

a liminalities monograph

**Connecting with the Cosmic: Arthur Russell,
Rhizomatic Musicianship, and the Downtown
Music Scene, 1973-92**

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During the 1970s and early 1980s, a diverse group of artists, musicians, sculptors, video filmmakers and writers congregated in downtown New York and forged a radical creative network. Distinguished by its level of interactivity, the network discarded established practices in order to generate new, often-interdisciplinary forms of art that melded aesthetics and community. “All these artists were living and working in an urban geographical space that was not more than twenty-by-twenty square blocks,” notes Marvin J. Taylor, editor of *The Downtown Book*. “Rarely has there been such a condensed and diverse group of artists in one place at one time, all sharing many of the same assumptions about how to make new art.”¹

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The musical component of this network was prolific. Minimalist and post-minimalist “new music,” disco, new wave and no wave emerged in downtown Manhattan during the late 1960s and 1970s; free jazz continued its radical flight during the same period; and hip hop mutated into electro in the early 1980s. During this period of frantic productivity, musicians attempted to work across the sonic and social boundaries of their respective genre-led scenes, while venue directors sought to introduce innovative musical programs that were performed against a shifting visual backdrop of installations, specially-commissioned artwork, lighting effects and experimental video films. It was, in short, a remarkable period in the history of orchestral and popular music in terms of aesthetic innovation and social relations as well as the way in which creativity and sociality are bound together. Arthur Russell, I argue in this essay, was not only a representative product of the downtown music scene, but also that his interactions with a range of musicians, scenes, spaces and technologies marked out the network’s radical potential.

Following his arrival in New York in the summer of 1973, Russell performed and recorded orchestral music, folk, new wave, pop, disco and post-disco dance, as well as a distinctive form of voice-cello dub.²

together some of the thoughts of these co-authors, whose names are listed in the "interview" section at the end of this piece.

¹ Marvin J. Taylor, "Playing the Field: The Downtown Scene and Cultural Production, An Introduction," in Marvin J. Taylor (ed.), *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene 1974-1984* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 31.

² Minimalist music — a contested term that was rejected by a number of its key protagonists — emerged in the 1960s as a reaction to serial music. Whereas serial music prioritized atonality, complexity and twelve-tone theory, minimalist music developed an aesthetic based on simplicity, tonality and sustained notes. By the mid-1970s, a new generation of young composers, including Arthur Russell, became interested in drawing on but not repeating the principles of minimalism, and, along with some of the pioneers of minimalism, introduced a form of compositional music that retained elements of minimalism but was more complex and expressive. By the end of the 1970s, new music became the most popular name for this broader movement in post-serial compositional music. Meanwhile, disco music was the popular term used to describe the form of danceable music that was popularized in discotheques between 1974 and 1979. From the early 1970s onwards, discotheques played a broad range of "party music" that included

If such a broad-ranging engagement was implicitly rhizomatic — or structurally similar to a horizontal, non-hierarchical root network that has the potential to connect outwards at any point, and is accordingly heterogeneous, multiple, complex and resilient — Russell intensified the non-hierarchical, networked character of his practice by working within these genres simultaneously rather than moving from one to another according to a sequential, dialectical logic. In addition, he also attempted to establish meeting points between downtown’s diverse music scenes, not in order to collapse their differences and generate a single sound, but instead to explore the points of connection that could provide new sonic combinations and social relationships. Although Russell worked beyond sound when he linked up with choreographers, photographers and theatre directors, his main focus was on the music he produced with a mutating group of musicians, many of whom were sympathetic to his cross-generic project. Russell regularly emphasized the presence of this collective network above his own input when it came to choosing artist names for his records, and he also developed a range of sounds that articulated and reinforced the decentralized complexity of the downtown scene. For these and other reasons, I will argue that

danceable rock, R&B, soul and imported music. Disco initially referred to this broad umbrella of danceable music — music that was being played in discotheques — but it acquired a more formal aesthetic meaning in 1974, after which it came to signify danceable music that ran at approximately 120 beats-per-minute and often featured a four-on-the-floor bass beat, a propulsive rhythm section, clipped vocals and, quite often, orchestral accompaniment. In 1979 a national backlash against disco resulted in the music industry dropping the term, and around the same time a number of producers began to introduce a form of dance music — post-disco dance music — that introduced elements of rock and dub, and was also organized around a less metronomic beat and rougher production values. Meanwhile, “new wave” emerged as an alternative term to describe punk music, the stripped down, aggressive and often speedy form of rock music that rejected the bloated excesses of progressive rock. Initially introduced as a less intimidating term for the marketing of this sound, new wave soon came to denote an approach to making pop and rock that tended towards experimentation in terms of its use of vocals and instruments. As new wave gained in popularity, no wave emerged as an art-driven, eclectic alternative that emphasized atonality and repetition while drawing on the themes of conflict and nihilism. For its part, dub emerged as a stripped down, echo and reverb-heavy version of Jamaican reggae music.

Russell's work can be best understood through the development of a new concept: the concept of rhizomatic musicianship, or a musicianship that moves repeatedly towards making lateral, non-hierarchical sounds and connections.

In developing an analysis of a musician who worked across generic boundaries in relation to a specific space and time, I hope to theorize the way in which a progressive musicianship can be understood in the context of the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari — who developed the materialist metaphor of the rhizome in *A Thousand Plateaus* — as well as Manuel DeLanda's elaboration of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the assemblage.³ Studies of music that begin with this theoretical framework have focused on composers who have developed their oeuvre within a single genre, or on specific genres that encourage rhizomatic practices or rhizomatic sounds (such as jazz fusion, dance and dub).⁴ However, very little has been written that begins with the musician, which implies somewhat problematically that composition and genre are the primary structures through which musicianship always takes place. Given that the concepts, practices and effects of composition and genre have contributed significantly to the stratification and hierarchical division of music, an analysis that starts with the musician offers an alternative way of analyzing sound according to its immanent rhizomatic potential (because sound, as I will go on to argue, can only move according to rhizomatic movements).⁵ Of course this focus runs the risk of framing the artist in the same terms that eulogize the

³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006).

⁴ This is true of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, as well as Ronald Bogue's *Deleuze on Music, Painting, and the Arts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), which discusses Deleuze and Guattari's theorization of music. The essays included in Ian Buchanan and Marcel Swiboda (eds.), *Deleuze and Music* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004) also focus on genre. I discuss this literature in more detail below.

⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari also characterize rhizomatic movements as transversal movements or communications. See, for example, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 11.

composer as an individualized genius.⁶ To focus on Russell, though, is to focus on a collaboratively minded, commercially unsuccessful practitioner who wanted to make music that could build communities and touch the cosmic.

In order to avoid privileging Russell as an isolated genius, or conversely as a mere product of a determining social system, I develop an analysis of the downtown assemblage — a body of interacting buildings, creative producers, technologies and other components — that draws attention to the territory’s decentered, rhizomatic character. Second, I set out the terms of what might be called a “rhizomatic politics” and point to some of the ways in which Russell’s music is rhizomatic, providing an overview of his work in three aesthetic blocks — orchestral/compositional music, pop/rock music and disco/dance music. Third, I discuss Deleuze and Guattari’s writings on music, as well as the way in which their thoughts have been applied to a range of musical genres. Fourth, I expand my concept of rhizomatic musicianship through a detailed analysis of Russell, drawing out his relationship to genre (the organized spectrum of sound), making music (practices through which sound is generated), audiences (the intended recipients of sound), becoming-woman/child/animal (the non-dominant groups with whom he identified) and the cosmos. Finally, I introduce some concluding thoughts about the strategic consequences of Arthur Russell’s rhizomatic politics. Of course Russell did not read Deleuze and Guattari, or sit down in order to map out a strategy that could be characterized as rhizomatic, yet it is through *A Thousand Plateaus* that

⁶ This liberal-bourgeois formulation remains prevalent within the dominant popular music market. Even pop and rock bands — i.e. musical collectives — are regularly figured as being the vehicle of an individual genius (who is usually identified as being the lead singer and/or guitarist). Talking Heads and David Byrne provide an interesting example, and not only because Arthur Russell worked with the band. Although Byrne has been lauded as the inspiration behind Talking Heads, after the group split up none of its members — including Byrne — went on to repeat their earlier critical and commercial success.

the contours and relevance of Russell's musicianship can begin to be theorized.⁷

1. The Downtown Assemblage

In *A New Philosophy of Society*, Manuel DeLanda draws on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the assemblage to suggest that all social entities — from the subpersonal to the international — can be best understood through an analysis of their components.⁸ These components are not defined by their role in a larger assemblage, so “a component part of an assemblage may be detached from it and plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different.”⁹ And although components have a degree of autonomy, the properties of the component parts do not explain the assemblage as a whole because the whole is not an “aggregation of the components' own properties but of the actual exercise of their capacities.”¹⁰ In other words, assemblages are not reducible to their parts but emerge out of the *interactions* between their parts, so the capacities of a component “do depend on a component's properties but cannot be reduced to them since they involve reference to the properties of other interacting entities.”¹¹ Assemblage theory offers

⁷ This research is part of a wider project that analyses the emergence of creative radical communities in New York in the 1970s and 1980s. This project began with *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-79* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004) and will continue with two further books: a biography of Arthur Russell and an analysis of 1980s dance. The project is first and foremost a work of historical retrieval that is organized around archival research and extensive interviewing, and aims to establish a detailed record of the communities who participated in these scenes (while it is still possible to write such an account). Detailed descriptions are developed by quoting important protagonists, citing archival extracts and describing affective experiences, and these descriptions are combined with grounded contextual analysis, i.e. how the scene was related the wider world and why it matters.

⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 88. DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society*, 12, 121 (fn 10).

⁹ DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society*, 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

an alternative method for analyzing the world because components are not merely products of a grander social macro-structure. At the same time, DeLanda's conclusion that an assemblage amounts to "more than the sum of its parts" avoids the pitfalls of an individualist perspective that interprets society as a "mere aggregate."¹² The collaborations and the network are more important than any purportedly individual contribution, even if the creative producers in the network are active agents and not mere products.

Assemblage theory enables an analysis of downtown New York that refuses to fetishize the territory's industrial buildings as autonomous monuments of a bygone era, and the theory also helps avoid a portrayal of downtown's artistic population as constituting a series of discreet creators whose individual contributions resulted in the "aggregate" of downtown. At the same time, assemblage theory encourages a critique that interprets downtown New York as being more than the "mere product" of a shifting historical era that marked the demise of industrial capitalism and the onset of neoliberal capitalism in the West. Born in Mexico in 1952, DeLanda moved to New York City in 1975 and made a number of short films on Super 8 and 16 before he became a programmer and computer artist in the early 1980s. Maybe his experience convinced him he was neither nothing nor everything.

A swirl of labyrinthine streets that offset the geometric grid of midtown and uptown, the SoHo/NoHo/TriBeCa assemblage of downtown Manhattan functioned as the center for the city's light industry until structural limitations persuaded manufacturers to relocate to cheaper and more accessible zones during the 1960s. In search of expansive living spaces that were sufficiently cheap to enable them to pursue an unprofitable line of work, a range of artists, musicians, photographers, sculptors, video filmmakers and writers moved into the deserted area of downtown and forged a radical artistic community. Meanwhile, as downtown broke with its manufacturing past, industrial technologies were replaced by a series of creative technologies that ranged from traditional art materials and musical instruments to cutting-edge video cameras and synthesizers.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4, 5.

