

Pluralism, Minor Deviations, and Radical Change

The Challenge to Experimental Music in Downtown New York, 1971–85

Tim Lawrence

Beginning in 1970 and continuing through the early 1980s, New York City hosted a series of transformative developments in music culture that have few historical parallels, and also continue to resonate to this day.¹ Within dance music, DJing and what became known as disco began to germinate in the city's downtown lofts and dilapidated discotheques at the very start of the period. A short while later Bronx-based disc jockeys (DJs) and dancers came together to forge the early contours of hip-hop. Also dating back to the early 1970s, punk, new wave, and eventually no wave germinated in spots such as Max's Kansas City, the Mercer Street Arts Center, CBGB, the Mudd Club, Danceteria, and Tier 3. Coinciding with these developments, other musicians took to gathering in nearby loft spaces to explore the outer reaches of jazz, or what became known, somewhat reductively, as "loft jazz," and across the same period Puerto Rican musicians took Cuban-inspired salsa music forward in the Nuyorican Poets' Café and the New Rican Village.² Meanwhile, in a range of neighboring buildings, a group of young composer-instrumentalists engaged with the legacy of the first generation of experimental composers, as well as the more recent work of the so-called minimalist composers, to generate what came to be known as "new music." Including Glenn Branca, Rhys Chatham, Julius Eastman, Peter Gordon, Jill Kroesen, George Lewis, Garrett List, Arthur Russell, Ned Sublette, David Van Tieghem, and Peter Zummo among its number, this new generation engaged with the music that was unfolding around them, and through their embrace of popular forms stretched experimentalism and composition to the breaking point.

The aesthetic and canonical scope of experimental composition received its most

influential outline around the time this new group of composers materialized into an embryonic network, when Michael Nyman published *Experimental Music and Beyond* in 1974. Distinguishing experimental music from the avant-garde tradition, Nyman noted that in contrast to the work of serialists Boulez and Stockhausen, composers such as John Cage, Morton Feldman, and Christian Wolff questioned the traditional unities of composing, performing, and listening. In particular Cage, Feldman, and Wolff became interested in the notation of sound-generating ideas rather than exactly repeatable performances and placed a newfound emphasis on chance and indeterminacy; their concern was the uniqueness of the moment, not of a scored idea, and they accordingly sought to create a role for the composer that specified the uniqueness of the realization of their works. This approach contrasted not only with the objectives of avant-garde composers, who sought to freeze the moment of uniqueness, but also with those of the “minimal” composers with whom Nyman concluded his overview (namely, La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass).³

Nyman was hardly in a position to comment on the contribution of the new generation of composers, because their work had only just begun. However, although other writers have enjoyed more opportunities to write about this group, its contribution remains largely uncharted.⁴ The impression is created that experimental composition stopped with the game-changing interventions of Young, Riley, Reich, and Glass, so Wim Mertens and Keith Potter have published books dedicated to that group, while in *The Rest Is Noise* Alex Ross dedicates his penultimate chapter to the minimalists before developing a survey of what has happened since—including but a fleeting reference to the “postminimalists,” who, he writes, have “taken cues variously from funk, punk, heavy metal, electronic and DJ music, and hip-hop.”⁵

Aside from the imprecision of the “postminimalist” category, which could equally include the more elaborate compositions of Glass (*Einstein on the Beach*), Reich (*Music for 18 Musicians*), and Riley (*Shri Camel*), it has left the post-Cagean experimental canon looking distinctly male, white, and heterosexual, as well as notably curtailed in terms of its encounters with musical forms that are not grounded in composition.⁶ If both of these outcomes need to be challenged on cultural and aesthetic grounds, so, too, does the elision of what might be the least articulated but most profound contribution of the

postminimalists, who refused to categorize the results of their work, and, as will be argued, operated not just as pluralists but as **radical** pluralists. Their openness to a wide range of music styles and combinations, and, more important, to the principle that music should not be pursued solely through hermetic boundaries that become aligned with institutional and commercial interests, stands as a usable past that informs not only a wide range of musicians but also the outlook of magazines such as the **Wire**, which refrains from using the word **experimental** in its “Adventures in Modern Music” motto and has championed the free-will wanderings of Russell and like-minded musicians.

Gravitating to performance spaces such as the Kitchen and the Experimental Intermedia Foundation, along with the Artist’s Space, 10 Beach Street, 98 Greene Street, the Clocktower on Broadway, and 112 Greene Street during the first half of the 1970s, the radical pluralist composers hailed from a range of relatively conventional music schools. Chatham studied serial music at school, joined Morton Subotnick’s Composer’s Workshop at New York University, and then became the founding music director of the Kitchen, an experimental space located in SoHo, where he created the music program and worked as its inaugural director between 1971 and 1973. Russell studied composition at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and classical Indian music at the Ali Akbar College of Music before enrolling at the Manhattan School of Music in 1973; he gravitated downtown soon after and became music director of the Kitchen for the 1974–75 season. List attended the Juilliard School of Music, produced the New and Newer Music concerts at Lincoln Center, worked as a freelance trombone player, and succeeded Russell as music director of the Kitchen, where he worked between 1975 and 1977. Eastman joined the Creative Associates at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo in 1969, sang baritone on the 1973 Grammy-nominated recording of Peter Maxwell Davies’s **Eight Songs for a Mad King**, and moved to New York in 1976. Sublette was briefly enrolled in the PhD program in composition at SUNY Buffalo, where he studied with Feldman (a poor match) and became friends with Eastman, with whom he headed to New York. A classmate of Russell’s, Van Tieghem, studied at the Manhattan School of Music with Paul Price, a pioneer of modern percussion, and James Preiss, who played percussion with Reich. Gordon undertook graduate studies in composition at the University of California, San Diego, before he moved to the more

notably open Center for Contemporary Music at Mills College, where he met Kroesen. Lewis studied philosophy at Yale and composition as a member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) before he, too, headed to New York, where he composed, performed, and also served as music director of the Kitchen between 1980 and 1982. Zummo worked with Cage and Alvin Lucier while completing his BA and MA at Wesleyan University. Emerging from perhaps the least orthodox background, Branca studied theater in Boston before he moved to New York and focused on guitar bands and composition.

