 to 2010* edited by Lauren Rosati and Mary Anne Stainiszewski, put a wide lens onto the cultural ecology that gave birth to the Kitchen and its community.

Ault points out that most publications on specific alternative spaces—as is the case with the Kitchen—are self-produced and purely celebratory in tone, often issued to mark the occasion of an anniversary. At its 40th anniversary in 2011, the Kitchen staged a comprehensive

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10 The major example for the Kitchen was published in 1992, just after its 20 year mark, where resident archivist Lee Morrissey compiled and edited a collection of essays called *The Kitchen Turns Twenty*, that included reflections from ex-staffers like music directors Rhys Chatham and Garrett List, curator Roselee Goldberg, and dance director Eric Bogosian, as well as the artists who launched their careers at the Kitchen, including Philip Glass, Laurie
exhibition, *The View from a Volcano: The Kitchen's SoHo Years, 1971-85*. While no essay was produced, this exhibition was the culmination of an archival organization process of the institutional archive, which was acquired by the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles in 2013. The archive, and the material of the exhibition, consists of video, audio, and photographic documentation of events, press releases, press clippings, posters, flyers, correspondence, and other ephemera. These materials and audio recordings of oral histories by Kitchen director Robert Stearns, dance director Eric Bogosian, and music director Rhys Chatham, were key sources for this study. Additionally, both the website of Electronic Arts Intermix,\(^\text{11}\) of which the Kitchen was a subsidiary until 1973, and the website of founding artists Steina and Woody Vasulka,\(^\text{12}\) make available online a large volume of scanned documentation and ephemera from the Kitchen’s first years.

Ephemera became the focus of art historian Gwen Allen’s approach to navigating the artistic output of New York in the 1970s when she published *Artists’ Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* in 2011. “During the 1960s and 1970s,” Allen writes, “magazines became an important new site of artistic practice, functioning as an alternative exhibition space for the dematerialized practices of conceptual art. Abandoning canvases, pedestals, and all they stood

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\(^{11}\) “A Kinetic History: The EAI Archives Online”, Electronic Arts Intermix, accessed March 1, 2018 at www.eai.org/webpages/700.

\(^{12}\) The Vasulka Archive, www.vasulka.org.
for in the established institutions of modernism, this art sought out lightweight and everyday media.”

In her discussion of the artist-run publications founded to counter what was perceived to be problematic and inadequate in the critical establishment at the time, Allen traces a history of alternative magazines through a variety of lenses—the magazine as an artistic medium itself, the magazine as an alternative space, and the magazine as a mirror, one that reflects and makes visible the activities of a community. In considering the popular music activities that occurred at the Kitchen and in the context of the alternative space movement, artists’ bands can be seen as somewhat analogous to artists’ magazines—both are appropriated forms of mass media, reclaimed by an avant-garde as a space for art, done so in order to critically reflect back on establishment strangleholds of content. Magazines like *Artforum* sensed this relationship and experimented with inserting playable records on flexi-disc among its pages, publishing recordings by Laurie Anderson in 1982 and Brian Eno in 1986 issues. While both an artist starting a magazine and an artist starting a band might be a subversive act, both are done out of enthusiasm for that form’s potential, and as part of an experimental practice. Allen’s framework opened up a perspective where the word “magazines” could be swapped with “bands” and her description of them holds up. Like magazines, artists’ bands are also “a distinct form of communication,” “a throwaway, every day form,” an “inexpensive and accessible…vehicle for art that was more concerned with concept, process, and performance than with final marketable form, where its ephemerality was central to its radical possibilities as an alternative form of distribution that might replace the privileged space of the museum with a more direct and alternative experience,” and one that “courts failure…not as an indication of defeat, but as an

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expression of the vanguard nature of these publications and their refusal of commercial interests.” ¹⁵ Indeed, artists’ bands—short-lived, barely recorded, peddling in quick performances—were, like these magazines, a tool for the resistance and critique of the earlier outlined “common enemies”—mediocrity and the commercialization of the art world as well as mass culture. Though not without functional and core differences, the conceptual fluidity between artists’ magazines and artists’ bands demonstrates that artists’ activities of this period are linked by a practice of experimentalism that cuts across an expanded field.

Addressing this same impulse from another direction is Daniel Kane’s 2017 book “Do You Have A Band?” Poetry and Punk Rock in New York City. Kane’s text addresses the same phenomenon of exchange between popular music and other artistic practices downtown New York in the 1970s, in this instance, specifically with poetry. He focused his study on a group that hovered around another downtown venue—the St. Mark’s Poetry Project. Kane asserts that “the poetry scene was at least attempting to inscribe itself as a self-consciously avant-garde project, a quasi-Marxist utopia where the cultural workers were in control of the forms of production,” sentiments that align with the adjacent scene at the Kitchen. ¹⁶ The Kitchen and Poetry Project habitués often overlapped and considering how each venue, and many other alternative spaces, had their own identities, artists could fashion performances for each context. Kane described how poets like Patti Smith and John Giorno would release recordings of their readings as LPs, which would circulate among the independent record shops like Colony Records and Bleeker Bob’s, displayed alongside punk and rock recordings. ¹⁷ Kane’s study indicated that other fields beyond art and music are beginning to contend with the impact popular music had within this

¹⁵ Allen, 1-2.
¹⁷ Kane, “Do You Have A Band?”, 9.
period, and investigate why so many key figures of other artistic fields performed in rock and roll bands. Kane’s book is predicated on the premise that “punk” as a style and an attitude, as well as a form of music, was responsible for this impulse, but I contend that it is not that simple. This paper will show that Arthur Russell’s engagement with disco, Julius Eastman’s twist on Motown R&B, the spark of inspiration John Cale took from the Everly Brothers, and so forth complicate punk as a viable term for understanding how popular forms of music became useful for artists. Kane’s book signals that a consequential tendency occurred—one that included punk music—and crossed artistic boundaries invading a broad spectrum of artistic activity during this period. While punk does accurately relate to a lot of the activity I will outline, much falls outside of it or the fit isn’t exactly so neat. Rather, I will aim to show that all words that merely indicate a “genre” will inevitably fail to encapsulate and accurately represent a pattern of activity where style and aesthetics are not the binding factor. Idea-driven practices, such as those outlined here are more aptly described by their common interrogation of social norms through their methods of experimentation.

Exhibitions and publications that have generally addressed the artists’ engagement with music have overwhelmingly been focused specifically on the vinyl record—one part of what I am calling the wider rock band “apparatus.” The earliest example of such an exhibition is the Record as Artwork: From Futurism to Conceptual Art organized by curator Germano Celant, with the assistance of future Kitchen programmer Roselee Goldberg at the Royal College of Art in London from October to November 1973.18 Expanded for a tour of U.S. institutions in 1977, it consisted of more than 150 records and album covers created by artists such as Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Marcel Duchamp, Kurt Schwitters, Jean Dubuffet, Alan Kaprow, Robert Whitman, 

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Joseph Beuys, Jack Goldstein, and Laurie Anderson.\textsuperscript{19} Celant describes the ways the record, and by extension artists’ bands and their activity, figure into art historical narratives writing:

> Beginning in the art of the 1960s, the record has taken its place alongside communications media such as video, the telegram, the photograph, the book, and the film as a tool in achieving the objectivity which artists, leaving behind the expressionistic climate of the 1950s, seemed to be seeking. In line with the reductive theories of that period, the record contributes to the isolation of one component of art work—sound—while on the other hand it enriches the array of linguistic tools available for the task of exploding the specifically visual, and pushing back the limits of the art process. The record thus extends and enhances artistic precepts.\textsuperscript{20}

When Goldberg joined the Kitchen staff, she arranged for the exhibition to travel there from April 13 to May 19, 1979, signaling that the artists’ engagement with popular music had a special relevance within the Kitchen context.\textsuperscript{21} In March of 1981, artist-musicians Barbara Ess and Kim Gordon organized an exhibition of new artist-made record covers at White Columns (formerly 112 Greene Street/112 Workshop) that included contributions from many of the key artists that were engaged with popular music surrounding the Kitchen including Vito Acconci, Dan Graham, Gretchen Bender, Paul McMahon and Nancy Chunn, Anne DeMarinis, and Glenn Branca.\textsuperscript{22} In 1988, Ursula Block organized \textit{Broken Music} at the Daadgalerie in Berlin. Block had become interested in artists’ activities in music after witnessing the New York scene in 1974, having travelled there when her husband René Block’s SoHo gallery hosted Joseph Beuys’

\textsuperscript{19} Jack Goldstein’s vinyl artworks were also exhibited at the Kitchen. Laurie Anderson’s first record, “It’s Not the Bullet That Kills You—It’s the Hole” of 1977, an edition published by Holly Solomon Gallery, was included in the exhibition. Germano Celant. \textit{The Record as Artwork: From Futurism to Conceptual Art.} (Forth Worth, TX: The Fort Worth Art Museum, 1977).

\textsuperscript{20} Celant, \textit{The Record as Artwork: From Futurism to Conceptual Art}, 16.


infamous performance with a live coyote, titled *I Like America and America Likes Me*.\(^{23}\) Tapping into the heightened exchange between art and music at this moment, she learned of and developed relationships with Cage, Nam June Paik, Maryanne Amacher, Laurie Anderson, Christian Marclay, and other music-oriented artists from the Kitchen’s community. Their work inspired her to organize *Broken Music*, named after a 1979 record by Milan Knížák, and edit its corresponding catalogue, a comprehensively index of artists’ vinyl output to date.\(^{24}\) In more recent years, *The Record: Contemporary Art and Vinyl* was staged at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina in September of 2010. It built on Celant and Block’s previous work by taking a global approach and extending the consideration of artists’ records to more diverse communities.\(^{25}\) This focus on the vinyl record has been a convenient way for art institutions, traditionally in the business of displaying objects, to take its first steps toward addressing and historicizing artists’ engagements with music in context with the narratives of art history. Focusing on the record and its object status, however, misses the point as to why artists were compelled to make music as an artistic strategy— which was not unilaterally a relishing in the objecthood of the record, but rather a more complex set of operations. Most significantly, it ignores the role played by live performance as an integral part of this activity. Whereas records

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\(^{24}\) Ibid.

are displayable items and ones that can be played repeatedly at any time, performance presents many more challenges for display in institutions comprised of traditionally designed gallery spaces. For this reason, this thesis is centered on the Kitchen as a venue for performance, and it is specifically oriented toward telling the history of live events, often a forgotten part of the picture, as well as their related ephemera and objects.

Several significant exhibitions at New York art institutions have attempted to address the interchangeable sensibility between media activated by artists that flourished during the 1971 to 1985.26 In the catalogue for the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s 2009 exhibition The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984, curator Douglas Eklund writes that “the connection between art and music was vital during this whole period.”27 Essentially a survey of the object-oriented visual artists of the Kitchen’s milieu, it is perhaps the only major institutional art exhibition to integrate rock ephemera and documentation alongside more traditional forms of art from this period.28 While one of the exhibitions great successes is its desire to “resituate the canonical works grouped under the rubric of ‘Pictures’ in their original context as part of an interdisciplinary continuum,” not just through photography and painting, “but also through performance and multimedia presentations that explicitly camped right on the brink of theater,”29 it sticks mainly

26 The exhibition that most specifically addresses the Kitchen and its context was The Downtown Show: The New York Art Scene, 1974-1984 at New York University’s Grey Art Gallery in 2006. I am choosing to discuss its corresponding catalogue, The Downtown Book, dedicated a specific section to music, including an essay written by Bernard Gendron, grouping it with his more comprehensive look at music and art in his book Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club, discussed later on in this introduction.

27 Eklund also places the birth of the Pictures generation in the art school boom, specifically within the context of the “‘post-studio’ classes that John Baldessari taught at the then-new California Institute of the Arts,” where he “liberated students from single-medium formalism,” and “also emphasized a sense of social responsibility.” Douglas Eklund. The Pictures Generation, 1974-1974 (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2009), 192.

28 Eklund’s exhibition included rare footage of rock performances filmed by Ericka Beckman, who dug out the long-forgotten reels from her storage for the exhibition. A version of the films was later screened by Sonic Youth’s Lee Ranaldo at various locations, exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, and distributed as a DVD under the title of 135 Grand Street 1979, signaling a renewed interest in this material. Source: the artist’s website, http://www.erickabeckman.com/135-grand-street/.

to that canon—one unified by practices of image appropriation. While still a very marginal part of the overall exhibition, Eklund approaches instances of popular music through its relationship with, and through the same lens afforded to, artists investigating the powerful ways images shape notions of culture and the self. He, therefore, gives us a more useful approach in thinking of an artist’s engagement with the rock band as “image” appropriation from popular culture. However, he does not situate rock activities driven by or absorbed by these artists as in-conversation with composer or “new music” innovations, with which it shared a stage and players. Nor does his art-centric point of view consider how ideas or practices within music, both popular and post-Cagean, may have impressed upon art, or even appropriated art, as opposed to the other way around. Eklund’s discussion points to the fact that these particular forms of popular music occur on the margin between music and art in ways that have important traction within the dialogues of each and that the strategy of appropriation can be a powerful tool even outside of traditional image making.

Picking up that torch left by Eklund, Jay Sanders looks to investigate works explicitly at the “brink of theater,” in his exhibition *Rituals of Rented Island: Object Theater, Loft Performance, and the New Psychodrama—Manhattan, 1970–1980*, held at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2013. Whereas Eklund tells a history, largely that of the Kitchen, in relationship to images, Sanders and J. Hoberman’s catalogue essays tell a similar history as it relates to the theatrical impulse, or “psychodramas,” with specific attention to the prevalence of objects operating within early performance art. For this study, I take a cue from Eklund and Sanders, and their approach of identifying a selective, thematic history within the scope of this
period, adding to it the layer that is popular music—a different slipstream running through the same river, sharing an ecology and many of the same dips and bends.\textsuperscript{30}

The Museum of Modern Art’s \textit{Looking at Music} exhibition series,\textsuperscript{31} situated in the museums’ media galleries between 2008 and 2011, compiled to a large extent the material this thesis addresses. While these exhibitions were groundbreaking in their contextualization of popular music in the art museum, no scholarly essays or catalogues were produced. Consisting of ephemera and videos, they were exhibited away from other forms of art, separating music from its broader context in contemporaneous artistic practices. Moreover, ephemera was presented as something to be “looked” at, as opposed to be experienced, and besides one DJ-based event in 2011, live performances of popular music were not presented seriously as part of the curatorial program.\textsuperscript{32} While materials from these exhibitions have entered the museum’s collection, they


\textsuperscript{31} Organized by Barbara London, the series included \textit{Looking at Music}, August 18–December 21, 2008, focused on the 1960s; \textit{Looking at Music}, August 13, 2008–January 5, 2009, focused on the mid-60s to mid-70s; \textit{Looking at Music: Side 2}, June 10–November 30, 2009, focused on the late 70s; and \textit{Looking at Music 3.0} from February 16–May 30, 2011, focused on the 1980s and 1990s. Source: moma.org.

\textsuperscript{32} From 2007 to 2013, I served as a member of a committee of staff at The Museum of Modern Art tasked with planning concerts and other public programs, understood to be an initiative to engage young audiences. Before the \textit{Looking at Music} exhibitions, popular music in the museum largely came in the form of entertainment for parties and events, and seen as an extension of fundraising and development efforts. Music performance appeared at MoMA outside of the curatorial program and collection, largely outdoors in its Sculpture Garden, throughout its history. Most notable among these programs is the ongoing Summergarden series for jazz and classical music that was started in 1971. The press release for Mobil sponsored Summergarden at its launch lists “Jazz-rock, rock, blues and folk groups” in addition to classical and Jazz, among its scope, and did extend in the 1970s to include experimental performances by Kitchen habitués, such as composer-performers Steve Reich, Joan LaBarbara, and Laurie Spiegel, as well as dances by Pooh Kaye and Andy de Groat, and fashion show/performance art by Robert Kushner. (Summergarden, Press release, July 20, 1971, The Museum of Modern Art, https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/4691/releases/MOMA_1971_0128_90.pdf.) It further included happenings directed by artist Marta Minujin, as well as regular acrobatic shows with aerialists the Multigravitational Experiment Group and Punch-and-Judy puppet shows. While the museum boasted that Summergarden attracted crowds of 50,000 people to the museum in its first season, it inhabited separate status from the art, and one expressly casual and not of serious consequence, rather billed as entertainment that “should be casual, intermittent and not overwhelm or interfere with [the] basic idea that the Garden is an oasis of beauty and quiet, in a big, busy city.” (Harvey, Michelle, “Take a Breather: Summergarden at MoMA ,” The Museum of
are not routinely included in thematic collection hangs concerning the same artists or period. This marginalization, which would apply to any content not traditionally privileged in the grand-narrative of modernism as reflected in the museum’s departmental structure, points to the problem of institutional inflexibility in a medium-based bureaucracy. This signals that, to an extent, narratives outside of modernism await full acceptance in the field. The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate on a critical level how certain popular music activities, many of which were included in MoMA’s exhibitions, engage with the broader context of experimentalism, and therefore are integral to the history of artists in the postmodern period.

The conservative, perhaps self-preservationist, impulses that make the institution slow or reluctant to embrace new forms, especially forays into popular music, which are easily mistaken as throwaway entertainment, resides in deeply entrenched and hierarchical notions of value in fine art. This discussion typically forms around a high versus low dialectic, something MoMA itself attempted to tackle in the polarizing 1990 exhibition High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture organized by curator Kirk Varnedoe and journalist Adam Gopnik. The curators set up the exhibition as a break from the “stalemate” they perceived within a body of critical and scholarly literature which was predicated on a negative slant against “low” material, lumping it into stereotypical categories without nuance, and positioning it as a threat putting “high” culture.


Significant acquisitions including the Silverman Collection of Fluxus work in 2008, the Steven Leiber Audio Collection of over 300 music recordings in 2013, in addition to the focus on venues of postmodernism with the acquisition of over 100 works related to East Village nightclub Club 57 in 2017, and the exhibition Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done in the Fall 2018, indicates that a shift is impending.
in “imminent danger of extinction.”[34] They take the position of brave heroes willing to take the leap of viewing this “low” material open-mindedly, acknowledging its value to art. While the exhibition makes a significant step forward in better understanding the complex and specific histories of appearances of popular culture in modern art, providing evidence of their inextricable relationship going back to the origins of modernism, its total reliance on examples from masterworks of the Western canon merely reinforced a hierarchical stance. They carried out a search for the “unruly details which make history matter,” and the “eloquence of peculiar facts,”[35] and set about detailed detective work into the actual scenarios that brought these two worlds together,[36] in order to counteract the trend of scholarly work that seemed “depressingly unconcerned with the basic stuff of history: the particular facts of how modern paintings, sculptures, and drawings actually got made.”[37] That search however—limited within the confines of the curators’ taste and the museum’s collection—can be seen, as Art Journal reviewer Michele H. Bogart points out, “as an attempt to rescue the discipline [of art history] from absorption into literary theory, anthropology, or even disintegration.”[38] She goes on to say the exhibition’s “strategy envelops popular culture under the formidable wing of art history in order to reassert the autonomy and authority of the discipline as guardian and celebrant of the canon of

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34 They might have been thinking particularly about Hal Foster’s The Anti-Aesthetic, an anthology of essays that represent the coterie of critics that emerged around Rosalind Krauss, and whose definitional writings on the post-modern become integral fodder for many of this study’s forthcoming discussions, particularly in relation to the concept of “pluralism” and new media in relation to painting and other traditional arts. It is listed among a comprehensive annotated bibliography included in Varnedoe and Gopnik’s text, which lists a large body of literature not only around “mass culture” and “critical anthologies,” but each of the “low” mediums that comprise the exhibition’s sections: graffiti, caricature, comics, and advertising. Notably popular music is omitted. Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik. High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture (New York: Museum of Modern Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 17.


36 For example, uncovering exactly why Picasso chose that particular strip of Le Journal to collage into his 1913 cubist drawing Bottle of Vieux Marc, Glass, and Newspaper. Ibid, 26-27.


great masters.”  

In his essay “High and Low Revisited,” published in American Art a year after the exhibition and its wave of public debate, Ivan Karp asserts that the exhibition does not go far enough to uncover how associations of high and low are “intimately associated with notions of power and control, with ideas about who should be entitled to have a voice and who should be silent,” concluding with the reminder that “modern art began as a political gesture directed against the definition of high art that ruled the art world.” The artist’s turn to the popular was not just to find new forms, but rather they turned to “crude and vulgar resources” to “energize them to resist the high arts.” It is this politicized, destabilizing energy that drove the community of artists around the Kitchen and SoHo in the 1970s to turn to underground rock and punk forms of popular music, and the particular form of artistic rebellion it afforded them. This thesis will aim to avoid the pitfalls of Varnedoe and Gopnik by breaking out of the neatly, institutionally defined canon of this period outlined by Eklund’s in The Pictures Generation, and include marginal figures left out of art narratives because of their identity or nonconformist approach to media. These artists make up the majority of the Kitchen artists and who existed alongside the few who filtered through to larger notoriety. Focusing on a venue, as opposed to single artist or movement, allows this. Additionally, I aim to track the entangled history of popular music with art in this period, not to absorb the music activity into the “validated” terrain of high art, but rather to demonstrate the existence of an expanded field that resides outside of the high and low boundaries, one I will come to associate with experimentalism.

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39 Ibid.
41 Ibid, 17.
42 To clarify, while the material of popular culture, and music in general, has been marginalized by art institutions, music is not marginalized art. Rather it is consumed by a vastly larger public than traditional art ever receives. The purpose of this study is not to finally bring musicians their due by giving them serious intellectual treatment afforded by institutions and universities, but rather track instances where art and music are in conceptual alignment, impacting and blurring the lines between both fields.
Bernard Gendron’s *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club* also makes the high/low relationship the center of his argument for what he calls a “popular aesthetic,” arguing for music’s relevance to art in the same fashion Varnedoe and Gopnik argue for caricature, comics and advertising: by tracing backwards a genealogy of popular music and avant-garde overlap, going back to the cabarets of Montmartre. Gendron sees the 1970s in New York, and the activity around the Kitchen, as an “unprecedented... high/low encounter, a level of intensity and equality never before achieved,” and to get at the crux of this high/low relationship, he looks to what Varnedoe and Gopnik did not, social systems of power. To do so, Gendron invokes Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital, “which is expressed by one’s position in cultural institutions, one’s aesthetic authority and education, the extent to which one’s works are sanctioned by cultural authorities, one’s place in the cultural hierarchy, and so on.” While useful in parsing out the power dynamics to which culture is undoubtedly handcuffed, the high/low descriptor still fails at addressing artists’ realities. While “low” forms become useful for an artist looking to resist forms of power, as Karp described in relation to MoMA’s *High & Low* exhibition, and Gendron’s assertion of issues of cultural capital are integral elements to better understanding the dynamics at place, the presence of the popular still isn’t so easily summed up. As Duchamp observed in his Philadelphia speech, artists use new media out of a sense of liberation, not because they wanted to go slumming in the depths of kitsch, even ironically, but rather because popular culture was a part of their everyday life—one experienced laterally. This broader liberation enabled by Duchamp and Cage begs for an understanding of the

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relationship between diverse aspects of culture outside of a high versus low construct. If one truly believes in art’s revolutionary potential, then language needs to be found to describe its value that can escape from the restrictions of capital. Rosalind Krauss argues that new media, such as video, once in the artist’s hands, “shatters the modernist dream” and “proclaims the end of medium-specificity,” allowing the aesthetic experience to pervade all areas of the social experience. Because cultural capital traffics in prestige, “critical approval, respect, canonization,” it remains tethered to the hierarchies of modernism. A truly liberated postmodern arena is a de-territorialized space where value is ascribed on a different scale.

Musicologist Ben Piekut argues this value can be excavated by following discrete networks of connections. His book *Experimentalism Otherwise: New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits* adheres to a structure taken from Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory, tracing connections, both strong and weak. “The major and minor characters of my minor universe moved regularly through a variety of cultural, institutional, bohemian, and political milieu,” writes Piekut, who maps the “causal connections and confrontations that “permeate the biographies of downtown artists.” To the Argonauts of the postmodern arena, he makes the

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46 Gendron sees popular music’s “transition from entertainment to art” as “permanently shifting the terms of cultural power between high and the formerly low” as a “historical major break” that can be “usefully construed as a transition between modernism and postmodernism.” While he writes, “I want to make it clear that I am not introducing a new idiosyncratic conception of the postmodern,” he does find the “primary site of the postmodern” to be “the field of engagements between high and low,” referencing the theory of Fiedler, Jencks, and Venturi. Gendron, 10-11.
48 Ibid.
49 Krauss’ discussion of the post-medium condition is more closely discussed in the first section of this thesis with parallels between the apparatuses of both video and popular music.
50 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Used here as stand-in for the curious minds reading and thinking about history broadly, it is the name for an adventurer engaged in a quest, as defined by Miriam-Webster dictionary, so named after a band of heroes in Greek
following challenge: “Pick a point in this network—composer, venue, critic, publication, performer, event—and follow it where it leads. Explain the strange topology that results.”

Piekut’s universe is identified as experimentalism, a term that in musicology specifically refers to the tendencies of a post-Cagean canon of composers, who coalesced into a tangible network when Michael Nyman published Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond in 1974. In Nyman’s book, he argues that “American experimentalism,” led by Cage, breaks with “European avant-gardism” as typified by Karlheinz Stockhausen. Piekut compiles Nyman’s set of “purely music considerations,” outlined as the central tendencies of experimentalism, and adds to it a long list of commonly used hallmarks and tropes. However, Piekut draws a distinction between experimentalism as a *genre* and what he calls “actually existing experimentalism,” or the process of experimenting in the general sense. His book then aims to track the artists, events, and organizations at the edges of experimentalism, and see how the act of “testing the quotidian, the ordinary, the accepted, the given—not for any directed purpose, but as an open ended project—can reveal the unknown, the unnoticed, the extraordinary, or otherwise.”

Interestingly, Nyman’s book, which was responsible for the identification of the genre, was part of a wider series of books produced by London publisher Studio Vista in the mid-70s, which included the following titles: Experimental Architecture, Experimental Cinema, Experimental Dance, and

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54 Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise*, 5.
55 This European Avant Garde is also referred to as “serialism” noted for its atonal sound. Nyman, Michael. *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (London: Studio Vista), 1975.
57 These descriptions of experimentalism include: fluid processes instead of static objects; antiteleological procedures instead of goal-driven works; new roles outside of traditional hierarchies; notation of a set of actions rather than representations of sounds; performance foregrounded over writing; and Piekut adds to it the mission to liberate sounds; an avoidance of stylistic continuity; rugged individualism, a maverick spirit, academic nonaffiliation, and general noninstitutionality. Quoted from Piekut, 5-6.
Experimental Theater, hinting at the wider potential for viewing art through the binding lens of the experimental impulse.

Piekut hints at a wider potential for the term experimentalism in an epilogue to his book, in which he traces a series of connections between the avant-garde music community in Ann Arbor, Michigan and Iggy Pop and the Stooges. He shows that experimentalism pertains to popular forms of music, but does so not to make a “normative argument for expanding the boundaries of the canon of experimentalism (‘the Stooges should be included’),” but rather to understand “the complexities of attachment—how the Stooges can be both associated with a particular formation, and absent from its canonical history.” He offers the chapter up as a provocation for a future study, stating:

I shall not attempt to present a historical overview of the links between pop music and experimentalism, nor to distinguish and define something called “pop experimentalism.” But the music of La Monte Young, Philip Glass, “Blue” Gene Tyranny, Glenn Branca, Arthur Russell, Rhys Chatham, Ronald Shannon Jackson, Henry Cow, Laurie Anderson, Boredoms, and Sonic Youth, among many others, surely suggests that such a study would be invaluable.

In expanding the field, “we are moving in the direction of ‘all the fish swimming together in the same tank,’ to borrow one of Cage’s favorite sayings,” but Piekut warns that,

Although this approach to tracing an experimental supercategory is appealing, it fundamentally misunderstands what experimentalism has been: not only a collection of style characteristics or an attitude toward innovation but, rather, the network of discourses, practices, alliances, and material arrangements of

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59 Nyman, back jacket. Interestingly, Studio Vista is also the publisher of Gene Youngblood’s influential 1970 text Expanded Cinema, which included an introduction by Buckminster Fuller. It was an important, defining text for Kitchen founders Woody and Steina Vasulka and figures around Jonas Mekas’ Film-Makers Cinematheque in the late 1960s, as discussed in section 1 of this thesis.
60 Piekut, Experimentalism Otherwise, 177.
61 Piekut, Experimentalism Otherwise, 196
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
knowledge production that produce musical style and condition an attitude toward innovation.\textsuperscript{65}

Here Piekut argues that it is not good enough to simply create a catch-all “supercategory” based on formal or ideological concerns alone. One has to acknowledge the actual situations that engendered them. If the Argonaut honestly follows Piekut’s directive to pick a place in a network and navigate its “strange topology,” the interconnections in its reality will require experimentalism to expand beyond the concerns of music itself. For she will inevitably embark on journeys that wanders in and out of the terrain of music, coming into contact with artists, dancers, architects, poets, activists, philosophers, and gurus. As Piekut’s case studies show, these situations also contend with current global, local, and social events, political upheavals, poverties and windfalls of fate, and perhaps most significantly, colliding personalities. Just as popular music exists on the edges of experimentalism (the genre) for Piekut, it also exists on the fringes of art. In the context of fluidity between music and art, as previously established by Duchamp and Cage, and for the purposes of understanding the relationship of forms of popular music at the Kitchen to contemporaneous art making, I propose extending the term ‘experimentalism’ to include the art discourse.\textsuperscript{66} To support the idea of an expanded field of experimentalism that undergirds both music and art, among other artistic mediums, I look to the educational philosophies of John Dewey, who used the term to describe a structure of schooling that would support his ideals of democracy.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{66} This shift builds on the growing discussion around experimentalism as a useful construct for discussing art and its reach across other fields in the Post-Cage era. Examples of art historians turning to experimentalism are Hannah Higgins and Douglas Kahn, editors of \textit{Mainframe Experimentalism: Early Computing and the Foundations of the Digital Arts} (2012), which tracks a “diverse array of artists, musicians, poets, writers, and filmmakers around the world engaging with mainframe and mini-computers to create innovative new artworks that contradict the stereotypes of ‘computer art,’” Eva Díaz, author of \textit{The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College} (2015), and Branden W. Joseph author of \textit{Experimentations: John Cage in Music, Art, and Architecture} (2016).
A philosopher of widespread influence on schooling in the first-half of the twentieth century, Dewey saw education as a “reconstruction or recognition of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experiences.” He saw the scientific method as the best way to engender that process, in that it “holds all truth up to an ongoing inspection, a principle running counter to the conservative belief in the eternal value and truth of the Western canon.” This emphasis on a process of inquiry is analogous to the creative process, employed by artists across the spectrum of artistic production. The scientific method is “designed to be responsive to the improvement of existing conditions,” and it “hones the very important skills of reflective thinking, a required condition for informed participation in a democratic society.” This sentiment of social-reform, coupled with its intrinsic challenge to authority, would have no doubt resonated with the generation active at the Kitchen in the seventies, a time of deep mistrust in the established institutions in the art world and in capitalist society—precisely the common enemies that unite the range of artists in this study. In Dewey’s educational experimentalism “traditional subject matter lines are dissolved and reconstituted topically, according to the problems and purposes of the educational situation,” placing a premium on “interdisciplinary construction of subject matter.” In this definition of experimentalism, the artist is not defined by, or limited to, their choice of medium or genre, but rather by the topic of the problem they seek to address, no matter the means.

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69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Dewey also was a significant influence for “happenings”-progenitor Allan Kaprow. (See Jeff Kelley’s Childsplay: the Art of Allan Kaprow)

72 Hlebowitsch, “John Dewey,” 75.
There is a direct line connecting Dewey to Black Mountain College, where postmodernism’s seminal community was drawn together and where Cage would develop the theoretical foundations for 4’33”. John Andrews Rice, the “brilliant, audacious, and iconoclastic” founder of Black Mountain College, was deeply inspired by Dewey, arranged for him to visit several times, during which Dewey was especially interested in Josef Albers’ art program, and later appointed him to the college’s advisory board. His influence is evident in Black Mountain College’s famously interdisciplinary approach, where collaboration between the various programs was encouraged. In a broader sense, Dewey’s example infused the foundations of the American educational system with experimentalism. This influence ripples out specifically in the period of this study, not only from Cage, but also from the “massive boom” in college education in the late 1960s, that “unleashed on the world huge numbers of artists, highly educated and trained professionally, in the early 1970s.”

It was the simple observation that so many British rock bands, beginning with the Beatles, emerged from the art school system, that set Simon Frith and Howard Horne on their task of writing Art into Pop in 1987, perhaps the first critical text exploring the connection between popular music and art. While largely focused on bands in Britain, Frith and Horne

74 In her book The Experimenters, Eva Diaz tracked experimentalism at Black Mountain College under Dewey’s influence as the “glue binding the often-fragmented interdisciplinary discussions,” and finds it to be “perhaps the crucial midcentury modernist practice,” writing: “Whether in the context of education, community, or visual art and music, many aspirations became attached to experimental practices: collaboration and interdisciplinarity, countercultural ambitions, artistic avant-gardism, cultural improvement, and political progressiveness.” Eva Diaz. The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 3-4.
75 Eklund, The Pictures Generation, 22.
76 Simon Frith and Howard Horne. Art into Pop (London: Methuen, 1987). Frith and Home’s proposition is perhaps most thoroughly explored by Michael Bracewell who traces Brian Ferry and Roxy Music’s evolution under Richard Hamilton’s tutelage at the Newcastle School of Art in the early 60s, which becomes a jumping off point for an expansive exploration of art and popular music through the 1970s. He describes the Hamilton-Ferry connection as combining “the sharp inheritance of pop cool meeting the wily strategies of Duchampian aesthetics.” See: Michael Bracewell, Re-Make/Re-Model: Becoming Roxy Music (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2007).
assert in their chapter “The Rock Bohemians,” that the “most significant art/pop community
came together in the Mercer Arts Center,”77 where The Kitchen was housed in its early years. To
arrive at their conclusions, they asked what it was about the art school that fed so directly into
popular music, an educational system they saw as predicated on condoning and encouraging “an
attitude of learning through trial and error, through day-to-day experiment rather than through
instruction.”78

Tim Lawrence, in Hold On to Your Dreams: Arthur Russell and the Downtown Music
Scene, 1973-1992, a deeply nuanced biography of Arthur Russell who is a key figure for this
study, discusses how “more artists graduated from art schools between 1974 and 1984 than any
other time in U.S. history,”79 and that “the excitement of what was going on downtown drove
them to New York.”80 He goes on to note that many of these young would-be artists “were
disappointed to find that the SoHo gallery scene had become institutionalized and elements of
the visual arts had lost their creative edge, and so they turned to music, which appeared to be
comparatively open.”81 He quotes The New York Times critic John Rockwell, who wrote that
“performance art and rock performance offered a fresh challenge to many young artists. Rock
entailed fewer technical demands than classical music, and seemed less a closed craft guild,”82
and it rapidly drew in a “new generation of post-Warhol, pop-oriented art school graduates.”83

77 Frith and Horne, Art into Pop, 113.
78 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
83 Frith and Horne, Art into Pop 113.
Lawrence argues in his essay “Pluralism, Minor Deviations, and Radical Change: The Challenge to Experimental Music in Downtown New York, 1971-85,” a specific account of musicians at the Kitchen, that instead of the term ‘pop experimentalism’ lodged by Piekut, the best way to describe these artists is the term radical pluralism. Piekut and Lawrence modify the term experimentalism (Piekut adding ‘pop’ as a prefix, Lawrence naming it defunct) to address the limits of how it has been routinely used in musicology. Because the term experimentalism was affixed as a label specifically to the minimalist composers explored in Nyman’s influential book, the genre Lawrence argues, leaves the “post-Cagean experimental canon looking distinctly male, white, and heterosexual, as well as notably curtailed in terms of its encounters with music forms not grounded in composition.” He asserts that the musicians working in the Kitchen “stretched experimentalism and composition to the breaking point,” specifically through “their embrace of popular forms,” breaking with “their experimental upbringings.”

