THE AVANT-GARDE IN THE KITCHEN

A tenth anniversary celebration of art for art's sake walks a fine line between indulgence and innovation, revealing the connections between the fringe and the mainstream.

By Jon Pareles

There's nothing more self-conscious than a self-styled avant-garde — and nothing that gets obsolete faster. The artists involved seem to spend a lot of time looking over their shoulders: dreaming of/dreading mainstream acceptance, searching for funds in the meantime, nervously awaiting rejection by the *next* avant-garde. All under the scrutiny of media — in mass, specialist, and in-group sizes — that rush to canonize and cannibalize new aesthetic notions, shunting them in and out of the spotlight like other "fashion trends." It's a tricky position for any artist whose vision isn't so armor-clad, and an even trickier one for any place purporting to be an avant-garde "institution" — it's a contradiction from the get-go.

These natterings are prompted by the tenth anniversary celebration of the Kitchen, probably the best-known (to foundation grantors, the NEA and the *New York Times*, anyway) avant-garde hotspot in America. For two "Aluminum Nights" in June, Kitchen regulars and sympathizers staged marathon shows at Bond's disco (which is a lot larger than the Kitchen's SoHo loft) as a benefit for next year's artists' fees. There was music by Philip Glass, George Lewis (currently the Kitchen's music director), DNA, Julius Hemphill, Laura Dean, Todd Rundgren, Glenn Branca, Love of Life Orchestra, Steve Reich's musicians, Lydia Lunch, the Raybeats, and others; videotapes and installations by or of Nam June Paik, Brian Eno, Shalom Gorewitz, the Kipper Kids, Public Image Ltd., and others; various dance troupes, and performance hybrids by Meredith Monk, Laurie Anderson, and Robert Ashley. It wasn't a historically accurate summation of the last ten years of the Kitchen or the New York scene, but it provided some illumination on the fate of the 70s avant-garde.

DEBORAH FEINGOLD

Glenn Branca performing his galvanizing "Ascension of Christ," a crescendo of tremolo guitar overtones climaxing in three volcanic power chords.

Cynics at the benefit suggested that what happened in the 70s was the continuation of the 60s avant-garde by other means. Watching three TV screens worth of Eno's varicolor New York skyline and recalling Andy Warhol's Empire State Building film, I could've agreed. And like most of the self-conscious vanguards of this century, 70s types made their own attempts to defy categories, to meld various arts, and to come to terms with technology. Naturally, there were some 60s holdovers and some direct follow-ups — where would Reich, Glass, et al., have been without La Monte Young? — although the technology (video!), the dress code and many of the participants were new. The telltale change, however, was in vocabulary and attitude: the 70s avant-garde replaced "cosmic" with "interesting." No more of that goofy, awestruck, vaguely deistic hippie stuff — art experiments in the 70s would be conducted in a dispassionate, value-free state of mind. Instead of invoking murky mystical ideals or programmatic manifestos, the 70s avant-garde simply claimed what Robert Fripp, prefacing a Kitchen concert, called "the right to be boring."

Just like oh-wow hippies, but with clearer heads, Kitchen audiences were generally willing to suspend judgment for the duration of an "event" (not a "happening," by the way). Where 60s vanguardists would throw in anything that looked vaguely useful, 70s types tended to be exclusive, carefully limiting their devices. People at new-music concerts might listen to a single note with its pitch being varied infinitesimally at great length, or to simple patterns repeated over and over, or to free improvisations, or — as at the Kitchen-sponsored "New Music, New York" festival in 1979 — to pieces like William Hellermann's "Squeek," — written for the various-register tones produced by an unlubricated swivel chair, on which Hellermann had developed remarkably precise buttocks technique. Some of the "boring" stuff turned out to be just that; some was self-indulgent; some, like "Squeek," made the most out of a fascinating dead end, and some was not only "interesting" but influential.

In the course of the 70s, minimalism — those simple repeated patterns — escaped the avant-garde and found itself an audience. Although some minimal procedures germinated in the 60s, the Kitchen (with its media savvy and status as an "institution") has been closely associated with the growing respect accorded Glass, Reich, and fellow travelers including Laura Dean, Michael Nyman, Eno, and others. As art music goes, minimalism has definitely hit the bigtime. Instead of playing for 200 people at the Kitchen, Glass and Reich can each sell out Carnegie Hall annually. As for outreach, their ideas have filtered into pop music via Talking Heads, XTC, Feelies, Public Image Ltd., David Bowie, Robert Fripp, even Giorgio Moroder and the Police. Perhaps because minimalism dovetails with the drone of rock and the repetition of funk (Reich has studied the African connection in Ghana), there's no culture shock between pop and this facet of the avant-garde. The presence on the benefit program of the Raybeats (surf-minimalism),

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Bush Tetras (hard-funk minimalism), Love of Life Orchestra (atonal jam-funk minimalism), Lydia Lunch (abrasive minimalism) and Red Decade (suite minimalism) showed how much cross-fertilization has occurred. Throughout the 70s, art types have kept a close, admiring watch on pop culture, and vice versa. Downtown New York even offered propinquity: the Kitchen's first home was the literal kitchen of the Mercer Arts Center — where the New York Dolls reigned — because there was space for video equipment and concerts. The art-punk connection now attracts a slew of poseurs, yet important new-music composers still seem more eager to be John Lydon than John Cage. (And, of course, any 70s-vintage record exec will be glad to tell you about his roster of "artists.")