Irrespective of their training, the new crop of composers embodied a level of demographic diversity that was largely absent in earlier generations. Eastman and Lewis boosted the previously negligible presence of African Americans in the compositional strata, while List and Russell engaged explicitly with African American forms, and in so doing introduced a range of African American musicians into the downtown scene. Women were much more prominent than they were in the orchestral establishment thanks to the notable work of composers Kroesen, Maryanne Amacher, Laurie Anderson, Joan La Barbara, Mary Jane Leach, Elodie Lauten, Annea Lockwood, and Meredith Monk. Meanwhile Eastman and Russell articulated a more openly queer presence than earlier experimental composers had (aside from Pauline Oliveros).⁷ Flamboyantly gay, Eastman wrote a series of compositions that bore outré titles and revealed details of his nocturnal visits to sex clubs to anyone within earshot. Inspired by his friend and mentor Allen Ginsberg, himself a forthright gay rights activist, Russell told people about his sexuality when he thought it was appropriate, defended disco when homophobes turned on the culture, and composed a series of explicitly queer twelve-inch singles (two of which featured Eastman).

These and other composers were extending the explorations of earlier experimentalists as well as responding to opportunities presented by the historical conjuncture. Following Cage's embrace of Asian philosophies, Lou Harrison's engagement with gamelan, and Henry Cowell's incorporation of a broad range of global sounds, the minimalists intensified the break with the Eurocentrism of serialism through their exploration of the musical traditions of India, Africa, and Indonesia. And while Young retained a certain affinity for the rigors of serial technique, Riley, Reich, and

Glass were more obviously influenced by the shifting climate of the second half of the 1960s, when the radicalism of the countercultural movement created a milieu that virtually invited them to challenge the more conservative tendencies of the academic establishment. In contrast to the avant-garde establishment, Riley, Reich, and Glass also made a virtue of writing accessible compositions because it was in the spirit of the times to create music that actually attempted to reach an audience. Glass and Reich formed working ensembles that held exclusive rights to the performance of their music and imbued them with the status of rock band leaders. With these freedoms and modes of expression newly established, the radical pluralists wondered if there were further barriers they could tear down and soon started to breach the divide that separated the compositional field from popular culture.

Initially skeptical about the value of rock, Russell saw the proto-punk band the Modern Lovers perform and was struck by the proximity of their “minimalist” aesthetic (which featured two or three chords per song) to what was unfolding in the compositional scene. He was also taken by the group’s visceral performance style, which went far beyond anything that could be heard at the Kitchen. A little later Russell reached a similar conclusion when he went to a downtown private party called the Gallery, one of the incubators of what could be termed downtown disco, and witnessed dancers scream their loudest when one of the DJ’s selections segued into a break, its most stripped-down section. A regular at CBGB, Russell took the Gallery DJ Nicky Siano to see Talking Heads perform at the venue, and he also persuaded Van Tieghem to hear the Ramones play at the same spot. Meanwhile Gordon, who was similarly enthralled by the rise of punk, new wave, and disco, took Chatham to hear the same Ramones concert. “While hearing them, I realized that, as a minimalist, I had more in common with this music than I thought,” Chatham wrote later. “I was attracted by the sheer energy and raw power of the sound as well as chord progressions which were not dissimilar to some of the process music I had been hearing at the time.”⁸

Other composers also came to appreciate the intrinsic value of so-called popular music in ways that they found both bemusing and captivating. Sublette remembers liking listening to Roxy Music and David Bowie on the radio during his time in Buffalo and recalls Eastman at that time blithely confessing that he’d lost the ability to distinguish

between “new music” and “the music on the radio, which at the moment he was speaking happened to be Earth, Wind & Fire.” List, meanwhile, traces his initial break with the hierarchical assumptions of compositional music to the time when he set out to think about Beethoven’s 7th Symphony, only to find himself whistling an Elvis Presley number. “This wild contradiction (or what seemed to be) was the first inkling of what was really happening in my musical mind, and, although it took a couple more years of intense work to make something out of it, this contradiction became, not two forces working against one another, but a kind of unity,” he later wrote.⁹ Finding Reich’s appropriation of nonwestern forms somewhat imperialistic, List developed a deep-seated dislike of *Drumming* and argued instead for the value of collaborating with black (and indeed nonblack) musicians who lived in New York. “The atmosphere at the time was very clean, postmodern and definitely not ‘street,’ which is where I was coming from,” comments List. “I preferred Arthur, Rhys, Peter Gordon, Anthony Braxton, George Lewis, and, of course, Frederic Rzewski.” List adds, “We wanted to go from minimalism into popular language and it was very much in the air at the Kitchen to break down these barriers.” Having played in a rock-jazz fusion band called Sunship while at university, Zummo also found himself drawn into popular contexts. “Some people were more pop-minded,” he says. “I was not, but I played like that, so it kept coming up.”

The radical pluralists were aided by the rise of what came to be known as the downtown scene, an integrated network in which creative workers were able to form interdisciplinary collaborations with relative ease, if not carefree abandon. That had not happened earlier because the pioneers of disco, hip-hop, punk, new wave, loft jazz, and minimalist music, along with creative workers in other fields, moved downtown and set about their work in fairly discrete communities and spaces. But as the protagonists of these scenes began to bump into each other and check out parallel movements, they stretched out, and as part of the exercise, the would-be pluralist composers found themselves engaging with new genres. They were almost universally struck by the physical energy of these parallel scenes, as well as the degree of musical innovation that was being forged within them. They also pursued the question raised most insistently by List: why look to the sounds of Africa, India, and elsewhere when experimental

collaborations could be forged in a nonexploitative, nonderivative manner with musicians who were living on the same block, around the corner, or a few subway stops away? Why write music from a position of bourgeois detachment and imperial appropriation when work could engage with alternative, visceral practices directly and less clinically? “In New York, you met new people every day, from all over the world,” notes Sublette. “It was endlessly stimulating, and the energy of that powered a lot of what we were doing. Black and white culture had been forced to be distinct for so long that, even with the best intentions, it took some time for people on either side of the former color line to become accessible to each other—even in New York, which provided the densest, most intense ethnic mix of any American city. But the process was under way, and we wanted it to be under way.”¹