These three sets of components — the space of downtown, the cultural producers who moved into the area, and the technologies they deployed — combined to generate a diverse range of concerts, exhibitions, installations, video films, sculptures and dance parties, as well as multi-media works and events that combined more than one of these elements. At times it was difficult to see a pattern in these forms of expression, although a general link could be detected in their attempt to break with the perceived straightjacket of the past (uptown) and the commercial (midtown) in order to develop an experimental minimalist and post-minimalist alternative.

There was no privileged player in the reconstituted milieu of downtown New York. While it is tempting to attribute absolute agency to the artists who moved into the empty loft spaces and proceeded to produce a radical art, they were only able to move into the neighborhood because, light industry having moved out, the state decided to sanction their illegal occupation of the abandoned buildings as a cost-effective way to regenerate the area. In addition, downtown's semi-derelict condition and geographical location encouraged artists to develop an alternative practice that distanced them from the more comfortable conditions and rituals of midtown and uptown art, while the expansive contours of the lofts inspired them to develop big, bold, energized works — works they might not have produced in another milieu. The materials and technologies they used to make their art also acquired a level of agency, with the found objects of the neighborhood suggesting new forms of collage or installation, or new technologies such as the computer, the synthesizer and the video camera offering novel ways to capture the world.¹³ Most importantly, the sheer openness of downtown encouraged a wide range of creative producers to move into the geographical zone, and the resulting concentration of artists helped generate meetings and collaborations that would not have happened

¹³ For example, the video artists Steina and Woody Vasulka opened the Kitchen with a piece titled "Electronic Image and Sound Compositions" in which most of the generated sounds were "products of images, processed through sound synthesizer." Lee Morrissey (ed.), *The Kitchen Turns Twenty: A Retrospective Anthology* (New York: The Kitchen Center for Video, Music, Dance, Performance, Film and Literature: New York, 1992), 5.

if these sets of creative practitioners had remained geographically discreet. With no clear hierarchy in the relationship between people, buildings and machines, downtown amounted to a collective aggregation of components that could act both materially and expressively, as well as either increase (territorialize) or decrease (deterritorialize) its degree of homogeneity. Like all assemblages, the network did not evolve outside of the interactions of its components, and to varying degrees these interactions had material effects on the development of the network.

Although downtown did not follow a linear path of either deterritorialization or territorialization during the 1970s and 1980s, an overarching trajectory can be traced. The downtown assemblage deterritorialized from the manufacturing assemblage when light industry and its attendant workforce moved out. Cheap rents enabled the artistic population to survive by combining their work with part-time jobs — even Philip Glass had to return to taxi driving following the premiere of his acclaimed score for Robert Wilson’s opera, *Einstein On the Beach* — while nascent performance spaces received some support from public funding bodies. Downtown practitioners also produced a deterritorialized art by avoiding the methods that were being sponsored by established institutions (most notably in uptown Manhattan) or commercial entertainment institutions (which were located in midtown Manhattan), and the broad-ranging make-up of the downtown “artists’ colony” resulted in interdisciplinary meetings and collaborations that deterritorialized their former disciplines.¹⁴ The hybrid, fragmented and fractured aesthetic that came to dominate many of these productions helped reinforce the downtown assemblage’s decentered character. “[T]he vernacular of Downtown was a disjunctive language of profound ambivalence, broken narratives, subversive signs, ironic inversions, proliferate amusements, criminal interventions, material surrogates, improvised impersonations, and immersive experientiality,” notes the art critic Carlo McCormick. “It was the argot of the streets, suffused with the strategies of late-modernist art, inflected by the vestigial ethnicities of

¹⁴ The SoHo artist Richard Kostelanetz titles his memoir of SoHo, *SoHo: The Rise and Fall of an Artists’ Colony* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003).

two centuries of immigration, cross-referenced across the regionalisms of geographic and generational subculture, and built from the detritus of history on the skids as a kind of cut-up of endless quotation marks.”¹⁵

Three types of musician converged in downtown Manhattan during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Compositional minimalists started to perform in a range of spaces, including the Kitchen, an experimental venue for video and music that was located in the Mercer Street Arts Center; rock minimalists began to play in adjacent spaces in the Mercer Arts Center, with the New York Dolls taking up a residency in the venue’s Oscar Wilde Room from June to October 1972; and David Mancuso (the Loft), Robin Lord/Nicky Siano (the Gallery) and Richard Long/Mike Stone (the SoHo Place) staged all-night parties in a cluster of loft spaces. Although the collapse of the building that housed the Mercer Street Arts Centre in the summer of 1973 upset the equilibrium of these music scenes, each reacted by establishing a firmer and more demarcated foundation in downtown, with the Kitchen, the Loft and the Gallery moving to larger, more centrally-located premises, while the displaced rock minimalists regrouped in an underused, unpopular venue called CBGB’s, which was situated on the Bowery. By the time the reconfiguration was complete, each music scene was committed to a form of experimentalism yet operated as one of a series of self-contained aesthetic and social entities.

If the music scene was in a state of limited flux, with musicians exploring boundaries within but not between generic parameters, many still perceived music to be a space of relative mobility, in part because the art scene had been commodified more rapidly. The first art gallery opened in SoHo in 1968 — perhaps because art objects such as paintings were cheaper to create than musical recordings, and art was more attractive than music to individual investors — and journalistic accounts of “the rise of SoHo” focused on the area’s

¹⁵ Carlo McCormick, "A Crack In Time," in Marvin J. Taylor (ed.), *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene 1974-1984* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 69.

burgeoning art market.¹⁶ This process of commodification encouraged individual artists to develop an identifiable and marketable style, and this relative sedimentation (or “molarization” in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms) of the art market prompted a number of artists to explore the freer (or more “molecular”) music scene. Laurie Anderson, a sculptor, followed this path by combining spoken word poetry with processed violin playing, and when the Rhode Island School of Design graduates David Byrne, Tina Weymouth and Chris Frantz arrived in the city they quickly switched their attentions to the less institutionalized music scene. “When I came to New York I guess I was very naïve,” Byrne told a reporter from *Art News*. “I expected the art world to be very pure and noble. I was repulsed by what I saw people putting themselves through, the hustling to try and



The Kitchen, 1976. Left to right: Garrett List with his back turned to the audience, Arthur Russell, Ernie Brooks, Rhys Chatham (left saxophone), Scott Johnson (guitar), Kenneth (then Keshavan) Maslak (centre sax) and Peter Gordon (right sax). Photograph by Teri Slotkin. Courtesy of Robert Stearns.

¹⁶ For example, see “The Most Exciting Place to Live in the City,” *New York*, 20 May 1974.

get anywhere. My natural reaction was to move into a world that had no pretense of nobility. Since I'd always fooled around with a guitar, I formed a rock band."¹⁷ One can imagine Deleuze and Guattari approving of their decision. "In no way do we believe in a fine-arts system; we believe in very diverse problems whose solutions are found in heterogeneous arts," they write. "To us, Art is a false concept, a solely nominal concept; this does not, however, preclude the possibility of a simultaneous usage of the various arts within a determinable multiplicity."¹⁸

Cultural practitioners started to work in earnest across generic and disciplinary boundaries from the mid-seventies onwards. If they had not done so already, galleries, concert spaces and dance venues refashioned themselves as multi-media environments that promoted a range of artistic practices, many of which were presented against the backdrop of a sound system and a DJ. Showcasing a wide range of downtown performers, these venues began to attract significant audiences, which in turn meant that the performers could expect to be paid for their efforts. More than ever before, downtown artists and musicians could look forward to earning a modest income from their art, and this encouraged a further surge in productivity that culminated in what McCormick describes as "a total blur."¹⁹ Downtown's rhizomatic assemblage became a multitude, which made it — drawing on Tiziana Terranova's description of multitudes — difficult to control yet also enormously productive thanks to its "dynamic capacity to support 'engaging events,' while acting with a high degree of distributed 'autonomy and creativity'."²⁰

The artistic movement was territorialized in legal terms in June 1974 when the New York authorities passed the Emergency Tenant Protection Act, which validated the previously shady practice of loft living and specified that residents had to be artists (or manufacturers). However, the attempt to revitalize downtown as a dedicated artistic

¹⁷ Steve Hagger, *Art After Midnight: The East Village Scene* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 13.

¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 300-1.

¹⁹ McCormick, "A Crack In Time," 68.

²⁰ Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 105.

zone in which residents would maintain the local infrastructure and start to pay taxes proved to be unsustainable. Realizing that prices could not be held down indefinitely and that the state would not be able to restrict residential use, a number of artists bought up properties as a real state investment, and at the same time non-artists also started to move into the area — either because they liked it or because they recognized an excellent investment opportunity when they saw one — and took to arguing with the regulatory authorities that they were in fact artists. During the second half of the 1970s, the gentrification of SoHo accelerated, with the opening of the Dean and DeLuca supermarket in 1977 a potent symbol that the area was no longer run “by the artists, for the artists,” even if the artist presence was still central to the area’s “cool” cachet.

Even when it was cheap, SoHo was still too expensive for many creative practitioners, and so many ended up living in satellite neighborhoods such as the East Village and Alphabet City. This process accelerated after property prices skyrocketed at the end of the decade, and towards the beginning of the early 1980s the *New York Rocker* declared that because “old SoHo” had become an “affluent Disneyland” of “chi-chi novelty shops... and chi-chi eateries,” downtown now extended from “from Alphabet City to the Fulton Fish Market, NoHo to Tribeca [sic].”²¹ The expansion of downtown resulted in the closing down of the supposedly Utopian period when artists were able to live only with other artists, although it could be asked: what is so Utopian about artists being able to live with each other? In the expanded version of downtown — a downtown that no longer revolved around SoHo — artists stopped thinking of neighborhoods such as the East Village as secondary satellites, and they also began to value the way in which they shared their buildings and streets with a variety of non-artists.

This expanded version of creative downtown also came under attack during the first half of the 1980s. The Reagan administration’s decision to divert money from welfare and the arts to the military resulted in arts organizations having to become financially self-

²¹ Tim Carr, “That Downtown Sound... From A to Z,” *New York Rocker*, June 1982.



Twelfth Street, situated between First Avenue and Avenue A, in 1987. Arthur Russell ended up living on Twelfth Street for almost his entire adult life. Photograph by Allen Ginsberg. Courtesy of Peter Hale.

sufficient, which in turn encouraged them to take fewer risks when drawing up cultural programs, and downtown's identity as an area for artistic experimentation was further undermined when the beneficiaries of the stock market boom started to move into its chi-chi lofts. Taylor dates the end of the downtown era at 1984, by which time "the larger art world had encroached on the scene."²² Kyle Gann, who writes about downtown music for the *Village Voice*, agrees that some kind of decisive shift had taken place. "After 1985, commercial pressures were about as difficult to avoid in Downtown Manhattan as rhinoceroses," he comments.²³ The pressures on downtown's alternative culture continued to intensify during the 1990s when the AIDS crisis hit its peak and Mayor Giuliani set about

²² Taylor, "Playing the Field," 35.

²³ Kyle Gann, *Music Downtown: Writings from the Village Voice* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2006), 7.

clamping down on New York's nightclubs and "cleaning up" the city.