Not that new-music composers are writing pop songs. The static-harmony, simple-rhythms repetition that rock picked up on is only one aspect of what Reich and Glass (and Meredith Monk and George Lewis and Glenn Branca and Robert Ashley and Laurie Anderson and Rhys Chatham) are doing. With the occasional exception of Monk and Anderson, these composers use time-spans much longer than the average pop tune, and they don't honor pop's clear distinctions between foreground and background. Glass' music has as much melody in the bass and midrange as in the treble, and it's so information-packed that it seems to refer to the whole of music history; allusions I heard for the first time at the Bond's performances of "Dance No. 3" and "Train Spaceship" included German oompah bands, "Chopsticks," dervish chants, Buxtehude organ polyphony and Romantic woodwind twitters. Glenn Branca's "The Ascension of Christ," the most galvanizing piece I heard at the benefit, was simpler: battering-ram drums and bass behind four noisy electric guitars playing tremolo chords, their overtones combining and colliding and reverberating, in a long slow crescendo that culminated in three volcanic power chords. Like Ravel's and Stravinsky's approximations of early jazz, Branca's music has nothing to do with pop structure, but it wouldn't exist if he didn't have an earful of rock 'n' roll.

Few of the other acts on the bill were such showstoppers; true to the Kitchen's past, there were experiments, including flops like the Feelies' percussion-and-guitar instrumentals (they sounded like inner tracks from *Crazy Rhythms*) and poet John Giorno's echoplexed rant, in which the technology overwhelmed the meaning. George Lewis' "Atlantic" called for a trombone quartet to sustain unison and near-unison notes for tests of overtone perception, overly reminiscent of Stockhausen's *Stimmung*. Nor was minimalism the only permitted style. Julius Hemphill improvised a bluesy, innocent melody while K. Curtis Lyle danced; DNA played a set of their laconic yet grating no-wave; and Maryanne Amacher sat primly behind an electronic console and unleashed vast, oceanic surges of sound in a piece called "Critical Band."

On the interesting/self-indulgent borderline was Garrett List's "The Kids Are Hungry," a half-sung, half-played "cantata" for voice and trombone, sort of a thinking-man's equivalent of a talking blues. There was also a streak of opportunism — something the Kitchen generally avoids — in the appearances of noted videophile Todd Rundgren (singing hippy-dippy acoustic protest songs), of Oliver Lake's execrable Jump Up (a sellout attempt that's not even funny, much less funky; Lake's singing is its worst insult) and of Jim Carroll, who read a passage that managed to combine his two basic shticks — heroin and Catholicism — in its opening sentences. Ten years ago, playing at the Kitchen meant a chance for in-group exposure; now it confers legitimacy like any other institution.

The 70s avant-garde had a heightened awareness of context; in fact, the only thing that united most Kitchen events was the notion of "performance" — the realization that every presentation involved some sort of transaction with the audience, whether it was a collusion, a ritual, a confrontation, an amusement, a put-on. The audience participation of the 60s turned into the audience self-consciousness of the 70s: if the emperor was, indeed, nude, was it cool to say so? At the benefit, guitarist Ned Sublette came onstage guitar-less in cowboy shirt, along with Glenn Branca, who strummed away on acoustic guitar while Sublette rasped and yodeled and howled an interminable ballad in some weirdly inauthentic hillbilly style, deadpan all the way. It was the sort of thing that might make you reconsider the great American redneck ethos, or might send you running for a Bob Wills record; since nobody knew what to make of it, I guess it worked. Conceptualism (and considerable intensity of execution) strikes again.

The implications of "performance" — something rockers have always considered — inspired composers and visual artists to come up with a new hybrid in the 70s: performance art, a catchall term for experimental presentations that were not exactly concerts or drama or dance or whatever. Quite a few performance pieces turned out to be eclectic, pretentious duds, but the benefit included three good ones. Meredith Monk's "Turtle Dreams (Waltz)" will no doubt stand on its own as music when ECM releases it in August, as a minimal minor-key vamp for electric keyboards with four-part vocal polyphony; in performance, the singers also dance in patterns, and a woman in a white hoop skirt drifts enigmatically across the stage at the end. Robert Ashley's *Perfect Live (Private Parts)*, portions of which are on two Lovely Music LPs, sounds like a bluesy vamp with deadpan narration, but it's actually a made-for-television opera, and its videotape version has so much going on that it'll take more than one (or ten) viewings to figure out all the connections. Most eclectic of all was Laurie Anderson's "Songs from United States," excerpts from her four-part magnum opus, which uses koan-like tests, slides and film and shadow projections, minimal vamps with lyrics (quasi-songs), and in one grand non-sequitur, a sax section that segues from Ellington-style chords to James Brown to marching-band stolidity to out-and-out noise. All of Anderson's puzzle pieces shouldn't fit together, but they do. What more can you ask from a maturing avant-garde?

Just one thing, but it's a tough one. Too many 70s avant-garde efforts — even in allegedly visceral rock 'n' roll — have been performed in deadpan, noncommittal style, as if even the idea of emotion would contaminate the experiment. After 50s and 60s vanguards tried to open up our feelings and senses, the 70s avant-garde reacted with strategies of alienation, indirection, irony; self-consciousness makes emotion seem unhip. One thing the 80s avant-garde should learn from pop culture is that no matter how smart you are it's possible — and a good thing — to move people's bodies and hearts as well as their minds. M

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