They went about their work in various ways. Having become interested in free jazz and then punk, Chatham joined a couple of bands until he felt he had “got the feeling of the music and its rhythms,” after which he composed *Guitar Trio*, which became one of the founding pieces of no wave, or the form of experimental postrock music that challenged the perceived aesthetic limits of punk and the commercialism of new wave.¹⁰ Russell introduced drums into his compositional pieces, sang off-center folk songs, formed a pop group that sought to blend Abba with Fleetwood Mac, and joined the Necessaries, a new wave band. Perhaps most influentially, he recorded a series of twelve-inch singles that pioneered the sound of mutant disco and featured combinations of amateur percussionists and vocalists who danced at the Loft, new wave guitarists, folk musicians, Philadelphia-based rhythm section players, a James Brown backing vocalist, a host of DJ remixers, and composer friends such as Eastman, Gordon, Kroesen, and Zummo. Gordon formed the Love of Life Orchestra (LOLO), a downtown dance band that underpinned its performances with a disco beat, recorded and played on a number of twelve-inch dance tracks, and went on to release albums that combined orchestral and pop music. And in between assignments with Russell, LOLO, and the dancer/choreographer Stephanie Woodard, Zummo joined John Lurie’s Lounge Lizards, which blended no wave and jazz. He later recalled, “It turned out to be pluralistic, but it

¹ AU: Please add a source for the quote from Sublette.

was our day-to-day at the time.”²

Other composers also felt compelled to pursue pluralist engagements that breached the aesthetic conventions of compositional music. Having started to play in the downtown jazz loft scene, List formed a band that featured the drummer Ronald Shannon Jackson, who played with Ornette Coleman; the saxophonist Byard Lancaster, who contributed to the Philly Sound and played with Sun Ra; and Youseff Yancy, a Muslim veteran of the “chitlin’ circuit” who played trumpet and theremin. Occasionally appearing in her own theater works as a male character with a penciled-on mustache, Kroesen wrote explicitly feminist songs that explored the intersection between rock and composition while working with musicians such as Bill Laswell and Fred Smith. Van Tieghem cofounded LOLO with Gordon and expanded his percussion orchestra to include toys, found objects, and electronics, which culminated in the release of *These Things Happen*, a 1984 album on Warner Brothers. Pursuing a form of “postmodern multi-instrumentalism,” Lewis occupied the fault lines that existed between “putative ‘jazz’” and “pan-European contemporary music” in collaborations with eclectic musicians such as Muhal Richard Abrams, Anthony Braxton, Anthony Davis, Douglas Ewart, Roscoe Mitchell, Phill Niblock, and Richard Teitelbaum.¹¹ And Branca formed bands, developed guitar ensembles, and became an influential pioneer in the no wave scene.

The logic of the moment virtually required New York-bound composers to break with their experimental upbringings. “I grew up as a composer in the orbit of Cageans like David Tudor, Alvin Lucier, Pauline Oliveros, or for that matter Morton Feldman and Earle Brown,” recalls Sublette. “I can remember the phrase ‘the Age of Cage’ being used, albeit humorously.” Sublette performed a number of Cage’s compositions and came to “flatter myself quite the Cage interpreter,” yet he reconsidered his position after settling downtown. “The rock public wanted to be beaten up by sound and was very much in opposition to the Cage thing,” he notes. “John’s music had grown increasingly austere, and its randomized, meditative quality was such as to immobilize the listener, something absolutely contrary to where the New York vibe was going.”³ Joining Sublette in New York, Eastman appeared on a number of Russell’s mutant disco recordings; collaborated

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with Jeff Lohn of the Theoretical Girls, as well as Gordon; gave incendiary titles to a number of his compositions (“Evil Nigger,” “Crazy Nigger,” “Nigger Faggot,” “Gay Guerrilla”); and introduced a dance/punk energy into his experimental language.¹²

Gordon, meanwhile, reassessed his relationship with experimentalism around the time the composer and editor of *Ear* magazine, Beth Anderson, chided him for distancing himself from Cage. “John Cage changed my life,” recalls Gordon, who named one of his pet guinea pigs after the composer. “I was listening to rock and roll and then I read *Silence*, which was an epiphany. Cage taught us anything can be music, so I started to incorporate the music I loved—music that had a groove to it. But Cage never embraced jazz, and he didn’t like music that had a regular pulse to it. By the mid-1970s we were breaking away from Cage consciously because most of the experimental, post-Cage stuff was unlistenable.”⁴

From 1974 through to the early 1980s, the radical pluralist composers came to understand that their work was deemed to be experimental because, again, they and others said it was, and not because it was innately more innovative than any other musical form. As Russell told Zummo in an interview for the *Soho Weekly News* in 1977, “In bubble-gum music the notion of pure sound is not a philosophy but rather a reality. In this respect, bubble-gum preceded the avant-garde. In the works of Philip Glass or La Monte Young, for example, which are clearly pop-influenced, pure sound became an issue of primary importance, while it had already been a by-product of the commercial process in bubble-gum music.”¹³ Perhaps most tellingly, they referred to their work as “new music” rather than experimental music, the term being “intentionally open-ended,” says Sublette, and even stopped worrying about the idea of experimentation. “Experimenting was part and parcel of what we were doing, but it wasn’t a major concern,” recalls List. “We played our music in strange places, such as a bar in the not yet named TriBeCa, where NYPD cops hung out, and got them dancing to our arrangements of Chuck Berry and Hank Williams. This was clearly experimental, but on a sociological level more than

⁴ AU: Source needed for quotes. I won’t continue to ask, but all quotations should be documented. If a composer’s statements are from a single source, you could add a line the first time that source is cited stating something like “Subsequent statements by Sublette [or List or Gordon, etc.] are from this source.”

anything else.” List maintains that experimenting for the sake of experimentation is “dry,” and adds, “If we thought about the concept of experimental music at all it was with the intention of breaking away from its meanings and sound. The desire to play ‘popular’ forms was part of this break.”