With radical pluralism, Lawrence aims to rejuvenate a term Hal Foster stigmatized in 1985 after an initial wave of postmodern criticism and “at the precise moment,” Lawrence notes, “the Kitchen shifted from its old ‘guerrilla unit’ status in SoHo to a professionalized and administered “establishment.” Foster lambasted a post-medium culture of anything-goes, saying that it created “a kind of equivalence,” where a dismal sense of indifference, mediocrity, and conformity prevails in a “stagnant condition of indiscrimination,” dangerously aligned with free-market capitalism. Lawrence sees the musicians’ choice to diversify their sounds and

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85 Lawrence, “Pluralism,” 2.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
88 Lawrence, “Pluralism,” 15.
practices as a form of resistance to institutional and commercial structures and retrofits pluralism with the modifier of ‘radical.’ In the context of a study that asserts that actually existing situations that form context is critical importance, it seems useful to account for how terms are formed as well. Pluralism emerged at the dawn of the 20th century as a theory positioned against federalism, and it first introduced the idea of granting legal rights to corporations. Instead of conjuring capitalism, experimentalism emerges as the more apt term, especially when identifying artists unified against forms of hegemony, given the scientific method’s inherent questioning of the status quo. Furthermore, because experimentalism originated in science, it echoes advances in technology, like that of video, which helped ricochet art into this expanded terrain. Repositioned through the lens of Dewey’s influence, experimentalism is freed from its specific connotations within musicology, and becomes particularly useful in looking at this expanded scope of artistic activity.

While Lawrence quotes the Kitchen’s music director George E. Lewis in saying that an “expanded notion of experimentalism… was the multi-directional ‘genre’ that the Kitchen was created to support,” he also writes that these composers understood their work as experimental because “they and others said it was, and not because it was innately more innovative than any other musical form.” He quotes another Kitchen music director Garrett List stating that the actual act of experimenting “wasn’t a major concern.” However, the brand of experimentalism

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90 Lawrence, “Pluralism,” 19.
92 Lawrence, “Pluralism,” 20.
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
advanced here is not predicated on the act of simply “experimenting for the sake of experimentation.” Instead, it has a bigger concern, one that can be understood in a broader sense, in line with how Cage discusses it in terms of an overall concept:

Objections are sometimes made by composers to use the word experimental as descriptive of their works, for it is claimed that any experiments that are made precede the steps that are finally taken with determination…These objections are clearly justifiable, but only where… it remains a question of making a **thing** upon which attention is focused. Where, on the other hand, attention moves toward the observation and audition of **many things at once**, including those that are environmental—becomes, that is, inclusive rather than exclusive—no question of making, in the sense of forming understandable structures can arise (one is a tourist), and here the word ‘experimental’ is apt, providing it is understood not as a descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success and failure, but simply as of an act the outcome of which is unknown. What has been determined?”

Cage tells us his question can’t be answered with terms of success or failure, or of high or low—a scale that inherently assumes established values. Instead, he pushes beyond cultural capital, and asks to “test out” what the Argonaut, or in his words, the tourist, on her journey in the environment can find. Cage’s question is specifically earmarked by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their text *Anti-Oedipus* from 1972, who add it as a footnote to a section where they write, “The value of art is no longer measured except in terms of the decoded and deterritorialized flows that it causes to circulate.” They continue:

> It is here that art accedes to its authentic modernity, which simply consists in liberating what was present in art from its beginnings, but was hidden underneath aims and objects, even if aesthetic, and underneath recodings or axiomatics: the pure process that fulfills itself, and that never ceases to reach fulfillment as it proceeds—art as “experimentation.”

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95 An act List calls “dry” and not paramount to his process. Lawrence, “Pluralism,” 10.
96 This quote from John Cage come from his 1955 essay “Experimental Music: Doctrine,” written soon after the time he spent at Black Mountain College (1948 to 1952). It was later published as part of the 1961 compendium of his writing, *Silence: Lectures and Writings of John Cage* by Wesleyan Press (page 13). It also appears on page 1 of Nyman’s *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond.*
98 Ibid.
Deleuze and Guattari describe an art that has shuffled off the armature of its “-isms” and ventured underground to the realm of experimentation. This underground is a parallel universe, one that was always there, “hidden underneath” decades of criticism and its various trajectories, echoing back to Duchamp’s earlier recounted prophecy: “The great artist of the future will go underground.”

Armed with this definition of experimentalism, one can now go off the grid and stand before this underground landscape where popular music is but one part of a wider ecology of art. But like an underground, it is cavernous. Art historian Branden W. Joseph provides a map in his book Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage, which navigates along what he calls a genealogy of “a minor history.” Like Joseph, almost all the authors of the body of literature in which this study is situated, choose the genealogy as defined by Michel Foucault as the superstructure of their texts. Gendron writes that “a genealogy does not seek to provide a continuous history, a seamless narrative, but rather focuses on certain eruptions, breaks, and displacements of the cultural field.” Piekut asks that, “any account [of experimentalism] must be able, in the words of Michel Foucault, ‘to recognize the events of history, its jolts, its surprises, its unsteady victories and impalpable defeats.’” Joseph himself calls for “a Foucauldian genealogical outlook,” one that is characterized by “refusing the ascription of stable origins in favor of a field of historical contingencies, an archive always in contestation as an effect of power.”

99 Duchamp, Studio International, 43.
101 Gendron, Between Montmartre, 6.
102 A quote taken from the theorist’s 1977 essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” Piekut, 12.
103 Joseph, Beyond the Dream Syndicate, 47.
104 Ibid.
This outlook is one that informs Joseph’s concept of a _minor history_, which he develops from a quote by Mike Kelley, discussing his installation _The Poetics Project_ presented in 1997’s _Documenta_. Kelley sees the work as “an exercise in the construction of a history, and specifically a minor history,” and through its “examination, hopefully the present historicization of the Punk period will be perceived as a war for control of meaning—a war that one can still fully participate in.”¹⁰⁵ The installation was a cacophonous intermedia environment centered on _The Poetics_, a punk band created by Kelley and Tony Oursler while at CalArts.¹⁰⁶ Informed by these sentiments around an art-school band (echoing earlier mentions by Frith and Horne) and this desire to take back control of narratives from authorities (echoing earlier mentioned “common enemies”), Joseph links a minor history to Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding of a minor language or literature, where “major and minor are not simply quantitatively opposed nor are they qualitatively opposed.”¹⁰⁷ The “minor” is related to the major instead by “an irreducible or uncontainable difference”¹⁰⁸ to it as the norm, or the ideal. Minor histories appear “at the fringes of major movements or styles,”¹⁰⁹ never perfectly fitting in any single category. Not a leveling of hierarchies, like the “stagnant condition of indiscrimination”¹¹⁰ that Foster finds in

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¹⁰⁵ Joseph, _Beyond the Dream Syndicate_, 22.
¹⁰⁶ Before the Poetics, Kelley formed another notable band Destroy All Monsters in Detroit in 1973, sharing its heyday with Iggy Pop and The Stooges, both strong examples of the band activities that have specific traction in the art discourse, tracked in this study. The Poetics were formed by Oursler and Kelley to deliberately interrogate the artists’ band phenomenon. As an extension of this inquiry, Oursler conducted a series of video interviews titled _Synesthesia: Interviews on Rock & Art_ with twelve key instigators that bridged the visual art and rock divide including John Cale, Thurston Moore, Dan Graham, Kim Gordon, Glenn Branca, Laurie Anderson, Tony Conrad, David Byrne, Lydia Lunch, Alan Vega, and Arto Lindsay. The videos were screened as part of the wider multimedia installation created by Oursler and Kelley at Documenta in 1997. (“Tony Oursler: Synesthesia: Interviews on Rock & Art,” Electronic Arts Intermix, accessed December 1, 2018 at https://www.eai.org/series/tony-oursler-synesthesia-interviews-on-rock-art; access to videos provided by EAI.)
¹⁰⁷ Joseph, _Beyond the Dream Syndicate_, 48.
¹⁰⁸ Ibid 50. Gendron touches upon difference saying “What the scholar looks for… are not universal pop values, but certain enduring discursive formations that constrain how the game of aesthetic evaluation is played, what conceptual oppositions prevail, and so on.” (Gendron, _Between Montmartre_, 22).
¹⁰⁹ Ibid.
¹¹⁰ Foster, _Recodings_, 31.
pluralism, but rather “a field of continual differentiation: specific networks and connections,” one that is “never homogeneous” and that is to say, “always political.” Minor histories acknowledge and accept art as a space in which differences flourish.

Joseph’s minor history turns the historian into the Argonaut, adventuring among oddities, mirroring Cage’s sense of the artist as tourist, both undertaking forms of experimentalism. In this sense, the processes of history-making and art-making are in lockstep. In his book, Joseph chooses sometimes-artist, sometimes-musician, sometimes-filmmaker Tony Conrad as the center of his study, and in doing so, follows an instigator that walks between categories and mediums, a peripatetic that follows only his interest. Nowhere does Joseph call for the acceptance of music in the art discourse. Through the lens of experimentalism, he doesn’t need to. He calls Conrad his Orpheus—a guide through the New York underground. Here, I have the Kitchen take on that mythological role, a transport through a transformational period of experimentation.

Aspects of the Kitchen discussed here mark a messy history. It is an avalanche of points of connection and communications that are disseminated rhizomatically. The Kitchen is not a rock club. Other work dominates its reputation. However, even within this relatively minor area of the venue’s activity, it was impacted by and created major artists—names that often dwarfed their Kitchen contemporaries due to the very (popular) nature of their work. While this study must contend with some larger-than-life names, I have no desire to re-tell what is documented in volumes by music writers, and I downsize those paragraphs when possible (this is the case, for instance, of the Talking Heads). Rather, I am interested in tracing the emergence of a self-aware and challenging form of popular music that grew between art and music communities accounting

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111 Joseph, Beyond the Dream Syndicate, 50.
112 Ibid, 52.
113 Ibid, 54.
for those parallel histories that have largely been left out of narratives from either side. The experience of music is fleeting and ephemeral. Therefore, I made the effort to focus on the forgotten, underrecognized or only recently reestablished figures, like Arthur Russell, Barbara Ess, Julia Heyward, Julius Eastman, and others who complicate straightforward readings of popular music’s influence and allow diverse methods of resistance to emerge. The act of a visual artist starting a band—or choosing any cultural space to insert art—is a push against norms and an act of experimentalism. What follows will reveal a unifying impulse that implies a misalignment between the artist, their creative process, and the institutions that seek to organize their histories.
I. Video-Rock: The Kitchen’s Origins Among New York’s Intermedia Underground

Foundations: Steina & Woody Vasulka

The Kitchen was founded in 1971 by Steina and Woody Vasulka and a small group of artists experimenting with the newly available technology of video. After a year or so of inviting friends, artists, and anyone curious to their loft to check out the Sony Portapak System and the VCS3 Putney audio synthesizer they had acquired in 1969, word started to spread that it was the place to go to see and share artists’ videos. Soon people began coming by at all hours, and their informal screenings started to take over their living space. The Vasulka searched for somewhere else to continue their video salon (and get people out of their living room). They found there was no space in New York City sufficiently dedicated to the screening of videos, and set out to open one.¹ The Vasulkas found a space to rent in the streets between Houston and Canal in downtown Manhattan, a desolate manufacturing neighborhood that had only just been nicknamed “SoHo,” inside the old kitchen of a crumbling 19th century grand hotel, recently retrofitted as the Mercer Arts Center. Without enough programming to fill every night of the week in this first year, they asked their friend musician, Rhys Chatham to program music on Monday nights, and things grew from there.

This is the short-form version of the Kitchen’s origin story.² It was set up as an organization for a variety of reasons: to create a place for the growing video art community to

² An essay on the origin of the Kitchen’s founding by art historian Ben Portis was commissioned by Electronic Arts Intermix, and available on both the EAI website (eai.org), and the Vasulka’s own website (vasulka.org), both of which contain a large volume of digitized archival documentation and interviews from this period between June 1971 and August 1973.
come together and share work; to collaborate on building and using newly emerging machines; and to set up an organized entity to be eligible for the expanding number of grants coming out of The New York State Council on the Arts. This collective, however, had one additional, perhaps less expected aim, which set it apart from other video groups at the time—to create a “New Media Theater,” one that explored the interaction between performing music and a performing image. For this theater, the Vasulkas wrote a manifesto. It reads:

This place was selected by Media God to perform an experiment on you, to challenge your brain and its perception. We will present you sounds and images, which we call Electronic Image and Sound Compositions. They can resemble something you remember from dreams or pieces of organic nature, but they never were real objects. They have all been made artificially from various frequencies, from sounds, from inaudible pitches and their beats. Accordingly, most of the sounds you will hear are products of images, processed through sound synthesizer. Furthermore, there is time, time to sit down and just surrender. There is no reason to entertain minds anymore, because that has been done and did not help. It just does not help and there is no help anyway. There is just surrender, the way you surrender to the Atlantic Ocean, the way you listen to the wind, or the way you watch the sunset. And that is the time you don't regret that you had nothing else to do.³

This statement asserts the Kitchen as an experiment predicated on the interconnected relationship between sound and image and the limits of human perception. It is an experiment to reprogram media from solely being agents of commodity culture and mass conformity to an experience akin to nature—or perhaps that could be rephrased as akin to art. It is an experiment that supports, in the two decades ahead, the evolution of art forms that embody and transform popular culture into tools of subversion. With this experiment in mind, the section that follows pieces together a web of sources that aims to tell the Kitchen’s origin story with a specific emphasis on the musical

affinities of the artists active in the Kitchen’s founding. The history of the Kitchen’s first years, represented through this lens, is remarkably infused with the culture of popular music.

In 1959, Steina Bjarnadottir, a nineteen year old Icelandic violinist, was awarded a scholarship to the Prague Conservatory to study music theory. In Prague, she met Bohuslav Vasulka, an aspiring filmmaker, carpenter, and jazz trumpeter, who went by the nickname Woody, after the famous Hollywood jazz band leader Woody Herman. After gaining a degree in mechanics and industrial engineering, Vasulka entered the famed Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, known as FAMU. There he studied under a radical generation of filmmakers that would define Czech New Wave cinema, including Miloš Forman, Věra Chytilová, and Jan Němec.

New York’s Intermedia Theaters & Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable

Steina and Woody would marry in 1964 and move to New York the following year, arriving at an exceptionally rich time for avant-garde activities in the city. There Woody was likely able to use his FAMU connections to meet Czech experimental filmmaker Alexandr

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4 Some of these influences may not be central to what ultimately became the Vasulkas’ artistic obsessions, but rather, they support the trajectory and scope of this study, in that they informed how pop music interacted with the Kitchen in its SoHo years. After their acceptance of academic roles in the Department of Media Study at State University of New York Buffalo in 1973, Woody would focus on a brand of digital semiotics rooted in an exploration of tools such as the Rutt-Etra Scan Processor, and the building of his own devices, whereas Steina would continue to hold performance close to her ideas around video. See interviews with each artist by Gene Youngblood in Buffalo Heads: Media Study, Media Practice, Media Pioneers, 1973-1990. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008).


7 Vasulka recalled, “We were the generation living in the shadow of the revolution,” referring to decade-older dissident novelist Milan Kundera, a figure Vasulka was very aware of as someone from his hometown of Brno, and whose father was a prominent musicologist. Kundera attended FAMU but was expelled from school and the Communist Party for anti-conformist poetry, but was reinstated and joined FAMU as a professor of world literature, where he taught Vasulka. Tamor, “Interview with the Vasulkas,” 2.
Hackenschmied, also known as Alexander Hammid, the former husband of Maya Deren and co-director of her 1943 masterpiece *Meshes of the Afternoon*. Woody became an assistant editor and fabricator to Hammid’s partner, the Academy Award winning documentarian Francis Thompson, who was known for experimenting with inventive multi-screen presentations.\(^8\) Thompson and Hammid would have been aware of The Gate Theater, run by Aldo and Elsa Tambellini since 1966, as one of the only venues, other than Jonas Mekas’ Film-Makers’ Cinematheque, which held regular screenings of the works of Maya Deren, along with others of the film avant-garde including Stan Brakhage, Robert Breer, Kenneth Anger, and the Kuchar Brothers.\(^9\)

The Vasulkas frequented The Gate and got to know its eccentric owner, who dressed exclusively in black and created artwork entirely dedicated to the ominous color. Having experimented with projection and performance as early as 1963, Tambellini was staging a series of what he called “electromedia performances,” often at The Bridge, an East Village theater known for experimental productions managed by his wife Elsa.\(^10\) Just as black is said to absorb all other colors, Tambellini wanted to create a work of art that absorbed all of the arts into one *gesamtkunstwerk*.\(^11\) Presented in several variations between 1965 and 1971, with titles ranging

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from *Black, Black Round*, and *Black Zero*, audiences were presented with multiple film projections, with hundreds of hand painted and scratched frames streaming from projectors that were chaotically lifted and carried around the room. [Figure 1.1] They intermingled with slides, or what Tambellini called projected paintings, with various forms of lighting, balloons, dancers, a variety of live musicians, recorded sounds, and in later versions, TV monitors with video. The sensation is what Gene Youngblood described in his seminal text *Expanded Cinema* as, “a maelstrom of audio-visual events from which slowly evolves a centering or zeroing in on a primal image, represented in *Black Zero* by a giant black balloon that appears from nothing, expands, and finally explodes with a simultaneous crescendo of light and sound.”\(^{12}\)

In 1967, Tambellini opened the Black Gate along with the artist Otto Piene, known for creating inflatable sculptures. Inhabiting an upstairs room at the Gate, it was established as the first exclusively “electromedia theater.” During its four year run, the Black Gate hosted a wild roster of performances by artists including Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman, David Behrman, Jack Smith, Ed Emshwiller, and Jud Yalkhut, among others who would become early-Kitchen regulars.\(^{13}\) Woody Vasulka called Tambellini a “true and direct inspiration to our generation of synthesizing’ artists,” and found the man himself to be a “walking manifesto, obsessed, and fully committed,” noting that the Black Gate experience was foundational to his own investigations into perception.\(^{14}\) In November of 1965, Tambellini’s project was included in Jonas Mekas’ New Cinema Festival 1, commonly referred to as the “Expanded Cinema Festival,” at the Film-Makers Cinematheque, a month-long survey of intermedia activities. There

\(^{12}\) Ibid, 383.
\(^{13}\) One particularly memorable performance was staged by Yayoi Kusama, titled *Obliterations*. It involved Kusama live painting dots on nude models to a soundtrack created by Fluxus musician Joe Jones by amplifying the croaking sounds from a tank of thirty frogs. Aldo Tambellini, “The Black Gate Theatre,” *Aldo Tambellini*. Accessed on February 2, 2018 at http://www.aldotambellini.com/rebel2.html.
\(^{14}\) Runolfsson, “The Kitchen,” 94.
it was seen by Andy Warhol, alongside projects by Piene, and Stan VanDerBeek’s *Movie-Drome*, both of which fed into the Exploding Plastic Inevitable, or EPI, the influential series of intermedia concerts Warhol would stage at the Dom, another alternative theater, only a few weeks later. Beyond the festival, Warhol would have been keenly aware of Tambellini’s brand of electromedia theater, as a regular at the Bridge, where he premiered his film *Empire* in 1964.\(^{15}\) In his book *Witness to Phenomenon: Group ZERO and the Development of New Media in Postwar European Art*, Joseph D. Ketner III writes that, “the aggressive assault of Tambellini’s performance and the frenetic movement of the projection equipment across the room as a setting for musical performance was obviously appropriated by Warhol for the EPI,” adding that “the sensory overload of information was a strategy that Warhol drew from both Tambellini and VanDerBeek’s expanded cinema.”\(^ {16}\) Like Tambellini’s project, Warhol and his team of collaborators, which included Barbara Rubin and Piero Heliczer, both active figures in the experimental film scene, layered multiple films and slide projections, each moving around the room, projected on all surfaces, with a wide variety of colored lights, and sound recordings. [Fig 1.3 and 1.3] Dances were performed by his Factory superstars, often wearing all white like human film-screens, while Gerard Malanga would slink around the stage snapping a cowboy’s whip.\(^ {17}\)

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15 The *Empire* screening appears listed alongside Tambellini’s *Black* in the same advertisement for The Bridge Theater in the Village Voice. Source: Ketner, Joseph D. *Witness to Phenomenon: Group ZERO and the Development of New Media in Postwar European Art* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 195. The Bridge was also the subject of a CBS News television segment on the burgeoning scene of “underground film” in New York, which profiled Piero Heliczer filming the Velvet Underground, capturing some of their first rehearsals for what would become the EPI. The segment also includes interviews with Jonas Mekas, Andy Warhol, and Willard Van Dyke, head of the film department at The Museum of Modern Art. A round sign above the Bridge Theater door can be seen advertising Tambellini’s *Black Zero*. The clip is viewable at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CX2LrvyM0cE.


What distinguishes the EPI is how Warhol, ever-ready to exploit pop culture, frames all of this activity around a live set by a rock band, the Velvet Underground. It combined the intermedia experience with rock-n-roll for what Mekas said was “the loudest and most dynamic exploration platform” for the new “intermedia shows and groups.” The EPI was a hallmark of the time, largely due to its repeated performance across a two-year period, as well as touring to several US cities, gaining exposure to a large audience. With a palpable presence in the city’s art context of the time, the EPI can be pinpointed as the birthplace of the rock and roll band as a conceptual, performance art project, born out of, and trafficking within, an art context.

Beyond the visual elements of the EPI, the Velvet Underground’s music was also a blend of pop and avant-garde methods. They emerged as a group from a collaboration by John Cale, Angus MacLise, and Tony Conrad, members of the minimalist music avant-garde group the Dream Syndicate, who performed as part of radical composer Le Monte Young’s Theater of Eternal Music, in which they played sets of single notes in marathon sustained drones, tuned in the harmonic intervals of just-intonation. A figure who bridged the worlds of music composition and Fluxus, Young was known for having largely “galvanized the post-Cage generation of avant-gardists.” He became infamous for a series of compositions he debuted in December of 1960 during a series of concerts he organized with Yoko Ono in her Chambers Street loft. They were scores which simply consisted of whimsical instructions and poem-like phrases, including his Composition #15, which instructs the performer to “Turn a butterfly (or any number of butterflies) loose in the performance area,” and Piano Piece for David Tudor #1, which asks

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19 Piekut, Experimentalism Otherwise, 71.
20 Ibid.
21 Piekut, Experimentalism Otherwise, 72.
the performer to “feed the piano” a bale of hay. Young, who would later be invited to perform the inaugural event at the Kitchen, made a big impression on the Vasulkas who experienced a Theater of Eternal Music performance in 1969 that featured shifting colored light components created by Young’s partner Marian Zazeela. A fellow member of the Dream Syndicate, Zazeela first created slides for the Theater of Eternal Music’s contribution to Mekas’ Expanded Cinema Festival in 1965, the same festival that inspired Warhol to create the EPI. Her “elaborately calligraphic colored light projections… would be conceived as harmonically interrelated or even aesthetically unified with the music, rather than allegorically layered.” She described this relationship as generative, saying “Part of the projection falls upon us as we play and re-programs us,” and aligning with the position Steina Vasulka would come to take on her understanding of a performing image. The Vasulkas felt that the visual immersion, paired with the uniquely physical experience of sound waves in the drone-laden performance, was a transformative experience, saying it completely “changed our minds.” Steina Vasulka recounted how Young “created those standing waves, so if you would walk around, or if you would move your head, the sound would change… The whole room was magnetic. That was a watershed event for me… Walking into this La Monte event that had to have lasted 5 hours, I understood that things did not have to have a beginning, middle, and end.”

Cale and Conrad were classically trained musicians, practicing at the forefront of university-driven avant-garde music, each having studied directly with John Cage, David Tudor, Christoph Wolff, and Cornelius Cardew. They lived together in an apartment at 56 Ludlow

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24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
27 Chris Hill, “Interview with Steina Vasulka,” *Buffalo Heads*, 482.
Street. After intense sessions with Young, they would unwind with a collection of rock 45s.\textsuperscript{28}

Cale was especially astonished and excited by the idea that the just-intonation to which they tuned their instruments in the Dream Syndicate project with Young, could be translated to a pop context. He recognized this saying,

\begin{quote}
The thing that really amazed me about it was that [the Dream Syndicate] played similarly to the way the Everly Brothers used to sing. There was this one song which they sang, in which they started with two voices holding one chord. They sang it so perfectly in tune that you could actually hear each voice. They probably didn’t know they were singing in just-intonation, but they sang the right intervals. And when those intervals are in tune, as they were in the Everly Brothers and our group, it is extremely forceful.\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

Tony Conrad, who stopped playing in the group with Cale by the time they adopted the Velvet Underground name and they linked up with Warhol, observed that,

\begin{quote}
John started getting interested in rock-n-roll, although there was a great ambiguity in his mind about how somebody could be interested in both rock and classical music. But there was something very liberating about the whole rock thing, and in a sense 56 Ludlow Street came to stand for a lot in terms of some kind of liberating musical influence.\textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

This sense of liberation is something that Warhol links to the co-opting of popular culture, as he did in his art, saying,

\begin{quote}
The pop idea, after all, was that anybody could do anything, so naturally we were all trying to do it all. Nobody wanted to stay in one category, we all wanted to branch out into every creative thing we could. That’s why when we met The Velvet Underground at the end of ’65, we were all for getting into the music scene, too.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

Perhaps, more accurately than the “pop idea,” the liberating impulse that Conrad notes points to a “type of aesthetic relativism often associated with a post-Cagean, postmodern sensibility (the

\textsuperscript{28} Victor Bockris and Gerard Malanga. \textit{Up-Tight: The Velvet Underground Story} (Cooper Square Press, 2003), 14.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{31} Bockris and Malanga, \textit{Up-Tight}, 18.
freedom to indulge in high and low musical forms alike),” as described by Joseph, that becomes the playing field of experimentalism. In this aestheticized and expanded format, Cale found a context to infuse drones of intense duration, drawn from LaMonte Young, into the pop song; this is especially evident on “Heroin,” a track recorded in 1966 and performed as part of the EPI. In it, Cale lays down an unbroken, disquieting frequency on his viola as a waterfall of sound underneath Lou Reed’s lyrics and guitar. [AV 1] The EPI embraced chaos and cacophony but the result was not just a decadent, vapid free-for-all, but rather a cluster of different signifiers. The EPI intrigued Marshall McLuhan enough that he included the performance as a two-page spread in his 1967 quote-and-image collage handbook The Medium is the Massage, a play on the title of his influential concept, the medium is the message, from his book Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, published in 1964. [Figure 1.5] The all-enveloping total-media environment of the EPI experience was the epitome of what McLuhan describes when he wrote, “Electric circuitry has overthrown the regime of ‘time’ and ‘space’ and pours on us instantly and continuously the concerns of all other men. It has reconstituted dialogue on a global scale. Its message is Total Change, ending psychic, social, economic, and political parochialism.”

For Cale, the introduction of this expanded and media-loaded environment provided a transitional pathway from the art-minded, avant-garde mode of production he was used to in La Monte Young’s company, to the liberating format of rock-n-roll. “For me the path ahead suddenly became clear,” he said, “I could work on music that was different from ordinary rock and roll,” because the EPI gave him an alternative context to perform it in. This understanding

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32 Joseph, Beyond the Dream Syndicate, 228.
34 Bockris and Malanga, Up-Tight, 14.
of an alternative rock and roll, one that was chosen by the artist as a site for appropriation and transformation, a space to enact certain political and aesthetic stances, is what will prevail in the downtown art scene and at the Kitchen in the years ahead. In his essay on the EPI, Branden Joseph recognizes it as a watershed event for the “newly emerging spaces of information”\textsuperscript{35} that artists have come to inhabit. He writes,

The EPI was not simply a bricolage of existing signifiers, practices, and codes. Rather it formed a multiplicitous situation or “image” in which the possibilities of subjective transformation were opened to forms of political appropriation. Not primarily by the proletarian mass or the official, and often essentialist, counterculture, but by delinquents, drag queens, addicts, and hustlers: a “group,” as Kathy Acker observed about the Factory, ‘who no decent person, not even a hippy, would recognize as being human.’ It was a group, however, that would later emerge with punk and a politicized gay subculture.\textsuperscript{36}

The EPI and the Velvet Underground are a touchpoint for early formations and subsequent popular music forms at the Kitchen precisely for the band’s recipe of translating high-concept techniques from the avant-garde into the popular, colloquial, and therefore politicized form of rock. This combined with the recognition of the concert as a “situation or ‘image,’” resulting in something other than ordinary rock and roll, and more akin to the burgeoning field of performance art. The decadence of the delinquents and oddballs of New York that begin to practice this new form of rock particularly appealed to the Vasulkas and were an integral part of the fabric of the Mercer Art Center, the building they carved out as a space along with art dealer Howard Wise.

\textsuperscript{35} Joseph, "My Mind Split Open," 81.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
Video, TV, Performing Images

In May of 1969, the Vasulkas would have a further watershed encounter when they attended an exhibition at the Howard Wise Gallery on 57th Street called *TV as a Creative Medium*. A retired wealthy businessman, Howard Wise was a pioneer in supporting artists engaged with technology, whom he saw as continuing the work of kinetic artists like Alexander Calder, Yaacov Agam, Len Lye, and Jean Tinguely. *TV as Creative Medium* was the first exhibition of its kind, and it included video works by Aldo Tambellini, Eric Siegel, Nam June Paik, Frank Gillette and others who would go on to form the video art community and establish the medium overall. Wise’s prescient introduction in the exhibition program dramatically declares, “The machine is obsolescent,” and along with quoting McLuhan, he credits the television with enacting a radical change on society. In her profile on the exhibition and its impact in *AFTERIMAGE* magazine, Marita Sturken writes that each of the works “variously saw video as viewer participation, a spiritual and meditative experience, a mirror, an electronic palette, a kinetic sculpture, or a cultural machine to be deconstructed.” Works in *TV as a Creative Medium* exhibition toy with, and reposition what, Krauss called the “phenomenological vector” that links objects to subjects. In her essay “A Voyage on the North Sea,” she

38 In the program notes, he accurately predicts the decline of print publications and the advent of cyber schooling, as well as making the prescient observation that this generations of artists are the first to be “raised on TV”. Howard Wise, Program for *TV as a Creative Medium*, accessed February 10, 2018 at https://monoskop.org/images/4/4a/TV_as_a_Creative_Medium_1969.pdf
39 Sturken singles out *Wipe Cycle* by Gillette and Ira Schneider, as the centerpiece of the exhibition. A “television mural,” as described by the artists, of nine stacked monitors, with a hidden camera among them pointed at, and transmitting live, images of anyone approaching, it thought a closed-circuit, intercutting the viewer’s image with broadcast news footage. The multi-screen work must have echoed the structures Woody Vasulka was building for Francis Thompson, and a similar wall of arranged monitors would be constructed very early on in the Kitchen. Like Warhol’s EPI or Tambellini’s Black Gate, these multi-monitor wall constructions envelope the viewer, creating a space for the image to perform in front of them, in an experience that engages them both physically and psychologically, while also entangling them politically. Sturken, “TV as a Creative Medium,” 6.
investigates the logical end to modernism’s reductivist quest, as laid out by Clement Greenberg, and posits that the commanding issue for artists lies in “specific modes of address.”

This shift, as Krauss puts it, “shatter[ed] the modernist dream,” and was instigated by the advent of the Portapak video camera, a device that enabled artists to create “television, which means a broadcast medium, one that splinters spatial continuity into remote sites of transmission and reception.”

Furthermore, Krauss points to the impossibility of attempting to locate the true essence of television, which seems “hydra-headed, existing in endlessly diverse forms, spaces, and temporalities for which no single instance seems to provide a formal unity for the whole.”

Video operates among a constellation of tools: the camera, its operator, the monitor, tapes, electricity, broadcast transmissions, playback devices, and synthesizers incorporating both audio, visual, and spatial dimensions. The rock band, a rudimentary technology in comparison to video, which had been appropriated by artists (Warhol’s EPI) before the Portapak video camera’s time, similarly functions across an apparatus consisting of a multitude of parts—performance, music, recordings, fashions, instruments, electronics and effects, written words, record-objects, and ephemera. While guitars and drums date back centuries, the rock band is defined by its electronic tools, with the electric guitar becoming the central instrument by the 1950s, hardly a “new media” in the sense that video is. Both the apparatus of video and of the rock band are systems of amplification and distribution, not merely of sensory stimuli, but for ideas and experience. In this sense, like video, the rock band equally occupies a “kind of discursive chaos,” and curiously, one that also typically peddles popular culture.