Then again, the obstacles and limits did not always come from outside. "To read the history of Downtown between the decades, or what really happened between 1974 and 1984, is not to follow the footsteps imprinted in history but the skid marks of spontaneous encounters and urgent negotiations," writes McCormick in *The Downtown Book*, and this kind of depiction of downtown is becoming commonplace.²⁴ Yet McCormick introduces a point of qualification when he adds that the "dichotomy between external disillusion and insider membership is a relationship Downtown struck not only against the mainstream but also consistently upon itself" and that almost every "congregation that mattered was invented on its own conditions and fabricated its own turf."²⁵ The music scenes that emerged around new music, new wave/no wave and disco/dance were as notable for their internal rules as their laid back openness, and it was left to figures such as Arthur Russell to demonstrate that these sonic blocks of experimentation — the blocks of compositional music, pop and new wave music, and dance music — were porous.

Having lived in Oskaloosa, Iowa, between 1951 and 1967, and then San Francisco between 1968 and 1973, Russell moved to New York in the autumn of 1973. He spent his first months living uptown, near to the Manhattan School of Music (MSM), where he was studying, but headed downtown when Allen Ginsberg (a friend from San Francisco) invited him to share his East Village apartment. A westernized Buddhist who pursued his spiritual practice most intensely between 1970 and 1973, Russell thought about returning to San Francisco, where he could spend time with Yuko Nonomura, his spiritual teacher, and go hiking in the mountains. Yet Russell moved from Oskaloosa to San Francisco to New York because he judged these assemblages to be progressively less hierarchical and more intertwined, and although downtown Manhattan consisted of series of scenes that "fabricated" their "own turf," they also proved to be relatively permeable. It was in downtown New York that Russell's interactions proved to be most productive — i.e. where he was most

²⁴ McCormick, "A Crack In Time," 71.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 78, 79.

effected and effective — and his interactions with other musicians formed part of the material exchange that led to the downtown assemblage becoming more eclectic, democratic and hybrid. Russell appears to have understood that he worked not as an autonomous individual but instead *in relation* to other creative practitioners given that his work emphasized repeatedly the process of interaction rather than his own authorship, and it was in downtown that he was most able to work rhizomatically between genres or scenes.

2. Rhizomatic Politics and Arthur Russell's Musical Work

What might it mean to work rhizomatically? The key principles can be drawn from *A Thousand Plateaus*, a decentered, non-sequential book in which Deleuze and Guattari foreground their sympathies in the introductory chapter, which is titled “Introduction: Rhizome.”²⁶ “A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines,” write the authors. “You can never get rid of ants because they form an animal rhizome that can rebound time and again after most of it has been destroyed.”²⁷ Extending the category of the rhizome to include other natural and non-natural networks that are similarly organized, the authors add, “[T]he fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction ‘and... and... and...’”²⁸ The rhizome is therefore indicative of Deleuze and Guattari’s realist ontology in that it is material (because strawberry plants, the internet, swarms of bees and other rhizomatic phenomena exist in the world) and metaphysical (in that it raises abstract questions about the nature of being), and it also contains an immanent spiritual goodness. “We’re tired of trees,” they write. “We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles. They’ve made us suffer too much. All of arborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics. Nothing is beautiful or loving or political aside from underground stems and aerial roots, adventitious growths and

²⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 3-25.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

rhizomes.”²⁹ Avoiding dualistic distinctions, Deleuze and Guattari caution that elements of the rhizome and the arborescent can be found in each other, and comment that there are “despotic formations of immanence and channelization specific to rhizomes, just as there are anarchic deformations in the transcendent system of trees, aerial roots, and subterranean stems.”³⁰ But these nuances are submerged when they conclude: “Make rhizomes, not roots, never plant! Don’t sow, grow offshoots! Don’t be one or multiple, be multiplicities!”³¹

How can a “beautiful/loving” rhizome be distinguished from a “despotic” rhizome? Or, what differentiates a progressive rhizome from a regressive rhizome? In the absence of any clear lead from Deleuze and Guattari, I would like to suggest that non-despotic rhizomes display an ability to co-exist with other rhizomes, or be faithful to the principles of their own structure, whereas despotic rhizomes are characterized by an inability to co-exist with equivalent structures. Further, rhizomes become especially beautiful and loving when they embody and/or voice the pluralism, multiplicity and complexity that is immanent in their devolved, flat, networked, non-individualistic structure, so that open/heterogeneous communities are broadly speaking more rhizomatic than closed/homogeneous communities because they have developed the principle of non-hierarchical flatness to its logical conclusion. All viruses are rhizomatic, but those that kill their hosts, such as the AIDS virus, are not especially beautiful or loving, which suggests that a straight-forward celebration of the “viral” is politically limiting. It follows that human rhizomes must be assessed according to the same criteria and that the question must be asked: to what extent does human activity exist at the expense of other rhizomatic and non-rhizomatic structures? Human rhizomes have more potential than plant and animal rhizomes to form lateral relations across difference, yet if human rhizomes are to be beautiful and loving they must also have a planetary consciousness.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

I would add that rhizomatic assemblages that include humans (or cyborgs, which are assemblages that combine the human with the animal or the technological) have the potential to intersect with a wide range of progressive positions that articulate a dynamic, non-fixed egalitarianism. Opposed to patriarchal culture's rootedness in masculinity, the phallus and the experience of singular, centered sensation, a rhizomatic politics of gender and the body would be coherent with a feminist/queer politics that decentralizes the experience of non-genital sensation, and acknowledges gender and sex to be socially produced (as argued by theorists such as Rosie Braidotti, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Elizabeth Grosz and Donna Haraway).³² An equivalent rhizomatic politics of race would highlight the transracial interconnectedness of bodies, the non-privileged position of melanin in the human body, and the way in which diasporic networks generate hybrid identities (which would cohere with the work of critics such as Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall).³³ Because rhizomes are always in a process of becoming, a rhizomatic politics could align with queer and race projects that are anti-essentialist, i.e. articulate a non-fixed theory of identity, while the material character of the rhizome would militate against such a politics becoming overly reliant on the fanciful idea that being is merely a matter of postmodern discursive play. Of course human/cyborg rhizomes can possess a discursive dimension that has

³² Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2002). Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993). Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction (Volume I)* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990 [1978]). Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward A Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). Donna Haraway "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-81.

³³ Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures and the Allure of Race* (London: Penguin, 2000), and *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993). Stuart Hall "The Multicultural Question," in Hesse Barnor (ed.), *Un/settled Multiculturalisms* (London: Zed, 2000), 209-41; "New Ethnicities," in Kobena Mercer, *Black Film, British Cinema*, (London: BFI/ICA, 1988), 26-31; and "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" in Gina Dent (ed.), *Black Popular Culture*, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 21-33.

material effects, yet rhizomes are not exclusively determined by discourse because discourse does not frame the entire material world, so a rhizomatic politics should also be grounded in the material and the affective.³⁴ In other words, sensation (music's primary textural mode) must be considered alongside discourse (music's secondary textural mode).

As I will go on to outline, Arthur Russell worked rhizomatically to the power of seven. First, he worked within a series of networks and prioritized the collaborative group over his own individual presence to the extent that he de-emphasized his own input. Second, his music-making methods were rhizomatic inasmuch as he democratized the decision-making process, encouraged co-musicians to improvise, immersed himself in editing, took to recording several versions of the same song, and valued the openness of live performance to the closed circuit of the commodified recording. Third, he made music that was aesthetically rhizomatic in that it was often decentered, loosely structured, non-hierarchical and non-teleological. Fourth, he worked across three broad blocks of sound — orchestral/composition music, pop/rock music and disco/dance music — and often worked on them simultaneously. Fifth, he worked with genres and sounds that were “non-despotic” and valued forms (such as pop, disco and hip hop) that were to varying degrees associated with the feminine, the black and the gay (i.e. the non-hegemonic). Sixth, he attempted to make connections between genres and sounds that were to varying degrees segmented. And seventh, as a result of these connections Russell helped generate the idea of an integrated downtown community (rather than a series of segmented, semi-autonomous scenes).

What follows is an initial outline of Russell's rhizomatic politics — a politics that was concerned with the creation of an egalitarian, tolerant, integrated, non-individualistic artistic community (rather than an activist politics that argued and campaigned for the future

³⁴ The affective is defined Brian Massumi in his translator's introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus* as "a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act." Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, xvi.

introduction of such a community on a much wider scale). Russell did not develop his rhizomatic approach through individual study, but instead through a series of interactions that began in Oskaloosa, accelerated in San Francisco and reached their zenith in New York. He engaged with orchestral/composition music while in Oskaloosa, San Francisco and New York; he started to explore pop (in its loosest sense) in San Francisco, and then much more concertedly in New York; and he started to explore dance only after he had arrived on the East Coast. The rest of this chapter develops a condensed outline of those blocks, their relationship to the assemblages of Oskaloosa, San Francisco and New York, and their links to each other — at least as these relations were imagined and practiced by Russell. Because the thematic block approach creates an impression of generic order and relative separation that never existed in Russell's day-to-day life, the blocks should be imagined as existing in parallel, even though can only be presented one at a time. Russell was respectful of the differences that existed between these blocks of sound, but the lines that ran between them also intrigued him, and whenever it was possible he kept sound in rhizomatic play.³⁵

a. Compositional Music

Arthur Russell's primary musical affiliation as he grew up in Oskaloosa was with compositional (or orchestral/art) music. Suggesting a conservative outlook, his affiliation in fact constituted a rebellion against pop, the preferred music of his peers — “the jocks in school in the small town that I grew up in,” as Russell described them later — who liked to beat him up.³⁶ After running away to Iowa

³⁵ The lateral scope of Arthur Russell's work can be better captured in an account that moves according to a sequential series of diachronic movements, i.e. develops a series of temporal snapshots and explores the range of music he was pursuing at any one moment. This approach, which I have adopted in my biographical account of Arthur Russell's life for Duke University Press, faces an alternative problem in that the attempt to capture the striking simultaneity of his work forsakes the calm control that can come from a thematically ordered account.

³⁶ Quoted in Peter Zummo, “Eclectic Bubble Gum,” *SoHo Weekly News*, 17 March 1977.

City and then San Francisco, Russell enrolled in the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where he studied composition as a part-time student, and also in the Ali Akbar College of Music, where he studied Indian classical music, again in a part-time capacity. Russell moved in tangents in both environments. The San Francisco Conservatory of Music became the avenue through which he started to take private lessons with an influential tutor, William Allaudin Mathieu, whose inspirations ranged from Nadia Boulanger (the influential French-born composer, conductor and teacher) to Pandit Pran Nath (the renowned north Indian vocalist), and during these lessons Russell focused on writing angular folk songs. Meanwhile, at the Ali Akbar College he persevered with his cello, a non-traditional instrument in this context, and looked to blend the aesthetic practices of Indian classical music (vocal techniques, the drone, devotional songs, rhythm cycles, etc.) with other musical forms. “He wasn’t letting anyone dictate to him that he needed to make a choice,” recalls Alan Abrams, a friend in the college.³⁷ Russell pursued this dual track of Indian classical music and Western art music before he became aware of composers such as Terry Riley, who pursued a similarly unusual path in his attempt to overcome the formal conventions of Western art music. Signaling his intent, Russell featured the darbukka among more conventional western instruments in his first public concert, which was held at 1750 Arch Street in San Francisco in 1973.

