

'The Kitchen': an arts experiment aimed at the world

By David Stern

New York

It's birthday time at the Kitchen — the only place in town where you can see 2,000 hours of television, 45 concerts, 32 dance programs, 25 "performance pieces," and 12 exhibitions, all within the space of one season and three adjoining rooms.

A decade old, and livelier than ever, the Kitchen recently celebrated its 10th anniversary with a pair of mammoth shows called "Aluminum Nights." The list of performers reads like a Who's Who of new music — from the Philip Glass Ensemble to the Steve Reich Musicians, the Raybeats to the Bush Tetras, the Love of Life Orchestra to Fab Five Freddie & Friends.

And music was just one aspect of the event, which also featured video, dance, and poetry. Even at that, the whole potpourri — totaling about 15 hours — only sampled the energy, diversity, and experimentation that have marked the Kitchen during its first 10 years.

"We're looking for intelligent experimentation," says Kitchen director Mary MacArthur, who speaks with an enthusiastic air and a tenuous British accent. Under her guidance, the organization is reaching out in more directions than ever, toward artists in a wide variety of fields, including some that don't have neat labels yet. Today, its activity is international in scope. Recent innovations include:

- **Touring:** Last year, a dozen young composers, choreographers, and performing artists toured five European cities under the aegis of the Kitchen. Requests for further programs were promptly received, and the Kitchen now plans several such tours each year.

- **Distribution:** The Kitchen keeps an archive of (so far) 330 videotapes and 200 concert recordings, which are widely circulated. Exhibitions focusing on this material have appeared in the United States and abroad.

- **Television production:** "Live From the Kitchen" is a series of programs by artists who use TV as their theater. This has included Robert Ashley's superb "Music Word Fire," which recently aired on public television in New York as part of a projected 12-hour work called "Perfect Lives." Less



Photos by Paula Court

Philip Glass Ensemble: variety began to creep in

the way to see videotaped films by Stuart Sherman. A multitude of media, indeed.

On one level, this symbolizes much of today's new art, with its rampant collaboration among diverse disciplines. More concretely, the mix of media broadens audience tastes: Miss MacArthur is tickled with the idea of patrons arriving to see one event, and stumbling on two or three others they may never have heard of — and may like even better.

Though the Kitchen is dedicated to discovery, the word "new" is not a fetish there. "We might like an idea that's not new at all," says Miss MacArthur, "but a new development. Nobody likes to use the terms 'experimental' or 'avant-garde' anymore, because they seem critical. But experimentation is extremely important: It can be not only interesting, but... hilarious!"

Miss MacArthur underlines the entertainment value of much new art, disliking the view that "challenge" and "provocation" are all the "experimentalists" are looking for. "Sometimes I have the feeling that we're just after a good laugh," she says, warning against "this deadly serious idea of the avant-garde. When I enjoy something," she continues, "it may be serious, but it can be extremely funny, too. There can be keen enjoyment."

Thus children are often welcome at the Kitchen. "It's not an infallible touchstone," Miss MacArthur says, "but their reaction can be very revealing. A lot of our music events, for example, are visually fascinating. The techniques are often unusual; and because our space is modest, you're right

on top of the performers, unlike a place of the Lincoln Center type. So a lot of the mystery goes out of the work, and you can make all the connections. Children love the closeness, the directness. And plenty of grown-ups do, too, including me!"

The organization was founded in 1971 by a group of artists who wanted a space for experimental video screenings. Their first home was the Mercer Arts Center, a converted hotel, where the fledgling "art of video" was shunted into — you guessed it — an unused kitchen. After several moves and a lot of expansion, the organization still clings proudly to its serendipitous name.

At first, the Kitchen was intended solely as a showplace for noncommercial video. But soon it was realized, in Miss MacArthur's words, "that new music was being neglected, and sometimes sabotaged.

by the academic establishment." Electronic music, in particular, seemed congenital to the Kitchen's technological bent, and was duly included on the program. Then variety began to creep in, and before long such musicians as John Cage, La Monte Young, and Philip Glass were associated with the space.

Today the full billing reads: the Kitchen Center for Video, Music, and Dance. And artists of all kinds are scrambling to appear there, from poets to filmmakers. How does the organization choose among them?

"Artists come to us, and we go to them," explains Miss MacArthur, who has been feeling overwhelmed lately by the sheer number of inquiries the center now receives. "We get from 500 to 800 applications each season," she continues, "from people who would like to show or perform here."