Artists’ engagement with intermedia “proclaims the end of medium-specificity,” and allows the aesthetic experience to pervade all areas of the social

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41 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
experience. This shattered condition enacts a liberation, and echoes back to the very sense of liberation that Tony Conrad couldn’t quite place when he described his and John Cale’s turn to rock and roll. In breaking themselves free from the reductivist restraints of Young’s minimalism, popular music afforded them that aesthetic liberation, but it also embodied a political one. This is echoed in Michael Shamberg’s review of the *TV as a Creative Medium* exhibition in *Time* magazine, where he contextualizes video art in the political moment of 1969, writing,

> The younger generation has rebelled against its elders in the home. It has stormed the campuses. About the only target remaining *in loco parentis* is that preoccupier of youth, television. Last week the television generation struck there too…The ten artists, all in their 20s or 30s, are… electronics experimenters, united by disgust with usual TV fare.46

Shamberg picks up on what unifies these artists: their common enemy—the status quo. They turn to television, from their diverse artistic and scientific backgrounds, not for its visual qualities, but as a political statement. Their experimentation with the flow of material and stimuli around them, binds them in the shattered post-medium context, parallel to the way the flow of information in television, what McLuhan calls the “new electronic interdependence,” binds individuals in “the image of a global village.”47 Functioning along the same lines, popular music shares these strong affinities for the amplification of social and political ideas—two tools of populist communication, ripe for appropriation, ripped from mainstream culture by artists.

> Woody and Steina Vasulka, inspired by viewing this exhibition, went out and purchased a Portapak camera and approached Eric Siegel about forming an artist collective. The trio called themselves “The Perception Group,” and with Portapak in hand,
they set out to explore and tape, as they called it, “New York's cultural playgrounds,” which included the Judson Church, La MaMa, Automation House, the Village Vanguard, Fillmore East, WBAI Free Music Store, and the infamous nightclub Max’s Kansas City. Steina recalls, “After those outings, everyone would gather in our loft to look at the instant playback-something that most people at that time had never experienced before. Even the word ‘video’ was a brand-new addition to the vocabulary.”48 They befriended Warhol star and drag queen Jackie Curtis, for whom they assisted and videotaped various productions of experimental cabaret theater. Curtis’ musical *Vain Victory: the Vicissitudes of the Damned*, a prime example of the campy cabaret that shared the stages at the Bridge and the Dom with experimental and intermedia theater, was staged at La MaMa in May of 1971. The production’s poster shows the long list of collaborators, with “Video by ‘The Vasulka’s’” appearing right below “Andy Warhol.” [Figure 1.7] Program credits show that violin accompaniment was also provided by Steina Vasulka, sets were designed by artist Larry Rivers and constructed by Woody Vasulka. The show starred Eric Emerson, a “proto-glamb” Factory regular with “anarchic spirit and exhibitionist charisma,”49 and the singer in the rock band Messiah, soon to be re-named the Magic Tramps; captured by the Vasulkas’ video, Emerson appears on stage blanketed head-to-toe in glitter.50 [Figure 1.8] Emerson and his bands form one of the links between the Vasulkas and the Mercer Arts Center, where the Kitchen would be located, and would draw them closer to underground rock, as well as the emerging aesthetic links between cabaret and rock-and-roll that will be evident there. In addition to the Curtis play footage, the Vasulkas taped

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Jimi Hendrix in concert at the Filmore East, antics among the Warhol Superstars, and Jazz musician Don Cherry playing in Washington Square Park. It was edited into a compilation video titled *Participation*, a “free-form time capsule of an era,”51 a literal realization of the artist-as-tourist in the New York underground. [Figure 1.9]

The first public screening the Vasulkas organized was not in a gallery or even in a film or video specific venue, but rather at Max’s Kansas City, the notorious music venue and steakhouse hangout of the Warhol scene.52 Steina Vasulka recalls Max’s Kansas City owner Mickey Ruskin, known for making trades with and extending generous tabs to his artistic clientele, selling them several TV monitors, and later granting them access to the bar’s upstairs room.53 Both melting pots of the creative milieu, Max’s Kansas City was a fitting start for the Kitchen, and signals what will be the Kitchen’s long-term and under-explored relationship to club culture. Moreover, the venue made sense for the way the Vasulkas thought about the function of the video image, which is of an image that *performs*, and is in direct relationship to sound. Fundamentally, Steina Vasulka, who continued to be active as a violinist during her years in New York, drew upon this as the root of her fascination with the medium, stating:

> My background is in music. For me, it is the sound that leads me into the image. Every image has its own sound, and in it I attempt to capture something flowing and living. I apply the same principle to art as to playing the violin: with the same attitude of continuous practice, the same concept of composition. Since my art schooling was in music, I do not think of images as stills, but always as motion.54

She reiterates in another interview that “it was especially the potential for generating sound from image and image from sound that was to form the basis of an enduring enthusiasm for video as a medium.” Video was appealing because it supported this generative relationship, locked in an inextricable interplay, and like Zazeela’s color slides for the Theater of Eternal Music, sound and image “re-programed” each other. It signals that, on an abstract level, a generative interdependency operates between all phenomena in the post-medium arena.

**The Kitchen at the Mercer Art Center**

Less than a year after the *TV as a Creative Medium* exhibition, Howard Wise closed his gallery. Video work had no viable market like painting and sculpture, and Wise determined that the best way to serve artists was by creating a non-profit to distribute funds from public sources. He formed Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), a non-profit video distribution service that exists to this day, and applied for grants through the New York State Council on the Arts. Under the umbrella of EAI, Wise would coordinate a range of activities including the Kitchen, and took over the funding efforts for Charlotte Moorman’s extravagant and carnivalesque annual Avant-Garde Festivals. As part of EAI’s initial grant application, a sum of $15,000 was requested to

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55 Hill, *Buffalo Heads*, 496.
56 Sturken, “TV as a Creative Medium,” 6.
57 Ibid.
58 Staged annually since 1963, the Avant-Garde Festivals began as a series of concerts, a gathering of the composers working on the fringes of music composition, which included John Cage, David Tudor, Morton Feldman, Le Monte Young, and James Tenney. Along with the composers like Stockhausen, artistically diverse figures, such as Allen Ginsberg and Yvonne Rainer, were presented alongside absurdist antics staged by the Fluxus group’s Dick Higgins, Allan Kaprow, Alison Knowles, and Geoffrey Hendricks. The combinations of these groups is evidence of the fluidity between composers-driven music and artist-drive Fluxus activities, both interpreting the score as one of its primary languages. Per Piekut, Moorman was an important, “catalytic force in New York experimentalism.” (Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise*, 140.) The fact that her activities came to be administered by the same team as the Kitchen operation under EAI, speaks to a certain common tenor that thrived within both spaces and colored much of their activity—one that blended a respect and serious dedication to an intellectual rigor, with a playful exuberance, that could even border on pure silliness at times, but overall allowed for a wide net of artistic acceptance to be cast. Moorman’s influence wasn’t one simply of strategies for playful entertainment, certainly her projects couldn’t be
support the Perception Group, Woody and Steina Vasulka’s collective with Eric Siegel. They would use the funds to open what they initially called The Electric Kitchen at 240 Mercer Street, inside the Mercer Arts Center, a labyrinthine cluster of six ramshackle theaters that *The New York Times* called “a kind of a downtown Lincoln Center seen through the wrong end of the telescope.” [Figure 1.10] When the Broadway Central Hotel opened in 1871, it was one of the largest hotels in the world, a grand example of the Gilded Age. A hundred years later, it had fallen into disrepair and was operating as a welfare hotel. Seymour Kayback, a bawdy air conditioning magnate, invested in retrofitting a portion of the hotel into the theater complex in 1970, and on November 2, 1972, *The New York Times* ran a profile stating, “Mercer Stages are a Supermarket,” noting a plethora of holes in floors, crumbling walls, and broken pipes along with said to have had mass appeal, but rather she demonstrated a quest for uncompromising accessibility, relinquishing not a single iota of radicality while demanding free admission and staged in the most public of places: Central Park, the Staten Island Ferry, and Shea Stadium. “I’m very bored with the concept that art is for a few people—the chosen few,” she said. “I participate in activities organized by big museums..., but I have a secret love for reaching people who don’t get to museums or concerts normally... I’m very interested in fun and not making art such a snobbish, mysterious thing.” Source: Geoffrey Hendricks, ed. *Critical Mass: Happenings, Fluxus, Performances, Intermedia and Rutgers University, 1958-1972* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 179. Moorman’s sensibility is built on, not a desire to dumb-down content or to make artwork more palatable for the masses, rather her festivals built room for more instances of difference, norm-breaking disruptions, and avant-garde concepts to be seen and exposed to anyone outside the sanctioned zones of acceptance, a strategy not unlike that enacted by artists who turn to popular music at the Kitchen—ultimately political gestures. Howard Wise’s support of the Avant Garde Festivals starting in 1971, enabled them to expand in scope and reach, incorporating a video program with the help of Woody and Steina Vasulka in 1972, and Moorman continued her ambitious program through 1982. Source: “Annual Avant Garde Festivals,” *Electronic Arts Intermix*. Accessed February 10, 2018 at http://www.eai.org/webpages/1175.

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60 Electric was quickly dropped from documents in the first year, and an effort was made to expand the name to “The Kitchen - LATL: Live Audience Test Laboratory,” but ultimately kept it simple because, as Steina recalls, “We did not want the audience to know they were some kind of laboratory rats, but that’s what they were.” Hill, *Buffalo Heads*, 500.


63 The Mercer Arts Center took over several floors of the hotel, which had been renamed the University, and to get a sense of the environment, note that in the first six months of 1972, there were 22 robberies, one homicide, three rapes, and “untold drug-related crimes and assaults” reported there. Needs, *Dream Baby Dream*, 133.
the description of half-constructed theaters.\textsuperscript{64} The brick-walled vault that was the former catering kitchen of the grand hotel was scouted by Andres Mannik (also known as Andy Mann), a Finnish artist and carpenter, who had worked as a carpenter for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. He suggested it to the Vasulkas after attending their screenings at Max’s Kansas City.\textsuperscript{65} Steina recalls arriving at the space, saying,

He showed us a great place in a dilapidated building on Mercer Street and we were sold. Problem was, everybody told us, this part of town was a wasteland, and nobody would ever show up. Even the names NoHo/SoHo were unknown then. Woody named the place after its previous function, ”The Kitchen.” We had to clean out ancient wooden iceboxes and utensils from this former bar mitzvah-type reception place at the old Broadway Central Hotel.\textsuperscript{66}

The Kitchen began to be used by a variety of people: Perception (who had expanded beyond the Vasulkas and Eric Siegel to include Frank Gillette, Ira Schneider, Beryl Korot, and Juan Downey),\textsuperscript{67} Andy Mann, Dimitri Devyatkin, and Shridhar Bapat, a tech-savant of sorts, who in addition to assisting Charlotte Moorman on the administration of the Avant Garde Festivals, worked for Nam June Paik, getting his TV-sculptures to function.\textsuperscript{68} Paik himself was not an official associate, but lived only a few doors down at 110 Mercer Street, and Steina Vasulka recalled, there was “hardly a week that he does not show up, ”often in his slippers and bathrobe.\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{64} McCandless, “Mercer Stages Are A Supermarket.”
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{67} Hill, Buffalo Heads, 496.
\textsuperscript{68} An unsung force among the intermedia underground of the time, Bapat was involved in bringing to life the visions of a wide set of influential artists and spaces including stints working for Shirley Clarke, Jonas Mekas at Anthology Film Archives, and Shigeko Kubota. His sensational and tragic life story is chronicled by art critic Alexander Keene’s article “Aleph Null: Shridhar Bapat’s Undergrounds,” Bidoun Magazine, Summer 2012, https://bidoun.org/articles/aleph-null.
In addition to these video practitioners, a coterie of musicians immediately became involved. Mann and Woody Vasuka built a matrix of monitors at one end of the room that became the performance space, and musicians would perform in front of them as part of their regular experiments with video and intermedia concerts. [Figure 1.11] The Mercer Arts Center had a music director named Michael Tschudin, whom the Vasulkas looped into helping them realize their aspirations for concerts. He performed as a jazz pianist with his group Cynara, and he led the Midnight Opera Company, a collective of musicians experimenting pairing jazz instruments with electronic devices to “create immersive video and musical environments.”

The Midnight Opera Company also came under the umbrella of Howard Wise’s EAI and served as the house band of the Kitchen, performing to videos by the Vasukas, Devyatkin, and Bapat. Tschudin was also a regular of the Warhol affiliated cabaret scene, and like Steina Vasulka on violin, was part of the accompaniment on several of Jackie Curtis’ musicals. Tschudin would frequently sit in with Vain Victory star Eric Emerson’s glitzy rock band the Magic Tramps. The Tramps struck a deal with Kaybach, that if they helped renovate the Mercer, they could play regularly. By employing the Tramps, Kaybach was essentially trying to have them loop in their Warhol-connected network, and build a rock scene to draw that audience to the Center. Not only did the Tramps routinely play at the Kitchen, they also cleaned the floors after performances, used it as a rehearsal space, and experimented with video gear themselves.

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72 “The Mercer was in shambles… We worked cleaning away garbage, broken mirrors, and wheelbarrows of trash. We worked a deal with the manager to let us play in the theaters if we helped build the stages,” recounts Sesu Coleman of the Magic Tramps. Needs, Dream Baby Dream, 116.; Steina also lent out the keys to groups to use the space as she saw fit, including the Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo, an all-male drag ballet troupe. Source: Hill, Buffalo Heads, 490.
Center was a crossroads for this confluence of undergrounds, and the strange mix of milieu spoke to the Vasulka on a political level, who wrote:

In many ways, we liked the Mercer Arts Center. It was culturally and artistically a polluted place. It could do high art and it could produce average trash. We were interested in certain decadent aspects of America, the phenomena of the time: underground rock and roll, gay theater and the rest of that illegitimate culture. In the same way we were curious about more puritanical concepts of art inspired by McLuhan and Buckminster Fuller. It seemed a strange and united front - against the establishment.73

The Vasulkas saw the embrace of these “polluted” worlds as liberating, allowing them to embrace “things that were forbidden to serious intellectuals in the sense of purity of thinking,” and by doing so, they could generate an “undefined creative milieu” at The Kitchen.74 Their sense of solidarity with the diverse operators functioning within this “underground” or alternative culture, even those diametrically opposed to their own taste, mirrors the “shattered condition” or the “multiplicitous situation” in art of this moment, as discussed earlier by Joseph and Krauss. Here the post-medium arena, where the aesthetics spills out to all areas of the social experience, mirrors what for the Vasulkas can be seen as an extension of a politicized world view. It is an outlook that recognized that, as McLuhan writes, “minority groups can no longer be contained—ignored. Too many people know too much about each other. Our new environment compels commitment and participation. We have become irrevocably involved with, and responsible for, each other.”75 It is a direct result of what he calls “an electric information environment.”76

75 McLuhan and Quentin Fiori, The Medium is the Massage, np.
76 Ibid.
**Synthesizers: Video and Electronic Music**

As video experimentation got underway, new synthesizers and image-processor machines were being engineered by Kitchen regulars, particularly Bill Etra, Eric Siegel, Woody Vasulka, and Paik. It was apparent to Woody that electronic musicians who were working with audio synthesizers and similar tape-reel based tools, like Morton Subotnik, whose 1967 album *Silver Apples of the Moon* was well known among the avant-garde scene, were far more advanced than video practitioners in developing their hardware.\(^77\) Experimental music and experimental video art are drawn together so closely at this point in history because both avant-gardes were focused and dependent upon specific electronic equipment which was technically similar and effected by regular technological modifications and enhancements. Woody Vasulka had taken his Putney audio synthesizer to the dance studio of choreographer Daniel Nagrin who routinely invited experimental musicians to perform as accompaniment for rehearsals.\(^78\) There they met a teenage musician working as an accompanist named Rhys Chatham, and they bonded instantly. Chatham grew up playing harpsicord and piano under his “serious amateur”\(^79\) musician parents, and spent his early youth in the library at Lincoln Center where he discovered books by John Cage, and he immersed himself in the world of atonal serialism typified by Karlheinz Stockhausen.\(^80\) As a mere high school student, he joined Morton Subotnik’s electronic music studio at New York University as an apprentice.\(^81\) Chatham brought the Vasulkas to Subotnik’s studio, and they

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\(^79\) Ibid.
\(^80\) Ibid.
\(^81\) The Bleeker Street studio functioned as Subotnik’s personal lab, which ran like an open-door, free-spirited commune. Subotnik arrived in New York in 1966, from the influential community around the San Francisco Tape Music Center, bringing with him one of the first prototype modular synthesizers, the Buchla Music Easel. Between 1962 and 1963, Subotnik collaborated with Don Buchla to engineer a solution for electronic music that didn’t rely on the cutting and splicing of tape, which included experimentation with optical synthesizers that ran through a spectrum, creating sounds from pictures and shapes. Ultimately Don Buchla designed the famous Music Easel, known today as “The Buchla,” using a modular, interchangeable system of patches that mimics a computer. Not a
joined the composer’s student assistants in exploring his gear. The studio gained a certain progressive aura, enhanced by some of the more radical figures of the rock underground who started coming by. Members of the Velvet Underground, the Grateful Dead, and Frank Zappa were known to have visited Subotnik, adding to the sense that aspects of rock-and-roll was moving further and further from the mainstream and becoming entrenched in the fringes of experimental communities.\(^{82}\)

Chatham, who joined the Kitchen staff at age nineteen, would serve as its first music director until 1973.\(^{83}\) The Vasulkas were likely also impressed by Chatham’s connection to LaMonte Young, for whom he worked as a piano tuner, and they asked Chatham if he could convince Young to perform at the Kitchen. Steina remembers that after Young’s concert, “everybody else wanted in,” noting that, “at first the avant-garde music was presented every Monday and then it spilled over to Tuesdays. For the two years that we ran the Kitchen, we kept congratulating ourselves on how lucky we were that these people would be so kind to come and perform, even as we had no fee for them. In reality it turned out, we were it - the only outlet.”\(^{84}\)

Chatham’s nights quickly grew a regular audience. These sessions ran the spectrum between serious and academic presentations, to whimsical and deliberately comedic spoofs on radical traditional musician himself, he reoriented to the modular format specifically to create an instrument that anyone, not just those who are trained musicians, could play. The technologies pioneered by Don Buchla and Robert Moog were foundational for the field of electronic music as it is today. The studio was operated with a set of young students who went on to comprise many of the important early minimalist and drone music composers active in New York, including Charlemagne Palestine, Eliane Radigue, Serge Tcherepnin, and Maryanne Amacher, all of which would stage memorable performances in the early years of the Kitchen. Subotnik remembered this coterie, saying, “If I thought of the Columbia-Princeton composers as pedigrees, my assistants were mongrels, and they were sweet and wonderful people. It was an immensely exciting moment and we had a great time.” Source: Gluck, Robert. “Nurturing Young Composers: Morton Subotnick’s Late-1960s Studio in New York City,” Computer Music Journal, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring 2012): 71-85.

\(^{82}\) Gluck, “Nurturing Young Composers,” 73.

\(^{83}\) Chatham’s first music directorship at the Kitchen lasted from 1972 to 1973, and he would return to serve as music director again from 1977 to 1980.

sound making, sometimes in the same performance. A notable event was a May 27, 1972 concert with Maryanne Amacher, one of Chatham’s cohort at Subotnik’s studio. Chatham remembers Amacher ringing him on the phone only hours before showtime to say she was actually far away in Boston, and couldn’t afford the bus fare down to New York, but that she’d play the music anyway and the audience should try and listen to it telepathically. Documentation shows that psychically fused long-distance listening was planned in advance. Either way, the open-minded audience that showed up to an empty room loved it (one person even swore they could faintly hear the New England-played sounds), and it became a favorite legendary moment of the early days at the Kitchen, often invoked to describe the accepting and failure-resistant environment that allowed for comfortable risk-taking throughout its history.

Chatham’s programs would establish one of the preeminent programs for new composers in New York City, creating a home base for a generation of musical iconoclasts too ahead of their time for uptown audiences. Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Peter Gordon, Arthur Russell, Robert Ashley, and Pauline Oliveros would all thrive there throughout the 70s. These events, which packed the

85 Such was the case for Jim Burton, a young composer who presented Six Solos on October 17, 1972, which featured atonal compositions performed on piano, clarinet, and flute with mathematically shifting phrases of notes, as well as Potpourri, a percussion solo with cooking utensil, pots, and pans performed by Burton in a chef’s outfit, as well as a subsequent circus-themed piece where he unsuccessfully attempted to get a cymbal to jump through a hoop. While Village Voice critic Tom Johnson, a regular at the Kitchen’s music nights, found most pieces to be “nothing special musically,” he ultimately thought the evening amounted to “an extremely effective blend of musical ideas and theatrical ideas.” Source: Johnson, Tom. “Jim Burton’s ‘Six Solos’,” Village Voice, October 26, 1972, http://tvonm.editions75.com/articles/1972/jim-burtons-six-solos.html; Video documentation of Jim Burton’s “Six Solos,” The Kitchen videos and records, 1971-2011 (bulk 1971-1999), The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.


88 Ibid.

89 Eric Bogosian and Robert Stearns both reference the performance in their oral history recordings in The Kitchen Archives at the Getty Research Institute, though neither of them would have been present. The Vasulkas also used the event as an example to extoll the virtues of a lack of administration: “Of course, there were catastrophes. Only an environment creatively secure can afford them. We would not have had a telepathic concert from Boston if the event was being advertised months in advance and the artist was getting a fee.” Quoted from “The Kitchen,” Vasulka.org. Dated Fall 1978, http://www.vasulka.org/archive/Kitchen/KD/KD005.pdf.
house and caught press attention, however, were not exactly the intermedia concerts and underground rock-and-roll that the Vasulkas had imagined. Even so, rock was literally all around the Kitchen in the adjacent collection of ballrooms that comprised the Mercer, and frequently spilled over into the Kitchen itself. It is in this context that the early history of the Kitchen makes one of its seminal encounters, when the New York Dolls took up a residency with weekly shows from June to October in 1972.

The New York Dolls’ Trash Aesthetics

“It would be difficult to exaggerate the impact of the New York Dolls at the Mercer Arts Center. For an entire generation of New York’s musical youth,” writes music journalist Tony Fletcher, it “was a revelation, the experience—almost transformative.”90 Even with Chatham running avant-garde concerts on Monday nights, the Vasulka continued their own experiments with their “house bands,” Tschudin’s Midnight Opera Company and jazz-outfit Cynara, and Eric Emerson’s Magic Tramps, who had traded in their glitter for black leather, skulls, and candles.91 The New York Dolls had just formed when their charismatic front-man David Johansen met Emerson at Max’s Kansas City. "Eric Emerson and the Magic Tramps had this room at Mercers,” Johansen recalled in an interview, saying it was “called 'the Kitchen,'” and that it was “like a video room, and he said he wanted us to come down and open for him.”92 Sesu Coleman, the Tramps’ drummer, recalls the first show with the Dolls: “It was in a small video room called the ‘Kitchen’ and we played there often. We were trying to give the Dolls a place to play and be

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seen. I think this was their second gig ever.”93 The event appears on the Kitchen’s printed calendar for May 1972 as “Video-Rock,” listed alongside the Tramps, and Satan, “a fire-eating performance artist.”94 [Figure 1.12] While it’s unclear what particular videos were played, it was likely drawn from tapes by the Vasulkas, Bapat, and Andy Mann, whose tape titled “Video-Rock” appears on other Kitchen schedules. The listing also includes the phrase “ELECTRONIC EXCORCISE” [sic], misspelling of exorcise, tying the goth-rock aesthetics of the Tramps and fire-eater to the video electronics of the room, evoking a decidedly more devil-in-the-machine take on the video image than the more utopian “Media God” of the Vasulka’s manifesto. The packed show made such an impression on the Mercers’ manager that he granted the Dolls a residency, and they played the adjacent Oscar Wilde Room every week for the next several months, resulting in what “was hailed as the city’s most significant underground happening since the Exploding Plastic Inevitable,” six years earlier.95

The Dolls’s off-kilter rock performance coupled a somewhat demented take on New York’s 1960s girl bands, like the Shirelles and the Shangri-Las, combined with the decadence and squalor of cabaret—a fitting reflection of the decaying splendor of the Mercer Arts Center. Their radical semi-drag look led Lorraine O’Grady, writing for the Village Voice, to call David Johansen, “an absolutely fabulous combination of Mick Jagger and Marlene Dietrich.”96 Their performance packed a pastiche of bygone 60s innocence into a camped-up nihilism and was a

94 The calendar also lists Richard Nusser as the organizer. Nusser was a critic for the Village Voice, who’s Riffs column regularly covered downtown rock. Interviews with Johansen, Sesu Coleman, and the Vasulkas who mention the New York Dolls show do not make mention of Nusser. See Figure 1.12.
95 Needs, Dream Baby Dream, 118.
deliberate rejection of the cultural establishment.\textsuperscript{97} Photographs of their performances at the Mercer show the crowd surrounding the band, sharing the stage for an almost in-the-round experience, creating a sense of immediacy between the performers and the audience in a way that must have felt worlds away from the big stages of mainstream arena rock of the time. [Figures 1.13-14] Thunders said the Dolls saw themselves as “a lightning rod for artists, writers, and all kinds of outcasts put together.”\textsuperscript{98} As their predecessor, Firth and Horne saw the Velvet Underground as “the model for an avant-garde within rock and roll, the source of a self-conscious, intellectual, trash aesthetic,”\textsuperscript{99} an aesthetic that became the Dolls hallmark, as purveyors of “trash-rock.”\textsuperscript{100} In his study of Tony Conrad, Joseph sees the trash aesthetic as the specific linchpin between avant-gardism and rock-and-roll. Joseph points to Conrad’s stint in the gleefully commercial pop group The Primitives, a less-serious precursor to the Velvet Underground, which included John Cale, Lou Reed, and Walter de Maria as its modish members.\textsuperscript{101} Joseph warns that in retrospect it is be convenient to point to the “liberating impulse” as earlier extolled by Conrad as the impetus for his cohort’s assertive walk across the borderlines from the avant-garde into rock—an impulse rationalized with now-established understandings of the post-medium, postmodern condition. In the moment, however, there were actually existing situations and encounters that paved their path. For Conrad, Joseph asserted, it

\textsuperscript{97} Member Johnny Thunders said the Dolls were specifically positioned against the big stadium rock prevailed at the time, exemplified by Led Zeppelin who played to audiences of 30,000, with guitarists posturing as masculine heroes playing extended indulgent, emotive soloing. He lamented that “Rock became establishment. It became business. It became no fun. It wasn’t sexy. It was all packaged and repackaged, and shoved down your fucking throat.” Source: Needs, Dream Baby Dream, 119.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{99} Firth and Horne, Art Into Pop, 112.

\textsuperscript{100} Heylin, From the Velvets, 72.

\textsuperscript{101} Walter de Maria, canonical earth-work artist, was a frequent drummer in various bands, including in a short-lived project of Warhol’s that prefigured the Velvet Underground. Warhol described it to Glenn O’Brien, saying “Claes Oldenburg and Patti Oldenburg and Lucas Samaras and Jaspar Johns and I were starting a rock and roll group with people like LaMonte Young, and the artist who digs holes in the desert now, Walter De Maria,” in which Warhol said his role was, “singing badly.” In-fighting meant the group didn’t last beyond a few rehearsals. (Firth and Horne, Art Into Pop, 117.)
was the “transgressive, camp aesthetic,” influenced by Flaming Creatures’ filmmaker Jack
Smith, that specifically drove these artists into rock. In that sense, the New York Dolls, who
premiered their song titled “Trash” at the Mercer, and who perhaps most fully embodied the
trash aesthetic anywhere in music, extend a certain trajectory as the next-coming of the Velvet
Underground. [AV 2] It is one that reaches back to, what Joseph calls:

an important but under recognized facet of the cultural ferment of the late 1950s
and early 1960s, one related both to the investigations of the downtrodden
underbelly of the American Dream by Rauschenberg and the early Claes
Oldenburg, particularly the latter’s installations and happenings at the Judson
Church Gallery and his East Village incarnations of The Store (1961-62) … The
trash aesthetic they developed during this time represented a distinctly political
position, an opposition to, or critique of, the prevailing ideology and ethos of
American capitalist culture and a means of acting out rebellious, even
revolutionary impulses against it.”

But Joseph doesn’t see this trash aesthetic in the same lens of camp, as described by Susan
Sontag in her well-known essay “Notes on ‘Camp’” from 1964. Where she sees camp as
“sensuous surface,” “pure artifice,” and “disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical,” he
posits trash aesthetics as concerning “the outmoded brought back as ruin,” echoing the Dolls’
more devilish, decrepit remolding of 60s girl groups, appearing as “the cast-off, outmoded
detritus of capitalist society.” Joseph states that Smith’s work, extrapolated here to the Dolls,
asserts an “outmodedness” that reveals to us the “constructedness of the present moment,”
indicating a contrived mainstream society. In “Trash,” Johansen breaks from the punchy,
repetitive lyrics of Trash, pick it up/Don’t throw your life away, to sing How do you call your

\[^{102}\text{Joseph, Beyond the Dream Syndicate, 228-229.}\]
\[^{103}\text{Joseph, Beyond the Dream Syndicate, 235.}\]
\[^{104}\text{Sontag was a noted audience member of the Dolls’ Mercer shows, as was David Bowie, Elton John, Fran Lebowitz, and future members of the Ramones and Blondie. Source: Gordon Lamb. “The Mighty Thau,” Vice, June 12, 2012, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/3b5pqv/the-mighty-thau.}\]
\[^{106}\text{Joseph, Beyond the Dream Syndicate, 244.}\]
\[^{107}\text{Ibid.}\]
lover boy? a mocking revival of a line from the 1956 hit “Love is Strange” by R&B duo Mickey & Sylvia—responding with trash! as the name of the object of his affection. As innocent dolls reconstructed as sexualized, volatile men, they are the embodiment of a distorted, exasperated view of a generation raised on the artificiality of mainstream television, left dejected. Where trash aesthetics revives retro images of the past, Joseph asserts, they are “still in essence dejected and as such akin to the socially dejected status of marginalized and oppressed peoples, whether on the account of sexuality, class, or race.”

A trash aesthetic is an assertion of difference, and thereby, a political gesture against the norm.

To Conrad, Jack Smith’s “sexuality and retro aesthetics, which had an incredibly compelling character, seemed not to fit into Cagean formulation,” rather he “offered something that was very, very different... It didn’t have to do with being the most avant-garde…What happened instead was that you had somebody who lived at the brink of his art, and often splashed around in it in a most egregiously conspicuous fashion.”

The Dolls unapologetic aesthetics of trash positioned the rock-and-roll band, a politicized appropriation of Americana, as a tool for avant-garde artists, evidence of a different kind of rock, one that has powerful aesthetic capabilities. They encapsulated this not just in their lyrics, or their song structures, or in their performance style and presence, but rather in the totality of their concept, the sum of all the parts, which could perhaps be described simply as an attitude. As Johnny Thunders reflected, “the Dolls were an attitude. If they were nothing else they were a great attitude,” and at the center of this sense of attitude is personality, which asserts itself at the precise time when a shift is

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108 Ibid.
109 Conrad quoted in Joseph, Beyond the Dream Syndicate, 240.
110 Needs, Dream Baby Dream, 118.
taking place among the avant-garde, unsettled by video and other electronics, and at the dawn of performance art.

**Personality Crisis**

Frith and Horne saw the Mercer Arts Center as one of the few key “performing scenes” in history where “art ideas are obviously dominant.”\(^{111}\) It was here “experimental artists” met a “new generation of pop-oriented art school graduates.”\(^{112}\) In particular, they assert that these bands were distinguished by a specific “self-consciousness about what they were doing… where personality became an art object, every performance an art work.”\(^{113}\) This shift of focus on to the personality is echoed in the New York Doll’s song “Personality Crisis,” which along with “Trash” form the centerpiece of their Mercer-period performances.\(^{114}\) [AV 3] Johansen stated that he saw himself as an actor when he was onstage, but unlike theater, in rock-n-roll the artist isn’t embodying a fictional character, but rather something in between a character and their “real” identity. This double enactment is what Philip Auslander, author of *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music*, calls *persona.*\(^{115}\) Through their persona, he writes, pop musicians “took themselves and their bodies as the objects or sites of narrative and feeling.”\(^{116}\) This centering on the artist’s personality-as-product follows a similar shift that was underway in the experimental music world as epitomized by John Cage’s collaborator and composer David Tudor, whose turn away from notated music to creating unique live

\(^{111}\) Firth and Horne, *Art into Pop*, 112.

\(^{112}\) Ibid.

\(^{113}\) Ibid.

\(^{114}\) Sonic Youth, one of the primary rock bands to emerge from the Kitchen community in the early 1980s, and in turn pioneer the alternative music genre, recorded a tongue-in-cheek version of “Personality Crisis” in 1990, which can be accessed at https://youtu.be/r4y_v6mXicg.


\(^{116}\) Ibid.
performances ushered in the term “composer-performer.” In his essay “Not So Much a Program of Music as the Experience of Music,” included in the catalogue for the Walker Art Center’s 2017 Merce Cunningham retrospective, Ben Piekut describes Tudor’s collaborations with Cage in the late 1950s and 1960s as the “house band” that performed music live alongside Cunningham’s dance productions.\(^{117}\) He surmises that the music and practices Tudor employed during this period as a composer eliminated “the consistent and repeatable work”—a score that could be “played” by any musician. Through the idiosyncratic manipulation of electronics and custom-made hardware, where the “sonic personality of a given performer” is crucial to a given work, he “scrambled these normative categories of musical labor.”\(^{118}\) Photographs of Tudor in 1965 show the elaborate configurations of electronics he wove together, such as his self-engineered instrument *Bandoneon! (a combine)*, which he live manipulated in a fashion that was highly idiosyncratic. [Figure 1.12] Piekut quotes Tudor saying that moving beyond notation freed him up artistically. “I can’t distinguish between the experiment and the performance,” Tudor said, “and if I do that, I’m getting into… the product, and there’s no product here.”\(^{119}\) Piekut asks then “what replaced product?” and writes, “one could say ‘process,’ or one could say ‘improvisation,’… but in light of the collapsing distinction between composer and performer… we might also say ‘personality.’”\(^{120}\) Tudor’s reliance on experimentalism, an approach based in self-driven inquiry, rooted his work in his own distinct personality. Ross Wetzsteon, theater critic for the *Village Voice*, wrote in 1967, “There seems to be a trend in the performing arts to unite the creator and performer,” noting that some of John Cage’s scores, most of the Beatles songs,\(^{117}\) A group which often included people like Gordon Mumma and David Behrman who would go on to be key performers in The Kitchen’s music program.\(^{118}\) Piekut compares this crucial sonic personality to contemporary examples in James Brown, Captain Beefheart, and Miles Davis. Benjamin Piekut. “Not So Much a Program of Music as the Experience of Music,” *Merce Cunningham: CO:MM:ON TI:ME*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2017, 115.\(^{119}\) Piekut, “Not So Much a Program,” 119.\(^{120}\) Ibid.
many of the presentations at the Judson Dance Theater “could not be performed by anyone other than the creator.”¹²¹ A generation of experimental musicians that would emerge under the influence of Cage and Tudor and establish the genre of new music known as experimentalism at the Kitchen, link back to this moment when Tudor branched out from the traditional role of the composer, blending his personality into the medium and the process. This is a shift that happened against the backdrop of the rise of rock and roll as a cultural phenomenon, where the display of personality through the limited and rudimentary tools of vocals, guitar, bass, and drums is the genre’s driving and distinguishing quality.

