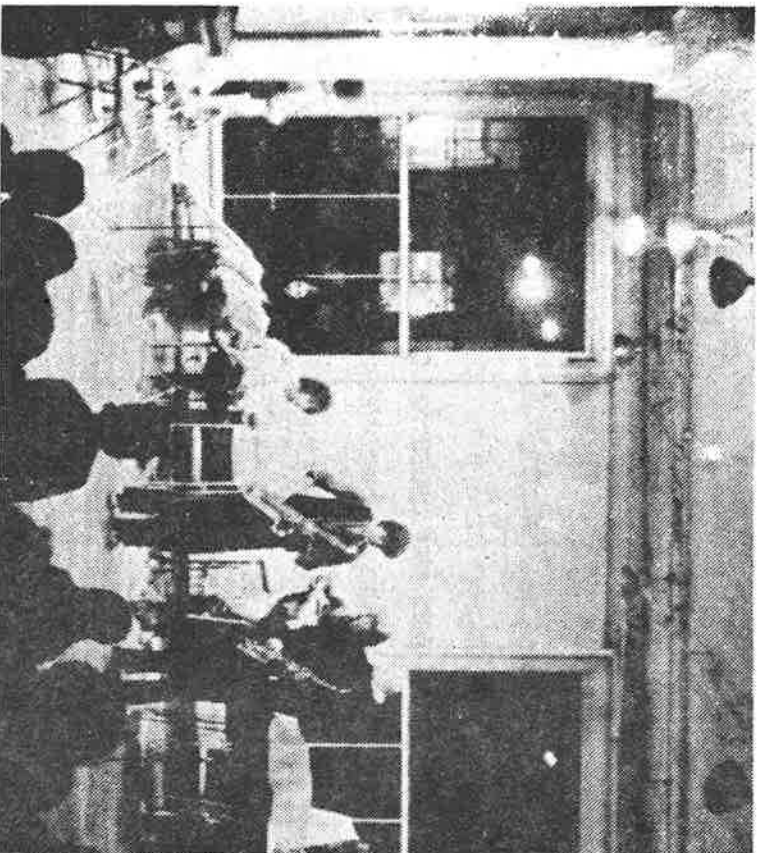


Finding 'alternative spaces' for new musical ideas

BY CHARLES WARD
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The main room of New York's Kitchen Center for Video, Music and Dance is a plain, functional area on the second floor of an old building in New York's SoHo district, as seen in this 1976 photograph.



Audiences often assume informal stances when they attend concerts at the Kitchen.

WHERE DO YOUNG MUSICIANS GO when they want to present work to the public? If they are involved in any avant-garde or experimental work, they often will have to search hard to find a performance place or an underwriting organization sympathetic to their art.

More and more, on a national basis, these musicians, along with artists from other media, are finding "alternative spaces" to be the champions of new ideas in an increasingly visible way. Whether through university ensembles, contemporary arts museums or independent non-profit organizations, the alternative arts are finding a new strength and identity.

That growth was expressly stated at the first national convention of American new music advocates which attracted representatives from over 50 organizations and governmental agencies to New York City in mid-June to talk about the burgeoning interest in new music. The convention was sponsored by the Kitchen Center for Video, Music and Dance and held in conjunction with its festival *New Music, New York* and an Institute in Contemporary Experimental Music held by the Music Critics Association.

A definition of alternative space was offered by Pauline Oliveros, a Houston native who now director of the Center for Music Experiment at the University of California at San Diego.

"Generally, the Alternative Space develops and maintains resources and facilities for musicians and artists too extensive for an individual to support. It is an institution without academic or conventional box office goals. It provides space, facilities, and assistance for artistic research and for performances for small, interested audiences. It is a meeting place for the exchange and development of experimental ideas. It often begins as a collective, usually interdisciplinary in nature, supported by several persons who are intensely interested and committed to such work, and who need an outlet or place to do their own work in an atmosphere of peers."

No generalizations about alternative spaces as institutions are feasible; variety is far more prevalent.