In the spring of 1973 Russell decided to move to New York in order to develop a livelihood as a musician, and the following autumn he enrolled in the MSM, a prestigious launch pad from which to begin a career as an academic/composer. Situated uptown and embedded in the complex, intentionally alienated sounds of serial and post-serial music, the MSM failed to satisfy Russell’s desire to reach beyond the formal and social limits of the Western orchestral tradition. Russell sought out friendly alliances yet became perturbed by the way students were required to obey the aesthetic model set out by senior professors if they wanted to have a chance of pursuing a career as an academic composer. “He was having interesting problems with Charles Wuorinen [an influential serial composer who was based at

³⁷ Alan Abrams interview with Tim Lawrence, 20 July 2005.

the MSM],” remembers Christian Wolff, who Russell visited at Dartmouth during this period. “Wuorinen is this hyper controlling, rationalized serial composer, so he was completely at the other poll of what I imagine Arthur was interested in doing and what I was doing. The idea of him studying with Wuorinen blew my mind. They were at loggerheads the whole time.”³⁸ On one occasion, when Wuorinen gave umbrage to one of Russell’s compositions, “City Park,” a repetitive piece that fused music with writings from Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein, Russell explained that he was excited by the way its non-narrative structure meant listeners could “plug out and then plug back in again without losing anything essential.” Wuorinen replied, “That’s the most unattractive thing I’ve ever heard.”³⁹



Arthur Russell playing cello on a beach in Minnesota, circa September 1971. Courtesy of Chuck and Emily Russell.

³⁸ Christian Wolff interview with Tim Lawrence, 2 July 2007.

³⁹ Arthur Russell recounted this story to Frank Owen, "Echo Beach," *Melody Maker*, 11 April 1987.

During his first semester Russell looked into the prospects of transferring to another college. Having spent an afternoon hanging out with John Cage the day after he arrived in New York, Russell got in touch with Wolff, one of the pioneers of indeterminacy, and thought about transferring to Dartmouth. That option appears to have become less enticing after Russell was invited by Wolff to play in a New York concert, at the end of which he met Rhys Chatham, the first Music Director of the Kitchen.⁴⁰ Chatham was sufficiently impressed with Russell to persuade Robert Stearns, the director of the Kitchen, to appoint him as the venue's next Music Director for the ensuing season, which ran from the autumn of 1974 to the summer of 1975. Having accepted the offer, Russell attempted to support other local and relatively low profile composers rather than build a program that accentuated the work of composers who were beginning to acquire an international reputation. His season opened with Annea Lockwood, a local musician, who performed "Humming: and Other Sensory Meditations," a minimalist piece that invited audience participation. And the final concert featured Nova'billy, an upfront communist outfit led by Henry Flynt, whose wacky take on music and politics was not always respected by the serious end of the music market.⁴¹ It was left to Stearns to etch out a night for Steve Reich.

In rejecting the serial/post-serial establishment and exploring a line of orchestral music that has been variously dubbed "gradual music," "phase music," "process music," "static music" and "minimalist music," Russell joined a comparatively flat network in which the pioneering figures (especially Riley, Reich, Glass) were still young and lacked the authoritative gravitas that could come with an institutional base. Even though the aesthetic forged by these composers was still in its infancy, younger composers such as Chatham and Russell, as well as figures such as Peter Gordon and Garrett List, were not interested in repeating their approach, but

⁴⁰ Indeterminacy decentres the authorship of the composer by introducing elements of chance and improvisation into the compositional process.

⁴¹ For more on Henry Flynt, see Benjamin Piekut, "Taking Henry Flynt Seriously," *Institute for Studies in American Music Newsletter*, 34, 2, Spring 2005.

instead sought to develop their own radical flights. “Arthur was very much influenced by the whole minimalist thing,” says List. “But we didn’t want to be minimalists, so we tried to find a way of dealing with it without jumping on the bandwagon.”⁴² Downtown’s compositional network was also flat because its participants sought to write music that would attract an audience — an outlook that had been dismissed by uptown composers, who were not overly concerned with their accessibility.⁴³ “This [serial music] was seen as a complex music and the uninitiated listener was supposed to find it as difficult to understand as advanced physics,” notes Gordon, who developed a close relationship with Russell. “The composer’s ‘audience,’ therefore, was a small group of fellow composers, academics and aficionados. What we posited was a populist philosophy: new music could be composed which addressed both the sensual needs of the listener as well as the intellect. The audience for this music was seen as being the members of the community — artists, writers, neighborhood people.”⁴⁴ Because the vast majority of downtown composers never had any money to put on shows, they regularly asked their composer/musician peers to volunteer their services, and a network based on an extended exchange of favors became the central mechanism through which new compositions got to be staged. Russell became a player in this network, playing for friends, who in turn participated in his own performances.

During his year as Music Director, Russell also staged a performance of *Instrumentals*, his first major composition. Although *Instrumentals* was notated, its modular structure allowed Russell and his co-musicians to select a range of sections to practice, after which they would listen to a tape of their efforts and decide collectively which blocks should be performed during the concert. This decentering of the author was embedded further thanks to Russell’s

⁴² Garrett List interview with Tim Lawrence, 23 October 2006.

⁴³ In 1958, *High Fidelity* published an article by Milton Babbitt titled “Who Cares if You Listen?” In fact Babbitt titled his article “The Composer as Specialist,” only for editors to introduce the more aggressive alternative without his knowledge. However, the new title nevertheless resonated with the elitist outlook of serialism. (Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milton_Babbitt on 25 July 2007.)

⁴⁴ Peter Gordon interview with Tim Lawrence, 6 February 2007.

decision to encourage his musicians to use the notated score as a launch pad for improvisation, a move that signaled a further shift away from the stratified and hierarchical foundations of the compositional tradition. Drawing heavily on the basic standard era chord progressions that had dominated popular music during the 1930s and 1940s, the content of Russell's provisional score contributed to the impression that he was deliberately distancing himself from the elitist underpinnings of compositional music, while the sheer length of the composition, which ran to a possible forty-eight hours, inevitably decentered the position of the composer, whose artistic intention would always remain fragmented. The introduction of an accompanying slide show (featuring nature photos taken by Yuko Nonomura) encouraged the audience and the musicians to assimilate the music in relation to the cosmos rather than the figure of the composer. Meanwhile, Russell conducted the concert in a deliberately low-key style in which he restricted himself to deciding when an improvisatory flight from the selected refrain had become so chaotic it was no longer feasible to continue. The clipped effect of these sections, some of which did not extend beyond thirty seconds, resulted in the performances out-popping pop in their sparkling brevity.

Sound clip⁴⁵: [Instrumentals](#), recorded live at the Kitchen, 27 April 1975. From *First Thought Best Thought* (Audika, 2006). Courtesy of Audika.

Glass believed *Instrumentals* demonstrated Russell was “way ahead of other people in understanding that the walls between concert music, popular music and avant-garde music are illusory.”⁴⁶ (“There have been attempts from both camps to bridge the still very considerable gap between contemporary art music and the wilder shores of popular entertainment, with concerts by Peter Gordon at the Kitchen and some of the work of Brian Eno immediately coming

⁴⁵ Editor's note: All of the links to sound clips direct you to mp3 files on the *Liminalities* server.

⁴⁶ Philip Glass interview with Tim Lawrence, 19 November 2004.

to mind,” wrote Robert Palmer of a later performance in the *New York Times*. “Mr. Russell’s presentation, imperfect though it may have been, suggested not just a furtive embrace, but a real merging.”⁴⁷ Glass began to take a keen interest in Russell and, in his capacity as Music Director for Mabou Mines, invited him to play a cello piece during the theatre company’s performance of the Samuel Beckett radio play *Cascando*. A short while later, Glass arranged for Russell to compose the score for *Medea*, which was staged by the avant-garde theatre director Robert Wilson. (The high-profile commission appeared to mark a decisive turning point in Russell’s career as a composer, but Russell ended up falling out with Wilson and was eventually replaced by the British minimalist composer Gavin Bryars.) Glass went on to release Russell’s score for *Medea* on his own label — the piece was re-titled *Tower of Meaning* — and Russell followed this up with the release of *Instrumentals*, which came out on the Belgian label Les Disques du Crépuscule. The Wilson fall-out left Russell deeply disillusioned with the compositional world, however, and although he would go on to perform pieces for the cello at downtown venues such as the Kitchen and the Experimental Inter-media Foundation, he no longer harbored the dream that he could flourish as a composer of orchestral music.

b. Pop and New Wave

As a kid growing up in Oskaloosa, Arthur Russell held popular music in disdain, and when he moved to San Francisco in the late 1960s he steered clear of the city’s rock scene, which was so successful it was dominant (at least locally). Nevertheless Russell did start to compose avant-garde folk songs for the guitar and cello during this period, and he began to embrace pop music after hearing Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers play live in New York towards the beginning of 1974. That experience was powerful enough for Russell to decide to invite the band to perform across four consecutive nights at the Kitchen during his year as Music Director, and the following year he persuaded his successor to book Talking Heads. “Arthur’s unique

⁴⁷ Robert Palmer, “Pop Music: Modern Meets Rock,” *New York Times*, 6 May 1977.

contribution was to introduce rock groups to the programming, which was considered heresy at the time, but proved to be prophetic in its vision,” recalls Rhys Chatham. “I was shocked. But it made me think, and I ended up joining in.”⁴⁸ Russell had come to appreciate that pop music as well as compositional music was engaged in a form of minimalism — or a pared-down repetitive music that could generate a transcendental experience — and in a 1977 interview with the composer-musician Peter Zummo he argued that pop was often ahead of the avant-garde in terms of aesthetic progressiveness. “In bubble-gum music the notion of pure sound is not a philosophy but rather a reality,” he told Zummo. “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.” Russell added that pop music’s commercial self-sufficiency enabled its practitioners to be honest and unencumbered, whereas avant-garde art music tended to generate pretentious discussions about value (including discussions about its superiority to pop and jazz) because its composers had to justify their right to be scheduled on aesthetic rather than commercial grounds.⁴⁹

The separation between the worlds of compositional music and popular music was so ingrained that even though the old Mercer Street Arts Centre housed both kinds of music, there was no point of interaction between the two sets of players. The cultures remained separate until Russell became interested in their points of intersection, and in a rhizomatic act he disrupted the institutional boundaries that existed between the two factions in order to demonstrate their overlapping aesthetic principles. The decision to programme the Modern Lovers and Talking Heads was Russell’s way of demonstrating that minimalism could be found outside of compositional music, as well as his belief that pop music could be arty, energetic and fun at the same time. “[F]or all of time painting has had the project of rendering visible, instead of reproducing the

⁴⁸ Rhys Chatham interview with Tim Lawrence, 28 January 2006.

⁴⁹ Zummo, “Eclectic Bubble Gun.”

visible, and music of rendering sonorous, instead of reproducing the sonorous,” write Deleuze and Guattari, and the showcasing of the Modern Lovers and Talking Heads, like the construction of *Instrumentals*, was intended to render audible the lines that run between compositional music and pop.⁵⁰ Within a couple of years the Kitchen was regularly programming rock-oriented performers, and two of its most prominent composers, Glenn Branca and Rhys Chatham, became significant figures in the No Wave scene.