This objectification of personality has its counterparts in the visual arts during this period. From larger-than-life figures like Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys, who would quarantine himself in René Block Gallery for three days with a live coyote in 1974 just around the corner from The Kitchen, to performance art practices that center on the artists’ own body by Vito Acconci, Carolee Schneemann, and Yvonne Rainer, much art at this time shifted to being an experience of a person, as much as of an object. Along with alternative spaces, which were largely artist-run, independent magazines emerged in this period, aiming to reclaim criticism from the establishment, such as with *Avalanche*, which printed interviews with artists as opposed to the words of a critic, asserting the artist’s right to represent their art in their own words, and in doing so, reinforced this cult of personality.¹²² Just as Tudor’s custom electronics refashioned the composer into the performer, the essential nature of video art pioneered by the Vasulkas and their counterparts at the Kitchen also problematized the typically asserted loci for art from the


¹²² *Avalanche* was further distinguished by the extreme close up of an artist’s face on each of their covers. For an analysis of *Avalanche* see Gwen Allen’s *Artists’ Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 91-120.
object to a projection of the self—or in Krauss’s word, to narcissism. In 1976, Krauss published the influential essay “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” in October magazine, writing, “Reflexiveness in modern art is a… doubling back in order to locate the object... [In video, the image] that appears on the monitor cannot be called a true external object. Rather, it is a displacement of the self, which has the effect... of transforming the performer’s subjectivity into another, mirror, object.” Krauss sees video as “a psychological situation, the very terms of which are to withdraw attention from an external object—an Other—and invest it in the Self,” asserting that the true “medium of video is narcissism. Experimental music, video art, and performance art of this moment each share this intrinsic link, and at the same time, as seen throughout the Kitchen’s history in the 70s and 80s, each find themselves blended with forms of popular music.

In 1973, Robert Stearns, an art history graduate and employee of Paula Cooper Gallery nearby the Mercer Art Center in SoHo, took over from Woody and Steina Vasulka as director of the Kitchen. He recounts the last months in the Mercer Arts Center, saying “We were aware of the New York Dolls performing... They were such a freak act, you couldn’t miss them. We thought we were doing weird stuff but the Dolls made our clan look like eggheads from Columbia University.” According to Stearns, a number of composers who were involved with The Kitchen were “guardedly hostile” toward their rock neighbors, although he wonders if the bands helped create “a distinct atmosphere that influenced the whole environment.” Stearns’ own personality brought a distinctly art-world sensibility to the Kitchen and profound administrative energy that would transform The Kitchen from an ad hoc space into a thriving

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124 Ibid
125 Lawrence, Hold On to Your Dreams, 64.
126 Ibid.
grant-funded non-profit institution. Several of these changes responded to the Kitchen’s growing audience but also to the growing public funds being made available by the National Endowment for the Arts and other entities that required a certain level of organization in their applications.

To be eligible, Stearns divested from Howard Wise and Electronic Arts Intermix around the same time Mercer Arts Center owner Seymour Kaback decided to not renew the Kitchen’s lease. Stearns had moved the Kitchen’s equipment to a loft on 59 Wooster Street, owned by art dealer Leo Guidice, secured through his gallery connections, only a few weeks before the Mercer Art Center would come to a spectacular end. *The New York Times* reported that on August 3, 1973, the once-grand Broadway Central Hotel, then known as the decaying welfare hotel The University and home to the Mercer Arts Center, collapsed, killing four people, injuring dozens, as over 300 inhabitants fled when the building’s “walls buckled in two sections on the Broadway side, sending six to eight floors of wall to the ground with roars and clouds of dust.”

Having made a narrow escape, the Kitchen’s transition to the loft on Wooster Street marked the end of a particular era. However, that distinct atmosphere developed by the Vasulkas at the Mercer Art Center will carry over but evolve in its new home. Stearns described it as one that was demonstrably informed in an underrecognized way by the experience, aesthetic, and presence of popular music. There it served as a foundational platform and supported hundreds of artists working in an environment of pan-genre experimentalism, one that is frequently punctuated with particular influence from popular music throughout its next decades.

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127 Stearns had been placing ads in the *Village Voice* promoting the Kitchen schedule, and Kaback grew annoyed, as he wanted a consolidated schedule that promoted all the activities at the Mercer Art Center to promote, leading him to end their lease. “Robert Stearns: Oral History,” K2000308. The Kitchen videos and records, 1971-2011 (bulk 1971-1999), The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

III. Artists’ Bands at the Kitchen

Robert Stearns & the Kitchen in the Art World

Robert Stearns moved to New York in 1970 and went to work for Paula Cooper as the first employee in her gallery at 96-100 Prince Street, which had opened in 1968—the first commercial gallery to open in the SoHo neighborhood.\(^{129}\) [Figure 2.1] Along with a focus on large-scale minimalist abstraction, Cooper had carried over strong relationships with a stable of artists from her time at Park Place in Tribeca, an artist-run cooperative. In his oral history, Stearns described his time with Cooper as multi-faceted: “Paula saw it more as a display space to cultivate artists, not really intended as a gallery,” he recalled, noting that between 1970 and 1973, the space also welcomed performances and events, activities that deviated from the “boutique” like atmosphere of the dominant and sales-oriented 57\(^{th}\) Street galleries.\(^{130}\) The Paula Cooper Gallery served the surrounding artist community by opening its doors for poetry readings, dance, music, and rehearsals, “shifting the locus of ephemeral activity, providing an established art space for work that was often provisional, and at times highly experimental.”\(^{131}\) Notable events include performances with Philip Glass, Steve Reich, La Monte Young, video programs by Linda Benglis, and even political protests with artists associations.\(^{132}\) Postcards and advertisements for these activities show La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela performing alongside their mentor Pandit Pran Nath. A hybrid-medium production with avant-garde theater troupe Mabou Mines that included sculptural sets by artist Jene Highstein and music by Philip

\(^{131}\) Kelly, “Space Matters,” 188.
\(^{132}\) Ibid.
Glass in June 1972 made a particular impression on Stearns. [Figure 2.2; Figure 2.3] These activities inspired Stearns to think about the potential of positioning the art gallery setting as a home for more out-of-the-box and collaborative programming, and not just for traditional art objects and sales. While working at Cooper, Stearns’ roommate was Jim Burton, a musician who had performed several times at the Kitchen and whom Rhys Chatham had singled out as his successor as the next music program director. Stearns and Burton would use the space for hourslong sessions of free-form experimentation with the in-house electronic music and video equipment—early video tapes show their casual, anything-goes sensibility, where drinks were shared and clothing was optional.133 “I was interested more in these unusual kinds of projects that the Kitchen was doing, than perhaps in selling paintings or sculpture per se,” Stearns remembers.134 Through the blueprint of Paula Cooper Gallery, Stearns said, “I found that there was a possibility for gallery or art spaces to be something a little different from simply a place that sold painting and sculpture to individuals or museums. So, I thought perhaps Jim and I might join into this venture together.”135 The Vasulkas had left for teaching positions in Buffalo in the summer of 1973, and a new group of leaders emerged at the Kitchen, which included Burton and Stearns. As his enthusiasm for and involvement in the Kitchen increased, Stearns, known for his indefatigable administrative abilities, was installed by Howard Wise, whose Electronic Arts Intermix was still its parent company, as its first executive director.136 Almost immediately, and days before the 1973 New York State Council for the Arts applications were due, it became

134 “Robert Stearns: Oral History.”
apparent that EAI and the Kitchen would garner more support if applying for grants individually, or step on each other’s toes in the process, and the two organizations amicably divested.  

As traced by Ault’s *Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985*, by 1971 the SoHo neighborhood had been officially re-zoned from a light manufacturing area to allow legal artists’ lofts and independent galleries and non-profit alternative spaces to multiply. The contemporary art community began to adopt the industrial aesthetic as the preferred context for display, typified by Jeffery Lew’s 112 Greene Street/112 Workshop in a dilapidated converted warehouse. With the 59 Wooster Street location secured with the help of a contact of Paula Cooper’s, the Kitchen moved into the heart of the alternative space and artist-residence nexus at its early and pivotal years. The Kitchen assimilated into this art-centric context from the nearby but decidedly different sensibility within the Mercer Art Center and gained a new institutional identity. It was one that hovered between the traditional white cube of the art gallery and the black box of the theater—a grey zone which enabled it to function as a flexible space for flexible artists’ practices. True to this open and absorbing spirit, the new space was inaugurated with two nights of performances celebrating John Cage, just after his 60th birthday.

Stearns was instrumental in forging this new identity for the Kitchen by carrying over the distinctly minimal aesthetic sensibility—or perhaps what today would be called its brand—from

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138 Known as a loosely organized space led by artists Jeffrey Lew and Gordon Matta-Clark, 112 Greene Street/112 Workshop was known for artistic interventions that intervened or altered its physical spaces, with an open-door policy for exhibition, albeit one dominated by an often-described cliquish circle, that like Paula Cooper Gallery, became the site for performances by Philip Glass, Dickie Landry, and Yvonne Rainer. See: Robyn Brentano and Mark Savitt, eds. *112 Workshop/112 Greene Street: History, Artists, and Artworks* (New York: New York University Press, 1981).

his time at Paula Cooper Gallery. Through the logotype and the formatting of press releases, calendars and ads, Stearns refreshed the feel of the Kitchen to one that aligned with this new artist-concentrated audience. Stearns “brought Helvetica” to the Kitchen, recalled a later staffer. This had the powerful effect of absorbing any performance or event—music, video, dance, or otherwise—into the visual art community and its conversation. In this sense, the Kitchen was mimicking attributes of the white cube—the windowless, empty void that emerged as the ideal viewing context for art in the age of Modernism—and casting anything put within it in its shade.

**In & Out of the White Cube**

Due to ideological shifts brought on by Minimalism, Conceptualism, new media, and happenings in the 1960s, ones that challenged the primacy of traditional painting and objects, issues around the context of display became a paramount concern in the 1970s. This brewing discussion came to a head when artist and critic Brian O’Doherty, drawing on the Zeitgeist of the early 70s SoHo art world, published “Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space,” in *Artforum* in 1976. Pointing out that the white cube art gallery was “constructed along

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140 Part of this new identity, Stearns registered the Kitchen as Haleakala, Inc. after divesting from EAI. The word references the world’s largest dormant volcano located in Maui, Hawaii from which Stearns says, you can see the world from 10,000 feet in the sky—it is an equally grand and earthy name as Willoughby Sharp and Liza Bear’s contemporaneous alternative magazine *Avalanche* that covered many events at the Kitchen. Stearns had wanted the Kitchen to adopt Haleakala as its official name, saying that the Kitchen sounded to him already outdated: “It has a 1960’s anti-establishment ring to it. It's too cute.” However, after receiving a call from John Cage who said, “we all already have the Kitchen on our resumes, and I don’t want to change it,” the name stuck. Source: Ancona, “Strange Brew,” 43, and “Robert Stearns: Oral History,” K2000308. The Kitchen videos and records, 1971-2011 (bulk 1971-1999), The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.


142 There is an interesting precedence for the “art-ification” of different artistic mediums through graphic design and branding in Fluxus. One of SoHo’s other original residents, George Maciunas was able to mold the wildly amorphous and immaterial activities of happenings and scores by a wide variety of radical artists and musicians that spanned geographical locations globally, by labeling the ephemeral with a distinct font, logo, and literally packaging them together into kits. For more on Fluxus and graphic identity, see: Julia Robinson, “Maciunas as Producer: Performative Design in the Art of the 1960s,” *Grey Room*, No. 33, Cambridge: MIT Press (2008): 56-83.
laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church,” O’Doherty asserted the powerful idea that “context is content.” In the white cube, he wrote, art appears “untouched by time and its vicissitudes,” yet the transcendental setting validates its exclusivity—"aesthetics are turned into commerce,” and the gallery’s wall “becomes a membrane through which aesthetic and commercial values osmotically exchange.” The Kitchen was an imperfect white cube—not quite a pristine white gallery with smooth walls on all sides, and not a raw, splintering, dirty industrial space like 112 Greene Street, either. Rather, like most alternative spaces in SoHo at the time, it was a converted loft where a thick coat of white paint and wallboards were inserted into the one-time manufacturing space, which lent a gallery feel when necessary while making it blank enough to enable a transformation into a make-shift black box when the lights are turned off and folding chairs are brought out. The Kitchen operated as a “grey box,” but one that peddled in the currency of white cube values. In its convertibility, it could opt to challenge those values. Artists across the spectrum opted alternatively for both, with dancers moving in full light on occasion, to visual artists working with theatrical lighting arrangements on stationary objects in others.

New activity that emerged in the sixties and seventies—Land Art, conceptual practices, media and its interventions, and performance—was pushing art off the canvas, out of the white cube, and into the world, leaving behind remnants that bore a new relationship to physical space

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144 Ibid.
145 Martin Beck points to the white cube’s relationship to convertible space writing in a challenge, writing: “Brian O’Doherty traced the concept of the white-cube exhibition space back to the origins of modernism, but one could argue that its prevalence in the 1970s was simply the result of the affordability and availability of wallboard. Although artists embraced the raw structures and surfaces of SoHo’s industrial spaces as a material and symbolic alternative to the art establishment, it was the conversion possibilities offered by wallboard that had important consequences for the future of alternative spaces.” Martin Beck, “Alternative: Space,” ed. Julie Ault, Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985, New York: The Drawing Center, 2002, 268.
and options for display. Music, however, was on a different path. Its avant-garde, which was epitomized by a group of composers adopting an aesthetic of minimalism and experimentation, ideologies that aligned with the visual art community, found themselves expelled from the established black boxes of uptown performance halls like Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall. New music, like that being produced by Steve Reich, La Monte Young, and Philip Glass, thrived by entering the white cube, the alternative art spaces downtown, gaining the certain caché and connotations of rarified transcendence it implied. But beyond any of these implied profits to be gained from the white cube, ideological or otherwise, new music activities were readily absorbed by the art context because it had nowhere else to go. The conversation around art post-Duchamp and post-Cage, was one that could comfortably take in and provide context for ideas that had no other home, be it in theater, dance, architecture, or with new tools like video—ideas rooted in experimentation.

**Soup & Tart: The Artist Audience, Recontextualization, & Multiplicity**

At Wooster Street, the Kitchen’s context shifted from the “distinct atmosphere” of counterculture and decaying glamour the Vasulkas enjoyed in the Mercer Art Center, to one unmistakably part of the art world. About one year after the move on November 30, 1974, it hosted Soup & Tart, an event created by Fluxus-affiliated artist Jean Dupuy. Soup & Tart gathered thirty-eight artists whose practices ran the gamut of artistic disciplines, and asked each—while dinning on French apple tarts and lentil soup—to perform anything of their choosing for two minutes. Video documentation of the crowded and chaotic event shows an atmosphere that hovered somewhere between a town hall meeting and an enormous dinner party.

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of family and friends. Artists such as Gordon Matta-Clark, who hilariously mocked his architectural interventions by bisecting a gingerbread house, alternated with musicians, like Philip Glass, who sang an *a cappella* rendition of his signature piano rhythms. [AV 4] Covering the event for *The New York Times*, John Rockwell provided a synopsis of the “miniperformances” from the “dizzying range of performers and performance artists,” writing:

> An “is-it for-real” sequence with Joanne Akalaitis successfully trying to incite somebody to prevent David Warrilow, announced as a former alcoholic, from taking a drink; a lovely duet for live and cassette-recorded violins by Laurie Anderson; a manic film of Mr. Dupuy making his tarts by DeeDee Hallek; a rippling martial-arts dance by Jana Haimsohn; a mysterious Moslem fantasy-dance by Joan Jonas; Richard Landry's insouciant New Orleans jazz sax solo (particularly his entrance); Nam June Paik's wispy, distant piano solo with polite applause from afar; Richard Serra's taped reminiscence of his childhood; Sylvia Whitman's dance sequence with six people who had consumed from zero to five tequilas 10 minutes before, and the classically statuesque Hannah Wilke's not entirely parodistic re-creation of seminude Victorian erotic tableaux vivants.  

Classical composer Arthur Russell’s haunting love song “Eli,” artist and sculptor Alan Saret’s country bluegrass turn on the guitar, and artist Dickie Landry’s saxophone performance all serve as indicators of how the short pop song fit into the casual and experimental performance context of these artists’ activities, and marks the moment from which many artists began to start rock bands.  

Soup & Tart not only equalized artists of many ilk onto one stage and within the white box, it announced that the Kitchen had been fully absorbed into the distinct artist-residence community of SoHo—the demographic that supplied the Kitchen’s regular audience as well. In this community experimental art was executed by artists and for artists. Soup & Tart was not a

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talent show or display of skills, rather each artist used their two minutes to announce their idiosyncrasies—personalities-as-product, which linked them to each other ideologically as experimenters, rather than through any shared aesthetic or formal relationships.

In this sense, the Kitchen offered artists the opportunity of recontextualization.

Reflecting back on his famous essay in 2007, O’Doherty writes,

As video, film, photography, performance, and installations became certified modes, attracting generations of the young, handmade painting became but one suburb of the artistic enterprise. With the intrusions of installations, video, and the rest, the white cube has become increasingly irrelevant; the gallery becomes a site—“the place,” the dictionary says, “where something is, was, or is to be.” The liaison of these art media with popular culture has brought into the gallery unruly energies which no longer have an investment in the preservation of the classical space. Whereas the gallery once transformed whatever was in it into art (and still occasionally does), with these media the process is reversed: now such media transform the gallery, insistently, on their terms.149

Here, O’Doherty points to popular culture as the source of “unruly energies” that tip the scales of control in the gallery space. The white cube can no longer be considered only in relation to art, but to non-art transforming its terms. Art and music intersect on crossing paths, walking in opposite directions through the white cube as they meet in the Kitchen, and what binds them at their point of convergence is their mutual absorption of popular culture. It is a context that work both ways: popular music isn’t being asserted as art when it appears in the gallery, nor is it merely “renting out” the space, so to speak, to use it as a temporary club—rather it hovers somewhere in-between art and non-art in a fashion similar to Duchamp’s readymades. Re-contextualized in the art space, the rock band is taken from everyday popular culture and is transformed into a tool for critique to subvert systems of power in mass culture along with the implicit values of the white cube. Unlike Duchamp’s Fountain and other readymades, a rock

149 O’Doherty, Studio and Cube: On the Relationship Between Where Art is Made and Where Art is Displayed, (New York: Columbia University, 2007), 40.
band isn’t a displayable object—it is a collaborative performance realized over a fractured landscape of events, recordings, ephemera, documentation, lyrics, song structures, noise making techniques, and fashions—which makes it unique in the scope of appropriation art. Not an image, not an object, the artists’ band is an appropriation of a multiplicitous context.

Multiplicity was something deeply connected to Brian O’Doherty himself. A former medical doctor, he worked as a critic for *The New York Times* and *Art in America* magazine throughout the Sixties and Seventies. Starting in 1972, he began making art under the name Patrick Ireland, one of several alter-egos he would develop.\(^{150}\) O’Doherty said, “I like the fact that once you remove the romantic narcissism of expressionist abstraction, the artist is allowed to be what he wishes to be; to be a scholar, to be a philosopher, to be a connoisseur, to be a thinker, to be a lawyer or a shop-keeper without any moral depreciation.”\(^{151}\) O’Doherty served as editor of the seminal “white box” issue of *Aspen* magazine dedicated to Minimalism and Conceptualism—a physical box that included many items including several vinyl records of music, and notably, the commissioned essay “The Death of the Author,” by Roland Barthes.\(^{152}\) Perhaps most consequential on a practical level was another of O’Doherty’s roles: administrator of grants for the visual arts and new media for the National Endowment for the Arts. Serving from 1969 to 1977, O’Doherty witnessed an NEA budget increase from $11 million at his start to $114 million by his departure, during which he was “instrumental in channeling NEA funds to

\(^{150}\) O’Doherty famously recorded an echocardiogram of Marcel Duchamp’s heartbeat in 1966, turning the oscilloscope into an artwork that could be hung on the wall, encased in a box, perhaps deliberately painted grey. For more, see: Hans Belting, “The Last Portrait of Marcel Duchamp,” *Beyond the White Cube: A Retrospective of Brian O’Doherty/Patrick Ireland*, ed. Christina Kennedy and Georgina Jackson (Dublin: Dublin City Gallery Hugh Lane, 2006), 38-43.


alternative spaces.” Not only did O’Doherty articulate the philosophical backbone of the alternative space movement through his essays on the white cube, but he was also directly responsible for creating a new category for alternative spaces within the NEA budget. He negotiated this through tense resistance for the increased support of performance art, environmental art, video, and conceptual art that fell in between existing NEA program areas. The system of pipelines he supported pumped funds into specific areas, as grants could be awarded under the umbrella of a space, a particular media, or in a specific region, and artists learned to work the system, diversifying practices to qualify for more support. As an example of how the art world adapted to public funding opportunities, Artists Space was founded in 1972 at 155 Wooster Street as a space specifically tied to the New York State Council for the Arts. At the Kitchen, Stearns doggedly pursued every possible funding source from government grants to private donations, including consistent sponsorship by Paula Cooper, doubling the budget yearly from 75 to 82.

**The Modern Lovers**

This influx of public funds and charitable support for emerging artists and emerging media added to the distrust many felt about seeing a rock band—a format that enjoyed mass popularity and had a suitable context in standard club venues like Max’s Kansas City or CBGBs—eat up non-profits’ budgets and dates that could go to practices that were under supported by or resisted the market. Yet bands did find their way into the art space. At the

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155 Paula Cooper Gallery would move to the lower level of 155 Wooster Street in 1973. Ibid.
Kitchen, the earliest example of such an invasion was a four-night run by the Modern Lovers from March 19 to 22 in 1975, advertised by a poster as “A Rock and Roll Show,” adding an asterisked note in tiny lettering on the bottom corner: “with support from NYSCA.”\footnote{Jonathan Richman formed the Modern Lovers with Harvard students Ernie Brooks and Jerry Harrison around 1970. They played frequently around New York and Boston and, notably, they were on the roster for the Mercer Art Center’s New Year’s Eve concert in 1973 alongside the New York Dolls and the Magic Tramps. Despite regular shows between 1970 and 1973, the band was unable to secure a recording contract and had decided to dissolve, making the Kitchen performance one of their final shows. Richman would continue with a long solo career building on the Modern Lovers’ concept. For Ernie Brooks’ account about the formation of the Modern Lovers see Legs McNeil, \textit{Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk} (New York: Grove Press, 2016).} \footnote{Russell moved from his hometown in Oskaloosa, Iowa to San Francisco to study at the conservatory and with Ali Akbar Khan, and lived with a Buddhist commune. He fell into Allen Ginsberg’s crowd, accompanying his poetry performance on cello. Under Ginsberg’s influence, Russell moved to New York in 1973. On the West Coast, Russell had been exposed to the experimental music practices of Terry Riley and the Center for Contemporary Music at Mills College, where Robert Ashley directed a program that attracted a coterie of faculty and students that would include Steve Reich, “Blue” Gene Tyranny, Peter Gordon, Laurie Anderson, and many others that would populate the Kitchen calendar in the 1970s and 80s. Tim Lawrence’s comprehensive biography of Arthur Russell, \textit{Hold On to Your Dreams: Arthur Russell and the Downtown Music Scene, 1973-1992} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), along with director Matt Wolf’s 2008 documentary film \textit{Wild Combination: A Portrait of Arthur Russell}, and the reissue across the mid-2000s of his music by Audika Records, increased the visibility of this groundbreaking figure, who died of AIDS in 1992.} The shows were organized by Arthur Russell who served as music director from October 1974 to August 1975. Russell was a cellist and composer with a background in classical and eastern music.\footnote{Lawrence, \textit{Pluralism, Minor Deviations,} 5.} The compositional strategies of La Monte Young, Terry Riley, and John Cage had set forth a path in the field of music to challenge the dominant establishment composers, who were largely sequestered in university positions that isolated and protected them from the need to appeal to an audience.\footnote{Lawrence, \textit{Hold on to Your Dreams}, 111.} As a dedicated Buddhist, the desire for broader accessibility resonated with Russell who saw wide-reaching popular music as a means to spread Buddhist ideas and spiritual experiences—a style of music he pioneered and called “Bubblegum Buddhism.” Russell felt that “refreshingly direct, pop music could reach the emotions and bodies of its listeners more directly than experimental art,” recalling that “as a kid, I always hated this kind of music because it represented something that I thought was too common. It was...
like all the jocks in school in the small town that I grew up in. These were the very people who used to try to beat me up… Now I listen to it with great amazement.”

He also noted that “in bubblegum music the notion of pure sound is not a philosophy but rather a reality. In this respect, bubblegum preceded the avant-garde.” He felt the simplicity of pop music had potential for spiritual effects: “Words can be many things at once, like a mantra… People can understand a phrase on a visceral level and it would mean the same thing that they understand on a spiritual level.”

Russell’s curiosity about phrases and mantras was enhanced when he attended a course at Columbia University on linguistics and the popular vernacular. It was the potential of this vernacular that rushed to mind when he saw a performance by the Modern Lovers in January of 1974. It was front-man Jonathan Richman’s deadpan delivery of “nonchalantly idiosyncratic lyrics in a plain-speaking style,” that “left a deep impression.”

Russell was intrigued and excited by the Modern Lovers because of their simplistic arrangements and quotidian vernacular also mimed minimalism, and it turns out that his fixation was with reason. Richman formed the Modern Lovers specifically out of obsessive adoration for the Velvet Underground, itself the pop-outgrowth of the avant-garde. Richman forged a relationship with John Cale, who recorded several demos, which remain as some of the Modern Lovers’ only recordings. "If the Velvet Underground had a protégé," said guitarist Sterling Morrison, "it would be Jonathan.” Just as Cale incorporated pulsating, sustained notes in just-intonation, taken from the Theater of Eternal Music in the Velvet Underground’s sound,

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161 Ibid.
162 Ibid.
163 Ibid.
164 Ibid.
Richman emulated the elongated, churning guitar parts from their song “Sister Ray” in his track “Roadrunner” as a direct musical quote, tracing this linage.\textsuperscript{166} [AV 5]

Like the New York Dolls, who appeared as the bastardized pastiche of bygone girl bands, the Modern Lovers appropriated the quintessential rock and roll band to fluctuate between nostalgia and critique.\textsuperscript{167} However, their version specifically casts an eye on the “modern world” and the museum. While their typical venue was not the art space, the band’s self-conscious and quasi-serious send-up of the art world would not have been lost on the Kitchen’s artist-rich audience. Richman positioned himself as “in love with the modern world now,”\textsuperscript{168} and sang about Pablo Picasso and taking his girlfriend to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston to look at the Cézannes. He plays dumb, while mocking the art world, slyly hinting at their intellectual elitism in “Girlfriend” (“But if I had by my side a girlfriend / Then I could look through the paintings / I could look right through them / Because I’d have found something that I understand / I understand a girlfriend”). [AV 6] He also attacked the blind adoration of its canon in “Pablo Picasso” (“Well some people try to pick up girls / And get called assholes… Pablo Picasso never got called an asshole / Not in New York”). [AV 7] He equated the modern world with the old world, (“I see the '50's apartment house / It's bleak in the 1970's sun,” “I want to keep my place in the old world / Keep my place in the arcane / 'Cause I still love my parents and I still love the

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{167} Also, in 1974, Argentinian artist David Lamelas, who was living and working among the London Conceptual Art scene, staged a series of convincing photographs in which he poses, guitar-in-hand, as a rock star, spot-lit and in the throes of a climactic moment. The series, Rock Star (Character Appropriation), is described as part of Lamelas’ “interrogation of media and time in the mid-1970s,” that “introduces character and stories” that invoke the aura of myth, interrogating “the production of images and desire,”—a gesture that pre-figured Cindy Sherman and the Pictures Generation’s character transformations and is contemporaneous with the art world’s increasing fascination with rock in New York outlined here. (Daniel R. Quiles, “Scheherazade’s Stories: Narrative and Delay in Duane and Lamelas’ Videos, 1976-87,” David Lamelas: A Life of Their Own, edited by María José Herrera, and Kristina Newhouse. Long Beach, CA: California State University Long Beach Art Museum,103.
old world”). For Richman, who went to art school and studied painting, the role of the slapstick rocker became the conceptual vehicle for his ideas, and technical skill need not be a part of that equation.169

Programmed by Russell almost as a provocation, the Modern Lovers were an affront to, but also a diffuser of the Kitchen’s serious atmosphere. At first, they were highly skeptical of Russell’s booking. “You realize who’s playing here tonight?”, Russell said to Kitchen video program director Carlotta Schoolman, who like Rhys Chatham, was known to be “deeply suspicious” of popular culture.170 “It’s Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers!” he says, “this is bubblegum music gone wacko!”171 Stearns knew a boundary had been broken, recalling, “It was new for the Kitchen. I remember my ears feeling as though they were hearing something for the first time, even if it was loud. Arthur was the first to draw on avant-garde pop culture. It was both nostalgic and cutting-edge.”172 Lawrence points out that Russell deliberately made the booking specifically to initiate a conversation about aesthetics between art and rock, and what challenged the Kitchen community the most was the sense that “a band with commercial aspirations was being invited into the front room of the noncommercial and extremely esoteric avant-garde.”173 “You didn’t have to be close-minded to feel some resistance toward the Modern Lovers,” reasoned musician Ned Sublette, adding that “The people who were playing the Kitchen were sophisticated musicians who had put a great deal of thought and study into what they did. In contrast, the music of the Modern Lovers was very simple-minded, and Richman’s

170 Lawrence, Hold on to Your Dreams, 65.
171 Ibid.
172 Lawrence, Hold on to Your Dreams, 66.
173 Lawrence, Hold on to Your Dreams, 64.
lyrics were utterly—and profoundly—infantile. When I arrived in New York I felt like I had escaped the places where the only music people could imagine was rock.” Only after the rock and roll band gets decontextualized as an earnest pursuit with skills and ambitions in mainstream success, does it open up to new artistic functions.

Where the Velvet Underground inherited much of its “arty-ness” from its association with the intermedia environments of Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable, the Modern Lovers shows were set among cheap pink and blue paper streamers that wrapped the Kitchen’s columns and a few party balloons, evoking an elementary school dance. However, both bands share the sense of being a construct set amid a diorama, and executed with a purposeful self-awareness. Warhol’s EPI incorporated the band as a symbol of something found in American mass culture—another industry like the movies, or advertising for the artist to infiltrate. The poster created for the Modern Lovers’ Kitchen shows in carnivalesque-lettering puts bold quotation marks around “A Rock and Roll Show,” as if it was a novelty or a curiosity being looked at under the microscope by its artist-audience. [Figure 2.4] Stearns recalled, “The concert was called the ‘Rock and Roll Show,’ and rock and roll was the bad guys, the commercial stuff, which was out of our territory.” The sense of the Modern Lovers being a “fake” band wasn’t lost on the press and a review in the Soho Weekly News said Richman’s “gestures are grossly exaggerated and just when you believe he’s truly singing of anguished unrequited love, he cracks a huge, boyish, self-conscious smile… Good-natured deadpan antics coupled with songs of loneliness and longing make for a powerful combination… Boston’s Modern Lovers are one of those mixtures of wacky

174 Lawrence, Hold on to Your Dreams, 68.
176 Lawrence, Hold on to Your Dreams, 68.
profundity and awkward professionalism that New York could use lots more of.”

Eklund, in his catalogue *The Pictures Generation*, connects the Modern Lovers to performance art tendencies, particularly in the work of Michael Smith, who dons the character of the “sad-sack Everyman who dresses up with nowhere to go… that relentlessly went against the entire culture of hip and the attendant idea that whoever was performing for you lived a freer and more unconventional life than you did.”

Smith’s character, Eklund argues, was rooted in Jonathan Richman’s “plaintive or restive odes to suburbia, holding hands, and the AM radio, over a drone that mixed the Velvet Underground and garage rock with the elemental simplicity of 1950s bubblegum pop.” He goes on to point out Richman’s “bluff was not hard to see through: for a generation of art-school students, anyone who sang that ‘Pablo Picasso was never called an asshole’ for trying pick to up women was obviously hip by pretending not to be.”

Smith’s January 1978 performance at the Kitchen “Let’s See What’s in the Refrigerator,” which included a character who “wore many hats” by simply trying on several actual hats before a mirror, certainly echoed the subversive-but-sweet irony of Richman singing about wanting to one day be “dignified and old,” and “I still love my parents.”

Eklund sees both Richman and Smith as “part of a broader reaction against the rhetoric of rebellion that was instantly co-opted by advertising and fed back to the masses one pair of bell-bottoms at a time.”