Alive to the power arrangements that informed their privileged position, some of the pluralists began to disrupt the institutional boundaries that had become attached to the notions of the high and the popular, and they also began to question the very status of the composer. Russell was one of the first, and also one of the boldest, when it came to upsetting the institutional arrangements that had come to separate composers from other musicians. Russell invited the Modern Lovers to perform at the Kitchen and in the process raised the eyebrows of those who doubted that this kind of music had a place in downtown’s most prestigious venue for experimental music. Russell went on to arrange for the Talking Heads to play at the Kitchen during List’s first year as music director, while List invited Don Cherry, Jack DeJohnette, the Revolutionary Ensemble, and Cecil Taylor to perform at the venue and ended his first season with a twelve-night series titled the Jazz Composer’s Orchestra Concerts. Robert Stearns, then overall director of the Kitchen, maintains that this amounted to “the first true efforts at multicultural programming.”⁵ When Chatham picked up his old job from List in 1977, he programmed rock outfits and in so doing consolidated the Kitchen’s shift from operating as a venue that showcased compositional experimentalism to one that embraced a broader set of practices.

Lewis, the Kitchen’s first black music director, opened the programming still further by booking a wide range of musicians to appear on his program, including Robert Ashley, Derek Bailey, Defunkt, the Ethnic Heritage Ensemble, Douglas Ewart, Diamanda Galás, Julius Hemphill, Rae Imamura, Jamaican Music Festival, Takehisa Kosugi, Joan La Barbara, Jackson Mac Low, Roscoe Mitchell, Evan Parker, Eliane Radigue, Frederic Rzewski, Carlos Santos, Tona Scherchen-Hsiao, Trans Museq, John Zorn, and others. “Not all the composers were black or jazz-identified,” he notes of his curatorship. “I was

⁵ AU: Source is needed for Stearns since this is the first mention of him. Ditto for any other new sources.

also able to bring a number of ‘new whites’ into the process—composers who might well have been excluded for reasons of the intersection of genre, musical methodology, and community membership.”

Lewis’s engagement within multiculturalism extended to his refusal to embrace the jazz label that was so often attached to the musicians of the AACM and their African American peers, because to have done so would have made him complicit with the idea that their musical scope was restricted to an identifiable sound. In *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, Lewis argues that jazz-identified artists in the 1960s embraced instrumental practices and frameworks to the point where “no sound was seen as alien to the investigations of improvising musicians.”¹⁴ The relationship among poetry, theater, and music was also explored, adds Lewis, while improvisers such as John Coltrane began to think of their works as being structurally integrated, and in so doing challenged those who, intentionally or otherwise, worked to “provincialize a musical tradition where exchange of sonic narratives has long been in evidence.”¹⁵ The AACM embraced the idea of aesthetic diversity, while Braxton, a prominent figure in the group, refrained from using the word *jazz* to describe his music. Ronald Radano argues that in the mid-1970s Braxton, maintaining that his work owed as much to Schoenberg, Webern, Boulez, and Stockhausen as Charlie Parker and Coltrane, unsuccessfully challenged critics “to come to terms with a creative world that called into question accepted definitions of jazz and the jazz musician.”¹⁶ Yet the de facto racialization of musical mobility, which saw critics and institutions grant white musicians total freedom while black musicians were expected to conform to certain aesthetic expectations, was challenged by Lewis, who maintains that his directorship helped “shift the debate around border crossing to a stage where whiteness-based constructions of American experimentalism were being fundamentally problematized.”¹⁷

Composers also upset the institutional framework that governed experimental compositional music by playing in clubs that were previously understood as settings for popular music (even though a great deal of the music included in this classification was in fact quite *unpopular*). The clubs were employed to play a conscious role in the engagement. A den for postpunk music and fashion, the Mudd Club hosted performances

by Branca and Chatham, while owner Steve Mass invited the music critic Tim Page to produce a series of concerts that featured musicians who worked at the intersection of compositional music and rock in 1981. Jim Fouratt, a key figure at the rock-disco Hurrah before he opened Danceteria with Rudolf Piper, pursued a parallel path, most notably through nights titled “Serious Fun” and “Art Attack,” which aimed to bridge the divided between high and low culture. These nights showcased composers such as Branca, Glass, and Van Tieghem alongside the German electro-punk band D.A.F., LOLO, and Galas. Chatham, Gordon, Kroesen, Russell, and Van Tieghem quickly came to appreciate that it was easier to attract a large crowd (and also get paid) if they played in a club setting. Joining in, Glass also coproduced two albums for the minimalist rock band Polyrock during 1980 and 1981.

“I used to feel in competition with the clubs,” commented Chatham in 1980, reflecting on his second stint as music director of the Kitchen. “I wanted to premiere things, to have the first place where Teen Age Jesus and the Jerks or the Contortions happened.⁶ But then I realized that it was impossible for the Kitchen because we don’t have a club format. It doesn’t feel the same.”¹⁸ Chatham added that he considered Arto Lindsay from DNA and the musicians working in DNA, Mars, the Contortions, and the Lounge Lizards to be composers, irrespective of their background. Yet he nevertheless remained committed in the first instance to the Kitchen, where he believed that he and his peers could continue to thrive in an environment that explicitly encouraged innovative forms of composition. “I want to give these people [Arto Lindsay, DNA, Mars et al.] an opportunity to expand so they don’t go stale, and so that they can think of themselves in other musical terms besides rock, if they want to,” he commented in a 1980 interview.¹⁹

The pluralist composers of the early 1970s also questioned the centrality of the score, which had been reframed but not displaced by Cage. “Cage’s work may have radically undermined the **function** of the score, but the **position** of the score in his work was primary,” notes Sublette. “**All** of Cage’s work was scored, that I can recall. And it was not only scored; the scores were published by C. F. Peters and dutifully purchased by university libraries everywhere, where we bookish young composition students imbibed them.” Stockhausen’s work with tape and the studio as a space of sonic exploration could

⁶ AU: OK? *Sic* doesn’t seem necessary here.