Although Russell worked in a range of pop contexts during the 1970s and early 1980s, he consistently avoided anything that required him to either assume the role of the lead artist or sacrifice his desire to pursue other forms of music at the same time. When John Hammond invited Russell to record some demos at Columbia, Russell upset the legendary A&R executive (who had most recently talent-spotted Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen) by turning up not by himself but with a unique mix of pop and orchestral musician friends. A short while later, Russell appears to have stepped back from the offer to become involved with Talking Heads because he was afraid that the band was too self-consciously arty, ironic, cool and straight-suited for his looser, more Beatnik persona. Instead he developed a tight alliance with Ernie Brooks, the bass player from the Modern Lovers, and invited the drummer David Van Tieghem (who played with Steve Reich) and the guitarist Larry Saltzman (who came from a pop background) to form the Flying Hearts. The group recorded a series of light, quizzical songs that were full of promise but failed to win a contract with any of New York’s record companies, who were focused on the zeitgeist of punk and new wave. Seeking out a friendlier environment, Russell took up an offer to record with the Italian pop-rock outfit Le Orme, and when that did not work out as planned, he teamed up again with Brooks and joined the Necessaries, a new wave outfit that the bass player had joined following the break-up of the Flying Hearts. Russell helped the Necessaries win a recording contract with Sire, the cutting-edge new wave label, but he became disillusioned on a number of counts. First, the band’s pyramid structure prevented him from developing his own

⁵⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 346.

songs; second, the tight, fast aesthetic proved to be aesthetically restrictive; and third, the rigors of playing in a band that wanted to break through restricted his ability to participate in parallel music projects. Russell's concerns ended up bubbling over during a promotional trip to Washington. As the tour van approached the Holland Tunnel — the symbolic staging post at which he would have left downtown New York in favor of a one-way journey into a recognizable sound, a life of on the road, and a requirement to devote all his energies to a single project — Russell decided that he had had enough and jumped out.

By the early 1980s, the exchange between pop/rock and new music was at its most intense, with no wave one of the most important sites of this exchange. “The no wave bands were at the borderline between art and pop, not only demographically (in terms of membership and audience), but also institutionally, insofar as they trafficked back and forth between art institutions (the alternative spaces) and seedy rock clubs,” notes Bernard Gendron. “Such sustained crossover activity between avant-garde and pop institutions was altogether unprecedented in the history of rock music or any American popular music, for that matter.”⁵¹ For all of its diversity, however, no wave regularly fell back on a series of aesthetic and performance strategies that were aggressive and even violent, and Russell appears to have been put off by the pressure to, in the words of his composer-musician friend Ned Sublette, simulate “the sound of World War Three.”⁵² Russell was too delicate and sensitive a soul to flourish in a scene that was charged by charismatic individuals and reverberant noise, and when the *New York Rocker* ran an extensive survey of the downtown scene that focused on the crossover between the art and rock scenes in June 1982, Russell did not feature, even though he had helped forge the early connections that culminated in downtown's most popular point of crossing.⁵³

⁵¹ Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 279.

⁵² Ned Sublette interview with Tim Lawrence, 1 June 2006.

⁵³ Carr, “That Downtown Sound,” *New York Rocker*, June 1982.



Publicity shot of the Necessaries. Left to right: Ed Tomney, Arthur Russell, Ernie Brooks, Jesse Chamberlain. Photograph by Paul Waldman. Courtesy of Carrie and Paul Waldman.

That did not deter Russell from playing and recording pop-oriented material in a barely traceable series of set-ups. He reformed the Flying Hearts with Brooks and other floating musicians and vocalists; he played in folk-oriented groups with Brooks and Steven Hall (who was introduced to Russell by Ginsberg in the mid-1970s and became one of Russell's closest friends); he established a mutating improvisational/experimental pop outfit called the Singing Tractors that included Mustafa Ahmed (an African-American percussionist), Elodie Lauten (another composer-musician) and Peter Zummo; and he invited these and other musicians/vocalists to play

on recordings of his own songs. “We would rehearse, get a set list out of Arthur, go on stage and have no idea what was happening,” recalls Zummo of Russell’s modus operandi with the Singing Tractors. “There was just no way to tell whether we were playing the songs in the order they were indicated on the set-list or not. He would just start going and you would have to make a decision, but it would be a difficult time to make a decision. That happened *all the time*.”⁵⁴ The tangential explorations continued in the recording studio, sometimes to the frustration of Russell’s peers, who often did not know what they were working on, or when their contributions would be formally wrapped up. “Working with Arthur was not easy and not typical,” remembers Ahmed. “I worked for hours on tracks but never got the sense we were finished because of his constant editing. Anyone who worked with Arthur would tell you this was the most frustrating aspect about working with Arthur. He never seemed to finish anything. Arthur was never satisfied.”⁵⁵

Russell’s obsession with editing tape — of bringing separate sonic recordings into the same sonic continuum — culminated during the recording of *World of Echo*, which was released in 1986. “We would be mixing on a piece of tape and I would see a splice go by,” recalls engineer Eric Liljestrand. “It was all very confusing. I could never really tell what we were working on until it was done.”⁵⁶ On the album, Russell’s cello playing accentuated affective range rather than virtuosic ability, while his voice, which had been subjected to the will of the instrumental tracks on previous pop recordings, discovered a similar freedom. Yet it was the interconnected quality of the voice and cello, which fused together like drifting gases, floating and merging until at points they were difficult to distinguish, that stood out. A shimmering, mystical celebration of vowel sounds, “Tone Bone Kone,” which would become the symbolic opening song of the album, expressed itself as textural affect rather than semiotic meaning, and for the rest of the album the songs evolved in meandering, mesmerizing threads,

⁵⁴ Peter Zummo interview with Tim Lawrence, 19 February 2004.

⁵⁵ Mustafa Ahmed interview with Tim Lawrence, 27 October 2004.

⁵⁶ Eric Liljestrand interview with Tim Lawrence, 26 October 2004.

fluttering about in tender butterfly movements that were impossible to predict and would have been terrible to contain or discipline. “When I have written songs,” Russell wrote in some accompanying, unpublished notes, “the functions of verse and chorus seem to be reversed for some unknown reason.” The comment underestimated the extent to which structure was dissolved almost entirely, and Russell’s decision to blend all of the songs together into one continuous plateau where there was no beginning or end suggested that if listeners did not willingly abandon their bearings before listening the album would do this for them. The aim, Russell noted around the same time, was to “redefine ‘songs’ from the point of view of instrumental music, in the hope of liquefying a raw material where concert music and popular song can criss cross.”⁵⁷ That made *World of Echo* the song-oriented successor to *Instrumentals*, which introduced popular forms into compositional music.

Sound clip: “[Tone Bone Krone](#)” from *World of Echo* (Upside Records, 1986, re-released by Audika, 2006, with additional tracks). Courtesy of Audika.

c. Dance Music

Arthur Russell did not plan to move into disco, just as he never planned to be blown away by the Modern Lovers, but having had serious affairs with two women, he started to date men, and one of them took him along to the Gallery, one of downtown New York’s underground private dance parties. Russell was inspired by the dance environment, in which a predominantly black gay crowd formed a material-spiritual body that built to an ecstatic peak through dance, and in so doing introduced additional sonic and affective layers (screams, whistles, whoops, smiles, bodily movements, etc.) to the vinyl selections. Integral to the Gallery assemblage was the DJ, Nicky Siano, who would select records in relationship to the mood on the dance floor, thereby extending and the world of recorded vinyl. The collectively generated selections created a profound impression on

⁵⁷ Arthur Russell, personal notes.

Russell. Arriving from a background in minimalist art and pop music, he was struck by the way in which 1970s dance music offered an aesthetically radical African-American variation of the stripped down minimalist sounds he was hearing in other parts of downtown. In addition, the economic viability of disco was established at a grassroots level, with the record companies providing free test pressings to DJs, who would in turn report back on their dance floor effectiveness, thereby providing the companies with valuable information about the commercial viability of their records. From 1976 onwards the importance of maintaining this link between the dance floor and the wider disco market was embedded further when record companies started to invite DJs to remix songs that were being lined up for release on the new disco format, the extended twelve-inch single, and DJs took to testing demo versions of these remixes with their dancers in order to gauge which parts required further work. It made sense, then, that Russell should be drawn not only to disco's social milieu but also to the culture's mode of music making, which was experimental, democratic and self-sufficient.

Teaming up with Siano, Russell started to record "Kiss Me Again" in November 1977, and he ferried reel-to-reel and acetate tests between the studio and the Gallery until Sire released the single towards the end of 1978. Although the track would turn out to be one of Russell's more orthodox dance recordings, it nevertheless subverted a range of disco conventions. Running at thirteen-minutes, which was twice the length of a regular disco twelve-inch, "Kiss Me Again" stretched out into a mutating exploration of becoming-sound — and therefore encouraged dancers to do the same. Ordinarily figured as the smooth-running engine of any disco recording, the rhythm section — the drums, the bass and the rhythm guitar — was tripped up intentionally by Russell's decision to deploy two drummers and two bass players, which created a subtle dissonance. And although the vocalist hoped to echo the typical performance of the disco diva, who would draw on soul and gospel techniques in order to deliver an assured performance that blended ecstasy, passion and pain, Russell aimed to destabilize her voice by inviting Siano (who was regularly high and had never entered a recording studio prior to "Kiss Me Again") to produce her. The vocalist's nervous

delivery complemented the song's lyrics, which recounted the story of a woman caught up in a S/M relationship — hardly the run-of-the-mill story of romance and resistance (or moving one's body) that was so common to disco. Following the practice of cutting edge remixers such as Walter Gibbons, Russell observed the reaction of the dance floor to a series of reel-to-reel tapes and test pressings in order to ascertain how the record could be improved. A collective production that drew in a range of musicians, technologies and crowd responses in addition to Russell's own musicianship, the record was released under the anonymous collective name of Dinosaur, even though it would have served Russell well to foreground his own name on his debut release. That, however, would have ignored the fact that the record was a product of the Gallery assemblage.

Russell accentuated the dance floor component in his next collection of recordings, which were released under the anonymous artist name Loose Joints. Whereas demos of "Kiss" had been used to test the response of the dance floor, this time around Russell invited dancers into the studio in order to channel the heightened affective atmosphere of the floor onto an original vinyl recording. Working in conjunction with Steve D'Acquisto, a pioneering New York DJ who he had met at the Loft, the incubator of the downtown disco scene, Russell invited a group of dancers to sing, play percussion and party alongside a number of the seasoned session musicians, and engineer Bob Blank, one of disco's most experienced studio hands, remembers this being the moment he realized there was "a different vibe out there in the trenches."⁵⁸ "It was like a circus," says Blank. "It was really important to let these people, who were regulars at the party, perform with the music because it was all felt."⁵⁹ Dominated by the regimented sound of European producers and the disciplinary R&B groove of Chic, disco's aesthetic had become slick and heavily mediated by the end of the 1970s, but Russell hoped to develop a looser sound that was connected to the organic spirit of the down-

⁵⁸ For a full account of the role of the Loft in the rise of seventies dance culture in New York and beyond, see Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*.