Peter Gordon, a composer and regular at the Kitchen, who plays along, writing a column in *EAR*

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177 Rubackin, “Boston’s.”
179 Ibid.
180 Ibid
181 Mike Smith said his performance *Down in the Rec Room* was “a comment on the art band movement in New York, amateurism, and artists' relationship to avant-garde strategies. It’s not really that clear in that piece, but that’s how it came about.” Mike Smith, “Is it Mike Enough?,” *Mike’s World*, exhibition website. Austin: The Blanton at the University of Texas Austin, 2007, at http://www.mikes-world.org/about/mikeandmike.html.
magazine, saying “I want to believe the Modern Lovers are just plain folk, ordinary men and women singing the songs they love to people who love to hear them. A fan told me that Jonathan performs mostly in hospitals and nursing homes and the only reason he wants to be more famous is so it will mean more to those people. Beautiful.”\textsuperscript{183} The event inspired an epiphany of sorts for Gordon about the value of popular music, and he writes “Music is going through an exciting period now, it’s coming out of the walls. Jazz musicians are acknowledging ‘new music,’ rock musicians are becoming more conceptually oriented. The ‘new music’ crowd is accepting jazz and rock without condescension.”\textsuperscript{184} He goes on to outline “a large group of composer/performers who are “defying the previous stylistic pigeonholing,” and lists Kitchen regulars like Garrett List, Jon Gibson, Arthur Russell, and Fred Rzewski, and noted that “even old stick-in-the-muds” like Robert Ashley and Rhys Chatham, are “coming around.”\textsuperscript{185} His revelation upon seeing the Modern Lovers is summed up when he writes, “The ideas are important, not the style. It’s the content which counts.”\textsuperscript{186}

Soon after the Modern Lovers shows, Russell would abdicate his role as music director, and Garrett List would pick up the baton. At this point, the music director was no longer working within a set framework of usual suspects to program. List found Russell’s gesture with the Modern Lovers to be game-changing, stating, “Arthur and I shared this thing about wanting to deal with a language that was more open than Minimalism or Cagean music or the uptown scene. We were all talking about trying to find alternatives to this, and the fact Arthur programmed the Modern Lovers was more like saying, ‘Let’s do this shit—let’s not just talk about it.’”\textsuperscript{187}

\textsuperscript{184} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{187} Lawrence, \textit{Hold on to Your Dreams}, 70.
Chatham also marked this pivotal moment, recalling that “Rock was somehow less. Back in the seventies, people were still questioning rock’s validity. Arthur’s unique contribution was to introduce rock groups to the programming, which was considered heresy at the time, but proved to be prophetic in its vision. I was shocked. But it made me think, and I ended up joining in. What can I say?” he says referring to his own piece *Guitar Trio* (1977) that blended punk and new music. The Richman series proved to open the door for a conversation with popular music that unlocked potential for a variety of artists, causing Stearns to look back and point to this as the moment when the Kitchen “really started to fly.”

**The Talking Heads**

When Russell approached List with a suggestion to open the Kitchen doors once again to a rock band, this time the just-formed Talking Heads, he didn’t hesitate. On March 13, 1976, the trio of David Byrne, Chris Frantz, and Martina Weymouth (the band’s fourth member would later become ex-Modern Lover Jerry Harrison) were fresh from the Rhode Island School of Design and arrived in New York hoping to join the art world. Byrne remembers, “When I came to New York I guess I was very naive. I expected the art world to be very pure and noble. I was repulsed by what I saw people putting themselves through, the hustling to try and get anywhere. My natural reaction was to move into a world that had no pretense of nobility. Since I’d always fooled around with a guitar, I formed a rock band.” The press release for the March 13 event,

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188 Ibid.
189 Ibid.
190 After the Modern Lovers program, Russell maintained a close friendship with Ernie Brooks, who introduced Russell to David Byrne and the Talking Heads, who arrived in New York only months earlier. Lawrence, *Hold on to Your Dreams*, 104.
191 Ibid.
which would be the Talking Head’s debut performance, shows Byrne was thinking of the band as a form of performance art, issuing the following statement:

Talking Heads is a group of performing artists whose medium is rock and roll music and its pursuant “band” organization and visual presentation. The original music and lyrics are structured within the commercial sensibility of rock and roll sound and contemporary popular language… David Byrne dresses like the proletariat every-man and relies on Frantz and Weymouth to complete their anti-individualist stance as a group concept.192

Talking Heads are asserting here, what artist and critic Dan Graham also writes when he says that it is rock’s ability to critique “U.S. corporate consumerism, recognizing the covert function of rock within consumer society as a propaganda tool for the myth of individualism.”193 He adds:

they see their conceptual role as to tear down the myths and assumptions of the 1960s (‘All that everybody still thinks is hip or beautiful’). They aim to ‘remake and remodel’ their source material to create a new or reconstituted form… to parallel/parody/put into perspective the way in which corporations synthesize new consumable products.194

Video documentation of the performance’s rehearsals, show the Talking Heads delivering their signature funk-infused danceable pop music with mismatched stiff delivery and minimal everyman aesthetic. [AV 8] It is, Gendron writes, this “explicit overturning of rock performance styles and the obviously ironic use of clichés of middle-class life that established the Talking Heads as a premier art-rock band.”195 John Rockwell, writing in The New York Times, and a regular reviewer of Kitchen music events, championed the Talking Heads as a “stimulating instance… of how the art world has had an effect on local rock,” and that they are the paradigm for those “who believe some rock is art and all rock can be considered in artistic terms.”196

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193 Dan Graham, “Punk As Propaganda,” Rock/Roll Writings (New York: Primary Information, 2009), 68.
194 Ibid.
195 Gendron, Between Montmartre, 257.
196 Ibid.
Despite their Kitchen debut, the Talking Heads did not remain in the avant-garde, and quickly catapulted into global mainstream success through the New Wave scene at CBGBs. However, it is clear from the Modern Lovers and Talking Heads events, programmed by Arthur Russell, that the Kitchen was functioning as a platform for exposing changes in both art and rock. The Talking Heads, were a symptom of a larger syndrome involving art and rock happening in the Kitchen’s midst, and whereas these two performances involve bands that create legacies within popular music, a spectrum of less “popular” forms of popular music not conventionally palatable to a mass audience were taking shape.

**Suicide & No Wave**

Russell located a useful, accessible, vernacular variation of minimalism in the stripped-down and self-aware rock of the Modern Lovers and the Talking Heads, but a group of artists centered around Glenn Branca took the opposite approach. They were turning to the rock format not to make Minimalism more understandable and popular, but to push the limits of the band format to the extreme through Minimalism, giving birth to noise rock and the No Wave movement—a distinct rebuttal to the press’ favorite Talking Heads descriptor, New Wave. This noisy and intense tendency originated back at the Mercer Arts Center with the extreme sound levied by Brooklyn-bred Martin Rev and Alan Vega’s band Suicide. Vega remembers playing in one of the Mercer’s adjacent rooms during the New York Dolls’ infamous residency, saying “You’d see the Dolls’ audiences dressed up in polka dots and colors. A party scene,” and when the show ended, the party crowd would get a shock, forced to walk through the room where Suicide performed their “street-war performance art onslaughs” to reach the exit.197 With

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rudimentary synthesizers and confrontational stage antics, Suicide was stripped-down and minimal, but unlike the sly humor of the Modern Lovers, or the bouncy pop of the Talking Heads, Suicide matched their deadpan stares with genuine intensity. “We were the next generation, living through the realities of war and bringing the war on to the stage,” Vega declared.\textsuperscript{198} He and Rev were active in SoHo before the Mercer Art Center opened, where Vega was a political activist and artist, as one of the founders, and “janitor/director,” of MUSEUM: A Project of Living Artists in 1968, which he used as a studio for his sound experiments.\textsuperscript{199} One of the earliest alternative art spaces to open in SoHo, MUSEUM stated that its purpose was to “forge a more alive connection between art and society, without the dissipation of force and quality occurring so frequently in the current art establishment.”\textsuperscript{200} It served as the home-base for the Art Worker’s Coalition, which led artists’ protests against MoMA and other institutions. Suicide held its first performance November 20, 1970 at OK Harris, an art gallery run by Ivan Karp on West Broadway, and where Vega also exhibited “fizzing, flashing light sculptures” constructed out of discarded televisions, light bulbs, or subway lamps stolen from the streets. After the exhibition, he deconstructed the sculptures and returned its parts to the curb, completing a life-cycle.\textsuperscript{201} A flyer that advertised the show as “Punk Music” was one of the earliest uses of the word punk.\textsuperscript{202} [Figure 2.5] “We didn't invent the word,” Vega says, “I probably got it from an article on the Stooges by Lester Bangs, but I think we were the first band to describe our music as punk.”\textsuperscript{203} Suicide was a regular presence at Max’s Kansas City and

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{198}{Ibid.}
\footnotetext{199}{Ibid, 82.}
\footnotetext{200}{Ault, \textit{Alternative New York}, 21.}
\footnotetext{201}{Needs, \textit{Dream Baby Dream}, 81.}
\footnotetext{203}{Needs, \textit{Dream Baby Dream}, 98.}
\end{footnotes}
CBGBs throughout the seventies, but the band never lost its avant-garde feel, and in 1977, Vega was invited to design a complete issue of alternative art magazine *Art-Rite*.

Founded by Edit deAk, Walter Robinson, and Joshua Cohn, *Art-Rite* was a “zine-like” newsprint magazine that ran from 1973 to 1978, and according to art historian Gwen Allen, “forged an iconoclastic, experimental style of criticism, focusing on younger, lesser-known artists in SoHo, whom the editors encouraged to write for the magazine and use it as a medium.” Operated on public funding like an alternative space, *Art-Rite*’s editors wanted to counter what they saw happening in mainstream art magazines like *Artforum*, who they asserted were unable to represent the “vital aspects of present day art” because of “commercial interests which persist in dominating communication outlets.”

DeAk, Robinson, and Cohn first met in a seminar on art criticism led by Brian O’Doherty at Columbia University, where he instilled in them his sentiments that “the artist-generated institution for making or showing work may be the single most important development of the seventies,” and mentored the magazine’s production. In 1976, *Art-Rite* began a regular series where an issue would be given over to an artist to, “create a mass-produced work of art available for less than a gallon of milk.” For his 1977 special issue, Alan Vega (listed as Alan Suicide), reprised his penchant for recycling by filling his issue with repurposed images of found photographs for a completely wordless set of pages, from images of Elvis and Iggy Pop, to religious and comic book imagery. Presented as his personal “iconography,” the issue reads as a treatise on the profane and the mundane of the American experience. [Figure 2.6] A text appears on the back of the issue, and reads as follows:

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205 Ibid, 122.
206 DeAk also worked as an assistant and later director of Artists Space, and will program a club-influenced music festival at the Kitchen called *Dubbed in Glamour*, covered later in this section. Allen, *Artists’ Magazines*, 127.
207 Ibid.
We dedicate this issue to the average American searching for excitement. These images, punked out from the ambient culture, are the touchstones of a new sensibility, icons of the dissipations and strengths of the modern spirit. Let the way of life idealized in these pages bring into your home the romance of the under-culture: horse racing, white trash, greasy rock 'n roll, muscles, motorcycles, and the end of civilization.  

Art-Rite enabled Vega to turn the pages of the magazine into an expression of this “new sensibility,” one that fueled alternatives to the mainstream—what he calls the “under-culture.” The fact that a band like Suicide, who bridges a radicalized format of rock with performance art, came together with the alternative publication Art-Rite points to strongly shared qualities between the artists’ band and the artists’ magazine, as argued earlier in relations to Allen’s text Artists’ Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art. What the artists’ band offered Vega was “excitement,” something that appealed to many young artists, like Glenn Branca who called Vega the “godfather” of, and a “tremendous impact” on, No Wave, the style he would define.  

Music critic Marc Masters’ 2007 book No Wave is the definitive text on the history of the movement and it traces a lineage from Suicide to Branca’s various projects. Several key events of the No Wave movement happened in art spaces, artists’ lofts, and specifically at the Kitchen and among figures from its regular performing community. Much has been written about these now legendary years of art and rock in the context of the music industry and its history. Under Rhys Chatham’s direction (who reassumed the role of music program director in 1977), the

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209 Other alternative magazines interact with popular music during the period. Notably Tellus Magazine was an all audio, cassette based alternative magazine. Glenn Branca and Barbara Ess produce Just Another Asshole. Under Ingrid Sischy’s direction ArtForum incorporated flexi discs featuring Laurie Anderson and Brian Eno. See: Allen, Artists’ Magazines, Appendix.
Kitchen played an important role in the formation of No Wave. In 1978, Brian Eno arrived in New York to produce a record with the Talking Heads.\textsuperscript{212} The former Roxy Music member, David Bowie collaborator, and noted British producer was professionally tied to major record companies, and rumors about his presence, and the opportunities he could offer, spread among the SoHo community quickly.\textsuperscript{213} Meant to be a short trip, Eno ended up staying in New York for seven months “totally absorbed by the cross-town traffic between music and art.”\textsuperscript{214} He recalled: “I happened to be in New York during one of the most exciting months of the decade... in terms of music. It seemed like there were 500 new bands who all started that month.”\textsuperscript{215} Many of these bands that formed among the artist community existed simultaneously, had overlapping members, were short-lived, and rebooted in new configurations, making for a messy web of histories to untangle. Among the specific instances of artists’ bands performing at the Kitchen, the partnership of Glenn Branca and Barbara Ess, and the various projects that issue forth from each of them, is a starting point. The paragraphs that follow summarize a flurry of activity among a group of artists that, like Alan Vega and Suicide, oscillate between the art space and the club, and who inhabit both the role of artist and musician simultaneously. It’s a loose coterie of artists who surround Branca and Ess and enact a re-envisioning of the rock band. They each took the rock band format and pushed it to its limits in varying ways, at times warping it until it became unrecognizable.\textsuperscript{216} Appearing in niche venues like the Kitchen, Artists Space, clubs like

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{213} Ibid.
\bibitem{215} Reynolds, “Brian Eno.”
\bibitem{216} The idea that artists’ band activity had some congruency with artists’ magazines at the time is reinforced by the fact that Barbara Ess published an alternative periodical of their own called \textit{Just Another Asshole}, active from 1978 to 1987. Ess coproduced issues 3 and 4 with Jane M. Sherry and issues 5 thought 7 with Glenn Branca. Issue 5 was a compilation vinyl LP produced with the assistance of White Columns of short, experimental music and spoken word recordings by eighty-four artists and musicians. Grant funded, benefits often involved concerts. Source: Allen, \textit{Artists Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art}, 269); another key example of the music scene colliding with the
\end{thebibliography}
Tier 3 and the Mudd Club, and private artists’ lofts, these performances were discreet actions, bearing far stronger ties to the scope and presence of avant-garde performance art than mainstream popular music. The result was a set of performing practices that stem from popular music, but was often so dissonant, uncomfortable, confrontational, radical, irreverent, and difficult, that in no way could be popular with a mass audience.

Branca arrived from Pennsylvania in 1976 intending to participate in New York’s experimental theater community with Richard Foreman and Mabou Mines but he immediately found himself drawn into the artist-driven music scene. For Branca, No Wave was a way to indulge the visceral enjoyment and dynamic potential that popular music provided but in a fashion that wasn’t rooted in the mainstream industry, wasn’t about being rich and famous, and wasn’t part of a perceived corrupt system. Like Vega, he was searching for excitement, saying (in the acerbic language he was known for):

If you want to know why you’ve even heard of No Wave, why anyone even bothered to give it a name, it was because there was this whole new scene of young visual artists who had grown up listening to rock music, who had come to New York only to do visual arts, to do painting, to do conceptual art. And when they heard these bands that were clearly coming from the same kind of sensibility that they were coming from, all they could do was imagine themselves up on that stage playing this fucking art music….

Art’s just this dead thing sitting on a fucking wall. This was exciting. Just to hear fucking art rock, and hear it in a way that appeals to all of those basic instincts that rock appeals to, but at the same time to be doing something that isn’t just more commercial music… you can’t imagine how exciting that was to people.²¹⁷

Video documentation of a solo performance of Branca on guitar shows his signature intensity and radical approach to song-making which was frequently structureless and relentless in

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duration. [AV 9] Recorded at composer Jeffery Lohn’s loft at 33 Grand Street, the video shows
Branca form an unhinged and unbroken wall-of-noise in an endurance-based performance. While
it echoes the drones of La Monte Young and John Cale’s sustained notes, it is executed with
more of an improvisational and loose fury, thick with density, and devoid of the earlier model’s
precision. This guitar solo prefigures Branca’s later all-guitar “symphonies,” which he performed
at the Kitchen several times in the 1980s. They consisted of intensely loud compositions and
hinged on an aesthetic of maximalism. Famously, John Cage called Branca a “fascist” after
experiencing one of these wall-of-noise performances at a festival in Chicago in 1982.²¹⁸ Cage,
whose 4’33” aimed to create an open field for the world to make its own indeterminant noise,
felt suffocated by Branca’s “intention,” as he called it, that filled all possible aural space, forcing
the audience to live in its densely packed sound, with Branca as its totalitarian ruler.²¹⁹ In the
same interview, Cage remarks: “One of the things I dislike most about European music is the
presence of climaxes and what I see in Branca, as I do in Wagner, is a sustained climax.”²²⁰ This
tendency of isolating a climactic moment and sustaining it emerges as a reoccurring trope among
the media-deconstructing artists engaging with popular music at the Kitchen. Branca’s chaotic
sound also had a correlation to the spastic energy of the free jazz movement that flourished
alongside the avant-garde art community during the seventies in SoHo. Of the key players in
SoHo’s “loft jazz” scene that got underway in the late sixties with Ornette Coleman, Cecil

²¹⁸ “Wim Mertens interview with John Cage, recorded at the Dip In The Lake festival, Chicago, 1982,” YouTube
took the criticism as a badge-of-honor and included the entire eighteen-minute recording of Merten’s interview with
Cage on his on his 2007 album Indeterminant Activity of Resultant Masses. (Dan Fox, “Like a Thousand Knives
knives-being-sharpened-tribute-glenn-branca-1948-2018.)
²¹⁹ Ibid.
²²⁰ Ibid.
Taylor, Anthony Braxton, it was particularly the abstract solos of Sonny Sharrock on electric
guitar that are echoed in Branca’s approach to the instrument.\textsuperscript{221}

Staring in 1977, Branca and Lohn joined Margaret DeWys and Wharton Tiers to form the
band Theoretical Girls.\textsuperscript{222} While comprised of the standard guitar, bass, and drums
instrumentation of the traditional rock band, Theoretical Girls mixed up expected song structures
with a jolting pace, paired with frightening lyrics, like “I’m really scared when I kill in my
dreams,” from their song “You Got Me.” [AV 10] So while borrowing the structure of popular
music, Branca, as did Suicide, mutilated the form to the point where it no longer carried the
familiar narrative structures or comfortable tones that satisfied a broad audience—including
condoning painful and borderline unlistenable sensations engineered to be a conceptual affront to
norms. The band’s only recording was a self-released single 7-inch with a cover featuring their
name in bold Helvetica letters that break and flip, reading backwards, marking a partial border of
the otherwise blank space, mimicking their deconstructionist take. [Figure 2.7] In a deliberate
break with traditional rock bands who typically line up as many back-to-back bookings and tours
as possible, Theoretical Girls only performed sporadically, and in total only gave around twenty
performances, two of which took place at the Kitchen: first as part of a lineup of bands on April
9, 1978, and as a solo night on May 21, 1978.\textsuperscript{223} The flyer created for the latter made use of
empty musical bars from pages of sheet music in a Burroughs-like cut-up, nonsensically

\textsuperscript{222} “It was photographer Jeff Wall,” Eklund noted, “who in a conversation with their early supporter and promoter
Dan Graham referred jokingly (but with an edge) to Ericka Beckman, Dara Birnbaum, Sarah Charlesworth, Jenny
Holzer, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, and Barbara Kruger, among others, as ‘the theoretical girls.’”—and which
inspired the band’s name as something of an art world inside joke. (Eklund, \textit{The Pictures Generation}, 144) Jeff Wall
also played in an artist-driven band Uj3rk5 with conceptualist Rodney Graham in Vancouver in 1978. Source:
The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, Box 44, Folder 1.
rearranged. [Figure 2.8] The April event featured the Gynecologists and Arsenal, both punk experiments by Rhys Chatham, as well as Daily Life, Branca’s second band, which included Wharton Tiers, Paul McMahon, and Christina Hahn.²²⁴ Writing in The New York Times in his column “The Pop Life,” John Rockwell reflects on these shows in a particularly relevant review, saying, “Today there is a whole crop of bands in New York that either have no pretensions whatsoever to commercial success or, if they do, are operating in a realm of total delusion.”²²⁵ He observes that “a number of performance spaces heretofore reserved for experimental ‘classical’ music, loft jazz, performance art or video have begun opening their doors to these new art-rockers,” noting that, “the city's premier experimental new-music and video loft space, the Kitchen, at 484 Broome Street, has been offering rock nights more and more often.”²²⁶ Pointing out to readers that the Kitchen is publicly funded, he warns “Conservatives might be appalled at this,” and he further breaks it down by writing:

Both Artists’ Space and the Kitchen are supported by public funds and private foundations, and the assumption generally is that such monies should be used to support noncommercial work. Rock is usually thought of as commerciality incarnate. Yet the point is that this sort of rock is itself so uncommercial that even most rock fans would be confused by it, not to say repelled.²²⁷

²²⁴ Christine Hahn traveled to Europe in 1979 and joined Martin Kippenberger’s punk band Grugas, and appears on a poster image created by the German artist. “The posters share with his more conventional artworks the desire to undermine the accepted structures of the art world by defying attempts to understand his artistic output as a whole, by blatantly embracing collaboration, and by actively involving himself in the promotion and reception of his work.” As the artist Jutta Koether wrote on the occasion of the 2006 Kippenberger exhibition at Tate Modern: “Martin’s posters best represent him and sum up the range of his ability: the humor, the social critique, the clever combination of provocative images and allusions. They were critical and politicized, perfectly expressing his ideas and his personality. A recent Tate Museum exhibition text wrote Kippenberger’s music was “characterized by a sense of experimentation and provocation.” His music included a cover of Nancy Sinatra’s “Bang! Bang!” Source: Watling, Lucy, “This Woman is Playing on Luxus,” Tate.org, March 2012, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/kippenberger-this-woman-is-playing-on-luxus-p79073.


²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid.
Even if this new form of rock is antithetical to the market due to its rejection of palatable and conventional tropes within the genre, he still found merit in Theoretical Girls’ actual performance at the Kitchen, writing:

But amid all the yowling distortion and sometimes silly posturing some fascinating ideas can emerge. Theoretical Girls got into some unusual shifting planes of instrumental color at the Kitchen, balancing gritty blocks of aural texture in an eerie, affecting way. And at one point Nina Canal, who is a member of another band called the Gynecologists, came on stage with a little girl and sang duets with her to a half-rock, half-harmonium accompaniment that was very beautiful. But also very, very far from the commercial arena.  

Photographs of the performance show the little girl and musician Nina Canal sharing the stage in the Kitchen’s no-frills, white-walled, gallery space, standing casually and dressed in plain clothes, likely adding to Rockwell’s impression of the unpretentious show as decidedly non-commercial. [Figure 2.9] Tentatively finding potential in this format, Rockwell concedes that artists undertaking the rock band may lead to something new, writing:

What it all comes down to is that New York artists, long caught in an excessively restrained, quasimeditational world, have become more and more drawn to the angry energy of underground rock. But they’re making use of those sound-possibilities as artists have generally done—as ideas and tools for creative development. That can lead to pretension and silliness, as experimental art always can. BUT it may also presage a new burst of excitement in New York rock, artistic and commercial.

**BANDS at Artists Space**

One month later, these bands, along with several others would participate in a now legendary festival at Artists Space, simply named “BANDS at Artists Space,” that took place across five days from May 2 to 6, 1978.  

Brian Eno attended all five days and immediately

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228 Ibid.  
after, produced the compilation album *No New York*, that distributed No Wave to an international audience. The idea for the festival came from Artists Space director Helene Winer, who said, “it just seemed like the right thing to do.” She assigned artist and Artists Space assistant Michael Zwack to organize it, and he reached out Rhys Chatham at the Kitchen for help enlisting bands. A statement on the sparsely typed press release matter-of-factly states: “This area of music has lately received much attention by artists, both as listeners and performers. The series is in keeping with Artists Space’s policy of presenting what is currently of interest in the art community.” Other bands on the line-up included DNA featuring Arto Lindsay, Lydia Lunch’s Teenage Jesus and the Jerks. Another was MARS, the seductive and clamorous band formed by artist Nancy Arlen and Connie Burg (who had met in Lucinda Childs’ dance workshops in 1975), Sumner Crane, and Mark Cunningham, who the *Village Voice*’s Robert Christgau called “arty and empty.” The most memorable moment of the series came from the spastic confrontational antics of James Chance and the Contortionists, who combined saxophone-driven jazz-rock with a punk attitude so unhinged they routinely incited violence, physically attacking audience members, adding a sense of actual danger drawing it closer to Chris Burden-esque performance art than anything in mainstream rock. The Contortion’s key song “Contort Yourself” might have reminded Artists Space’s regular audience of Jack Goldstein’s performance art work *Body Contortionist*, presented there in 1976, in which a live

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232 Ibid.
235 “The Contortions jumped into the audience and there was a huge fight,” said artist Matt Mullican, who shared the memory as one of the most stand-out moments in Artists Space’s history, “Everyone put their instruments down and joined in the brawl, except for the drummer, who kept on drumming… It was fantastic.” (5000 Artists Return to Artists Space, 71).
performer moved through a series of body-bending poses while bathed in green light.\textsuperscript{236} Music critic Simon Reynolds writes that Eno would have felt an affinity with the No Wave bands since he too came from an art school background. Eno “intuitively grasped,” Reynolds writes, “that no wave was destined to be a brief spasm of unsustainable intensity that needed to be documented before it passed.”\textsuperscript{237} Speaking to Rockwell in \textit{The New York Times}, Eno describes exactly what enthralled him about the Artists Space event saying:

The New York bands proceed from a ‘what would happen if’ orientation. The English punk thing is a ‘feel’ situation: ‘This is our identity, and the music emanates from that.’ I’ve always been of the former persuasion… But there’s a difference between me and the New York bands: They carry the experiment to the extreme; I carry it to the point where it stops sounding interesting, and then pull back a little bit. What they do is a rarefied kind of research; it generates a vocabulary that people like me can use. These New York bands are like fenceposts, the real edges of a territory, and one can maneuver within it.\textsuperscript{238}

Rockwell surmises that Eno is describing how these bands operate “right on that fascinating line between ‘art’ and ‘popular entertainment,’ and that it owes its vitality in part to one's inability to make easy categorizations about it.”\textsuperscript{239} In the same interview, Eno evokes a quote from Morse Peckham, where he said, “art is anything that offers one the feeling of being an art-perceiver,” and he goes on to say, “At some point along the continuum from rock to art, it's possible to lose the consciousness that you are an art-perceiver, but that point is always different for different people at different times.”\textsuperscript{240} This rings true in analyzing many of the bands born out of the


\textsuperscript{237} Reynolds, “Brian Eno.”


\textsuperscript{239} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{240} Ibid.
Kitchen’s community, where some projects resonate with the strategies and conversations in the art dialogue more than others, adding to the confusion around institutional acceptance of the artists’ band as a relevant tendency in art history. For Eno, this was a dividing line between the bands who appeared at Artists Space. Branca and Chatham’s bands were “pointedly excluded” from the No New York compilation, which was being produced by a commercial record label, “because of their ties to the SoHo art scene.”

Even though conceptual and performance artist Diego Cortez served as an advisor to Eno, he still decided their sound was more art than music and his record was about the latter. Coincidentally, the record was recorded in the basement of 112 Greene Street/112 Workshop, the very building where SoHo’s avant-garde scene had been largely galvanized, which had been retrofitted into Big Apple Recording Studio by 112 founder Jeffrey Lew. A practically undocumented chapter to 112’s history, numerous artists’ records were made in this basement studios. The record was released in November of 1978 by Antilles, a subsidy of Island Records, with whom Eno worked. [AV 11] Eno took the blurry photograph that appears as the cover himself. [Figure 2.10] Ultimately Eno moved to New York full-time and remained a resident until 1984. Given the interdisciplinary artistic climate, he

241 Reynolds, Rip-It Up, 59. Branca recalled the slight, deciding that Eno must have carefully considered him, as he attended the Theoretical Girls solo performance at the Kitchen later on that month, but “I have to assume that he just didn’t like us.” Branca remembers the limited selections for the LP almost “started war” between the bands. Source: Masters, “Interview with Glenn Branca.” But accounts differ: Chatham is quoted as saying he was invited by Eno but too busy to make the recording session. Source: Masters, No Wave, 111.

242 Jeffrey Lew installed the recording studio in the basement of 112 Workshop/112 Greene Street as he started to withdraw from overseeing the operations of the alternative space, where it was utilized by artists to make recording such as Philip Glass, John Cale, Art & Language, Dickie Landry, Meredith Monk, Anthony Braxton, and Sonic Youth’s first single, released by Glenn Branca’s Neutral Records. First called Big Apple Recording, it was later renamed Greene St. Recording. When Lew decided to divest completely from 112 in the summer of 1976, the art space moved to 55 continued on as White Columns. Source: Brentano, 112 Workshop, x. The recording studio was taken over by Philip Glass, Steven Loeb, and Michael Riesman, and throughout the 80s, it became known for recording a generation of genre defining hip-hop artists like Run DMC, Salt & Pepper, and LL Cool J. Source: “Greene St. Recording,” Wikipedia, accessed October 2, 2018 at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greene_St._Recording; “Big Apple Studio,” Discogs.com, accessed October 2, 2018 at https://www.discogs.com/label/272597-Big-Apple-Studio.

243 Brentano, 112 Workshop, x.

couldn’t resist crossing over into art world himself and began to explore non-music activities during this time, including multi-channel video art installations, which he exhibited at the Kitchen on September 1979, and May 1981. As the press release reads, Eno “applies his concept of ‘ambient’ music to visual work,” by pairing a matrix of video monitors showing color distorted cityscapes in a “fugue-like” “slowly-evolving” compositions.

**BANDS at the Kitchen**

Four years later in 1982, the Kitchen hosted its own version on the Artists Space concert, “BANDS at the Kitchen,” on December 27 to 30, hoping to engender a similar catalytic moment. The event featured an early performance by Sonic Youth, the band that would most consequentially materialize from No Wave’s legacy and the artists’ band phenomenon. While they traffic in the art space, Sonic Youth were more surefooted on the non-art side of Eno’s spectrum. Even though they would go on to a degree of commercial success in mainstream music, Sonic Youth was as much a product of the art world in SoHo as Theoretical Girls or the other No Wave bands. The band was formed by Thurston Moore and Kim Gordon in 1980, after Gordon had travelled across the country from Otis College of Art in Los Angeles, with friend and CalArts student, Mike Kelley. Kelley had actively been experimenting with the relationship between art and popular music as part of the Detroit-based band Destroy All Monsters and at CalArts as part of the quasi-serious band the Poetics, which included fellow  

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247 Sonic Youth’s mainstream success in the 1990s happened in a landscape significantly changed by MTV and the music industry’s adapted marketing strategies for “alternative music.”  
students Tony Oursler and John Miller. In New York, Gordon lived in an apartment upstairs from Dan Graham who had come to Otis as a guest lecturer in 1978, and who gave Gordon her first push into performing. “We had a running conversation on music and TV shows and architecture and art,” Gordon recalled, saying, “he asked me if I wanted to be involved in a performance piece involving an all-girl band and do a kind of interactive performance together with Miranda Stanton and Christine Hahn.” Graham staged the performance at the Massachusetts College of Art’s Eventworks festival, which had been curated by then-student Christian Marclay in April of 1980. Titled *All-Girl Band: Identification Project*, the performance required the women to describe all the men they see in the audience who they find attractive, a tactic to “invert and reverse the normal (unconscious) identification the spectator projects onto a film or theater performer.” It is a conceptual reworking of Graham’s experiments with mirroring images of an audience back at themselves, as done in his iconic performance *Performer/Audience/Mirror* of 1975, to which he had been tagging on rock performances: first with Theoretical Girls at Franklin Furnace in 1977, and then with the Static, Branca’s band with Ess and Hahn in London in 1979. Around the time of her performance as

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249 As mentioned in the introduction, Branden Joseph cites Kelley’s Poetics project, which was reprised as an installation as part of 1997’s Documenta, and statements by Kelley as inspiration for his understanding of a “minor history,” a device he uses not to pinpoint a history of lesser quality, but rather a history that shows evidence of an “irreducible or uncontrollable difference” from an “ideal form or standard,” one that is traced against “a field of continual differentiation: specific networks and connections,” a mapping of events that serve to “deteriorialize” and extend the “majoritarian standard.” Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate*, 20-53.


251 Ibid., *Dan Graham: Beyond*, 43.

252 Ibid.

253 Ibid; This performance echoes a device used by Jonathan Richman in the Modern Lovers’ song “The Mixer,” or alternatively titled “Men and Women Together,” in which he would routinely play at Harvard students parties. In the lyrics of the song, he directly addresses the audience from the stage, first with the boys in the room asking “Hey, how does it feel with sex all around?” and “How’s your self-confidence doing?” and then turns to the girls in the room and asks “How does it feel to be checked out? Don’t you feel insulted? Aren’t you a little bit nervous?” The Modern Lovers. *Precise Modern Lovers Order (Live In Berkeley And Boston, 1971-1973)*. Producer: Ernie Brooks. Burlington, MA: Rounder Records, 1994.

254 In 1979, Graham performed *Performer/Audience/Mirror* at London’s Riverside Studios, immediately after which the Static, the no wave band that formed after the dissolution of Theoretical Girls and Daily Life, and consisted of
part of an all-girl band in Graham’s piece, Gordon began writing criticism about Branca and other artists engagements with rock in *Artforum* and alternative magazines like *FILE* and *Real Life*.\(^{255}\) After meeting Thurston Moore, Gordon and he added Anne DeMarinis to form Sonic Youth, a classically trained musician who performed in several ensembles at the Kitchen, and then-girlfriend of Vito Acconci.\(^{256}\) Moore describes Graham and Acconci as having a complicated relationship to each other artistically, as both were working through ideas related to language and architecture and display, but that after Gordon and DeMarinis teamed up, they

Christine Hahn, Glenn Branca, and Barbara Ess. The recording was released by publishing imprint Primary Information in 2016. (See: [http://www.primaryinformation.org/product/dan-graham-the-static/](http://www.primaryinformation.org/product/dan-graham-the-static/); Graham also produced the Static’s “Theoretical Record” in 1979; Eventually Graham blends the paired performances in *Utilizing Two-Way Mirror and Time Delay* of 1983, eliminating himself, the audience then faced a semi-translucent mirror, as Branca performed his wall of noise compositions slightly behind them. Both the audience and the performer were doubly viewable on monitor feeds playing behind the reflective glass. (Simpson, *Dan Graham: Beyond*, 44.) In 1993, Kim Gordon directed a music video with Spike Jonze for The Breeders’ “Cannonball,” where she positions the band performing to a wall-sized mirror in reference to Dan Graham’s performance. Speaking in Tony Oursler’s *Synesthesia* video series, Gordon says she enjoyed slipping avant-garde references into mainstream culture during her later commercial success. (“Tony Oursler: *Synesthesia: Interviews on Rock & Art*,” Electronic Arts Intermix, accessed December 1, 2018 at [https://www.eai.org/series/tony-oursler-synesthesia-interviews-on-rock-art; access to videos provided by EAI.]


