

9/00

**THE KITCHEN CENTER FOR VIDEO AND MUSIC**  
**59 Wooster Street**  
**New York, New York 10013**

*NOTE: This article is from a report on The Kitchen written by Robert Stearns.*

The Kitchen Center for Video and Music is a Contemporary Arts Center specializing in, as the name states, *the arts*, which incorporates video and music. Public events and activities are presented under three programs: exhibitions, performances and contemporary music concerts. Mary MacArthur is Director; Eric Bogosian- Assistant Director; Rose Lee Goldberg- Video Curator; Jill Kroesen- Video Assistant; Rhys Chatham- Music Director; Marc Grafe- Music Assistant and Debbie Goldstein- Administrative Assistant.

**The Exhibitions** usually use video as the central visual element, using video monitors or projectors. Occasionally, exhibitions include photographs, drawings and sophisticated hardware other than video.

**The Performances** include events varying from screenings of new videotapes to works of non-literary theater. Performance Art, as it is often called, utilizes the various media of language, movement, video, sound, etc. It is an important and personal expression of art in this decade.

**The Contemporary Music Concerts** present the work of living composers. These concerts present a broad range of current endeavor. These concerts range from solo performances to ensemble and orchestral presentations. A season's schedule of concerts makes a clear statement about the quality and scope of contemporary music.

The Kitchen also houses a video collection and archives a viewing room, a touring program and in-house video production. Established in 1971 by Woody and Steina Vasulka in the kitchen of the Mercer Hotel, The Kitchen moved to its present space in 1973. Bob Stearns was director from 1973 to 1978. In the words of Peter Frank, the Kitchen is one of the first places "to devote itself entirely to a schedule of activities which defies easy stylistic or even mediumistic categorization."

#### **AN "ALTERNATIVE SPACE"?**

It is impossible to generalize quantitatively about these works. The Kitchen chooses to present artists' current works, which are sometimes unpolished sketches and ideas and at other times highly professional accomplished works. This flexibility is often impossible for larger, more established institutions to attempt. It has become vital, as the nature of contemporary art activity shifts, that a means is kept open for the artist to reach a public. If the older institutions cannot do this, it is necessary to invent new ones. One of the significant evolutions in the art world in the 1970's has been the development of what are sometimes called "alternative spaces." The term has some meaning. However, it carries with it a connotation of tentativeness, yet also betrays a comparison to some other form of institution - perhaps the museum. The Kitchen is not an alternative to anything. It has personal, uncollectable work and activity. The Kitchens' structure and its staff are uniquely suited to handle the special and changing requirements of the art world. One of the first places "to devote itself entirely to a schedule of activities which defies easy stylistic or even mediumistic categorization."

#### **RADIO AND TELEVISION**

The Kitchen occupies a large, handsome loft space in *South Central Soho*. As *Soho's* visitors have increased in number, so have The Kitchen's. But sitting tight is not The Kitchen's style. Now it is planning to come to its public when its public can not come to it. An ambitious but entirely feasible program of radio and television events is being mapped out in cooperation with Soho Television, WBAI, and other interested and feasible broadcast

organizations. By nature of the media which The Kitchen specializes in, the art presented is often suited for transmission to almost limitless audiences through radio and television.

The art media of video and music become the communications media of television and radio. This presents some staggering challenges for the future, and these areas are being explored. Inaugurated in February, 1976, cable television was introduced to the *Soho* neighborhood by the installation of a cable TV line at The Kitchen. Its presence charged the atmosphere, as old discussions about TV for art were rekindled. The reality of arts programming for television was now closer than ever in the past. We were able to begin scheduling exhibitions and videotapes that could be seen at the Kitchen and also viewed via cable TV, by the over 80,000 Manhattan Cable Television subscribers.