⁵⁹ Bob Blank interview with Tim Lawrence, 19 July 2004.

town dance floor, and so he ensured that the established “professionals” adapted their playing to the go-with-the-flow perspective of the dancer-musicians. Released under the studio name Loose Joints, recordings such as “Is It All Over My Face?” and “Pop Your Funk” featured drums that dragged behind the beat (instead of keeping the tempo precise or tight), jangly percussion, flat homoerotic vocals, street noise and ringing phones. Containing the plural voices of downtown disco, these and other records inspired by their unconventional aesthetic combinations contributed to the adaptable resilience of downtown’s dance network during the national backlash against disco, which persuaded the US majors to slash their disco output in the second half of 1979, and were later judged to be seminal examples of “mutant disco” or “disco-not-disco.”⁶⁰

Russell’s next set of recordings, which were laid down shortly after the Loose Joints sessions, opened up disco not to the atmosphere of the dance floor but instead to the practices of downtown art music. A number of downtown composer-musicians (including Julius Eastman, Peter Gordon, Jill Kroesen and Peter Zummo) were invited to join the principle players from the Loose Joints line-up (the Ingram brothers and the Loft singers) and read from a detailed score of Cagean-like parabolas. Russell’s ambition, however, was not to reproduce the form of lavish orchestral disco that could be heard on labels such as Philadelphia International and Salsoul, but instead to develop a form of conceptual minimalism that, evolving out of Cage and Young’s principle of indeterminacy, commenced with the written score before opening out into an improvisational jam. Intent on illustrating the serious minimalist credentials of disco to the wider downtown compositional community, Russell took a performance of his “orchestral disco” music into the Kitchen, and in so doing revealed the minimalist connection that existed between the downtown compositional and dance scenes

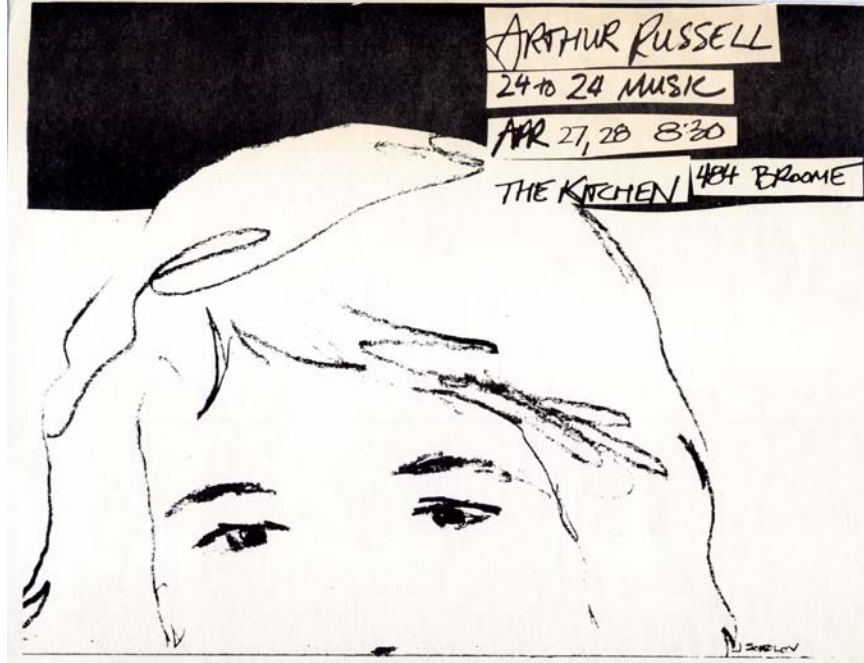
⁶⁰ Arthur Russell was the most heavily featured artist on Strut’s *Disco Not Disco* compilations, which brought together “Leftfield dance classics from the New York underground.” For more on this moment, see Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Post-Punk 1978–84* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 383–402, and Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 256–58.

— a connection that seemed unlikely to the scene's more conventional composers, who (like many of their new wave peers) were skeptical about the aesthetic value of disco.⁶¹

Russell's dance productions were becoming more and more deterritorialized. "Kiss Me Again" worked with the refrain of a recognizable verse/chorus structure, yet opened out into the lines of flight of the rhythm section. The Loose Joints sessions also began with the text of a prepared song, although on that occasion Russell encouraged the musicians to develop a jam that was rooted in the improvised ethos of the dance floor. Then, with the orchestral disco sessions, Russell deterritorialized the dance and art spheres, after which he made a copy of the master tape and started to explore the infinite sound combinations that existed in the two-inch master tapes. Cutting and editing between the different tracks and sessions, the subsequent release, which was titled *24 → 24 Music*, amounted to a vibrant, startling democracy of downtown sound that included a funk-oriented rhythm section, fusion-driven horns and keyboards, reverberant rockish guitars, and a range of voices (operatic/monotone/deranged/shouted). Appearing under the artist name Dinosaur L — a subtle but deliberate mutation of Dinosaur — *24 → 24 Music* suggested a production that was rooted in reels and reels of multi-layered, twenty-four track tape that contained limitless immanent potential.

Russell continued to work as a lightning conductor of the downtown soundscape during the mid-eighties when he integrated Latin rhythms (which were ubiquitous on the streets of the East Village) and the looped breakbeat ethos of hip hop (which had made

⁶¹ The description of this work as "orchestral disco" comes from my interview with Steven Hall, 30 November 2004. Peter Gordon's Love of Life Orchestra, which grew out of Arthur Russell's *Instrumentals* line-up and was organized as a regular band made up of downtown composers and musicians, worked with a danceable beat and appeared across a range of institutional settings. Yet whereas LOLO kept hold of its art perspective and did not receive play in clubs, Russell's "improvisational disco" was evenly grounded in art and disco, and received considerable play in the clubs.



Flyer for Arthur Russell's *24 → 24 Music* concert at the Kitchen, April 1979. Courtesy of Tom Lee.

Sound clip: Dinosaur L, “[#5 \(Go Bang\)](#),” from *24 → 24 Music* (Sleeping Bag, 1981).

its way from the boroughs to the downtown club scene) into a series of dance productions. Working in collaboration with Ahmed and Gibbons, Russell released two standout twelve-inch singles, “Let’s Go Swimming” and “Schoolbell/Treehouse,” both of which developed a tidal polyrhythm of forward flows and drag-back undercurrents. Moving away from the disco-not-disco of “Is It All Over My Face?” and the avant-garde orchestral disco of *24 → 24 Music*, the two records forged a form of jittery, jagged dance music that confounded easy categorization. “This is an *impossible* dance music, jumbling your urges, making you want to move in ways not yet invented, confounding your body as it provokes it,” Simon Reynolds wrote of “Let’s Go Swimming” in *Melody Maker*. “In its

tipsy mix, I seem to hear Can, Peech Boys, Thomas Leer, Weather Report, hip hop, but really this is unique, original, a work of genius.”⁶² Having become habituated to the regulated sequencing of mid-eighties hip hop and house, New York’s DJs struggled to assimilate the unfixed contours of “Swimming” or “Schoolbell,” which left a disappointed Russell to forecast (correctly) that his broken-up aesthetic would eventually be “commonplace.”⁶³ Instead of turning away from polyrhythm, however, Russell began to integrate black funk aesthetics into the pop recordings that he worked on right through to his death in 1992. The posthumous release of a number of these tracks on *Calling Out of Context* in 2004 provides evidence of a musical perspective that continued to draw together disparate influences while steering clear of rock music’s all-too-frequent disavowal of black music.

Sound clip: “[Hop On Down](#)” from *Calling Out of Context* (Audika, 2004). Courtesy of Audika.

3. Deleuze and Guattari: Music, Composition, Genre

“This is how it should be done,” write Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in a passage in which it is difficult to not imagine Arthur Russell. “Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times.”⁶⁴ Having lodged himself in the downtown assemblage and experimented with the opportunities that were on offer, Russell became a notable “producer of flow conjunctions” in the wider downtown music scene when he introduced pop/rock into the heart of the downtown compositional scene, and forged a point

⁶² Simon Reynolds, “Arthur Russell Let’s Go Swimming,” *Melody Maker*, 11 October 1986.

⁶³ Arthur Russell made this comment in an interview with David Toop on 7 October 1986, which is sourced from the original transcript.

⁶⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 161.

of meeting between disco and the compositional scene. How, then, can his work be theorized in terms of its affective qualities, and, secondly, with regard to Deleuze and Guattari's writings on music?

Music is especially rhizomatic because it is made up of sound waves that move through matter. Although light waves move more quickly than sound waves, they are less rhizomatic because they tend to be mono-directional (and can therefore be easily focused, as is the case with spotlights), whereas sound is omindirectional (and tends to spread, as is the case with a ringing bell). In addition, whereas light waves can move freely through air and transparent matter (glass, clear/shallow water, light plastics etc.), they cannot move through opaque material (earth, rocks, deep water, heavy fibers, etc.), while sound waves cannot pass through a vacuum, or non-matter, but can pass through everything else (which is why it is so difficult to insulate sound). The senses of seeing and hearing are similarly structured in that the seeing agent separates itself from the object of its vision through the eyes, which project the object as being in front and separate, and can also block out the object of vision with relative ease by closing its eyelids or averting its gaze. The hearing agent, in contrast, actively absorbs the sound waves of the object not only through its ears but its entire body, and this agent is unable to easily block out the object of sound, with the strategy of turning or blocking its ears of limited effect. In contrast to light waves, then, sound waves are structured according to their rhizomatic connectivity, and music, which is the cultural organization of sound, necessarily becomes a promising terrain for a rhizomatic politics. As Edward Said has put it, music has a faculty to "to travel, cross over, drift from place to place in a society, even though many institutions and orthodoxies have sought to confine it," and this makes it materially transgressive (even if it might not always be politically progressive).⁶⁵

Early on in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari note that music has "always sent out lines of flight, like so many 'transformational multiplicities,' even overturning the very codes that

⁶⁵ Edward Said, *Musical Elaborations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), xix, 55.

structure or arborify it,” and conclude that music is “comparable to a weed, a rhizome.”⁶⁶ They go on to note that music begins with a refrain, after which its object becomes the deterritorialization of the refrain, the “final end of music: the cosmic refrain of a sound machine.”⁶⁷ Whereas color tends to cling to territory, they add, sound is an effective deterritorializer, and music that breaks away from the refrain is invariably rhizomatic and therefore related to the process of becoming.⁶⁸ “What does music deal with, what is the content indissociable from sound expression?” ask Deleuze and Guattari. “[M]usical expression is inseparable from a becoming-woman, a becoming-child, a becoming-animal that constitute its content.”⁶⁹ In other words, music is a process of becoming-other that, in the words of Ronald Bogue, unfixes the “commonsense coordinates of time and identity,” in which the commonsense is figured in the man/adult/human oppositions to woman/child/animal.⁷⁰ The becoming, adds Bogue, does not involve the imitation of a woman/child/animal, because this would enforce social codes, but “an unspecifiable, unpredictable disruption of codes that takes place alongside women, children, and animals, in a metamorphic zone between fixed identities.”⁷¹ In this respect, becoming-woman/child/animal might be understood as a range of bodily expressions that get to be closed down by dominant heterosexuality and accordingly exist as an affective-material articulation of the sexual politics posited by queer theory.⁷²

Nevertheless Deleuze and Guattari do not romanticize music and note the dangers that lie within. Music can drag listeners into a “black hole” as well as open them to the “cosmos,” they argue, and since its “force of deterritorialization is the strongest,” it can also effect “the

⁶⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 11-12.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 349.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 21, 95, 347.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 299.

⁷⁰ Bogue, *Deleuze on Music*, 34.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁷² Rosi Braidotti discusses the relationship between Deleuzian theory, feminist theory and queer theory, especially in relationship to the writings of Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz, in *Metamorphoses*, 103-6.

most massive of reterritorializations, the most numbing, the most redundant,” resulting in a “potential fascism.”⁷³ What distinguishes a potentially democratic music from a potentially fascist music? Referring to Spinoza, a key philosophical influence on Deleuze and Guattari who maintained that the central issue of ethics was the ability to affect and be affected, Andrew Murphie argues that music becomes ethical when it is productive rather than anti-productive, when it sets free lines of flight rather than wears itself down through repetition that does not change, when it enables “movement and connection between different communities, different territories, environments, individuals” rather than erases difference and “allows both connection and escape from sovereignty.”⁷⁴ Or as Bogue puts it, “The final ethical measure of any music is its ability to create new possibilities for life.”⁷⁵

Deleuze and Guattari stay close to the art music cannon in their discussion of music, with Boulez, Cage, Debussy, Messiaen, Schumann, Varèse and Verdi cited for their becoming-ness, and the applause directed towards Boulez (the central figure in European serialism) for his work around “nonpulsed” or “floating” time that “affirms a process against all structure and genesis” might have puzzled the pioneers of minimalist music, who were clear about the way in which their aesthetic contrasted sharply with unapologetically elitist movement of serialism.⁷⁶ In contrast to serialism, minimalism signaled a return to tonality (versus atonality), single notes (versus complex harmonic sequences), accessibility (versus difficulty), repetition (versus progression) and improvisation (versus music that was entirely scored). A choice had to be made: as Glass put it, European serial music was a “wasteland” dominated by “maniacs” such as Boulez and Stockhausen, as well as US proponents such as Babbitt,

⁷³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 348.