\(^{256}\) Previous to her appointment at the Kitchen, DeMarinis worked part-time at White Columns (previously 112 Greene Street/112 Workshop) under then-director Josh Baer. Baer had invited Gordon to do exhibit as an artist there and in 1980, she opened “Furniture Arranged for the Home and Office,” an exhibition she says “the general area of interest for myself is experimental, using art to deconstruct design, … and design to deconstruct art as it exists within varying life styles.” Source: “Furniture Arranged for the Home and Office,” White Columns, January 27, 1981, [https://www.whitecolumns.org/archive/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/61.](http://www.whitecolumns.org/archive/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/61) In 1981, Baer asked Thurston Moore, with DeMarinis’ help, to organize *Noise Fest* at White Columns, which grew into a nine-day festival from June 16 to 24, 1981. Son of minimalist painter Jo Baer, Moore described Baer as a “young moneyed guy” up for investing in various art and music ventures, and 1981, he agreed to bankroll Glenn Branca’s record label Neutral, and release the first record by Sonic Youth. (Source: Daniel Kane, “An Interview with Thurston Moore,” *Postmodern Culture: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Thought on Contemporary Cultures*, University of California, Irvine, September 24, 2017, [http://www.pomoculture.org/2017/09/24/an-interview-with-thurston-moore/](http://www.pomoculture.org/2017/09/24/an-interview-with-thurston-moore/).) To coincide with *Noise Fest*, Baer invited Barbara Ess and Kim Gordon to curate an exhibition of artist-musicians, titled *The Big Beat*, following an earlier exhibition they co-organized of artist-designed album covers. These artists included Ikue Mori, Robert Longo, Alan Vega, Robin Crutchfield, Nina Canal, Soody Cisco, and Jeff McGovern. The press release for The Big Beat exhibition read “Much attention has been given to recent art movements. This work somehow parallels or derives its energy from current movements in music. (Punk, New Wave, Energist, Retro-chic). The artists in the exhibition at WHITE COLUMNS are all musicians—whether or not the work has any relationship to music remains open.” In addition to *Noise Fest*, White Columns held other notable music series including Speed Trials held on May 4-8, 1983. Speed Trials included performances by British primitive punk band The Fall, as well as Sonic Youth, Swans, Beastie Boys, Mofongo, V-Effect, and artist David Wojnarowicz’s band 3 Teens Kill 4. (See: [https://www.whitecolumns.org/archive/](https://www.whitecolumns.org/archive/)) Wojnarowicz’s experimental rock and multi-media performance with composer Ben Neill, titled ITSOFOMO, would later premiere at the Kitchen in 1989.
united the artists’ circles, both having an interest in punk and rock. DeMarinis, who stopped playing with Sonic Youth by 1981, became the director of the Kitchen’s music program in 1982, and programmed the band alongside Arto Lindsay’s Toy Killers, Swans, V-Effect, and notably, the Beastie Boys, then just seventeen years old. On the press release, the band describes their sound as “crashing mashing intensified dense rhythms juxtaposed with filmic mood pieces. Evoking an atmosphere that could only be described as expressive fucked-up modernism. And so forth.”

Jon Pareles, writing for The New York Times, commented on how the Kitchen turned into something of a rock club those nights, complete with the police shutting down Swan’s extreme volume.

Around the time of Graham’s all-girl band experiment in 1980, he had been publishing versions of an essay titled “New Wave Rock and the Feminine,” that explored the function of the male-gaze in rock, gender-coded instruments and song structuring, and pinpointed key women-led bands that challenged the status quo. In the essay he speaks specifically about the London-based band the Raincoats, whose representatives formed a parallel community of art school students and artists-turned-musicians in London, in connection with the Rough Trade Records

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261 Dan Graham. Rock/Music Writings, 150.
shop, label, and distribution network. Graham notes how, “male groups tended toward an orderly sound,” whereas women’s groups “made deliberate use of mistakes, silence, and personally motivated or arbitrary shifts of pattern and feeling,” adding that they were part of a continuum of bands that “as they recognized that rock was part of the media’s hegemony of control—‘the culture industry’—their approach took the form of self-critique.”

Two weeks before the large-scale “Bands at the Kitchen” event with Sonic Youth, Anne DeMarinis programed the Raincoats to perform at the Kitchen on December 12, 1982. [Figure 2.11] Raincoats singer and guitarist Gina Birch was also a member of a rebooted version of the Red Crayola, the music project of Mayo Thompson, who had moved to London after working as Robert Rauschenberg’s studio assistant from 1974 to 1979. While in New York, Thompson had connected with Art & Language and collaborated on the recording of their 1976 conceptual album Corrected Slogans. Described on the Kitchen’s calendar as a “contradictory confusion of feminism/glamour/folk/sex/rock.” Rockwell, writing in the New York Times picked up an “odd folkishness” and “haunting authenticity” from the performance that came from their “emphasis on amateur creativity.” The women of the Raincoats did not wish to be in a band to display technical skill—they were asserting that their value came from elsewhere—and instead choose the image of an amateur as something useful, something that gives them permission to open otherwise closed doors, and in turn, discover a self-fashioned, self-aware, and liberated status. Critic Greil Marcus penned an essay on the Raincoats’ Kitchen performance, and similarly

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262 Ibid.
picked up on this impulse, titled it “Disorderly Naturalism.” Greil Marcus, Liner notes, The Raincoats, The Kitchen Tapes, New York: Reach Out International Records, 1982. In it he writes that the Raincoats embodied the “the process of punk,” defined as “the move from enormous feeling combined with very limited technique—more to the point, enormous feeling unleashed by the first stirrings of very limited technique—to much more advanced technique in search of subject matter suited to it.” He describes for example, a woman who “dares to demand that someone listen to her,” and from that provocation, discovers she in fact has something to say. Marcus had been invited to write the essay for the release of live recordings made at the Kitchen that night by Reach Out International Records (ROIR), a cassette-only label run by Neil Cooper, husband of the gallerist Paula Cooper. Neil Cooper had been a music agent and club promoter before starting ROIR, and benefitting from the release of the Walkman that same year and by circumventing many artists contracts that did not restrict circulation on the new format, ROIR released its first cassette 1981 by James Chance and the Contortions, and routinely invited the “cream of the underground” to pen the liner notes. The bands distributed on Cooper’s ROIR cassettes enjoyed a good degree of symbiosis with the bands that performed at the Kitchen, certainly due in no small part to the close relationship Paula Cooper Gallery shared with the Kitchen, who was a fixture on their Board of Directors—demonstrating the deep channel of connections and investments the art world had in the experimental strains of popular music.

The Kitchen & the Club

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267 Ibid.
Between the mid-seventies and early eighties, while the Kitchen was creating opportunities for recontextualization for artists in the shifting connotations of the white cube, it also found reason to experiment with its own context. Since alternative spaces like the Kitchen were presenting popular music, it was natural that artists began to see the club as a potential site for exhibiting and performing art. On May 19, 1979, Rhys Chatham brought the Kitchen into the club space by programming a night of music with Jeffrey Lohn of Theoretical Girls at the Mudd Club as “the Kitchen presents.”270 The Mudd Club was co-founded by Steve Mass, James Chance and the Contortions’ manager Anya Philips, and Eno’s No New York advisor Diego Cortez, the same November that the No New York compilation was released.271 Housed inside a loft building in the Tribeca neighborhood used as a studio by the artist Ross Bleckner, the Mudd Club was the go-to nightlife activity for the Artists Space and Kitchen’s SoHo artist community.272 Like the Kitchen, it was what Bernard Gendron calls a “borderline institution” trafficking in both art and pop aesthetics as a “rock nightclub that was also performance space and art gallery, a site for ‘art after midnight,’” quoting the title of Steven Hager’s kitschy photo-filled publication on New York nightlife scenes published in 1986.273

On the flipside, the nightclub had been turned into performance art when artist Paul McMahon staged a mock club called “I’m With Stupid,” at the Kitchen in October 1977, and reprised it in 1978 as “The Party Club,” at Franklin Furnace during the holidays—always including Mahon on the guitar performing cleverly worded all-around-the-campfire style

271 Gendron, Between Montmartre, 290.
273 Hager’s live-from-the-scene reports and Gendron’s analytical rundown of avant-garde and pop aesthetics together paint a nuanced look into the club culture that lived side by side with the art world. Gendron, Between Montmartre, 290.
songs.\textsuperscript{274} Eklund describes McMahon’s events as “mock-formal, ephemeral, and high-spirited,” in which he and his partner Nancy Chunn designed sarcastically adorable invitations and decorations, and invited friends like Mike Smith to perform parodic routines.\textsuperscript{275} The performances appeared like something akin to a school child’s diorama: a box sweetly arranged with a fabricated environment, all as an elaborate stage for his Mr. Rogers-meets-Jonathan Richman inspired songs.\textsuperscript{276} Mahon and Chunn collaborated on what they called \textit{Song Paintings}, documented on Jamie Davidovich’s art-on-television program Cable SoHo, where Chunn painted an elaborate tableaux on a canvas, complete with curiosities like mountain ranges, assorted animals, and references to art history. [AV 13] The canvas became a backdrop for McMahon’s stage performance during which he would improvise clever songs based on details he observed while closely looking at Chunn’s paintings, spoofing techniques of art criticism. During the Kitchen performance, McMahon dyed dollar bills bright colors and threw them into the crowd, which Eklund suggests, “lampooned in advance the fanciness of the 1980s art world.”\textsuperscript{277} After “I’m With Stupid,” Glenn Branca’s partner, photographer Barbara Ess approached McMahon and asked him to join their band Daily Life.\textsuperscript{278} Later McMahon teamed up with Theoretical Girls’ drummer Wharton Tiers to form A Band, which released a 7-inch sing designed by Matt Mullican in his signature brightly colored pictogram iconography.\textsuperscript{279} [Figure 2.13] McMahon and Nancy Chunn routinely hosted “Battle of the Bands” evenings in their loft

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{275} Ibid, 192.
\bibitem{276} Eklund, \textit{The Pictures Generation}, 196.
\bibitem{277} Andrew Russeth, “‘It Takes a While to Figure Out Who You Really Are’: Artist Paul McMahon on His Curious Menagerie of a Career,” \textit{ArtNews}, March 22, 2018, http://www.artnews.com/2018/03/22/takes-figure-really-artist-paul-mcmahon-curious-menagerie-career/
\bibitem{278} http://paulmcmahon.tv/daily-life/
\bibitem{279} When Paul McMahon broke off from Daily Life, Ess, Branca, and Christine Hahn formed The Static, which notably performed in London with Dan Graham. Graham had supported Kim Gordon and Christine Hahn, along with Stanton Miranda as a “fake band” to be in his Rock My Religion. http://www.primaryinformation.org/product/dan-graamthe-static/
\end{thebibliography}
at 135 Grand Street, where friends would perform with their bands, or if they didn’t have one, make one up on the spot.  

One such party in 1979 was filmed by Ericka Beckman, and she captured footage of artists’ bands like Theoretical Girls, A Band, Chinese Puzzle, The Static, Morales, Youth in Asia, Steven Piccolo and Jill Kroesen.  

These nights relished in the deliberate amateurism that celebrated wit over skill, a liberating sense of “non-musician musicianship that made the punk bands of the moment seem like virtuosi,” similar to the impulses seen in the Raincoats “disorderly naturalism.”

As a filmmaker Beckman made a suite of Super-8 works, including *We Imitate; We Break Up, Out of Hand, and The Broken Rule*, which screened several times at the Kitchen between 1979 and 1982. Each film depicts sets of actors undertaking seemingly-pointless games with a mystifying set of rules. Brightly colored uniforms and sports-gear float against dream-like all-black backdrops, as an unseen chorus of girls taunt the on-screen players through nursery rhyme-like chants and handclaps at a brisk beat—a soundtrack evoking the unmistakable edge of a punk influence. [AV 15] Writing in *Artforum*, J. Hoberman says that Beckman’s films, evoking “primitive cartoons” with “syncopated energy,” can be “located at the ‘perceptual’ edge of Poststructural Punk: they’re not an absolute rejection of ‘70s formalism… but she’s an idiosyncratic original, with a full-blown style that’s completely her own.” It is specifically her “sing-song voice tracks, jerky robotic motions, and repetitive gestures” that aesthetically align her with Branca and Ess, and her quasi-childlike zones of school-time fantasy that mirror

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McMahon and Chunn’s faux clubhouses. “The recent movement of performance art toward music,” writes Sally Banes in her article on Beckman’s films for *Millennium Film Journal*, “especially toward rhythmic, high-energy percussion of punk and new wave—provides an important context for understanding Beckman’s work.” 285 Structured like individual songs, the three short films operate like tracks on an EP, each modifications of a singular aesthetic—one that rejects standard narrative conventions—with sets of lyrics. Where bands use instrumentation to create the “paper-page” for the language-based text to reside, Beckman’s film-songs layer lyrics on top of images. Beckman’s films are proto-music videos, albeit ones where she’s the composer and the filmmaker. They exemplify how avant-garde artists were employing the strategies and sensibilities of the rock band and mimicking its format in different directions.

**Feminist Conceptual Bands**

Just like its venture into the Mudd Club, the Kitchen went “off-site” to Fashion Moda, an alternative art space in the Bronx billed as a “place where art, science, fantasy, invention, technology would meet,” providing a “sensitive nexus and polylogue between the multifarious ethnocentric groups that live and/or pass through the stressopolis.” 286 The Kitchen’s October 18, 1980 program consisted of a twelve-hour marathon day, deejayed by Dan Graham. The *Soho Daily News* listing for the event cheekily asked “Thought-provoking cross-cultural inner-city fertilization, anyone?,” and the *Village Voice* described it as “something on the interface of performance art and music.” 287 Headlining the event was Y Pants, an all-female, all-visual artist band led by Barbara Ess between 1979 and 1982, and aside from her role in Daily Life and the

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Static. They describe themselves as “amplified toy rock,” and indeed, each member performed on miniature instruments or children’s toys: Ess on ukulele, Virginia “Verge” Piersol on a found paper-faced Mickey Mouse drum set, and Gail Vachon on a miniature toy piano, later adding keyboards and bass. The press release for the event describes how the musicians’ toy instruments “go through sound devices (tremelo and phase shifter) creating an unusual sound that has been described as ‘underwater oriental’ and as ‘science fiction with a strong beat.’”

The result of this comical arrangement of instruments was surprisingly complex, inspiring Rockwell to write in The New York Times that, “what makes Y Pants a success is the actual sound of the instrumentals—raw and driving yet exotic and imaginative in terms of timbre and minimalist structure.” Not only did they play small instruments, but they structured their songs around what Ess called “small music,” meaning their simple lyrics reflected exactly the everyday objects and moments the song titles described, for example, “Favorite Sweater” lamented a laundry load gone wrong.

This sarcastic approach to both their instruments and content wryly pokes fun at an overtly seriousness of the art world in which they also participated as painters and photographers. Their affront to seriousness doubly speaks to the fact that, even within the progressive community in New York, women struggled to be taken seriously, both as artists and musicians. Y Pants belonged to a small grouping of all-female conceptually driven artists’ bands that appropriated the band as a platform for feminist dissent, and on which academic and journalistic resources were dramatically limited in comparison to the available resources on their male counterparts, Branca and Chatham. Y Pants most pointed feminist

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statement is the reworking of “That’s the Way Boys Are,” the 1964 hit by teenage girl group icon Lesley Gore, best known for "You Don’t Own Me," and "It's My Party," whose songs reinforced stereotypes of the longing girlfriend while containing alarming evidence of conventionally accepted, even romanticized sexism. Y Pants make this explicit by transforming the upbeat pop hit into a chilling chant that, half way into the song, is backed by hysterical screams of a terrified woman. The cries are followed by taunting tribal beats from the toy instruments that twist the song’s tone to lay bare the bizarre, disturbing absurdity that lurk in a woman’s everyday experience. [AV 17] Y Pants use of toy instruments as an affront to an oppressive society echoes Cage’s Suite for the Toy Piano, which he composed in 1948 in the aftermath of WWII, stating that he chose the diminutive instrument because "I didn't think there was any good in anything big in society." Y Pants song “Obvious” contains lyrics written by art critic Lynne Tillman, who satirically suggested “Do the obvious!” as the latest dance craze. Ess fashioned the song as dirge, or funeral lament, with the refrain “Don’t be afraid to be boring.” While Y Pants’ sarcasm is biting, it’s joyfulness is undeniable—a duality that is a hallmark of artists’ bands who appropriate a form that is laden with cultural implications to confront, yet is one that offers satisfying expressive modes for performance.

The small grouping of conceptual feminist artists’ bands that Y Pants belonged to also included Ut, a trio who alternated between their instruments after each song, denying notions of expertise and hierarchy, and DISBAND, led by Franklin Furnace founder Martha Wilson, who dropped instruments all together. Wilson remembers realizing that many of her downtown artist peers were playing in bands and wanting to join in, but she herself couldn’t play any instruments.

“So,” she says “I called up my girlfriends who were long on concept and short on skills,” and formed DISBAND.\(^{294}\) Between 1978 and 1982, Wilson performed alongside a shifting roster of all-visual artist collaborators that included Ess, Daile Kaplan, April Gornik, Barbara Kruger, Ilona Granet, Donna Henes, Diana Tor, and Artforum editor-in-chief Ingrid Sischy.\(^{295}\) Wilson was the founder and director of Franklin Furnace, a Tribeca alternative art space that focused on artists’ books that also hosted a notable performance art series, making it “a cross between the museum archive, the avantgarde kunsthalle, and the cabaret.”\(^{296}\) The fluid format of the space, according to its curator Jacki Apple “opened a whole discussion of what constituted a ‘book’ and how far that definition could be stretched,” commenting that a “certain elasticity” for “unconventional interpretations” resulted in Franklin Furnace’s activities to be exemplified by a “willingness to experiment, rather than for representing any one group or style.”\(^{297}\) This sensibility naturally spilled over to Wilson’s concept for DISBAND, which relied on pantomime, loose choreography, handclaps, and chants. The band members dropped instruments in favor of “plastic bags, newspapers, a hammer, Col. Sanders chicken buckets, a bed sheet, hotel bells” and other objects, not necessarily as noise makers, but as open-ended props and devices in their performances.\(^{298}\) Less extrapolated from the music, it was the structure of the typical stage performance—and evening of short vignettes like a collection of pop songs, each a few minutes

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\(^{297}\) Apple, “A Different World,” 39.

\(^{298}\) Wilson, 48.
long with lyrics—that became a useful device for this band of performance artists. DISBAND performed regularly around the city’s alternative art spaces and galleries, including a two-night run at the Kitchen on May 29 and 30 in 1981. [Figure 2.17] Later, they travelled to Italy on a performance art tour, called Per/For/Mance, organized by Florence’s Teatro L’Affratellamento, where they shared the stage with Chris Burden, Laurie Anderson, Paul McCarthy, and Julia Heyward. Lyrics for some of DISBAND’s songs were supplied by Barbara Kruger, who tapped into her signature bold critiquing language that deconstructed the messaging imbedded in social and consumer transactions. Her lyrics for DISBAND’s “Fashions,” are as follows:

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You don’t have to tell me where your passions lie
You don’t have to tell me if you laugh or cry
If you’re he or she
Or if you’re taken or free
Because it’s all in your fashions

I can see the answers
In your footwear
In your jackets
And in the cut of your hair
I can see the answers
Where you hang out
When you wake up
And what you laugh about
Because it’s all in your fashions

You don’t have to talk about your politics
You don’t have to talk about the movies you see
About the dance you do
I don’t need a clue
Because it’s all in your fashions

I can see the answers
In your address
In your bookcase
And by the look on your face
I can see the answers
In your best friends
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299 Francesca Alinovi. Per/For/Mance. (Florence: Teatro Affratellamento, 1980).
On your T.V.
And by the money you make
Because it’s all in your
It’s all in your
It’s all in your f-a-s-h-i-o-n-s

Video documentation shows the song performed at a 1979 performance at Franklin Furnace, and one can hear the sweet, upbeat melody that wouldn’t sound out of place as an advertisement’s jingle. [AV 18] While lengthier than the signature phrases that would later fill her murals and other textual interventions, Kruger’s song is not unlike the words urgently slapped across advertisements that have an “aggressive mode of addressing the viewer,” like a political and feminist statements in her visual art. “Fashions” takes the pop song out of its typical context through its incising text. That same year Kruger organized an exhibition at the Kitchen called “Pictures and Promises: A Display of Advertising Slogans and Interventions,” for which the press release read:

The quotation qualities of these words and pictures remove them and their ‘originals’ from the seemingly ‘natural’ position within the flow of dominant social directives, into the realm of commentary. This comment, at times, alternates ideas of presentation, seduction, interruption, representation, and the impossibility of opacity.\(^{301}\)

In the 2018 exhibition *Brand New: Art and Commodity in the 1980s* at the Hirshhorn Museum, curator Gianni Jetzer, discusses the “transformative” effect of Kruger’s “decontextualization” of commodities into the art space writing that “in the hands of artists, advertisements became working material for more and less subtle critiques.”\(^{302}\) Kruger’s engagements with DISBAND show how an artist’s strategies can materialize in different mediums in different ways, pointing to not only the idea as the true focal point of their work, but also the strategy of experimentation.

\(^{300}\) Wilson, *Martha Wilson Sourcebook*, 160.


The rock band, in the hands of artists, can be seen as functioning similarly—a manipulated commercial signifier of mass culture and consumerism.

In addition to Barbara Ess’ Y Pants and Martha Wilson’s DISBAND, other women in the Kitchen’s orbit were using popular music as a performative and political outlet. Jill Kroesen, whose avant-garde musical, *Stanley Oil and his Mother: A Systems Portrait of the Western World*, was staged at the Kitchen in 1977, was a Kitchen fixture, and collaborated with Peter Gordon and Arthur Russell. She was best known for her performance in her mentor Robert Ashley’s talk-operas *Private Lives* produced by the Kitchen for public television from 1978 to 1982. She released a pop single titled “I Really Want to Bomb You,” in 1980, which matched Patti Smith-like vocals with lyrics that mix love with the apocalyptic.303 In September of that year, she shared the bill with Boris Policeband for a concert at the Kitchen, both performances teetering between performance art and rock. Only cryptic information on Boris Policeband exists—his anonymity was obviously a deliberate ruse, as biographies included on press releases from across his five performances at the Kitchen only indicate he’s a “composer and performance artist,” who “has not harmed anyone yet,” and “will not be available... to provide further insight into his work.”304 He was known for incorporating phrases into his song lyrics picked up in-the-moment from a police scanner that he listened to via custom constructed head-gear.305 Like Kroesen, performance artist Julia Heyward began creating pop music around 1980

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305 The elusive Policeband was one of two musicians interviewed in a publication created as part of Columbia University philosophy professor Sylvère Lotringer’s influential conference Schizo-Culture in 1975, described as “an unprecedented collision of French vanguard philosophy with New York’s radical art practitioners.” Source: Sanders, *Rituals of Rented Island*, 37. The only other rock band to be included was The Ramones. Sylvère Lotringer and David Morris, eds. *Schizo-Culture: The Event; The Book*, 2-vol. set. New York: Semiotext(e), 2014; Masters, *No Wave*, 204.
under the name T-Venus. Kroesen and Heyward are both artists that have “fallen into the margins,” but in whom interest was reinvigorated by the Whitney Museum’s *Rituals of Rented Island* exhibition, organized by Jay Sanders in 2013. Emphasizing object-based performance art of the seventies, that exhibition stopped short of exploring popular music’s significant role in the practice of several of the artists on its checklist—who include Ericka Beckman, John Zorn, Laurie Anderson, Mike Kelley, Mike Smith, and punk-influenced British duo Kipper Kids.306

Part of Edit deAk’s landmark performance art program PersonA at Artists Space, Heyward performed stream-of-consciousness monologues that spiraled out from “double-entendres, nursery rhymes and singing, sexual references, birdcalls, and voice modifications, ventriloquism, subliminal seduction, and other forms of dissociative communication.”307 In December of 1975, she appeared as a duo with Laurie Anderson at the Nova Convention, a two-day festival of performances celebrating William S. Burroughs organized by John Giorno, with a line-up that included Keith Richards, who cancelled and was replaced by Frank Zappa at the final minute.308 They wore men’s tuxedos and sang Anderson’s “The Language of the Future,” and directly addressed the audience through a vocoder to masculinize their voices—the first instance of what became a hallmark of Anderson’s future performances.309 In regard to her performance, Heyward told Roselee Goldberg that, “What makes this work more intimate, and more riveting, is that the distinction between the personality of the artist and the work presented is blurred in the

306 Kipper Kids performed at the Kitchen as part of Imports, a series organized by Roselee Goldberg, that included Judy Nylon, Bruce McLean, and Anne Bean. The press release reads: “Most of these artists emerged during the years that the Rolling Stones, Lou Reed and Alice Cooper were presenting their extraordinary extravaganzas. Their parody of pop style and presentation as applied to an overly serious art world earned their reputations as glamorous artists, and attribution they have yet to reject!” Source: “Imports,” Press release, November 2-19,1978. The Kitchen videos and records, 1971-2011 (bulk 1971-1999), The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, Box 36, Folder 29.


308 Giorno had leaked to the Village Voice that Richards was due to appear and hundreds of people showed up expecting the Rolling Stone. In a moment of real pop and art collision, one account remembers “the audience are screaming, ‘KEITH! KEITH! KEITH!’ through everything—even Philip Glass.” McNeil, *Please Kill Me*, 377.

performance.” Given that popular music also involves this mode of address—a quasi-authentic self that directly and indirectly addresses the audience, not as a character, but as a persona—performance art and popular music shared a reflexive structural dynamic that made performing in a band a natural fit for many in the avant-garde. In 1980, Heyward teamed up with members of the Contortions and the Raybeats to create an eight-song video album intended for the just emerging technology of laserdisc. Screened at the Kitchen and followed by performances on January 23 and 24, 1981, the video album titled 360 showed the appetite for the marriage of popular music and video which would be made official one year later with the birth of MTV. The press release for 360 reads: “The cinematography is geometry with rhyme, while the music is cinematic rock-and-roll.” A press photo shows Heyward posing with the laserdisc propped on her shoulder, her face reflected in its mirrored surface. [Figure 2.18] However, after the “inevitable letdown of seeing color and clarity fade, hearing music’s power and richness dilute down with every transfer and remix,” Heyward abandoned plans to manufacture the disc, speaking to the risks of ever-changing technologies. Heyward and her band T-Venus would join a 1982 nationwide tour sponsored by the Kitchen, alongside Eric Bogosian, Glenn Branca, and Fab Five Freddy, that was kicked off on the Staten Island Ferry—one of many the Kitchen organized between 1980 and 1985 with artists from their community that travelled to cities across the U.S. and Europe.

310 Quoted in Sanders, Rituals of Rented Island, 35.
312 Ibid.
Avant-Garde in Concert: *Dubbed in Glamour/Aluminum Nights*

As bands entered the art space and began rubbing shoulders with avant-garde performances on its calendar, presentation strategies of the rock concert spilled over to the other activities at the Kitchen, which staged several large-scale rock concert style events that featured large line-ups, not just of bands, but of artists across disciplines. The precedent of 1975’s Soup & Tart, where more than thirty-five distinct artists presented micro-performances mere minutes long, paved the way for certain stand-out events that encapsulate the spirit and particular mentality of a moment with large line-ups of artists, without regard for standard formats. In 1980, former *Art-Rite* publisher Edit deAk organized *Dubbed in Glamour*, on November 21 to 23. Outside of *Art-Rite*, deAk was known for having organized the first series dedicated to performance art at Artists Space, titled PersonA, in April of 1974, which featured Adrian Piper, Jack Smith, Scott Burton, and Laurie Anderson.315 Critic John Howell, writing in *Live* magazine, called *Dubbed in Glamour* a follow up to deAk’s earlier program, and “another take on the whole phenomenon” of “performance as art,” this time with “nightlife glamour instead of art world aestheticism.”316 The result was “three long nights of fun, extravagance and spectacle,” that reflected the *Zeitgeist* of downtown.317 Whereas Soup & Tart used the art world value set of the white box, the quick wit of Fluxus, and the stripped-down aesthetic of Minimalism to communicate a unified sensibility about all the participating artists, *Dubbed in Glamour* shifted

317 Ibid.
the Kitchen’s context into the dark, decadent, and debaucherous zone of nightlife that was then dominating the creative community’s attention. The event promised performances by “new new wave rock, funk, hip hop and theatrical musical groups,” video, film, and slide presentations, readings by the “glitterati literati,” and “post- post- post- modernist entertainments,” which could include anything, from “burlesque, fashion, gymnastics, and other stunts.”\footnote{318 [Promotional poster, Figure 2.19] DeAk asserts these activities as “rites” of the “personality cult” to be enacted in dedication to “the average American in search of self-image (always settling for entertainment instead).”} The press release submits what reads as a manifesto for the newest generation of the art community—one that exists after the popular music, rock band, and pop star infiltration of the art world. It reads:

DUBBED IN GLAMOUR is an exposé of the energies of the Para-Soho luminaries, that part of the artworld which never had a loft, is younger than the artworld and hangs out in clubs. This creative group on the ‘scene’, but geographically and financially marginal to that static institutional bastion, the artworld, has paradoxically become art’s ‘great white hope’. During the past few years a great deal of energy has been spent on the new wave turf in the presentation of self, the image as self-controlled product. This phenomenon shows an advanced case of adjustment to the talent-marketing culture at large and was bound to wash new wave into it. And indeed, it has.

These masters of cosm-ethnic synthesize the self and environment in highly theatrical terms. They understand that in their self-socialization process taste and fascination is currency. Entertainment here is reinforced as a true venue to reach out with, as well as the manifestation of self. Glamour is used as Uniform. Glamour is seductive, a promotional entity. It designates the self, commodifies it, supplying the costumers with the image as product… where self, costumers and image are all having fun! “And our taste is tagged with a ticket of price” (Satyricon).\footnote{320}

\footnote{319 Ibid.}
\footnote{320 Ibid.}
If the cultural influence of rock and roll helped push art’s focus toward the personality, then deAk confirms the take-over is complete. In her statements, she owns the fact that art has become inextricably linked with the “presentation of self” and “the image as self-controlled product.” She asserts that since this “new wave” of artists are self-aware—a layer on their identities akin to glamour—entertainment is theirs to exploit. Like with many artists who appropriate the image of a band, this dual-identity isn’t corrupt. Rather, deAk asserts, those who would “dub” themselves as something else and the “image” of self they create, are “both having fun!” Artists donned the image of a rock musician, not only to critique the society that controls such format, but because they love it as well. The half-fake and half-real sentiment recalls a quote deAk used at the head of an article written for Artforum the same year as Dubbed in Glamour, credited to another art-scene produced rocker, Iggy Pop: “A good product has the ability to set forth true and false propositions. If someone comes on with only what’s true, it’s very boring, because nobody has that much truth in them.” With that in mind, Dubbed in Glamour brought fun-with-an-edge to the Kitchen in a variety show-like program hosted by John Waters-muse writer Cookie Muller, along with downtown club fixtures Anne Dion and Chi Chi Valenti. They ushered the audience through a series of performances that included comedy skits, lip-synchs, and fashion shows that both championed women creators and lampooned female stereotypes. Each night was concluded by a band, including the Bush Tetras, an all-female group formed by Pat Place of the Contortions. A mainstay band among the art community, the Bush

321 Edit DeAk, “Copy,” Artforum, Vol. 18, No. 6 (February 1980): 92. Iggy Pop’s connections to the experimental music and art community of Ann Arbor Michigan are explored by Piekut Experimentalism Otherwise, 177-198.
Tetra’s angsty song “Too Many Creeps,” was a feminist battle cry with a funk beat lodged against the constant catcalls and harassment New York women faced on the street.322 [AV 20]

Among the significant moments at *Dubbed in Glamour* was the presentation of a nascent version of Nan Goldin’s ionic series of photographs, “The Ballad of Sexual Dependency.” Goldin began photographing intimate moments of her inner circle of friends in 1978, and the following year began experimenting with displaying them as a slide show accompanied by a specific soundtrack of popular music. While individual prints of the photographs have been exhibited, Goldin described the music-accompanied slide show as “the real work.”323 It is an artwork that is constantly influx, with Goldin continually adding and editing both the hundreds of images and paired songs into new variations. The first show had taken place at the Mudd Club for Frank Zappa’s birthday party where a soundtrack was provided by a live DJ, and a subsequent presentation included a live performance by the band the Del Byzantines (which included painter James Nares and filmmaker Jim Jarmush).324 Goldin’s slide show translates the exhibition viewing experience from its typically white boxed format into the black box, for something akin to a concert or film. The images are experienced collectively by an audience in a controlled window of time, received both visually and sonically. With the incorporation of music her photography joins the stage and performs. Goldin writes that, “the narrative voice of the soundtrack gives it larger context than just being pictures of my friends,” adding that the interplay between the images and the songs are “where the relationships between the personal and the universal come in, where I can make more political points about sexual politics, about

324 Ibid.
gender, about relationships.”

Greil Marcus, writing about the Ballad’s playlist of songs, observes that “the soundtrack is a collection of Goldin’s friends, just as the photos are. The songs are characters as much as the people we see.” These pop songs evoke nostalgia, they manipulate the viewers feelings, and as Marcus observes, they may be ordinary and “a cheap thing,” but nevertheless reflect “tremendous feeling.”

Goldin writes that the soundtrack exists to elicit “intense emotional effect,” writing that it is her “goal is to provoke the same emotions in my audience as are described in the show.” Popular music becomes a device, in this context, for art to modify and animate its mode of address, mirroring the concert setting of the event.