"We find a lot of talent that way," she notes. "But we also discover a lot through indoctrination from other artists. Someone comes up and says he saw a great tape in South Dakota, and we should call this person in Washington, or Berlin. You learn to trust those informants."

In addition, nearly everyone who works at the Kitchen is an artist, too. This has disadvantages — they usually want to "get back to their own work" after a couple of years — but Miss MacArthur values their "talent and immediacy and expertise" when selecting works for the program. An artist "knows how the piece was made," she says, and can offer "informed opinion" as no outsider could.

Significantly, it's the work — not the personality — that comes under consideration. And age is regarded as a red herring. "It's fashionable to talk about new and emerging artists," Miss MacArthur says. "That's good, because they're needed recognition for a long time. But they aren't necessarily 20-year-olds. They can be 60 or 70."

As an example, she mentions Conlon Nancarrow, the player-piano wizard who is "emerging for a whole new generation of people." Nor must an artist's material be newfangled. Though a Beethoven recital would be a bit far out for the Kitchen, it's a possibility, if the approach were new or different. Miss MacArthur recounts a conversation with two highly unconventional musicians — Julius Eastman and "Blue" Gene Tyranny — who discussed the idea of a thoroughly classical concert, perhaps Bach or



Laurie Anderson at one of 10th anniversary show

monumentally, video artist Joan Logue is assembling 30-second "commercials" by such radical artists as Spalding Gray, Philip Glass, Meredith Monk, and John Cage.

Then there's the usual monthly schedule of music, video, dance, and other works, presented at Kitchen headquarters, 484 Bleecker Street in the downtown SoHo neighborhood. Events take place in three rooms: a gallery for exhibitions, a small "viewing room" for video, and a large "performance space."

The Kitchen thrives on informality. It suits the philosophy of Miss MacArthur and her colleagues to tuck so many different works into one place at one time, with only a wall or two separating them. On an afternoon not long ago, for instance, one passed a group of portraits by Joan Logue, and overheard a rehearsal by pianist Frederic Rzewski, on

Scarlatti, performed with their own highly individualistic perspectives and techniques.

Summing it up, Miss MacArthur notes that "other places do the traditional things very well, so we don't have to. But if we saw some aspect which is being overlooked, that's just when we'd like to step in."

In her heart, Miss MacArthur regards the Kitchen as primarily a center for experimental video, with other artistic activities added for good measure. This is commendable, since video is often treated as a lonely stepchild — or at best, a baby brother — of the older arts. Still, video itself is shifting gears these days, and Miss MacArthur is quick to point out the change.

"We've espoused the box," she says. "When the Kitchen started, video was seen as an alternative to television. Now we're interested in video as television. The distance between the two is decreasing, and there's a lot of overlap."

In other words, video art is loosening up. You'll still find intensely radical and highly "conceptual" work, especially in museums and "fine art" settings that include video. But the Kitchen is leaning toward video that incorporates "mainstream" impulses while keeping up its own rigorous purposes and standards. While the usual TV content may be rejected, many traditional-style images may be retained and used in new ways. Or they may not be. There's really "no single direction" in today's video, says Miss MacArthur, and that's the most promising fact of all.

As the Kitchen grows older, its influences — in many arts — will probably increase.

"We're a clearinghouse for information," she says, "and we're beginning to see the applications we get — all the hundreds — as a real asset. We have experts to choose among all those aspiring artists, and our judgments can be valuable in the marketplace."

For example, cable-TV systems are looking for "software" to fill their new channels, and video artists are hoping for an "impending breakthrough" in sales of their work. "The cable executives want to buy something that's good," says Miss MacArthur, "and will still look good in 20 years. We're the ones who can judge that and give good advice all around."

Despite such plans and ambitions, the Kitchen knows hard times are ahead if government funding is substantially cut for artistic organizations. "Corporate support is very unlikely to make up the deficit," Miss MacArthur says, "and the corporations themselves say so."

"In any case," she continues, "corporate donors are among the most conservative. They'd rather give to things that are indisputably excellent, like the Metropolitan Opera. Of course, these should be supported. But it's hard for guys like us. It's hard for emerging organizations that have worked like crazy for 10 years, and thought things were going to start getting better — not worse."

Game as ever, though, the Kitchen is already planning more — and more imaginative — fund-raising operations. Even here, their approach is unconventional. "Museums can trim their acquisitions," Miss MacArthur says, "in order to keep the collection at all costs. For us, it's just the opposite."

"We're always looking for something new and different, because that exploration is what we're all about. We look for vacuums. And when we see one, we rush in!"