⁷⁴ Andrew Murphie, “Sound at the End of the World As We Know It: Nick Cave, Wim Wenders’ *Wings of Desire* and a Deleuze-Guattarian Ecology of Popular Music,” in Gary Genosko (ed.), *Deleuze and Guattari: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 2001), 258, 266.

⁷⁵ Ronald Bogue, “Violence In Three Shades of Metal: Death, Doom and Black,” in Ian Buchanan and Marcel Swiboda (eds.), *Deleuze and Music*, 115.

⁷⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 262, 267.

“who were trying to make everyone write this crazy, creepy music.”⁷⁷ Deleuze and Guattari demonstrate that they do not feel bound by the ideology of serialism when they comment on Young’s “very pure and simple sound” and go on to celebrate the move “from modality to an untempered, widened chromaticism” before adding, “We do not need to suppress tonality, we need to turn it loose.”⁷⁸ Elsewhere, they describe Balinese culture as an example of a rhizomatic plateau, or something that is always in the middle rather than at the beginning or the end, because it offers “a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a culmination point or external end.”⁷⁹ That, however, does not lead them to highlight the way in which Balinese Gamelan formed the aesthetic framework for Reich’s *Music for 18 Musicians* — which debuted in 1976 and was considered his first major post-minimalist composition — and they are surprisingly hesitant when it comes to the rhizomatic potential of minimalism and post-minimalism given that this alternative movement had achieved a foothold in Europe by the time they published *A Thousand Plateaus*.⁸⁰

The suspicion that time and place cannot explain the omission of minimalism and post-minimalism from Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis is reinforced by the fact that the Belgian minimalist composer Wim Mertens published his own Deleuze-inspired account of minimalism in 1980 (the same year that *A Thousand Plateaus* was first published in France). In *American Minimal Music: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass*, Mertens draws a parallel between the Deleuzian concept of the decentralized work, which does not rely on teleological development and lies outside of history, and the goals

⁷⁷ K. Robert Schwarz, *Minimalists* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), 114.

⁷⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 344, 350.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁸⁰ Steve Reich also drew on West African drumming, while Philip Glass, Terry Riley and La Monte Young were heavily influenced by Indian classical techniques. Although these practices fall outside of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s frame of reference, it would have been entirely consistent for them to emphasise the rhizomatic qualities of these musical traditions. Jeremy Gilbert draws attention to the Deleuzian character of Indian classical music in “Becoming-Music: The Rhizomatic Moment of Improvisation,” in Ian Buchanan and Marcel Swiboda (eds.), *Deleuze and Music* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 129-33.

of the minimalist composers, who generate “singular intensities” that are “ever changing and shifting” and have “no content” beyond themselves.⁸¹ Mertens analyses the way in which minimalist music shifts the listener’s attention from the content of change to the process of change. “In repetitive music this change is a kind of new content, and in a way one gets the suggestion of an entirely free flow of energy,” he argues. “The ecstatic state induced by this music, which could also be called *a state of innocence, an hypnotic state, or a religious state*, is created by an independent libido, freed of all the restrictions of reality.”⁸² In this Mertens rearticulates Jacques Attali’s analysis of the way in which minimalism’s “increase in libidinal intensity” compensates for the loss of historical content (the primary object of serial and post-serial music). “What is important is the shift of energy,” writes Attali, who is quoted by Mertens. “The intensity exists but has no goal or content.”⁸³

The striking absence of any sustained reference to minimalism/post-minimalism in *A Thousand Plateaus* is trumped only by Deleuze and Guattari’s failure to reference the entire field of popular music. Admirers of their theoretical work have stepped in to deploy the concepts of the rhizome, the assemblage, and the Body without Organs (which is described by Bogue as “a decentred body that has ceased to function as a coherently regulated organism, one that is sensed as an ecstatic, catatonic, a-personal zero-degree of intensity that is in no way negative but has a positive existence”) to a range of music genres.⁸⁴ Tim Jordan analyses rave culture in Deleuzian terms and notes that dancers abdicate their subjective identity in order to merge into a collective body that resembles a Body without Organs.⁸⁵ Simon Reynolds draws attention to the rhizomatic structure of the music of Can, Miles Davis, dub, hip hop,

⁸¹ Wim Mertens, *American Minimal Music: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1988), 121.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 122, 124.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁸⁴ Bogue, “Violence In Three Shades of Metal,” 115.

⁸⁵ Tim Jordan, “Collective Bodies: Raving and the Politics of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari,” *Body & Society*, 1, 1, 125, 130.

house and jungle.⁸⁶ In a wide-ranging analysis of improvisation, Jeremy Gilbert draws attention to the way in which the groundbreaking jazz fusion albums of Miles Davis are “perfectly rhizomatic,” and argues that “music made through a non-hierarchical process of lateral connections between sounds, genres and musicians, which aims always to open onto a cosmic space, must be archetypically modern and rhizomatic in Deleuze’s terms.”⁸⁷ In a separate piece, Gilbert also comments on the way in which Richard Dyer’s “In Defence of Disco” essay anticipated Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis of music by a year, and in so doing provided an example of a music culture that achieved the quality of a BwO more convincingly than any of the compositions cited in *A Thousand Plateaus*.⁸⁸ In addition, Drew Hemment examines the affective modes of the electronic dance music assemblage, while Michael Veal notes the way in which dub has influenced applications of Deleuzian theory.⁸⁹ A convincing case can therefore be assembled that Deleuze and Guattari’s theory not only could but also *should* be applied to popular music because it is there that it can find its most persuasive home.

The qualities associated with Deleuze and Guattari’s depictions of the rhizome and the BwO were certainly felt in music scenes that emerged in downtown New York during the 1970s and early 1980s. Mertens refers to minimalism’s ability to create a “hypnotic” or “religious” or “ecstatic state,” as well as an “independent libido, freed of all the restrictions of reality,” and all of these elements were prominent in the new wave scene that developed out of CBGB’s and the no wave scene that mushroomed soon after.⁹⁰ At the same time, Mertens’s description seems to better describe the Gallery, where the

⁸⁶ Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 388.

⁸⁷ Gilbert, “Becoming-Music,” 123, 124.

⁸⁸ Jeremy Gilbert, “Dyer and Deleuze: Post-structuralist Cultural Criticism,” *New Formations*, 58, 2006, 109-27.

⁸⁹ Drew Hemment, “Affect and Individuation in Popular Electronic Music,” in Buchanan and Swiboda (eds.), *Deleuze and Music*, 76-94. Michael Veal, *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs In Jamaican Reggae* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 254-55.

⁹⁰ Mertens, *American Minimal Music*, 124.

DJ and the dancers embarked on a trance-inducing journey that, evoking the title of *A Thousand Plateaus*, would vary according to the shifting plains of affective intensity that were generated through the collective act of “playing the vinyl.” Mertens writes that repetitive music “can lead to psychological regression,” but it was on the floor of the Gallery rather than CBGB’s or the Kitchen that dancers whooped and screamed as they let go of their socialized selves under a sky of multicolored balloons.⁹¹ And while Mertens draws attention to the way the “so-called *religious* experience of repetitive music is in fact a camouflaged erotic experience,” it was at the Gallery that participants generated an unrivalled exchange of sensual movement.⁹²

Minimalist/post-minimalist music, Indian classical music, Balinese Gamelan, new wave, no wave, jazz fusion, dub, disco and electronic dance music all generate decentered structures within which a range of rhythms and instruments are interwoven. Many of the musicians who produce these sounds also move in rhizomatic ways: the jazz improviser who gives up her or his artistic autonomy to the improvised collective drive of the group; the DJ who is sandwiched between pre-recorded music and the demands of the dancing crowd; the dub engineer who dismantles structured songs and opens sound into an anchorless, shifting universe; and so on. What is striking, however, is the extent to which the applications of Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts to music centre around either distinctive musical genres (including jazz fusion, which became a recognized subgenre of jazz) or, to a lesser extent, specific modes of making music (such as improvisation, which occurs within a set of demarcated practices). While these genres and modes of music making remain compelling, little work has foregrounded the question of *how a musician might work rhizomatically* (other than participate in the playing of music that is rhizomatic/encourages rhizomatic approaches to playing), and it is this question that will provide the main focus for the rest of this essay.

Following the earlier survey of Russell’s three blocks of intertwining musical practice, it will come as no surprise that I want

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

to argue that Arthur Russell is “a component” (rather than “the man”) that can help explore the ramifications of Deleuze and Guattari’s writing on music in terms of musicianship, not only because he worked in downtown during the heightened era of the 1970s and 1980s, but also because he zigzagged across the downtown spectrum with as much if not more conviction than any of his peers (many of whom were still notable for their dedication to zigzagging). Having noted that a BwO is characterized by gaiety, ecstasy and dance, Deleuze and Guattari stalled when it came to applying this concept beyond the field of art music, and although downtown composers understood that minimalist rock could reach a heightened level of affective intensity, Russell was almost alone in realizing that it was in disco that the “hypnotic,” the “religious” and the “ecstatic” found their fullest expression.⁹³ In addition, while new wave and no wave outfits including the Bush Tetras, Konk and Talking Heads appreciated the potential of seventies disco and funk and integrated elements of black polyrhythm, their music was still channeled towards the rock scene and rarely featured in New York’s clubs. There were no ifs and buts when it came to Russell, who played and recorded successfully in all three scenes, and approached music as a series of tangential possibilities rather than dialectical problems and solutions. Like a vine, Russell appeared to only move up or down if such a movement was necessary to move across.

4. Arthur Russell’s Rhizomatic Musicianship

One of the most striking features of Arthur Russell’s musicianship was that he did not work within a single genre, but rather a multiplicity of genres, and did so not by imagining a progression from one to another, but instead in an act of whirlwind simultaneity. Many of Russell’s composer-musician friends were also notably wide-ranging — Peter Gordon, Garrett List, Ned Sublette and Peter

⁹³ Again, the Love of Life Orchestra underpinned their music with a regular disco beat and aimed to function as a downtown band that played danceable music. Indeed the band’s leader, Peter Gordon, invited Arthur Russell to join LOLO. However, LOLO’s recordings did not cross over into the disco milieu.

Zummo spring to mind — and together they developed a resolutely eclectic approach to music-making that contrasted with composer/musicians who either remained focused on staying in the art/orchestral realm or explored plural aesthetic forms in a dialectical manner inasmuch as their goal was to find a “solution” to a musical problem. Although this latter approach did not preclude cross-generic work, it could often involve an analysis that divided the musical spectrum hierarchically according to aesthetic values or, more viscerally, taste.