_Dubbed in Glamour_ also played host to a historic moment in popular music history when Bronx rap group Funky Four Plus One More debuted the first hip hop performance to take place in downtown Manhattan. It is particularly interesting that the impetus of this milestone was a feminist event—the “one more” to the four male members being Sha Rock, the first female emcee among the pioneering Sugar Hill Records-affiliated community. Video documentation shows Sha Rock performing alongside her four bandmates as they take turns at the microphone delivering rhymes in a style wholly new to the Kitchen audience, eliciting a strong reaction of cheers and applause from the crowd. [AV 21] Howell described the hip hop rappers taking turns “at individual bios spoken/sung in alliterative slang… ‘Manhattan’ another world to these Bronx groovers, but they ripped the joint, had to repeat numbers for overcome Manhattanites.”

After seeing them at the Kitchen, Debby Harry, who also performed during _Dubbed in Glamour_, invited Funky Four Plus One More to join Blondie on _Saturday Night Live_ on February 14, 1981,

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325 Ibid.
327 Ibid.
328 Westfall, “Nan Goldin.”
which was the first appearance of rap on television. Their appearance at Dubbed In Glamour was the start of several engagements between the downtown avant-garde art community and hip hop artists, including an event at the Kitchen the following year organized by choreographer Toni Basil called Graffiti Rock on October 2 and 3, 1981. Rodney C of the Funky Four returned along with and Fab 5 Freddy and accompanied dance battles by uptown crews—for many it was the first time break dancing was scene downtown. The arrival of a new form of popular music in rap and hip hop must have been thrilling for the downtown avant-garde crowd, which by definition, is meant to be advancing into new expressive terrains. The rappers’ radical gesture of talking instead of singing aligned with the modus operandi of an avant-garde—one oriented to valuing similar provocations to established forms, and especially ones offering a more democratic and effective vernacular for describing their world. Had the art community not come to accept forms of popular music as part of their wider conversation through artists’ bands and other alternative forms of rock, their minds might not have been as open to rap and hip hop at such an early point its existence.

In June of 1981, the Kitchen celebrated its 10th anniversary with a two-night benefit event called Aluminum Nights that staged avant-garde activity in the context of a large-scale rock concert. [Promotional poster: Figure 2.20] Set against the backdrop of threats made by newly elected President Reagan to defund the National Endowment for the Arts, which at that time supplied $80,000 of the Kitchen’s $200,000 annual operating budget, the non-profit space rented the “huge pleasure palace” Bond’s International Casino in Times Square. In stark contrasts to

the Kitchen’s typical nightly audience of two hundred, Bond’s boasted a capacity of two thousand, and only days before, it had been the site of a near-riot when venue promoters oversold a performance by the Clash by thousands of tickets, causing a police shutdown of Times Square. The Soho News previews picked up on the colliding worlds, touting how the event awkwardly “puts the downtown avant scene practically back to back with the Clash,” and spread an erroneous rumor that David Bowie would be sitting in with Philip Glass. Photographs of the audience showed the large-scale concert-like setting. [Figure 2.21] Both sold-out nights hosted performances that stretched past 3 a.m., with line-up that leaned heavily on the Kitchen’s popular music-oriented regulars, mixed with more niche experimenters: June 14 with Glenn Branca, Talking Heads’ David Byrne, DNA, Fab 5 Freddy, Philip Glass, Peter Gordon’s Love of Life Orchestra, with poetry by John Giorno; June 15 with Laurie Anderson, Robert Ashley, Maryanne Amacher, Bush Tetras, Rhys Chatham, George Lewis, Bebe Miller Dancers, Steve Reich, and DEVO performing as VEDO. Both days’ performances were supported by video installations by Robert Longo, Brian Eno, Nam June Paik, and founders Steina and Woody Vasulka, plus “intermittent performances” by Eric Bogosian and Dan Aykroyd. A review in the LA Times paints a picture of the event’s most striking “surprise hit” moment, where a crowd that even counted Mick Jagger among it, fell under a “spellbound hush” cast by otherworldly abstract vocalist, Meredith Monk.”

At no other point in the Kitchen’s institutional history did popular music appear so dominant, overtaking avant-classical music, video, dance or performance art, as its primary genre than at Aluminum Nights, where under added pressure for a successful benefit,

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333 The Clash famously played seventeen shows until every ticket buyer was honored. Source: Palmer, “Clash Melee.”


335 McKenna, “A Birthday Party.”
all the trappings of entertainment and the rock concert aligned both as an artistic and a practical strategy.

The mood rubbed off on covering reporters leading them to characterize the Kitchen as the place that “introduced the art world to punk,” and the event as a “panoply of downtown experimentalists and art rockers,” showcasing “vanguard rock.”336 Rockwell, the music critic for The New York Times, had the closest analytical eye on the Kitchen’s first decade; he made a point to note that, “the large number of rock bands on the list, for example, might seem surprising to those who regard rock and art as antithetical,” but he assured his readers that there is a distinction.337 Rather he found Aluminum Nights “metaphors for the very manner in which downtown experimental artists in many mediums routinely work together, influencing one another’s work in a way which ‘uptown arts,’ sometime weighed down by the complexity of their traditions, frequently do not.”338 Specifically, on rock, he wrote:

In lower Manhattan, art influences rock, and rock influences art. The lines between what is personal statement and what is a possibly commercial reaching-out a public have blurred beyond all hope of clarification—and that seems a healthy development for both art, which can sometimes appear cut off from society uptown, and rock, which can too easily pander to the lowest common denominator.339

This co-dependence is perhaps best summed up by a limited-edition silkscreen poster made by Robert Longo that, like the promotional poster, depicted a cocktail-dressed woman mid-motion in high-contrast black and white against a bold red background. [Figure 2.22] The image stemmed from Longo’s Men In The Cities series of charcoal pencil drawing, picking up on

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337 Ibid.
338 Ibid.
339 Ibid.
motifs he explored in Artists Spaces’ watershed exhibition *Pictures*, organized by Douglas Crimp in 1977. [Figure 2.23] That year, while Longo was working as a curator of the video program at the Kitchen, he developed these signature large-scale drawings. Eklund sees Longo’s oversized single-figure drawings, which depicted men isolated and suspended mid-fist-fight, mid-jump, or mid-dance, as reflections on male stereotypes and a sense of “gender confusion” that “much of the forward-looking popular music of the period toyed with,” from David Bowie to the New York Dolls. The jolting figures were Longo’s way of appropriating the image of the bands he saw performing in SoHo, and specifically James Chance of the Contortions, of which he says, “The way James Chance moved onstage — in spasms, almost like psychotic impulses. It really moved me.” At the time, Longo regularly performed on guitar with Rhys Chatham, and led his own band Menthol Wars, started in 1980 with fellow artist Richard Prince. To him music and art were variations of the same idea, saying, “it was amazing to hear music that sounded how your art looked.” He debuted the drawings, then extended to include images of both men and women, at Metro Pictures Gallery in January of 1981, for which the press release read: Longo’s figures of “arrested action” reflect “attitudes and style dictated by popular culture — movies, advertising, TV, music.” Their “extreme, though ambiguous posture and gesture... elevates them to the status of contemporary icons.” Like artists’ bands, these images took ordinary “images” from popular culture, and through certain

341 Ibid, 234.
342 Lloyd, Joe. “Robert Longo.”
343 Menthol Wars was also a name attached to a series of artists’ books produced by Richard Prince and published by Printed Matter. Comprised of appropriated images from advertising, they are described as exploring “the distinction (or lack thereof) between one’s actual self and one’s commercial ideal.” (See: “War Pictures, Menthol Pictures, Menthol Wars,” *Printed Matter*, accessed October 18, 2018 at https://www.printedmatter.org/catalog/42552/)
346 Ibid.
deft gestures, turned them into enigmas. Longo’s drawings are evidence that aesthetic strategies in art and music had aligned, linked by their mutual absorption of popular forms. *Aluminum Nights* was a celebration of that equilibrium—not only in content, but also in the desired mode of address, where any form of art suddenly found a home in the rock concert.

**IV. Popular Music in the Kitchen’s Video, New Music, Dance, and Performance Art**

Following the crisscrossing paths of artists, events, sites, and dates outlined in the previous sections, one could easily confuse this selective thread as the dominant history of the Kitchen in its SoHo years. Despite the volume of these aforementioned events, the overall program was not ubiquitously populated by bands and the like. Video, composition-oriented new music (distinct from popular music), dance, and performance art programs ran concurrently with the previously outlined intermittent activity. These other genres, ones more firmly rooted in avant-garde traditions, made up the content the Kitchen’s audience had come to expect. However, popular music had an impact on the Kitchen’s overall culture, affecting each of its central programs, and in some instances, shaping its most iconic moments. By 1985 when the Kitchen leaves 59 Wooster Street, the official title of the institution had grown in order to accommodate its expanding program from the Kitchen Center for Video and Music, as it was known in its early days the Mercer Arts Center, to the Kitchen Center for Video, Music, Dance and Performance.\(^{347}\) To demonstrate its impact, the following paragraphs will consider four significant events in the Kitchen’s history, one in each of its namesake categories that was shaped by popular music. This exercise is not to suggest that popular music should be tagged on

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\(^{347}\) Today, the Kitchen’s current name has grown to included literature, film, and art.
to the Kitchen’s list, but rather to demonstrate that it functioned less as a parallel program than as an overall sensibility that permeated all aspects of Kitchen activity.

VIDEO: Dara Birnbaum, *Pop Pop Video*

For the entire month of March in 1980, video artist Dara Birnbaum was “in residence” at the Kitchen for a program called *Pop Pop Video.* [Figure 3.1] Known for her process of re-cutting clips from network television, Birnbaum had first screened tapes at a solo screening in January 1978, and later as part of the Kitchen’s *Filmworks 78-79* (May 3, 1979) and *Re-Runs* (September 11-28, 1979) programs including her well-known 1978-piece *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman/Special Effects.*³⁴⁸ In what the press release called “a working situation,” Birnbaum used the Kitchen as a studio for “day-by-day re-edits of pop television,” wherein she edited new content from current broadcasts and held a viewing of that day’s results each night at 5 p.m. In addition, she produced new original soundtracks for the final works from seven men and seven women—all of whom were artist-musicians working in proximity to the Kitchen, and therefore engaged in similar re-workings of popular culture. Men contributed instrumental tracks (Jules Baptiste, Rhys Chatham, Scott Johnson, Jeffrey Lohn, Paul McMahon, Robert Raposo, and Wharton Tiers), whereas women provided vocals (Margaret DeWys, Barbara Ess, Kim Gordon, Stantion Miranda, Shelley Hirsch, Anne DeMarinis, Dori

Levine, and Sally Swisher). Birnbaum lists the “predominant concern of the collaboration” as a means to “reveal the processes and structures of commercial TV as the ‘distributive channel’ of informational, commercial and propagandistic messages.”349 A finale event was held on March 29, which included Birnbaum’s final pieces on a bank of six monitors with live-soundtrack performances by her musical collaborators. A typed heading on the program for the night read:

THE FUTURE OF TELEVISION LIES IN SOUND NOT IN IMAGE350

This statement that points to the vital role that sound plays alongside the visual—both “dynamic structures”—in television. Incorporating the pop song into her work gave her “the very dialectic” she was looking for—one that indicated the “strong interplay between the television and popular music industries.”351 The pieces she created as part of Pop Pop Video isolate the editing tropes of specific genres. For instance, Birnbaum observed that crime-dramas routinely used reverse angle shots to mimic confrontation, that superhero shows made use of special effects, and sit-coms relied on “two-shots.” She then edited down the footage of each of those genres into fast-repeating intercuts using those very techniques. By using the strategies of the medium on itself, she made televisions’ own devices of manipulation exposed and explicit.

For her previous videos, Birnbaum used the television program’s own sound as the audio source, however a shift occurred when making Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman/Special Effects. [Figure 3.2; AV 22] The video isolated short one or two-second snippets of the popular superhero TV series Wonder Woman, selecting the specific moments that the

349 Ibid.
main character makes her explosive transformation from everyday secretary to superhero. The clip freezes Wonder Woman’s spinning in her moment of transformation and loops it repeatedly, effectively making her spin “endlessly like a doll in a music box.” Like Branca’s noise compositions, Birnbaum captures and sustains the climactic moment. While editing together the film, Birnbaum kept the radio on in her studio and by chance heard the song “Wonder Woman in Discoland,” a top-40 disco hit with the repeated hyper-sexualized refrain of “shake they wonder maker”—perfectly fitting in context with the charged male-gazing media she was weaving together. Birnbaum inserted the pop song after the Wonder Woman transformation sequences end, tagged on as a coda, with the lyrics plainly scrolling up the screen on a flat blue background—an ice-cold delivery of pointed language, out of step with the disco sound—that flips the strategy employed in the video’s first half. By expressing “content of the song without any of its stylistic panache,” writes critic T.J. Demos, “it reverses the video’s strategy of mimicking and repeating pop-cultural spectacle in its extreme moments.” In Pop Pop Video: General Hospital/Olympic Women Speed Skating made during her month at the Kitchen, Birnbaum juxtaposes “pure physical performance” of women speed skaters competing in the just-ended Lake Placid Winter Olympics to the “performance of emotional stress” in the daytime soap opera General Hospital—cross-cutting the clips so the momentum of the skaters declines as drama between a male and female doctor heat up. Here, Birnbaum has the original soundtrack invade the sound-space of the TV footage. It switches between Robert Raposo’s upbeat and atmospheric guitar strumming and the moody, abstract, jazz-like scat-singing from Dori Levine and Sally Swisher. Out of sync with the cuts, the alternating and disjointed musical

352 Ibid.
354 Birnbaum, Rough Edits, 85.
styles alter the mood of the images and the viewer’s perception of the emotion and tenor of the 
moments on screen, revealing sound to have as manipulative effect as the intercuts. A 
photograph from the sessions shows Swisher, microphone in hand, standing next to Raposo on 
guitar as they live-reacted to the images on screen during the performance. [Figure 3.4]

For a second piece produced during Pop Pop Video, Kojak/Wang, Birnbaum intermixes 
the sound effects of the intercut source material—yelps, wise-guy dialogue, and gunshots from 
the detective series Kojak, the alarm-like tone of TV’s color bars test pattern, and computer-
generated laser beams whizzing through the screen of a computer in a Wang Industries 
advertisement—with a churning No Wave guitar track by Rhys Chatham. [Figure 3.5; AV 23] 
As the cuts line up the flying bullets with the streaming neon-graphic light beams of the 
computer-ad, Birnbaum phases the volume of Chatham’s dense rock tones in and out for a visual 
and aural sensation of movement. The pop songs function as additional found clips that curator 
Maggie Finch sees operating like a Duchampian readymade: “something existing in the world of 
popular culture which when placed in a different context can operate as a tool of seduction, 
entertainment, and critique all at once.” 355 This readymade effect is doubled in that Chatham 
himself is engaged with appropriating the image of the rock band and performing a parallel 
process of contorting form through popular media—in his case, the form of avant-classical 
music. Like TV clips, rock music has a quality of seduction, that both Birnbaum and Chatham 
exploit. “Seduction isn’t bad,” Birnbaum says in discussion with Benjamin Buchloh, adding, 
“Seduction as a practice or a strategy can be valid within a work.” Referring to

Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman, she said, “Most of the tape is ‘sugar sweet’ so that

355 Finch, “Interview with Dara Birnbaum.”
its critical intention can operate all the more successfully.” Buchloh observes that any “devaluation or deconstruction” by Birnbaum of the original television footage “does not cancel its seduction. It generates a different kind of aesthetic seduction, one that is more difficult to locate or identify.” Chatham was seduced by the Ramones, whom he saw perform in 1976, and was therefore convinced of the aesthetic potential of popular forms when re-worked through his avant-garde-leaning lens. Like Branca’s sense of excitement and Richman’s quasi-sincerity, the seduction of the popular form isn’t employed by artist of this period in total contempt, but as a double-edged sword, because, as Buchloh states, “the seduction of TV material is a strategy of oppression.” Moreover, Birnbaum’s images in *Pop Pop Video* focus on a specific pairing of men and women: the athletic bodies of female Olympians as a performed televised spectacle, juxtaposed with the soap opera of a male and female who are both professional equals and lovers, locked in a power play; and the secretary transfixed by the computer screen that absorbs beams of light echoing forth from men’s violent weapons. The pairings mirror the groupings of men instrumentalists and women vocalists, who in their individual roles, illustrate that women’s voices live within a male-defined environment. These conditions of suppression and control of difference are exposed by Birnbaum to not only be part of popular culture but exactly what supplies its seduction. As Eklund writes, “it was and is not difficult to see the specter of fascism lurking behind the bells and whistles of mass-cultural spectacle,” noting that Birnbaum and her generation of “Pictures” artists who “wanted to investigate how images achieve their power needed to reflect on the often-troubling history of our fatal attraction to images and illusion.”

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357 Ibid.
Art thus becomes a way for both the artist and the viewer to experience, and on some level enjoy, the seductive qualities of a reclaimed popular culture, through the act of acknowledging, and in fact weaponizing, its compromised status.

For the introduction to a publication on *Pop Pop Video*, created when it was installed at the Nova Scotia College of Art in Design in 1980 soon after originating in the Kitchen earlier in that year, Buchloh wrote that he hoped the volume would demonstrate the “potential of resistance and the actual critique of the Imperialism of media- (and by now often also the ‘high cultural’) representations” in Birnbaum’s work.\(^{360}\) Buchloh offers that it is this sense of resistance and critique that is what should be valued, without necessarily making a case for the artistic qualities of the video, which often is used as an excuse to facilitate its institutionalization.\(^{361}\) The same is true of artists’ bands—the argument is not to purely valorize popular music by accentuating all its expressive and positive qualities or to make the case that it deserves to be recognized by some authority. Additionally, unlike video, rock was not a new media, that, even in its electrified and amplified form, was at least three decades old. New media departments formed by institutions to rationalize the relationships between video and other forms of art that fall outside traditional object-making, would better be served by a more ideologically outlined box. The binding impulses between forms employed by artists, stretching long before the technological breakthroughs of electronic arts, are their shared function as a tool of resistance—a questioning of the status quo that is the hallmark of experimentation.

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\(^{360}\) The publication was part of a series called Pamphlets that “introduces… a wide variety of (previously forgotten, excluded or marginalized) positions into artistic production, but they all share the negation of the traditional object status as art. They incorporate critical perspectives that derive from feminist, psychoanalytic, and post-structuralist theory, from the political critique of ideology and representation, and from an increasing interest in the interdependence between mass-cultural and high-cultural formations in Modernist history.” Other editions were dedicated to the work of Martha Rosler, Jenny Holzer, and Gerhard Richter. Birnbaum, *Rough Edits*, 11.

\(^{361}\) Ibid.
MUSIC: Julius Eastman, *Femenine*

Popular music’s biggest impression on the Kitchen’s categories undeniably fell upon its new music program. Inhabiting the same broadly-defined field of music, the incorporation of devices from pop, punk, new wave, disco, and other popular forms, was of a specific concern for composers—especially given the parallel experimental Jazz community that rose up alongside it in downtown lofts. As demonstrated in some of the reactionary evidence supplied in the first and second sections of this study, a picture of how the avant-garde music community debated and absorbed to different degrees a more common vernacular culled from popular culture is thus evident. Lawrence mapped out a comprehensive analysis of popular music’s impact on the Kitchen’s new music milieu in his essay “Pluralism, Minor Deviations, and Radical Change: The Challenge to Experimental Music in Downtown New York, 1971–85.”

One of the central narratives that is well documented in available sources, but that is nonetheless a salient event in this topic, centers around Rhys Chatham, a key player in several previously discussed examples of popular music’s influence at the Kitchen. As founder of its music program, twice its curator, and as the unseen hand behind countless bookings and collaborations, Chatham figures large in this area. He makes his own personal evolution from a notoriously serious and rigid composer working within a post-Cage field and within Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass and La Monte Young’s legacies of minimalism, to a full-fledged punk guitarist, fusing the aesthetics of punk with the avant-classical tradition in his watershed 1977 composition *Guitar Trio*. [Figure

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362 Lawrence, “Pluralism, Minor Deviations,” 5.
363 *Guitar Trio* was first performed at the Kitchen as part of the large-scale New Music New York festival that Chatham and Stearns (then at the Walker Art Center) organized to coincide with an uptown conference of international members of the music press. Their three-week long series of concerts put downtown experimentalism on the map, with line-ups of Kitchen regulars that read like a Who’s Who of the contemporary compositional world, and resulted in a high-volume of press from far-reaching outlets. The following year the festival was reprised as New Music America and subsequently occurred annually as a 10-day festival in different cities across the United
Chatham’s revelation came upon seeing a performance by the Ramones at CBGBs in May of 1976, where he had the epiphany that rock was already stripped-down and aligned with minimalism. He writes of the moment:

What I heard that night changed my life. Their music was more complex than mine – they were working with three chords and I had only been working with one. I realized that, as a minimalist, I had more in common with this music than I thought. I was attracted by the sheer energy and raw power of the sound as well as the chord progressions, which were not dissimilar to some of the process music I had been hearing at the time.\(^\text{364}\)

Love of Life Orchestra composer and Arthur Russell’s collaborator, Peter Gordon, had taken Chatham to the Ramones concert to “see the new thing that was happening in New York,” after Chatham professed that he had never been to a rock club before.\(^\text{365}\) “I thought the music that Peter and Arthur were making at that time was almost sacrilege,” he recalls. “I wasn’t sure I approved of them. I thought it was tacky!... They were mixing popular forms together coming out of, for want of a better word, art music.”\(^\text{366}\) According to Chatham, the resulting composition of *Guitar Trio* relied on minimalist-inspired overtones generated by the electric guitar strings mixed with the “rhythmic thrust” and grouping of musicians from the “rock tradition.”\(^\text{367}\)

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\(^{365}\) Lawrence, *Hold on to Your Dreams*, 116.

\(^{366}\) Ibid.

\(^{367}\) Ibid. Notably in an essay for *Real Life* magazine, Kim Gordon writes a close-read of a performance of Chatham’s *Guitar Trio*, titled “Trash Drugs and Male Bonding,” published in 1980, Gordon chronicles the interaction between Rhys Chatham, Robert Longo, and Wharton Tiers, writing: “Rhys has set the basic structure on something which is impure, a guitar out of tune. To achieve a perfection or purity of form, the plight of modernism, in music is impossible, because there is nothing pure about music except a style that is part of the tradition of classical music and made modern by “new music” composers such as La Monte Young, Phil Glass, and Steve Reich. Once you include the musicians as individuals a certain amount of control is given up and the music can then be allowed to be impure and potentially more exciting. It becomes more like rock music, which often relies on a particular grouping of people setting up varying tensions, timings, and tones. Gordon argues rock allows “an impurity for the expression
The significance of Chatham’s breakthrough notwithstanding, I wish to point to another less-explored composer to demonstrate that popular music’s manifestation in the new music community at the Kitchen did not solely come from punk: Julius Eastman. Composer, singer and pianist, Eastman performed over eight times at the Kitchen and across cities in Europe as part of the Kitchen’s touring program. He was deeply entrenched in the Kitchen community, conducting and performing with Jeffrey Lohn (of Theoretical Girls), Arthur Russell, as a vocalist in Meredith Monk’s ensemble, and collaborating with choreographers Andy DeGroat and Molissa Fenley. Recent scholarship, published recordings, and a series of performances and exhibitions at the Kitchen in January 2018, has resurfaced Eastman’s oeuvre, which had largely fallen into obscurity since his descent into homelessness before his death in 1990. African American and openly gay, Eastman’s presence at the Kitchen, musicologist Ryan Dohoney writes, “shows how experimental music, the radical black tradition, and post-Stonewall gay sexuality were components in a cultural assemblage that is today usually celebrated for the creativity of mostly white punk rock, the minimalism of Philip Glass and Steve Reich, and the performance art of Laurie Anderson and Robert Wilson.” Eastman moved to New York in 1975 after leaving the Creative Associates program at the State University of New York at Buffalo. He quickly linked up with Arthur Russell through a SUNY friend, Ned Sublette. Eastman and Russell developed a special affinity, relating to each other as gay men and composers specifically interested in pop of purer moments,” adding that Chatham writes “dirty music.” Source: Kim Gordon, *Is it My Body?*, 26. Douglas Eklund also describes *Guitar Trio* in *The Pictures Generation*, 186.


vernaculars. Eastman’s first appearance at the Kitchen with S.E.M. Ensemble was three days prior to Russell’s “rock and roll show” with the Modern Lovers, which introduced popular music to the Kitchen for the first time. Russell was also hard at work developing his “orchestral disco” compositions Instrumentals, which he debuted at the Kitchen that following month. In the two years prior, Eastman had an aesthetic breakthrough with his composition Stay on It, which he performed and toured with the Creative Associates in Europe in 1974. [AV 25] The song, critic Kyle Gann writes, “was one of the first minimalist-based pieces to show pop music influence.”

Scored for “voice, clarinet, two saxophones, violin, piano, and mallet percussion,” the piece is contemporaneous with Steve Reich and Philip Glass’ seminal compositions, who pre-’73 were still focused on “abstract pattern.”

Gann locates Eastman’s prescient act of using a “kind of pop cadential figure” as a “primary material,” and in doing so he was “mixing genres, and making reference to a sonic object outside of the style he’s working in.” That specific “cadence”—a suite of notes, barely a melody, but rather an abbreviation of one—is repeated in an unwavering loop to form a foundation for flourishes and variations layered on top or altering its path. Gann writes that the musical phrase is “a kind of framing device to create both unity and surprise,” adding that the chain of notes jars the listener if broken, keeping the composition “lively,” while acting as “prop for improvisation,” the vocals, and lyrics.

Eastman said the composition was primarily concerned with making music “without using notes,” rather than to “use the musicians’ innate musical abilities,” emphasizing those opportunities for improvisation, reaching for a “spontaneity native to jazz.”

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371 Gann, “Damned Outrageous.”
372 Ibid.
373 Ibid.
374 Ibid.
toward Minimalism stood in stark contrast to Reich and Glass’ “mechanical kinds of repetition.”

Stay on It was indebted to exposure to and influence from Terry Riley’s modular composition In C, La Monte Young’s droning Theater of Eternal Music, and Frederick Rzewski’s pulsating political phrases in his 1973 composition Coming Together. However, Eastman’s composition stood apart, writes music historian Matthew Mendez, as “too haphazard for ‘process music,’ too wild and wooly for ‘another look at harmony,’ too expressive for assembly-line industrial precision.”

Rather Mendez evokes a quote from Arthur Russell, who said “The kind of repetition that comes out of me and is in dance music is somewhat different to the repetition of minimalist works of the sixties and seventies… It uses an extendable structure which on the one hand is recognizable, and on the other, improvisatory. It’s based on hearing what you do while you do it.”

This “extendable structure” or “specific cadence,” the short, repeated cluster of notes can hence be seen as a “riff” or “groove.”

This recalls the attention Eastman placed on such short riffs or melodies, when he asked one of his ensemble musicians to weave in the theme from “Stop! In the name of Love,” the 1964 Motown hit from Diana Ross and the Supremes, as part of the piece. Stay On It’s peculiar cadence can be seen as a short collection of notes that mirror the syllables and catchy rhythm of a sung phrase in a pop song’s refrain, like “Stop! In the name of love,” and its bouncy tune. It is as if Eastman plucked this single line from that Motown hit, modified it slightly, and repeated it to form the central motif for his piece. In doing so, Eastman isolated the precise moment in a pop song that contains its hook, the unit of text that holds its power of seduction. Like Birnbaum’s explosive-snippet of Wonder Woman spinning endlessly in her music box, stuck within her

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376 Ibid.  
377 Ibid.  
378 Ibid.  
379 Ibid.
climactic moment, Eastman edited a groove into an endless looping sonic image, a micro moment of the power particle of pop reverberating as the undergirding of his composition.

Mendez points out that disco went mainstream around 1973, and the “quasi-improvised ‘freak outs’” Eastman layered onto his pop-derived beat, bared a significant relationship to that danceable genre.\(^{380}\) Eastman would follow up Stay On It with a composition titled Femenine (composer’s spelling), which he performed at the Kitchen in March of 1975 with S.E.M. Ensemble, a group he co-founded with Petr Kotik. [Figure 3.7; AV 26] Femenine was a sixty-minute composition that continued the device of the central, repeating pop-like riff, this time played on the vibraphone, and undergirded by a consistent shake of sleigh bells built into a handmade mechanical contraption. The machine consisted of bells attached to a wooden stick and it ran on a small motor that shook them in an automated and unwavering pace. One of Eastman’s collaborators suggests the bells were meant as a parody of Minimalism, mimicking his fellow composers—perhaps a jab at the way they appeared to deny the tradition of lyrical virtuosity, but certainly got by pleasing crowds with their endurance and precision. Femenine was comprised of a cluster of instructions for musical phrases that a cellist, pianist, violinist, flutist among other instruments could improvise over a consistent phrase played by the marimba and automated bells’ beat. As the title indicates, Eastman used the compositional devices, both the improvisation-like flourishes and the pop-quotiation groove, to insert sexuality into the composition—arguably the exact the thing that rocks stars have in droves, and that classical music lacks. “Femenine” may have referred to all the non-minimalist, or non-straight aspects of the composition—its popular music quotes and jazzy-improvisations.\(^{381}\)

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\(^{381}\) Femenine was performed in June of 1975 at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo in one area of the museum, where a now-lost composition titled Masculine was played simultaneously in an adjacent room. Mendez, “That Piece Does Not Exist,” 161.
Gibson described the energy between the musicians engaged in the prolonged call-and-response style of improvisation that overlaid the motifs of *Stay On It* and *Femenine* as reminiscent of “musical lovemaking,” saying,

> You stay on this melody until you just can’t stand it. And it was always [fellow Creative Associates ensemble musician] Ben Hudson and Julius, and they just wanted to savor every moment of this thing… It got slower and it got sexier, and eyebrows and motions towards each other and flirting with each other. This piece is as much a theater piece as it is musical.³⁸²

Russell recruited Eastman to play organ in a 1979 performance of his evolving “disco orchestral” project *Instrumentals* at the Kitchen, which took Eastman’s proclivities toward disco to the forefront, interpreting it as “a form of serious music that revolved around shifting, repetitive structures.”³⁸³ Their shared desire to express their sexuality through music materialized when Eastman moonlighted as part of Russell’s disco-pop group Dinosaur L, contributing his bombastic tenor to orgiastic vocals for “#5 Go Bang!”, which became a hit among the gay loft disco scene in SoHo’s late seventies.³⁸⁴ The song was included in Russell’s 24 → 24 Music, performed at the Kitchen on April 27 and 28 in 1979. Never shy about his gayness, Eastman’s own music, Mendez states, was highly personal. He writes, “Pinned betwixt and between modernism’s heteronormativity and early minimalism’s apolitical empiricism, Eastman was asserting himself as an individual gay subject, death of the author be damned.”³⁸⁵

After listening to a song by Earth, Wind & Fire, Eastman once told Russell that he had “completely lost the ability to discriminate between genres of music.”³⁸⁶ Kitchen music director George E. Lewis, echoes this when he said, “congruent with an expanded notion of

³⁸² Ibid.
³⁸³ Lawrence, *Hold on to Your Dreams*, 157.
³⁸⁴ Ibid.
³⁸⁶ Lawrence, “Pluralism, Minor Deviations,” 6.
experimentalism,” the “multi-directional ‘genre,’” was precisely what the Kitchen “was created to support.”

Eastman’s near-lost compositions are some of the earliest examples of popular music becoming source material for new music composition at the Kitchen. His iconoclastic forays into popular and other “taboo” themes helped usher in the climate Lewis describes, and which came to dominate concerns for this community of composers.

**DANCE: Karole Armitage, Drastic Classism**

In her essay surveying dance at the Kitchen during its SoHo years, critic Sally Banes wrote that the period witnessed “significant shifts” as postmodern dance “changed from a purist, reductive, analytic style to a more theatrical, expressive, even flamboyant idiom,” a trend that mirrored similar shifts in performance and new music at this time. The unilateral trend could be seen as the effect of popular forms entering various vocabularies, and less reverence for academic or elitist tropes. Eric Bogosian served as dance program director at the Kitchen between 1977 and 1982, and his energy and enthusiasm significantly raised the profile and frequency of dance programming, making those years particularly relevant, according to Banes. She sees this “second generation of postmodern dancers” as exemplified by their proclivities toward “entertainment, appropriation, and pastiche,” and for having moved “serious avant-garde dance out of the museums and galleries,” which was associated with the previous generation surrounding the Judson Church, Trisha Brown, and Merce Cunningham, and “into the music club—that is out of the art world and into the popular music world.”

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387 Ibid.
389 Ibid.
That the music presented at the Kitchen was also changing, borrowing from punk and other forms of ‘avant-fringe’ popular music, allied these young choreographers with developments with both avant-garde and popular music. Like many young composers, they sought wider audiences for their work; turning to popular culture and collaborating with artists in other media were stylistic choices but were also, in part, ways to find broader appeal.

Among this group of choreographers championed by Bogosian, was Andy deGroat, Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane, Molissa Fenley, Johanna Boyce, and Karole Armitage, who Banes describes as sharing an “electrifying maximalism dealing in narrative and emotion.” Given the special relationship that dance and music intrinsically share, even when their content was detached from each other as it was in the hands of Cage and Cunningham, aesthetic discussions between the mediums has often been co-dependent. As composers absorbed popular music, so did their collaborations with choreographers. Rather than reiterate a case for louder, faster music, translating to faster, flamboyant dancing—which certainly was the case, as mentioned by Banes—I will look to Drastic Classicism collaboration between choreographer Karole Armitage and Rhys Chatham, to explore how popular music provided both artists a means to express and confront multiple and conflicting aspects of their medium, their skills and identities. Here, popular music, and particularly the radically deskilled form of punk, unexpectedly became a tool for Armitage and Chatham to redefine their relationship to their classically trained skill set, and the virtuosity they possessed, without denying it.