have led to the status of the composer being challenged, but Stockhausen didn't choose that path. Sublette concludes, "Even things that were obviously tape pieces had impressively bulky scores that were dutifully and expensively published by Universal Edition, who also published, say, Webern, and were thus presented as part of an unbroken line of European music culture that putatively stretched from Schoenberg to Stockhausen. At a time when records were difficult to make and distribute, the big guns of European music culture had their works distributed by subsidized classical-music labels (Deutsche Grammophone especially) and their scores published, thereby loading down library shelves all over the world."⁷

New music composers who worked with synthesizers and tape—Ashley, Oliveros, Gordon Mumma, and others—jettisoned the score to some extent. But for many of the pluralists, the polyrhythmic funk grooves of James Brown and the studio know-how that underpinned *Pet Sounds* and *Sgt. Pepper* illustrated the benefits of bypassing the score altogether and recording directly onto multitrack tape. "That was where the action was," argues Sublette. "None of the previously mentioned composers had anything to do whatsoever with grooves. But we listened in fascination as new records came out, and we loved disco, where I saw at least some of the intellectual practices of experimental music being put into practice for a living, breathing public. As the culture of the remix came into existence, it more and more began to resemble the convergence of all of this." Gordon and Russell were among the first to, if not abandon the score, then at least immerse themselves in recording, which enabled them to switch tactics and think of the studio as a compositional tool, as Brian Eno argued in a paper he presented at the Kitchen in June 1979.²⁰ For his part, Sublette decided to focus entirely on songwriting, formed a band that began playing at CBGB in 1982, and in 1985 had what he terms a "salsa conversion experience."

By 1978 Tom Johnson, a composer and rare reviewer of the downtown compositional scene, was moved to comment that "the experimental music the Kitchen has nurtured has also grown up." He added, "Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, Meredith

⁷ AU: Should this long quote be a block quote?

Monk, Robert Ashley, and Steve Reich don't appear in slightly glorified lofts much anymore. Their work now seems more appropriate to, well, to an established museum of new video and music."²¹ But, although Johnson covered concerts by the likes of Branca, Chatham, and Gordon, his engagement with their embrace of the so-called popular forms was hesitant, and he gave composers such as Russell virtually no coverage at all. "The Static is an experimental rock trio headed by Glenn Branca," he wrote in one candid piece published in September 1979.

I haven't heard them in person, although I expect to see them at the Mudd Club September 20, but was fascinated by "My Relationship" and "Don't Let Me Stop You," which arrived in the mail recently. This 45 is issued by Theoretical Records, and I understand that the group is an offshoot of Theoretical Girls, another SoHo ensemble. Perhaps that categorizes them as "new wave." Or would it be "no wave"? As I said, I don't keep up terribly well."²²

Sublette says bluntly, "Tom Johnson didn't have a clue what our generation was doing."

Staged by Chatham at the Kitchen in June 1979, the high-profile New Music, New York festival confirmed the emergence of a post-Cagean generation of composers while revealing some of the ongoing challenges they faced. Johnson noted the generational split in his report: "The older group derived much from Cage and almost nothing from popular culture, while the younger group almost reverses these priorities," he noted in the *Village Voice*. "While the song form is almost never used by the older composers, it occurred several times in works by the younger ones. While the older group tends to play synthesizers, homemade electronic devices, piano, or other standard instruments, the younger group is more likely to be involved with electric guitars or with some of the performance art trend of the '70s. The influence of Eastern philosophy is far more apt to be felt in the older group, while loud volumes are somewhat more common among the younger."²³⁸

Yet for all the talk of youthful experimentalism, Johnson brushed aside some of the more notable exclusions from the lineup rather casually. With regard to the notably small presence of black musicians, who were scarce compared to their presence during List's tenure as music director, Johnson argued that they could go instead to the "loft

⁸ AU: Should this be a block quote?

jazz” scene (as if a similar argument couldn’t have been made for the rock-oriented composers, who had the chance to turn to an equally prolific live rock club network) and added that their exclusion was correct on the grounds that “a truly ecumenical festival of new music in New York would have to include some of the klezmer musicians I wrote about two weeks ago, along with shakuhachi players, khamancheh players, Irish groups, Balkan groups, and so on.”²⁴ Lewis has noted how Johnson invoked the ideas of multiculturalism and diversity not to integrate African American musicians but “as part of his anti-jazz argument.” At the time, List attempted to highlight the marginalization of African Americans during a panel discussion that included Glass, Gavin Bryars, and John Rockwell but was met with a patronizing put-down. “I said, ‘You guys are not looking around you!’” recalls List. “‘You’re not really seeing what’s going on!’ They said, ‘OK, we’ve heard all of this before, Garrett. Don’t you have anything else to say?’” As for those who were interested in exploring disco, they weren’t invited and their absence wasn’t reported. As a result a limited version of liberal pluralism came to be eulogized at the precise moment the Kitchen shifted from its old “guerrilla unit” status to an establishment that was “administered quite professionally by people who knew how to raise funds” (in the words of Johnson).²⁵

Staged two years later, the Kitchen’s tenth anniversary “Aluminum Nights” celebration, held at the nightclub Bond’s on June 14–15, 1981, revealed a determination to reengage with a broader conception of pluralism in terms of both aesthetic and multicultural reach. In addition to the recognizable performances led by Glass and Reich, the event featured the experimental guitar work of Branca and Chatham, plus the Bush Tetras, DNA, the Feelies, Lydia Lunch and 1313, the Raybeats, and Red Decade (featuring Lewis on live electronics). The celebration also offered List on trombone; LOLO’s danceable pop; Fab 5 Freddy leading a hip-hop performance; Anderson’s experimental pop (“O Superman”); Maryanne Amacher’s sound installations; dance-music combinations from Laura Dean, Douglas Dunn, and Meredith Monk; poetry; acoustic music; improvised chamber music; and video works by Robert Ashley, Robert Wilson, Nam June Paik, Brian Eno, and the Talking Heads. The Kitchen had begun as a video exhibition space, and its name at this point was the Kitchen Center for Video, Music, and Dance, yet the inclusion of these forms revealed not only the breadth of the

organization's programming reach but also the extent to which artists, following the example established by Cage, Merce Cunningham, and a swarm of 1960s experimentalists, were breaking down the definitions of these art forms. Composition, dance, and video could no longer be distinguished from each other in any straightforward manner. "The Kitchen benefits celebrate the 10th anniversary of the performing-arts and video center and are designed as a hedge against possible cuts in the budget of the National Endowment for the Arts," commented Rockwell in the *New York Times*. "But more than that, the benefits serve as metaphors for the very manner in which downtown experimental artists in many mediums routinely work together, influencing one another's work in a way in which 'uptown arts,' sometimes weighed down by the complexity of their traditions, frequently do not."²⁶