• The Kitchen was founded in 1971 by artists and interested supporters in the kitchen of the Broadway Central Hotel as part of the Mercer Arts Center. It was first a gallery for artists, soon adding music to its program, and more recently dance. Its programs include video installations, a video viewing room and library, art shows in a small gallery, concerts in a wide range of styles that include jazz and rock, and dance. Its budget for 1978-79 will be \$280,000-300,000, including \$70,000 for music, and may reach \$450,000 in 1979-80. About \$40,000 was earned this season. The Kitchen is evaluating its current space, since the building is being converted to a co-op. The price to remain on the second floor which the Kitchen now occupies will be \$300,000.

Money has come primarily from the government agencies, first the New York State Council for the Arts and then the National Endowment. Now, the Kitchen has received its first grants from private foundations, part of a conscious attempt to diversify sources of funding, says Mary MacArthur, the director.

The Kitchen has sought to remain in the vanguard of the avant-garde and experimental. "The thing about the Kitchen is that it's responsive to the new waves of artists," she says. "If there is a renaissance of painting in New York, I hope we would show it. I hope we never get to the point where we don't shock people."

• The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, a prestigious contemporary arts museum, has a performing arts program headed by Nigel Redden that sponsors about 200 performances a year in music, dance, theater and poetry with 100 in all kinds of music. Although some concerts are held in the 350-seat center auditorium, programs will be held in the most appropriate space in the Twin Cities area. The center had held more traditional Sunday afternoon concerts, but in the 1960s the program expanded into opera, chamber orchestra and more adventuresome ideas.

"Right now, we fill gaps. We present things other people aren't doing in the Twin Cities," says Redden. The \$200,000 performing arts budget includes \$30,000 for new music; although the performing arts program earns about 50-60 percent of its budget, new music programs lose 90-95 percent.

• Real Art Ways in Hartford, Conn. is slowly evolving into a regional alternative arts place for the population of 700,000 living between Boston and New York. The center primarily devotes itself to music, with a special emphasis on minority, Third World and women composers. A balance is struck, partially for financial reasons, between well-known names and unknowns. Through a skilful use of public funding (including CETA employees) and political alliances, Real Art Ways has grown in four years to a budget of \$165,000-\$175,000.

Real Art Ways opens its 1979-80 season with a visit by Karlheinz Stockhausen. It has presented John Cage "which set up a tremendous credibility with the central New England musical establishment," says Joe Celli, founder of the center. He has seen the influence of his space grow slowly as interest in new and experimental music has spread beyond the geographical boundaries of

Hartford. "The concentric circle theory is beginning to work," he says.

"More and more, we're having to put out a handwritten sign. Sorry," sold out.

Many of the centers share the same problems: a visible identity with the public, funding, publicity including attracting and holding attention of the local critics, education of the public, recognition by the traditional musical establishment.

The last has been achieved in some local areas — the New York State Arts Council has been the leader — and the National Endowment for the Arts will soon implement a Contemporary Music Ensemble Program and a revamped composers' program that will enable new music projects to be eligible for NEA funding in ways not previously open specifically to them. Centers with activities in other arts, video for example, have found the visual arts sector of the NEA to be almost "visionary" in its support of new art and are pushing the music programs to take that kind of aggressive stance.

As a result of the conference, a steering committee has been established to pursue three immediate goals for the experimental music forces:

• To expand the Meet The Composer program now operating in New York and other eastern states to a national program. With a total budget of \$250,000, the organization serves as a resource center for linking composers with local sponsors for personal visits. In the past five years, over 3,000 composers have touched an estimated 3,000,000 people through Meet the Composer programs.

• To form a national alliance of experimental music/new music organizations, proceeding at first with regional organizations. Tentatively, another new music festival is scheduled to be held at the Walker Arts Center next spring.

• To directly affect the panels at the National Endowment for the Arts so that new music is adequately represented on the committees making decisions about funding and grants, and eventually a representative of new music to be appointed to the National Council of the Arts which is the NEA's ruling board.

One enthusiastic representative called the movement "this incipient revolution." That sociological analysis remains to be verified, but certainly, as other conferees noted, the experimental music/new music movement is a grass-roots movements. It has rooted well and now is seeking a luxuriant growth.