Having danced with Geneva’s Ballet du Grand Théâtre as a teenager, Armitage had a world-class education in ballet with an emphasis on Balanchine by the time she moved to New York and joined the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in 1975, where she remained until 1981. Her departure came soon after “she crashed onto the independent scene,” with Drastic

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390 Banes, “Choreographing Community,” 152.
**Classicism**, a dance she choreographed to a noise composition by Rhys Chatham. On December 13, 1979, Armitage had presented *Do We Could* at the Kitchen, a collaboration with visual artist Charles Atlas, then Cunningham’s in-house videographer, who designed costumes and lighting. The performance took place across six scenes, where the dancers encountered imagined obstacles as they alternated between slow motion and “valleys of rapidity,” frenzied passages where dancers moved in high-speed using every inch of the floor in “jerky steps and tight gestures,” inspiring the *New York Times* reviewer to note, “No one ever seemed to get anywhere. Yet everyone seemed eager to get ahead.” Each dancer had dipped their hands in vivid yellow or blue wet paint that popped out from the their business-like monochrome black or white dress. They splattered surfaces and left palm prints on the walls, pillars and themselves, emphasized by choreography that relied considerably on stiff flailing arms. Performed without music, video documentation shows the rapid stomping of the dancers across the color, the slamming doors, sudden deep breaths, creating an audible frenzied rhythm that aligns with the staccato energy of punk. [AV 27]

Chatham and Armitage first collaborated on a piece titled *Vertige*, where they shared the stage at Tier 3 nightclub in September of 1980 in something of a duet—Chatham on solo guitar stood side-by-side with Armitage who made corresponding movements. [Figure 3.8] This construct of the musician and dancer sharing the same stage is taken to the extreme in Chatham and Armitage’s next collaboration, *Drastic Classicism*, which debuted at the Dance Theater Workshop in February of 1981, and subsequently toured Europe and the US. [Figure 3.9] Chatham led an ensemble of six musicians that included No Wave and Kitchen regulars,

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guitarists Ned Sublette, Nina Canal, and Scott Johnson, plus Michael Brown on bass, and David Linton on drums. The musicians were spread out across the stage and the company of dancers frantically moved around them, interacting with them as they passed by. “Since the way Karole and I planned it was as equal collaborators,” Chatham said, “Karole had the musicians right on stage with the dancers. Karole even had her dancers manhandle (or womanhandle, as the case may be) us, kicking and jumping on us from time to time. And, of course, we musicians were dancing too, in our own way, each according to his or her ability.”

The dancers moved in an aggressive fashion that drew equally from Armitage’s two worlds: Cunningham’s modern dance, and ballet, including on pointe. The effect equalized the focus and importance of the musicians and dancers as both physical performers, each contributing to a level of movement on stage. Like Cage’s branding of Branca as a “totalitarian” of sound-space, and Birnbaum’s looping climaxes, Armitage and Chatham’s fast, extreme movement of bodies and sound aimed to max-out every cubic foot of air on stage.

Chatham and Armitage were united by the shared sense of liberation they felt from punk and took its impulse as a way to reinterpret their respective fields. "I loved punk when it began," Armitage recalled. "It was such a surprise. I loved what the people looked like. I loved the sound of the music and the negative impulse it offered." The attitude offered an alternative to what she perceived to be an “uptight” and “puritanical” dance world (“no emotion, no psychology, no virtuosity, no story, no drama, no sex. It was all about being as neutral and purely formal as possible”). Just as Chatham was inspired by the minimal yet effective set up of the Ramones,

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395 Friedlander, “An Extremely Drastic.”
Armitage was impressed with punk’s ability to “take three chords and a weird haircut,” as all that was required to make a compelling statement, one that “didn’t need a lot of stuff,” just “good ideas.” Despite relying on some of the genre’s stylistic clichés—dancers wore “black leather pointe shoes and ripped up warmers”—Armitage states that punk did not inform her on an aesthetic level. Rather, it manifested as a sensibility or attitude, saying she saw “raw, pop influences—whether punk of other kinds of street-culture influences—more as atmosphere.”

Her work did not recreate “street moves or vocabularies or their ethos,” she added, “it’s a kind of energy in the work rather than a vocabulary.” This specific attitude was one Armitage defined as set against consumer culture, rebelling against the “glossiness” and “money-making machine” that over-took rock and roll, which had been a “raw, and authentic… voice of individuals.”

Punk wasn’t the creation of a new form, rather it was a remodeling of an existing form: basic, classic rock and roll. Armitage and Chatham saw punk as an impetus to remake what they both shared and couldn’t deny: classically trained, virtuosic skill.

Chatham wanted one thing to be completely apparent within his wall-of-noise: that it was composed by a harpsicord tuner. Writing in the press release for the concert performance of the music created for Drastic Classicism, held at the Kitchen on April 17, 1981, [Video documentation: AV 28], Chatham writes,

I wanted to compose a piece which would make use of what I learned from working with electronic music over the past four years. When I first started this work, I worried over whether it was classical music or rock. It took me two years to figure out that it didn’t matter. I then could simply play on stage, whether in a club or art space, and have it be perfectly clear that this music was produced by someone who was obviously a classically-trained composer, obviously someone


397 Ibid.


399 Friedlander, “An Extremely Drastic.”
with experience in rock clubs, and obviously a harpsichord tuner, combining all the elements… I wanted to make music which would integrate the various facets of my training with the life around me, the violent energy of the clubs in NYC between 1977-1980.400

Chatham’s desire to embody both popular and classical music at once was realized by patterning different passages for the individual musicians around different dissonant tunings, a technique rooted in the classical tradition but realized with electric guitars, rapid pace, and high volume. Similarly, Armitage said she added “different rhythmic inflections and shapes,” but the dance was “founded on a pure base of classicism.” She recalled, "I was interested in going back and forth from one to the other, and in formal ideas mixed with the excitement of rock music and its forward motion and energy, which came from popular culture and had some drama for me. I didn't want to do abstract pieces."401 While many relatively unskilled people turned to punk and popular music because of its denial of virtuosity, granting the untrained the permission to be heard and valued outside of established values, Armitage and Chatham sought to liberate classical technique from classical style. For Armitage, that technique is arguably part of who she is—her muscles and posture were physically shaped by and ingrained with the hallmarks of the classicized European tradition of ballet from years of training. The popular music context offered both Armitage and Chatham a way to fully represent their identities as artists, shaped over years of different phases of practice, with various traditions and interests, whatever that may be, and make a work that funnels together these diverse aspects of their total personality.

To reclaim and remodel their classical skill, Armitage and Chatham took virtuosity to the extreme. Chatham’s noise wasn’t the result of chaos, rather it was meticulously formulated with passages packed so densely with notes that they became an abstract blur. Armitage’s dancers,

401 Dunning, “From Karole Armitage.”
with hyper-extended legs, enacted “a Cunningham style dance,” according to the *New York Times* review, “flung around with abandon and taken to a defiant exciting extreme.”402 Armitage used the piece to rewrite, she says, “how a woman in pointe shoes is supposed to behave.”403 Reflecting back on *Drastic Classicism* in 2004, the *New Yorker* wrote, “This was a time when feminists were saying that classical ballet, by its very nature, demeaned women. The woman was held, she was lifted; ergo, she was a plaything. Armitage showed the opposite.”404 The context of popular music allowed Armitage to not only wrestle ballet technique from its classical context in *Drastic Classicism*, but also from its patriarchal past.

**PERFORMACE:** Laurie Anderson, *United States, Part II*

Performance art, which had been brewing as an art form since the earliest days of rock and roll, and solidified during the seventies, was arguably the category most impacted by popular music at the Kitchen. Robert Longo’s performances *Surrender* (May 19, 1979), and *Sound Distance of a Good Man* (May 6-8, 1982) both incorporate rock bands into intermedia tableaux that include live performers as part of a larger collage of images. Christian Marclay drew upon the Kitchen’s conversation with popular music to develop his signature approach to the record and turntable as an artistic material. He staged *Disc Compositions* there on January 16, 1982, celebrated the history of the record player alongside hip-hop DJs at the event *His Master’s Voice* on November 24 and 25, 1982. However, Laurie Anderson stands out as the performance artist who emerged from this period and most significantly reflects the Kitchen’s popular music impulse. Due to Anderson’s dual presence in both art and mass culture extensive literature exists

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403 Ligeti, “Karole Armitage."
on her performance *United States, Part I and Part II*, staged by the Kitchen. On October 26 and 27, 1980, the Kitchen premiered a production of Laurie Anderson’s *United States, Part II* at the East Village’s Orpheum Theater. One year later, on October 17, 1981, the show’s centerpiece song “O Superman,” would reach number 2 on the UK pop charts. An iconic work of the Kitchen’s SoHo years, and due to both the hit single, and internationally touring stage show, it fully crossed over from the art world to mainstream popular culture. This success took the artist, who professed no interest in being part of the commercial music industry, entirely by surprise. Envisioned by Anderson as a “talking opera,” stemmed from her conceptual and multi-media performance art practice, it was not a straightforward appropriation of a rock band, as many other artists’ projects were. While she was a casual participant in the artists’ band phenomena happening at the Kitchen and its surrounding community, Anderson would almost certainly have remained an avant-garde figure on par with fellow talk-opera producer Robert Ashley, a multidiscipline conceptual artists like Vito Acconci, remained an in-joke like Paul McMahon, or obscured like pop recordings by Jill Kroesen or Julia Heyward, had it not been for the element in her work that resonated with the popular music audience. *United States* asserts that not only did popular music permeate all aspects of the Kitchen’s output, but that Anderson’s performance

405 Bob George, a visual artist with a special interest in record collecting, met Anderson while they both were working as educators at the Whitney Museum of American Art. George included Anderson on a compilation record he produced with engineer Bill Bielecki featuring artists’ audio-works called Airwaves, released in 1977, on his small label One Ten Records. After Anderson’s Orpheum performance, George convinced her to release “O Superman” on his label. George, who in December 1980, released Volume, an exhaustive list of punk and new wave bands, labels, distributors, shops, fanzines, and resources for musicians, which caught the attention of influential BBC deejay John Peel, who requested a “report from the New York scene,” and invited George on his show. There he played “O Superman,” leading to its meteoric rise on the UK charts. Source: Simpson, Dave. “How We Made Laurie Anderson’s O Superman,” *The Guardian*, April 19, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/apr/19/how-we-made-laurie-anderson-o-superman.


art—widely hailed as the ultimate exercise in hybridization that transcends traditional media, incorporating all of the Kitchen’s signature categories into one—is the alternative space’s most enduring work. It is the work that shattered the SoHo loft’s contextual recipe. Whereas part I of United States, then called Americans on the Move, was performed at the Kitchen on April 13 and 14, 1979, Part II was staged in a fully equipped theater, the Orpheum. In that window of time, Anderson’s unexpected hit song led her to sign an eight-record deal with Warner Bros, and as she effectively walked away from the commercial-resistant avant-garde. This “cross-over” to a higher-profile context triggered a change at the Kitchen. If members of its community were so viable in the market as Anderson proved to be, they needed to up the ante on production values, and the shoddy loft space of the Kitchen no longer could do. In a few short years, the Kitchen would feel the pressure to transition to a new space with better facilities to serve the new visibility achieved by their milieu. In 1985, the Kitchen closed the loft space at 59 Wooster, and moved to a window-less building that was built as an ice storage warehouse in the 1880s and functioned as a black-box theatrical space in Chelsea. In the move the Kitchen had effectively shed the white cube-half of its loft-context and fully entered the black box context which it inhabits to this day. 408

United States was the inevitable endgame of the Kitchen experiment—a space hovering between the white cube and black box as a catch-all context for various media. The first impulse is to define that experiment as one that asks “What will happen when video, music, dance, and performance share a venue, rub elbows, and their communities cross-pollinate?” The first

408 The second-floor spaces at the 19th Street location was retrofitted into a white cube gallery in 2005, by inserting white walls within the room “re-energizing The Kitchen's legacy in the visual arts,” per current director Tim Griffin, who sees the “gallery set within a performance space” ironically appearing as a “literalization of our contemporary moment, with, with the black box effectively crowning the gallery walls.” (Tim Griffin, “Program Notes,” The Kitchen Blog, December 27, 2013 https://thekitchen.org/blog/16.)
impulse is to answer by offering Anderson’s *United States* as the ultimate realization of that potential hybrid work. Yet *United States* does not tick all of the Kitchen’s boxes: it does not include video art, it does not include choreographed dance, and it does not overtly rely on Glass or Reich-derived Minimalist music.\(^{409}\) Rather the Kitchen experiment is perhaps more aptly described in asking “What happens when an avant-garde confronts popular forms?” and “What happens when an avant-garde, who sought an alternative context for their work to be seen, must confront a nightly audience, and satisfy them to engender further funding and opportunities?” The following paragraphs consider specific aspects of the content and context of Anderson’s *United States, Part II* and its aftermath to identify the qualities absorbed from popular music. It is a list of qualities that tick a different set of boxes, ones that better describe what was swirling in the Kitchen’s experiment—the inclusion of an accessible vernacular language, and the political gesture against the art market, and personality-as-product.

After being turned on to Conceptual Art by her Barnard art history professor Barbara Novak, Brian O’Doherty’s wife, she began her creating sculptural work that dealt directly with the violin, which she played seriously in her youth, modified with electronic playback devices.\(^{410}\) Anderson professes to never having had a “rock moment” in her youth, where she listened to and developed a nostalgia for popular music.\(^{411}\) However, she did participate in artists’ bands, including a short-lived group called Fast Food Band that included Arthur Russell and Peter Gordon in 1975.\(^{412}\) Building off performance work at Artists Space, the Kitchen, and an

\(^{409}\) Anderson’s musical accompaniment involved a reformation of Peter Gordon’s Love of Life Orchestra, a pan-genre project that incorporated classical and new music styles with jazz, rock, and funk. Anderson performed violin with the Peter Gordon’s early version of the Love of Life Orchestra at the Kitchen in 1975. Program is available at [http://archive.thekitchen.org/?p=1083](http://archive.thekitchen.org/?p=1083).


\(^{411}\) Ibid 375.

\(^{412}\) Roselee Goldberg’s monograph outlines Anderson’s introduction to music was through her rigorous childhood education in classical violin, which became the bases for her early sculptural modifications of the instrument.
installation of a jukebox that played over twenty “songs,” both musical and talk-based, at Holly Solomon Gallery, Anderson had developed the foundations of her signature style by time she premiered *Americans on the Move*, which centered on the theme of transportation as a hallmark of the American experience. [Figure 3.10] Critic Mel Gordon recorded descriptions of each song in *The Drama Review*, and texts from the performance were reproduced in *October* magazine. It caught the attention of critic Craig Owens who likened their fable-like stories with reflexive palindrome-like literary devices as indicators of an “allegorical impulse” in postmodern art. Owens’ definition of allegory as occurring “whenever one text is doubled by another,” or more explicitly when “one text is *read through* another,” is an apt description of the way artists were performing the image of a rock band as an artistic and political gesture. For Anderson, the allegorical quality of her performance is multi-fold, correlating to many of Owens’ signposts—“appropriation, site specificity, impermanence, accumulation, discursivity, hybridization”—through its “narratives of losing one’s way in labyrinths of signs,” told through fragmentary lines.

Goldberg points to early works that also manipulated playback devices like audio tape and turntables by attaching them to the violin, or to swinging doors, rocking chairs, and other furniture, turning them into musical devices. Additionally, in April of 1974, Edit deAk included Anderson in one of the performance art series Person A at Artists Space, where she debuted her slide-show and storytelling performance style, with altered-amplified vocals, during which she wore ice skates frozen into ice blocks, and played a violin filled with water. Goldberg also makes mention of two “art bands” Anderson joined: Fast Food Band, which included Arthur Russell, Peter Gordon, Scott Johnson, and Jack Majewski, active in 1975; and Mud Club regulars, Blue Horn File, a trio started in 1979 with Peter Gordon, and David van Tieghem, which Anderson explains were “at the intersection of pop and classical avant-garde,” and included toys instruments, like Y Pants, as well as violin, sax, keys, and percussion. Anderson also performed alongside Russell in Peter Gordon’s pre-Love of Life Orchestra ensemble at the Kitchen on February 4, 1976. During this period Anderson made records, first for a jukebox installation at Holly Solomon Gallery in 1977 which held 24 individual 7-inch records, each featuring songs she wrote about her friends, including one for the gun-wielding Chris Burden called “It’s Not the Bullet that Kills You, It’s the Hole.” Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson*. New York: Abrams, 2000, 70.

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of text conflated with photomontage slide-shows of hierographic images, and the deployment of irony.415

Once outmoded within art history dialogues, allegorical representation was used in the first half of the nineteenth century as a double-acting form of communication—to aid in the interpretation of moral concepts. Owens argues “the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter. And in his hands the image becomes something other.”416 At first, it would appear that the allegorist obscures easy interpretation by adding a double-meaning to his image. However, when the artist appropriates specifically from popular culture, as the postmodernists do, it has the opposite effect of turning the most accessible images of society into carriers of art’s opaque ideas. In this sense, one can see Owens’ allegorical impulse align with the search for a popular vernacular—one evident in efforts by Russell, Richman, Birnbaum, Branca, Eastman, Anderson, and so forth, who use popular music as a language that speaks to people beyond the art world. Beyond words, Anderson’s texts made repeated reference to signs, using stage lighting to cast cryptic shadow-puppet hand gestures reminiscent of American sign language against the backdrop, as if she is breaking down communication to something more elemental than her short syllables. [Figure 3.11] A video of “O Superman (For Massenet),” produced with Warner Brothers after the single’s success, adapted these lighting dynamics to bold effect. [Figure 3.12; AV 29] From buzzwords, to baby talk and sign language, the universal vernacular is integral to the artist’s impulse to engage with popular music. Furthermore, as Owens argues, allegory cannot be defined by its ability to interpret alone, it must be “metatextual.” Where the critique of the image

415 For a detailed description of Anderson’s United States series, see Goldberg, Laurie Anderson, 86-109.
reflects back on itself—rock music, television, and other media reworked in the artists’ hands are not merely forms of mass communication used to spread their word, they are used specifically to peel back the curtain from mass culture and expose the systems of control and oppression on which they operate. In this sense, United States, Part II, to which Anderson ascribed the theme of “Politics” and staged during the Reagan-Carter presidential campaign, a rock band seemed the necessary fit.

Allegory embodies a double meaning, communicating an image and simultaneously the concept it serves to represent. It is a shorthand, or a minimization of language, which reflects the overtly simplistic phrases Anderson uses in her performances. Her command of short, loaded and legible phrases that used familiar media buzzwords and delivered in simulated television newscaster speak, is perhaps more responsible than any other element in her work for its broad appeal—people understood it and got the reference at the same time. In conversation with Live magazine, John Howell asks Anderson about the infantile quality of her phrases, saying “How did the idea of ‘baby’ affect your language?” To which she responded, “I tried to keep words to one or two syllables… I wanted to pair that sense of a digital beat to appropriate language: nothing too flowery. Hence the words tended to be short. The phrasing tended to be slogans or repetitive progressions, like ‘when love is gone there's always justice, when justice is gone there's always force.’”

United States is filled with idioms culled from Americana and short parable-like stories that could be told around a campfire to a child. Furthermore, the music-enhanced storytelling, which Anderson approached from performance art and classical

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environment of the Kitchen, walked her inadvertently into something of an American folk tradition. She recalls this phenomenon with the following story:

The first time I realized I could work outside of the avant-garde circuit was 1978. I was scheduled to do a performance in Houston and since the museum wasn’t really set up for this sort of thing—no stage, no chairs, no sound system—the performance was booked into a local country-and-western bar. The advertisements suggested some kind of country fiddling, so a lot of regulars came. They arrived early and sat along the bar, so when the art crowd showed up—dressed in black and fashionably late—there was nowhere to sit. It was a strange looking crowd. About halfway through the concert, I realized that the regulars were really getting it. What I was doing—telling stories and playing the violin—didn’t seem bizarre to them. The stories were a little weird but so were Texan stories. I remember I felt a great relief. The art world was after all quite tiny and I’d been doing concerts for the same hundred people. This was a whole new world.\^418

The assertion of personal narrative lyrics to the forefront of the work unrooted from a purely art context as Anderson found her work naturally resonating with folk and singer-songwriter traditions. The emergent trend of monologist performance art which sought immediacy with the audience dovetailed with existing forms of popular music, where musicalized storytelling was inherent.

Allegory is also something of a trick—it’s A, but surprise! It’s also B—not unlike a joke, humor and novelty have something to do with Anderson’s engagement in popular culture. When she unexpectedly switches from the refrain of “O Superman,” sung in a voice digitally fractured into a harmony of registers by a vocoder, both male and female in pitch, in to a high-tone woman’s voice, mimicking an answering machine message (“Hello, I’m not home right now / But if you want to leave a message / Just start talking at the sound of the tone”), it has the effect of startling and charming the audience. Kathryn Van Spanckeren links Anderson’s humor to

feminist strategies in her essay, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Apocalypse: Laurie Anderson and Humor in Women’s Performance Art,” and argues that Anderson used humor to not only embody but transcend her femaleness.\textsuperscript{419} Much like many of the artists’ bands like Paul McMahon, Y Pants and DISBAND, her humor was employed to blast off the seriousness and pretention that rules the art world. The performance’s tone oscillates between bouncy and upbeat, mimicking commercial music, advertising, and television, and a cold severity and ominous sense of fear—a dynamic through which the audience is entertained and then made aware of implications of their state of entertainment. When asked what most surprised her about audience reactions to the Orpheum performance, Anderson replied, “I was surprised nobody asked why I was in drag, a reaction I got when I first started using those clothes with those male voice filters.”\textsuperscript{420} Anderson’s gender switching within the performance is another doubling for reflexive critique, a woman speaking through the voice and image of a man. Her androgyny stripped the rock star of its sexuality. Palpable through all the voices and characters is Anderson’s own multiplicitous but distinct personality—the central product of her art. As discussed in relation to the shift to composer-performer initiated by David Tudor and the nature of electronic instruments, the rock performer doesn’t enact another’s script, rather she stands in front of the audience as a personality, a quasi-self. Thus, in answering what exactly Anderson absorbed from popular music, we can answer that the pop-factor hovers among the allegorical devices of a self-reflexive and simplified vernacular, which includes humor and novelty, communicated through musicalized language with the immediacy of raw personality.

\textsuperscript{419} Van Spanckeren, “A Funny Thing Happened,” 94-104.
\textsuperscript{420} Howell, “Interview with Laurie Anderson,” 8.
The artists like Anderson who achieved traction in both the art and popular music worlds are asserted here as unified by their common enemies—the commodity culture and mass conformity. Anderson seems to break this mold by effectively signing a contract with those very corporate enemies, Warner Brothers. However, the perception of the art market as a corrupt system was just as much responsible for inspiring the alternative spaces movement, as anti-corporate sentiment. Whereas artists in the early 1970s saw their work resold with astronomical mark-ups in the burgeoning auction scene, lining the collectors’ pockets and not theirs, the music industry operated on a licensing system where artists received royalties. Anderson said she was never pressured by Warner Bros. to alter content, saying, “it’s wonderful. It’s much freer than the art world, and I like the economics better. A lot of artists are in a real bind because they tend to be politically somewhat left, while collectors tend to be politically somewhat right. It’s a conflict for them to deal with that.”

In 1990, former Kitchen performance curator Roselee Goldberg was working at the Museum of Modern Art when they staged the exhibition *High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*, discussed in the introduction. She was tasked with programming a performance series as a companion program to the exhibition and invited Kitchen regulars Anderson, Eric Bogosian, Brian Eno, Spalding Gray, and others to participate. Unlike the exhibition curators, Goldberg’s performance series did not position popular culture in relationship to the museum’s modernist collection, rather she presented a group of artists as “explorers” still searching out a new terrain. In a text included with the program brochure, Anderson recounts her perspective on the flaws of art world economics, adding that “Eventually the question comes up for every artist: Why am I really bothering to make art? And exactly who am I talking to?... One of my greatest hopes was that American artists could actually find ways to

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422 Goldberg, *High & Low*. 
finally enter their own culture.”423 In her introduction, Goldberg writes, “The history of artists’ performance in the twentieth century is also the history of this century’s art and popular culture,” pointing particularly to the late-seventies as a time that “witnessed the coming to town of the first fully fledged media generation.” She continues:

Nurtured on twenty-four-hour television and fast food, picture magazines, and B movies, their graduation coincided with rock and roll’s twenty-fifth anniversary, and with its ironic reincarnation, punk.

The media [was] catching up with what the artists had known all along… David Byrne and Brian Eno had long since made successful crossovers from the art world/new music to rock and roll and back again… While success in mass culture catapulted them out of the art world, it dropped them into an entirely separate state, belonging to neither. At first the question seemed to be how to make the crossover without losing integrity and the protection of the art world to explore now aesthetic forms. But soon it became obvious they were creating a new language, a new discipline, for this no-man’s land. For while its boundaries are marked by “high art” and “popular culture,” its geography is still being determined by these explorers.424

Anderson’s *United States*, was a key instigator in opening up space for artistic activity in a terrain that challenged the notions of “high culture” upheld by the institutions and demonstrated the crosstalk between art and popular music in a way that the shift could not be denied. Writing in the program notes from 1990, Anderson reflects against the political climate of a nation coming more and more conservative under back-to-back republican administrations of Reagan and Bush, and writes, “For me, at this time, art must address the issues—sensually, emotionally, vividly, spiritually. This means being involved with the aspirations, lies, and dreams of what is so snobbishly called low culture.” This posits a political position for art, one that must be “involved” and question norms—a state of questioning defined and driven by experimentation,

423 Ibid.
424 Ibid.
the process undertaken by the explorer in a new terrain that sits in the gap between popular culture and art.

CONCLUSION

I have endeavored to isolate and consider instances of popular music as it manifested against the backdrop of the Kitchen’s many transformations—from the new technology laboratory and counter-culture hang-out seen at the Mercer Arts Center to the alternative art space in an industrial loft where the avant-garde shared their work with each other. It then grew an audience, and artists productions grew to match. With the eye of the press shifted downtown, art stars and pop stars were made and the difference between them was blurred, as the Kitchen emerged at the city’s premier institution for experimental art. They outgrew the Kitchen’s facilities and capacity, just as gentrification began to stranglehold the once-desolate “light manufacturing” district of SoHo they inhabited fifteen years earlier.

The Kitchen consistently strived to expand the notion of experimentalism to new corners—one of which was television. Intrinsically interlocked with video and audio, the nature of television as a medium and within society was a central concern at the Kitchen, which hosted Television/Society/Art: A Symposium from October 24 to 25, 1980. A few years prior, the Kitchen started pursuing grants to fund productions for public television, notably for Robert Ashley’s Perfect Lives starting in 1978. Popular music similarly shares a strong bond with television as a mass cultural medium—a relationship that would explode with the birth of MTV in 1981. The Kitchen understood this marriage and routinely screened tapes of rock bands playing in area clubs, like at the June 1979 event Bands on the Inner Tube. This relationship between the avant-garde, television, and popular music is ripe for further study. Thus, it is
appropriate that the Kitchen marked the end of its time at 59 Wooster in a made-for-TV special. The Kitchen produced an hour-long program that aired the following year in 1986 on PBS, called *Two Moon July*. It included the Kitchen’s biggest-names including Laurie Anderson, David Byrne, Bill T. Jones, Robert Longo, and over twenty others spanning all of its supported disciplines, punctured by popular music moments from Arto Lindsay, John Lurie, and Brian Eno. [Figure 4.1] The television show served as a eulogy to the SoHo moment.

In this study, some forms of popular music have been shown to exist in the gap between popular culture and art. The output from that no-man’s land has shown several tendencies: trash aesthetics, personality-as-product, deliberate amateurism, quotidian vernaculars, the sustained climax, humorous rebellion, the ability to appropriate performance as well as images, and many others. At the Kitchen, artists declared popular music an alternative space for art. Artists’ bands caused art to have a personality crisis. In 1990, Sonic Youth, the group that absorbed the most from art’s affair with popular music and brought forth that sensibility for the next generation, released a limited-edition record distributed by *Sassy* magazine of a cover version of the New York Doll’s “Personality Crisis.” It is a recording that sums up many of the tendencies that emerged in the course of this study in one fell-swoop—a witty remake of the Doll’s remade pop. Noisy abstractions interrupt Kim Gordon’s deadpan vocals which add a subversive edge to an everyday pop song. [AV 31] Circulated like a periodical, the single was deliberately not marketed for the mainstream.

Institutions interested in preserving and representing the history of art must rise to the challenge of addressing this common impulse that scattershot artistic activity into everyday life. The history outlined in this study was indeed one of everyday life for those who lived it. Connections between musicians and artists is not a new discovery for those who participated in
performances, went to the shows, saw the advertisements and reviews in the Village Voice, and experienced first-hand the changing cultural forces that shaped these networks in the political moment. Yet academies and institutions fail to incorporate historical narratives that represent this reality—the actually existing interconnections between a network of artists. What I have uncovered is not a new history, but rather the need for a better language to express what bonded the artists profiled here—terms that reach beyond minimalism, pluralism, post-modernism, and punk, and instead assert a common sense of experimentation that drew artistic activity into new terrains. It is activity defined by the shared search for an alternative, an effort to resist the mainstream, to shift the context for art, and to create space where difference can be seen, all as part of an experiment against greater society.
V. Bibliography

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VI. Illustrations

Figure 1.2  Billy Name, *The Velvet Underground and Nico at The Dom*, 1966, gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 in., The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; Museum Purchase, © Billy Name Linich. Source: blog.warhol.org.

Figure 1.6  Poster for Jackie Curtis' "Vain Victory," produced at La MaMa in 1971. Source: La MaMa online archive, accessed March 1, 2018 at http://catalog.lamama.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/8223.
Figure 1.7  Stills from Steina and Woody Vasulka’s video documentation showing Eric Emerson performing in Jackie Curtis’ *Vain Victory* at La MaMa in 1971. Accessed March 1, 2018 at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3RBlwumDK8g.
Figure 1.9  Second floor plan of the Mercer Arts Center, showing the Kitchen’s proximity to the site’s collection of theaters, ballrooms, and cabarets. Plan appears in a promotional brochure, accessed at the Vasulka Archive, vasulka.org, accessed March 1, 2018 at http://www.vasulka.org/archive/Kitchen/KBR/KBR1.pdf.
Figure 1.12-13 The New York Dolls on stage at Mercer Arts Center, NYC. December 31, 1972. Photo: Bob Gruen. © Bob Gruen
Source: http://www.bobgruen.com/new-york-dolls/
Figure 2.1  Robert Stearns at Paula Cooper Gallery, 100 Prince Street, New York.
Figure 2.2  Advertisement for a 1972 performance by Pandit Pran Nath, La Monte Young, and Marian Zazeela at Paula Cooper Gallery, 100 Prince Street, New York. Source: https://50years-paulacoopergallery.com.

Figure 2.3  Paula Cooper Gallery announcement, 1972, for Mabou Mines with Lee Breuer, Philip Glass, and Jene Highstein. Source: https://50years-paulacoopergallery.com.
Figure 2.5  Promotional flyer for Suicide, OK Harris Gallery. November 20, 1970.  
Source: http://98bowery.com/punk-years/punk-art-catalogue-section-four.php

Figure 2.7  Cover of Theoretical Girls. Self-Titled. Theoretical Records. 1978. Source: disogs.org

Figure 2.8  Promotional flyer for Theoretical Girls. The Kitchen, May 21, 1978. Source: http://acuterecords.com/blog/?page_id=230.
Figure 2.9 Theoretical Girls. The Kitchen, May 21, 1978. Photo: Robert Sistema. Pictured: Jeff Lohn, Margaret De Wys, Nina Canal, Wharton Tiers (obscured), and Danielle Tilenick Source: http://www.kerryschuss.com/nwsw10.html
Figure 2.10  Various artists. *No New York*. 1982. Producer: Brian Eno. Antilles Records. Source: discogs.com
Figure 2.11  The Raincoats. The Kitchen. December 12, 1982. Photo: Paula Court. Source: archive.thekitchen.org

Figure 2.12  The Raincoats. *The Kitchen Tapes*. 1982. ROIR Records. Source: discogs.com
Figure 2.14-16 Ericka Beckman, Stills from *135 Grand Street 1979*, 1979, 8mm, color, sound. Source: http://www.erickabeckman.com.

Figure 2.19 Promotional poster for *Dubbed in Glamour*, The Kitchen, November 21-23, 1980. Source: archive.thekitchen.org.
Figure 2.20 Promotional poster for Aluminum Nights: The Kitchen’s 10th Anniversary Party and Benefit, Bond’s, June 14-15, 1981. Design: Robert Longo. Source: archive.thekitchen.org.
Figure 2.21 Photo of audience at *Aluminum Nights*: The Kitchen’s 10th Anniversary Party and Benefit, Bond’s, June 14-15, 1981. Photo: Paula Court. Source: archive.thekitchen.org.
Figure 2.22  Robert Longo. Poster for *Aluminum Nights*: The Kitchen’s 10th Anniversary Party and Benefit, Bond’s, June 14-15, 1981. Source: archive.thekitchen.org.
Figure 2.23  Robert Longo. Untitled, From the series "Men in the Cities," 1980. Charcoal and graphite on paper. Source: www.robertlongo.com
Figure 3.1  Dara Birnbaum. Promotional poster for *Pop Pop Video*. The Kitchen, March 1-29, 1980. Source: archive.thekitchen.org
Figure 3.2  Dara Birnbaum, Stills from *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman/Special Effects*. 1978. Video, 7 mins, color, sound. Source: eai.org.
Figure 3.3  Dara Birnbaum, Still from *Pop Pop Video: General Hospital/Olympic Women Speed Skating*. 1980. Video, 6 mins, color, sound. Source: eai.org.

Figure 3.5  Dara Birnbaum, Still from *Pop Pop Video: Kojak/Wang*. 1980, Video. 6 min, color, sound. Source: eai.org.
Figure 3.6  Rhys Chatham, *Guitar Trio*, New Music New York
Figure 3.7  
S.E.M. Ensemble: Julius Eastman, Roberto Laneri, Jan Williams, and Petr Kotk. Photo by Jim Tuttle. Source: https://www.thatwhichisfundamental.com
Figure 3.10  Anderson, Laurie. *Americans on the Move.*

Figure 4.1  Stills from Two Moon July. 1985. Video, 53 mins, color, sound. Ed Bowes, director. Source: http://www.ubu.com/film/kitchen.html
APPENDIX A – Audio/Visual Supplementary Information

AV 1 The Velvet Underground, “Heroin,” https://youtu.be/6xct9mSbYE
AV 3 The New York Dolls, “Personality Crisis,” https://youtu.be/E1i4A5yazr4
AV 8 The Talking Heads at the Kitchen, April 1976, https://youtu.be/ewY34GqbRkA
AV 15 Ericka Beckman, “We Imitate; We Beak Up,” http://www.erickabeckman.com/we-imitate-we-break-up/


AV 27 Karole Armitage, *Do We Could*, https://player.vimeo.com/video/35668583


AV 29 Laurie Anderson, “O Superman (For Massenet),” https://youtu.be/Vkfpi2H8tOE


AV 31 Sonic Youth, “Personality Crisis,” https://youtu.be/r4y_v6mX1cg