Meanwhile the Kitchen's new music agenda extended its reach beyond New York when the New Music, New York festival led to the formation of the New Music Alliance, an organization that included a number of low-budget, interdisciplinary spaces from other cities along with some more institutional partners. New Music Alliance proceeded to stage New Music America festivals in Minneapolis in 1980, San Francisco in 1981, and Chicago in 1982. Reporting in *Perspectives on New Music*⁹ in 1982, Deborah Campana noted that New Music America '82 received generous municipal support and made efforts to include not only Cage-inspired music but also avant-garde jazz, new wave, no wave, performance art, multimedia, and sound installations.²⁷ "Both regional and national artistic advisory boards were formed to help in the selection process in an attempt to attract an audience possessing wide-ranging tastes," commented Campana. "The musical result featured fifty composers in a week-long festival of new American music."²⁸ However, while Campana warmed to the AACM's performance of Douglas Ewart's Clarinet Quartet, she criticized the performances of LOLO and Kroesen, as well as the appearance of Gordon and Kroesen in Ashley's *Perfect Lives (Private Parts)*. "Whatever the reason, there was no musical justification for these people to perform on a nationwide showcase," she railed, offering no insight into their cross-generic interventions.²⁹ Campana also argued that Branca's appearance "dragged on for too long without direction" and was "oppressively pedantic."³⁰ (Sublette, who played alongside Branca,

⁹ AU: Note 27 reads *Perspectives of New Music*. Which is correct? Also occurs below.

disagrees, noting that it was “an excruciating auditory experience, though not without direction.”) Later on in the festival, tensions flared when Cage criticized Branca for “abusing sound and repressively forcing it upon the audience,” as well as running his ensemble in a manner that was “reminiscent of a dictatorship.”³¹ Offering a different response, Carl Stone, also contributing to *Perspectives on New Music*, maintained that the effect of the Branca performance was “powerful, compelling and totally exhausting—the experience [was] unlike any I had had in recent times, certainly unlike any at NEW MUSIC AMERICA 1982.”³²

Back in New York, the Kitchen was already suffering from Reagan era cuts to public funding that threatened to create a black hole in an annual budget that had grown from \$45,000 a year to more than \$250,000 (having begun with a \$10,000 grant from the New York State Council for the Arts). Mary MacArthur, who began to work as the venue’s overall director in January 1978, instructed the organization’s employees to pursue grant options and think up ways to make enough money to match grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. However, as the institution became increasingly focused on raising money, radical pluralism was sparingly employed when it served the wider financial strategy. More often than not it didn’t. Under the post-Lewis music directorship of Anne DeMarinis, who had been an early member of Sonic Youth, the Kitchen showcased a joint performance by the drummer Max Roach and the rapper/graffiti artist Fab 5 Freddy along with DJs and break dancers on November 15, 1983, as well as performances by bands such as Sonic Youth, the Swans, and the Beastie Boys. Overall, however, critics began to round on the venue, and in 1985 William Harris argued in the *Village Voice* that under MacArthur the Kitchen had gone from being “an organization run by artists to one top-heavy with administrators.”³³ Harris painted a picture of pluralism mobilized not to support work that explored the interstices of genre but rather to support financial sustainability and, as a consequence, aesthetic conservatism. In other words, this was a pluralism that purported to be open-minded, liberal, and tolerant, yet did so by complying with the existing power structures of the status quo. As an anonymous former curator told the *Voice*, “They [the curators] are creating packages of the Kitchen’s greatest hits.”³⁴ In the same interview, Chatham commented, “They [the curators] lack vision and are pandering to public taste.”³⁵

Gendron added that, from the middle of 1982 through to 1985,¹⁰ the Kitchen came to be “increasingly perceived as mainstream.”³⁶

Chatham responded by insisting that the whole new music experiment had gone too far and added that he had always considered his own work to be composition, even if it drew on rock and sounded like rock (or its no wave outgrowth). As he explained in a 1990 essay, “We who had worked to tear the walls of the academy down and break with the status quo had created a situation where the ideas associated with our various musical factions were up for grabs. While this had the effect of liberating composers from the ideological frameworks that had previously shackled them, it also led to a great deal of confusion among producers, critics, and composers themselves as to what this new music was actually supposed to be.”³⁷ Chatham maintained that art music, improvised music, and rock converged in the first half of the 1980s not because he and his peers sought to embrace a form of radical pluralism, but because the “formal issues endemic to each” coincided in a unique fashion that proved to be temporary. He added: “Musical pluralism was the direct result of the decimating of boundaries between the genres during the seventies and early eighties, which resulted in much exciting music; but by the late eighties, pluralism was having the effect of clouding the musical issues composers needed to address rather than clarifying them.”³⁸

Chatham delivered his critique within a broader turn against pluralism that included Hal Foster’s searing essay “Against Pluralism” (1985), published at the very moment when the radical pluralist agenda established at the Kitchen became most vulnerable. Focusing his attention on the art world, Foster argued that many practitioners had started to “borrow promiscuously from both historical and modern art, but these references rarely engage the source, let alone the present, deeply.” He added, “The typical artist is often foot-loose in time, culture and metaphor, a dilettante because he thinks that, as he entertains the past, he is beyond the exigency of the present; a dunce because he assumes a delusion; and a dangling man because historical moment—our present problematic—is lost.”³⁹ Assessing the shift to a state of artistic equivalence in which no style of art was as dominant and no critical position orthodox, Foster maintained that the shift to pluralism rendered art impotent, allowing for “minor