For music, a special event occurred on the evening of the Bicentennial celebrations. Through the efforts of WBAI-FM, the Center for New Music, The Kitchen and French National Radio, a live, two and a half hour program highlighting contemporary American music was broadcast simultaneously in New York and Paris. Coupled with television, we can foresee the possibility of live televised concerts and performances simulcast in stereo. We look forward to such collaborations in the future.

The art media of video and music become the communications media of television and radio. There has never been a time when it was possible to experience this connection between the production of art and its communication to audiences with such immediacy. The Kitchen is based both geographically and professionally within a community of artists. It is our desire to provide for both the community and the public at large within our finite resources.

-The Vasulkas

#### The Origin of The Kitchen:

For those who know The Kitchen in its current space, we would like to add a few notes on its origin, location and operation from spring 1971 to fall 1973. The "Old Kitchen" was located at the Mercer street entrance of the Broadway Central Hotel in the Mercer Art Center, a conglomerate of theatres adapted from the catering rooms and ballrooms of the hotel. Our space was a former kitchen.

The termination of the Mercer Art Center was the total collapse of the Broadway Central Hotel in August of '73. Shortly before this catastrophe, the directorship had been transferred to Bob Stearns, and the "New Kitchen" moved to its current location on Wooster Street.

The "Old Kitchen" was formulated by contributions of many people, namely Andy Mannik, Sia and Michael Tschudin, Rhys Chatham, Shridhar Bapat, Dimitri Devyatkin and later by Jim Burton and Bob Stearns, all of whom helped run the daily operations and programming. A particular credit for the three annual festivals: The Video Festival, The Computer Festival and The Womens Video Festival, should be given to Shridhar, Dimitri and Susan Milano respectively. Howard Wise, through "Electronic Arts Intermix," provided for us the administrative umbrella, without which we could not have existed. Eventually, the funding by the State Council on the Arts helped to secure the rent and further our continuation.

Since we started working with video we knew we had an audience. People would gather in our home. Friends, and friends of friends would come almost daily. The transition became inevitable. We had to go from a private place, our loft, to a public one. 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, homosexual 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.

The music in particular carried a similar kind of schism; on the one hand it was technological, represented by people working with synthesizers or certain structural investigations of sound - on the other hand, it was an almost theatrical rejection of established musical performing conventions. It was difficult to separate these tendencies within new music. Our personal interest was in performing video. Very soon we understood the generic relationship of video to other electronic arts, and this realization became our guiding policy.

To us it was difficult to become an establishment. We did not want to administer, or have an office, or even a phone. There was a pay phone by the door. Our idea of programming was not to select or curate, but to mediate and accommodate - no one was turned down and no one was served either, since there was no staff. The people that were around were creative artists and colleagues. The performers would bring their own crew, their own equipment and their own audience. At the end of the evening the audience would help stack chairs and sweep the floor. Some artists insisted on showing for free, but if there was a donation, the artist had a choice to collect it, split it or leave it to us. Almost everybody let us keep the box, which paid for the monthly calendar and petty cash.

It was this loose administrative arrangement that let people participate spiritually in the directorship. So, if there was any virtue in our arrangement, it was the participation. Once a place is well administered, it becomes a victim of its own well-working. It includes or excludes, seeks its hierarchy of qualities and eventually becomes an established idea, not always able to permeate with the needs of time. There is a self-preserving instinct within every creative person; preferring the sense of creative freedom to being bound to a successful model. Every instinct within the daily operation is superbly important. The Kitchen was only as successful as the artist of that particular day. It was reborn every 24 hours. 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.

The impulse to create a concept such as The Kitchen, should not be perceived as an administrative fundraising initiative. Looking back, we lived in a unique situation when an alternate cultural model had culminated into an ability to perform its content - whatever that meant. Suddenly it was ready and eager to express itself. We went into this venture with a simple and innocent belief that this activity, so relevant to us, also was of interest to others. As two newcomers, we were lucky to observe and participate so intensely in the bizarre culture of that time.

-Steina and Woody Vasulka

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