¹⁰ AU: Does this mean through 1985 or up to 1985?

deviation . . . in order to resist radical change.”⁴⁰ Foster argued that pluralism’s support of choice echoed the underlying ethos of free market capitalism, while its failure to adopt a critical position allowed the traditional values of taste and connoisseurship (including notions of the unique, the visionary, the genius, and the masterpiece) to regain currency. As a result pluralism led “not to a sharpened awareness of difference (social, sexual, artistic, etc.) but to a stagnant condition of indiscrimination.”⁴¹

However, the downtown pluralists didn’t seek to broaden the terms and conditions of the compositional field via a generalizing embrace of all musical practices as somehow equal and equivalent. Instead they engaged with a broader range of sounds and practices in order to generate specific freedoms, and in so doing they challenged the institutional and commercial structures that supported the idea of discrete genres. Robert Morgan would go on to argue in 1992 that “multiple canons” should replace the idea of a single, agreed-upon canon because “contemporary musical culture is fast becoming not a single relatively focused entity, but a *mélange* of conflicting subcultures that interact with one another in complex ways while still preserving considerable autonomy.”⁴² Yet the radical pluralists didn’t accept that genres might be stable in the first place, so instead of proposing some kind of democratic equivalence that supported their separate development, as well as their comfortable existence within the broader cultural and economic status quo, they challenged the very idea of generic coherence and boundedness. As a result their interventions shouldn’t be dismissed as amounting to little more than a “minor deviation” that ultimately propped up existing power interests but instead be seen as seeking to bring about a more radical transformation of the musical order.⁴³

Some believe that Chatham was ultimately so concerned with preserving his status as a composer that he failed to acknowledge fully the true radicalism of the moment, as well as the logic that underpinned his *volte-face*. “You have to understand that Rhys constantly lampooned the uptightness of music formalism but was at the same time very sincere about formulating composerly statements in a tone of high seriousness,” says Sublette. “But the pluralism of the time was an inspired response to the complexity of really existing society, a radical critique of the generic marketplace, and an assertion of freedom.” Lewis was also skeptical. “A frequently asked question in the

community during my years at the Kitchen, even by people like Rhys, whom I was able to discuss the matter with at some length, concerned why I felt the need to curate ‘those people’ because they had ‘so many other places to play,’” Lewis comments. “This wasn’t necessarily a racial designation, but one of genre. As I saw it, however, blunderbuss genre monikers like ‘jazz’ didn’t figure very prominently in my deliberations. Rather, I saw the work of people like Julius Hemphill as congruent with an expanded notion of experimentalism, which in my understanding was the multi-directional ‘genre’ that the Kitchen was created to support.”¹¹

Lewis maintains that the anniversary event (which appears to have been programmed collectively), along with his sponsorship of diversity, didn’t involve him and the Kitchen embracing a diversity of genres but instead amounted to a challenge to the very idea of genre itself. “In Hal Foster’s memorable phrase, pluralism becomes a location where ‘minor deviation is allowed only in order to resist radical change,’” comments Lewis. “The radical change during this period, however, is that a new genre—‘new music’—was being created that valorized diversity of musical practice and was trying to learn to valorize diversity of cultural reference.” That meant that the radical pluralism practiced by the large number of composers who gathered at the Kitchen—as well as the work of similarly minded musicians such as Zorn, Lindsay, and others who gravitated to parallel spaces and scenes—didn’t support the music industry status quo or capitalism’s will to market music according to recognizable categories. Instead it offered an alternative way of playing and appreciating music that began and ended with the everyday practice of generating music. “At the time, canons, genres and the like were unstable and under challenge from without and within,” Lewis adds. “Reality moved beyond the stereotypes.”

To some extent the Kitchen’s malaise can be connected to a broader decline in downtown creativity during the early to mid-1980s. Gendron notes, for example, that the punk/new wave movement lost much of its impetus, while the jazz scene also fell away sharply.⁴⁴ Both developments can be attributed in very general terms to the gentrification of downtown (which was itself linked to the rise of neoliberal capitalism in the city) and the evacuation of the area by composers, musicians, and other cultural workers who

¹¹ Au: Source is needed for quotes from Lewis. Also in the next paragraph.

could no longer afford to live there. Yet the downtown art scene didn't disperse in uniform lines, and Gendron also notes that the Kitchen displaced the Knitting Factory, and emerged as “the main arena for musical experimentation, operating on the borders of rock, funk, jazz, and art music”—and did so, it might be added, as a commercial space that, in contrast to the Kitchen, sold liquor, paid performers from the door, and put on concerts every night.⁴⁵

Perhaps it was inevitable that the forces of radical pluralism unleashed in the Kitchen would lead to its demise. Once grounded in experimental composition, the venue's *raison d'être* became less easy to articulate when it started to occupy the cracks and crevices of music making with ever greater boldness, and after key players moved on, their successors struggled to retain a sense of purpose. Meanwhile a range of alternative clubs came to host significant innovations in dance, hip-hop, salsa, and rock after 1983, even if real estate inflation, combined with the regressive leanings of Mayor Ed Koch, resulted in the network being weaker than it had been during the 1970s and early 1980s.⁴⁶ Decades later memories of institutional marginalization continue to linger. “When I was at UCSD¹² [Professor] Roger Reynolds proudly told me that he had never written a piece for saxophone and never would,” recalls Gordon. “They did not recognize what we were doing as being experimental. But I was trying to avoid being typecast into categories, so that was the experiment.” Sublette maintains that on the occasions when journalists deigned to notice what he and his peers were doing, they stereotyped and marginalized the movement as effete, elitist, dilettantish, and solipsistic. “There was so much more to it than that,” he concludes. “In trying to put everything into a box, they didn't notice we were trying to kick out the sides of the box. Retrospective looks have tended to repeat that tone without taking the trouble to examine what actually happened.” If what happened remains hard to define, that was precisely the point.¹³

Notes¹⁴

1. I'd like to thank Peter Gordon, Benjamin Piekut, Ned Sublette, and Peter Zummo for

¹² AU: Please spell out UCSD in brackets.

¹³ AU: Sources needed for quotes?

¹⁴ AU: I found several inconsistencies in listings of sources in the notes and references. Please check them all in case there are more.

comments on an earlier draft of this essay. All interviews were conducted by the author unless otherwise stated.

2. George Lewis of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) argues that many of the musicians “deeply resented the reduction of the diversity of their approaches to the term ‘loft jazz.’” George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 351.
3. Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 139–71. These composers would each resist the “minimalist” label. Glass, for example, maintains that his work up to and including the first eleven parts of *Music in 12 Parts* (1971–74), was minimalist, but he maintains that the final part of that piece marked his break with minimalism. See Tim Page, “Music in 12 Parts,” in *Writings on Glass: Essays, Interviews, Criticism*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1997]¹⁵ 1989), 98.
4. But see the important work of Bernard Gendron in *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Bernard Gendron, “The Downtown Music Scene,” in *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene, 1974–1984*, ed. Marvin J. Taylor, 41–65 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Tom Johnson, *The Voice of New Music: New York City, 1972–1982—A Collection of Articles Originally Published by the Village Voice* (Eindhoven, Holland: Apollohuis, 1989); and Kyle Gann, *Music Downtown: Writings from the Village Voice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
5. Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (London: Harper Perennial, 2009), 568. See also Wim Mertens, *American Minimal Music: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass*, ed. and trans. J. Hautekiet (London: Kahn & Averill, 1983); Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
6. Paul Hillier notes that by the middle of the 1970s Reich and other minimalists were in

¹⁵ AU: Amend year as needed. See query in references.

- fact “beginning to produce works of such size and stature” that the label of “minimalism” was beginning to look “mean-spirited and, worse, misguided.” Paul Hillier, introduction to *Writings on Music, 1965–2000*, by Steve Reich (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4.
7. See Jonathan D. Katz, “John Cage’s Queer Silence; or, How to Avoid Making Matters Worse,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 5 (1999): 231–52;¹⁶ and Ryan Dohoney, “John Cage, Julius Eastman, and the Homosexual Ego,” in this volume.¹⁷
 8. Rhys Chatham, “Composer’s Notebook 1990: Toward a Musical Agenda for the Nineties,” liner notes to *An Angel Moves Too Fast to See: Selected Works, 1971–89*, Table of the Elements TOE-CD-802, 2003, compact disc.
 9. Garrett List, “Twenty Years Is a Long Time,” in *The Kitchen Turns Twenty: A Retrospective Anthology*, ed. Lee Morrissey (New York: Kitchen Center for Video, Music, Dance, Performance, Film, and Literature, 1992), 24.
 10. Chatham, “Composer’s Notebook.”
 11. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, 343, 369.
 12. I’m grateful to Ryan Dohoney, who writes on Julius Eastman elsewhere in this volume, for the insight into Eastman’s embrace of dance/punk energy.
 13. Peter Zummo, “Eclectic Bubble Gum,” *Soho Weekly News*, March 17, 1977, 39.
 14. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, 37.
 15. *Ibid.*, 41.
 16. Ronald M. Radano, *New Musical Figurations: Anthony Braxton’s Cultural Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 1.
 17. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, 384.
 18. Jan Westervelt, “Rhys Chatham Interview,” *East Village Eye*, February 1980, 19.
 19. *Ibid.*
 20. Brian Eno “The Recording Studio as Compositional Tool,” lecture delivered at the Kitchen, New York City, June 1979, accessed May 23, 2012, http://music.hyperreal.org/artists/brian_eno/interviews/downbeat79.htm.

¹⁶ AU: Please add issue number or month or season.

¹⁷ Dohoney’s title correct? There was an inconsistency between the Dohoney’s essay and the contents page.

21. Tom Johnson, “New Music New York New Institution,” *Village Voice*, July 2, 1979.
22. Tom Johnson, “Contradictions and Glenn Branca’s Static,” *Village Voice*, September 24, 1979.
23. Johnson, “New Music New York New Institution.”
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. John Rockwell, “Avant-Gardists in Midtown for Benefit,” *New York Times*, June 13, 1981.
27. Deborah Campana, “New Music America 1982, Chicago, July 5–11, 1982,” *Perspectives of New Music* 20, nos. 1–2 (Autumn 1981–Summer 1982): 609.¹⁸
28. *Ibid.*, 609–10.
29. *Ibid.*, 611.
30. *Ibid.*, 613.
31. *Ibid.*, 613–14.
32. Carl Stone, “Report from New Music America 1982, Chicago, July 5–11, 1982,” *Perspectives of New Music* 20, nos. 1–2 (Autumn 1981–Summer 1982): 621.
33. William Harris “Slouching toward Broome Street: Can the Kitchen Survive?,” *Village Voice*, March 5, 1985, 45.
34. Quoted in *ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*
36. Gendron “The Downtown Music Scene,” 63.
37. *Ibid.*¹⁹
38. *Ibid.*
39. Hal Foster, “Against Pluralism,” in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1985), 16.
40. *Ibid.*, 13.
41. *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁸ AU: *Perspectives on New Music?* See query in text. Also occurs in note 32.

¹⁹ AU: *Ibid.* OK? The quote in text is by Chatham.

42. Robert Morgan, “Rethinking Musical Culture: Canonic Reformulations in a Post-tonal Age,” in *Disciplining Music: Musicology and Its Canons*, ed. Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 57.
43. My distinction between liberal pluralism and radical pluralism draws on work that differentiates between liberal and radical multiculturalism. See Stuart Hall, “The Multicultural Question,” in *Un/Settled Multiculturalisms*, ed. Barnor Hesse, 209–41 (London: Zed, 2000); and Sanjay Sharma, *Multicultural Encounters* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 3–21.
44. Gendron, “The Downtown Music Scene.”
45. Ibid.
46. For more on this, see Tim Lawrence, “Big Business, Real Estate Determinism, and Dance Culture in New York, 1980–88,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 23, no. 3 (September 2011): 288–306.

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²⁰ AU: Title OK? See query in notes.

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²¹ AU: Please add issue number or month or season.

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²² AU: 1987? Year of first publication can't postdate the reprint.

²³ AU: *Perspectives on?*