A radical downtown musician who shared an East Village apartment with Russell for a year or so in the mid-1970s, Rhys Chatham offers a contemporaneous example of this pluralist-dialectic approach. Having started out as a committed student of serialism, Chatham began to explore minimalism/post-minimalism/new music after attending a Terry Riley concert, and as the decade progressed friends introduced him to free jazz and then new wave, which he began to explore in relation to compositional music, establishing himself as a significant no wave artist in the process. “The amazing thing about the first half of the eighties in New York was that art music, improvised music, and rock had reached a point where the formal issues endemic to each nearly perfectly coincided, to such an extent that art music made by art composers in a rock context was rock music; where improvised music made by improvisers in an art music context was art music; where improvised music made by rock composers in a jazz festival context was warmly welcomed by the jazz audience,” writes Chatham, who remained affiliated primarily to the art music scene throughout. Chatham adds: “While it is certainly possible and indeed desirable in many instances to skirt the fringes of both fields, one eventually must make a choice regarding which set of issues to address in order to do any serious work in either. Anyone who says otherwise is being either cynical or naive.”⁹⁴

Because he refused to choose, Russell (and his like-minded peers) did not only deterritorialize music within a specific set of aesthetic

⁹⁴ Rhys Chatham, “Composer’s Notebook: 1990 Toward a Musical Agenda for the Nineties,” published in the sleeve notes to *Angel Moves too Fast to See: Selected Works, 1971-89*, Table of Elements, 2003.

coordinates but also between these co-ordinates. Developing an embedded art that responded to specific circumstances, he formed an alliance not with a specific genre (or social scene that attached itself to a specific genre) but instead with music itself. That kind of scope was not ordinary, even in downtown New York. As Jason Toynbee argues, “the radius of creativity of musician-subjects is circumscribed,” and “it is difficult to make new or different music because possibility is so constrained [. . .] by the magnetic attraction of conventional patterns and choices” as well as “the difficulty of hearing possibilities near the outside.”⁹⁵ Toynbee acknowledges that “extraordinary music can be made” and, drawing on Bakhtin’s work on heteroglossia, maintains that this occurs through a process of “social authorship” in which the social author “cites and inflects *voices*, that is musical sounds and forms which have already been produced, musical possibles in other words.⁹⁶ Concluding that the author is neither dead nor a transcendental spirit, but is instead an editor and a parodist, Toynbee cites Charles Mingus as an example of a social author who urged his musicians to develop distinctive voices and integrated these with a broad range of references (including gospel, the blues, early jazz, Latin music and Caribbean music). Yet Toynbee notes that Mingus is both ideal and atypical in his range, and that other authors “may cite less often, less reflexively and with a weaker sense of the possibilities of combination.”⁹⁷ Working with an equally broad range of references, Russell was also atypical, and his reluctance to bring these sounds together into an identifiable generic field — in the case of Mingus, jazz — suggests a particularly fluid, decentered outlook.

Russell’s approach to music making was not liberal.⁹⁸ That kind of outlook would have involved him either situating himself in one

⁹⁵ Jason Toynbee, *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity and Institutions* (London: Arnold, 2000), 66.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁹⁸ The following distinction between liberal and radical approaches to music making draws on the distinction that has been made between liberal and radical multiculturalism. I am indebted to Ashwani Sharma for pointing out this distinction. For more, see Stuart Hall’s “The Multicultural Question,” in B Hesse (ed.)

genre and professing his tolerance (but not actual appreciation) of other genres; or situating himself in one genre and being prepared to integrate the aesthetics of another genre on the terms and conditions of the first genre; or hovering between a number of genres while neglecting to confront the difficult question of how to mediate between their contrasting and conflicting aesthetic and social priorities. Instead Russell attempted something much more radical and challenging, which was to work across a range of generic sounds and to explore their potential points of interaction in a non-hierarchical manner. As a result, there were occasions when he integrated pop into compositional music (*Instrumentals*), and other occasions when he took compositional music into pop (*World of Echo*). Pop and compositional techniques were also explored within the context of dance (Loose Joints, Dinosaur L), while dance and funk were merged with pop (on the *Calling Out of Context* recordings). None of this work involved the seamless meeting of two different worlds. Instead, Russell struggled to find local solutions — and it is reasonable to assume that the material we can now hear constitutes the more successful of these combinations. Along the way, other musicians had to be persuaded of the reasonableness of the exercise, and Russell did well to surround himself with so many open-minded and (perhaps above all) patient collaborators.

Lacking a home turf, Russell ventured into unfamiliar territory. When he made these journeys, as was the case with Indian classical music (the Ali Akbar College), disco (the Gallery, the Loft, the Paradise Garage), and rock/new wave (CBGB's, Danceteria, the Lower Manhattan Ocean Club, the Other End, the Village Gate), he did not approach the musical scene in question as a tourist or even anthropologist, but instead attempted to become part of it. Struck by the wondrousness of the worlds he was encountering, Russell encouraged others to make a similar journey, so he took composers down to CBGB's, rock friends to underground dance clubs, and club dancers to the Kitchen. Shuttling between the roles of host and guest, Russell maintained this radical-plural-nomadic perspective from the

Un/settled Multiculturalisms (London: Zed, 2000), 209-41, and chapter one in Sanjay Sharma's *Multicultural Encounters* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 3-21.

moment he ricocheted between classes at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and the Ali Akbar College of Music (and sought out intersections between these forms and folk) right through to the end of his life (when he recorded songs on his cello for an art music label, as well as funky pop played on a range of electronic and acoustic instruments for a post-punk label). In other words, Russell's cross-generic, inter-milieu work was not a phase; it was his purpose.

a. Making Music

Arthur Russell enjoyed making music in the mould of the composers that are celebrated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, which is to say that he composed music that opened with a refrain before it embarked on a process of deterritorialization. At the same time he also pursued this trajectory in a more radical manner than the composers cited by Deleuze and Guattari inasmuch as he regularly elided his own authorial presence in the process. As a result, the move from the simple refrain to the complex process of deterritorialization could not be straightforwardly attributed to Russell, which in turn contributed to the undermining of the figure of the towering, authoritative composer — the bourgeois-liberal figure of superior insight who has been critiqued by, among others, Jeremy Gilbert and Jason Toynbee.⁹⁹ In *Instrumentals*, Russell allowed his musicians to decide which parts of the score they wanted to play, and during rehearsals and performances encouraged them to improvise out of the score, thereby generating a collective line of flight. In a similar manner, the Loose Joints sessions began with Russell's written songs, after which the assembled musicians were encouraged to improvise

⁹⁹ Gilbert, "Becoming-Music," 123, 124, 127. Toynbee, *Making Popular Music*, 54-55. In *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 68-77, Jacques Attali notes how the intensification of economic competition and the introduction of copyright laws during the nineteenth century initially benefited "star" performers (interpreters) rather than composers. "It thus became almost impossible to have one's music heard without first being profitable, in other words, without writing commercial works known to the bourgeoisie," writes Attali. "To be successful, a musician first had to attract an audience as an interpreter: representation takes precedence over composition and conditions it." (70)

around a groove. (Sometimes these moments of improvisation were so hot they displaced the refrain, as became the case with the seven-inch single release of “Pop Your Funk” and, a little later, the “Female Version” of “Is It All Over My Face?”)¹⁰⁰ Regarding the sessions that resulted in *24 → 24 Music*, the musicians began not with songs but a more developed orchestral score, yet the next stage followed a now-familiar path: they were invited to jam. And when Russell got together with Mustafa Ahmed, Elodie Lauten and Peter Zummo (plus a range of other musicians) to play the experimental pop of the Singing Tractors, the group would start out with some straight-forward chords, after which Russell did his best to engineer an extended spell of creative chaos.

Russell was sufficiently committed to the deterritorialization of the author to have this reflected in the naming of the various groups in which he performed. Although it would have been easy for him to release his dance recordings under his own name, Russell was absolutely clear that that would have been untrue to the collective process that underpinned the productions, and so he released these tracks under a series of non-individualizing pseudonyms (Dinosaur, Dinosaur L, Loose Joints, Indian Ocean, etc.). While Russell’s ventures into pop and rock were framed by the conventions of the genre, in which musical collectives regularly assume a generic name, Russell was quick to correct anyone who described the Flying Hearts as his own band. And when his chance to rise to individual fame as the new Bob Dylan or Bruce Springsteen arrived, he glided past the

¹⁰⁰ In an interview conducted on 9 May 1998, Steve D’Acquisto, the co-producer of the Loose Joints sessions, confirmed that he and Russell used a sixteen-bar out-take from “Is It All Over My Face?” to create the rhythm section platform for “Pop Your Funk.” The “Female Version” remix of “Is It All Over My Face?” was completed by Larry Levan and sounded so different to the original version that listeners assumed the transformation was due to Levan’s handicraft. It now seems certain, however, that Levan was not working with the twenty-four track tapes of the original version, but instead another outtake, which existed on a separate reel-to-reel. Although Levan introduced important edits and effects, the assumption that he magically produced an entirely new record out of the first is incorrect, with credit equally due to the musicians who improvised around the original refrain, as well as Russell and D’Acquisto for encouraging this flight to take place (Lawrence, forthcoming).

opening as if it was not there and invited a collective of friends to play in the hallowed presence of John Hammond.

The ethos of attributing authorship to a networked collective that is neither a homogeneous mass nor a group of individuals was organically linked to the downtown milieu in the 1970s, where money was scarce and composer-musicians could for the most part only perform their music by entering into a network of favors in which they performed for each other for free.¹⁰¹ Yet while the experimental composer Arnold Dreyblatt notes that many composers remained committed to their identities as composers, Russell showed little concern for such tags. “Someone like Rhys Chatham had new music credentials and developed a composed music with the electric guitar, maintaining all along that he was first and foremost a composer,” comments Dreyblatt. “Arthur, though, was absolutely unconcerned with identity — with projecting ‘I am just this’. Rhys was standing there saying we are composers, whereas Arthur didn’t need to do that at all. That loss of identity — the loss of the I-genius — can be very threatening to the new music world, but that was Arthur.”¹⁰²

Russell’s reluctance to forward himself as an author/composer according to the enduring model of the bourgeois individual is further evidenced in his unwillingness to settle on a final mix because it is this kind of definitive commodity-statement that (at least in the twentieth century) that has become the focus of artistic and material value. “Arthur would talk about the process being as important as the goal,” says Jeff Whittier, who attended the Ali Akbar College and remembers Russell being committed to the Indian musical concept of “practice,” or *riaz*. “I didn’t entirely agree because as a musician you are defined about how you play at any given time and the product is the measure of the *riaz*. But Arthur would say that the process was more important than the end product.”¹⁰³ Many friends remember bumping into Russell while he walked the streets of downtown, listening to alternate versions of his own recordings on a Walkman, unable to decide which version he should settle on, and his

¹⁰¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 341.

¹⁰² Arnold Dreyblatt interview with Tim Lawrence, 22 May 2006.

¹⁰³ Jeff Whittier interview with Tim Lawrence, 2 August 2005.

fascination with the infinite possibilities of sound received further reign in the recording studio, where he would spend hours and hours introducing intricate details that were often beyond the perceptive range of engineers. Often characterized as being indecisive, Russell appears to have been rooted in a reluctance to cage music, or constrict it to a final take. “In a way Arthur disliked his records because he felt that the performance involved was just one of many possible ways of interpreting the song,” says Donald Murk, a companion who worked as Russell’s personal manager for a couple of years in the late 1970s. “Recording was always a drawback because it preserved something, whereas the moment after might be better, so he didn’t accept that the vinyl version was something he had to duplicate. He wanted to use the music as a platform to create a sound environment.”¹⁰⁴

Russell’s willingness to view music as its own agent, in which it could assume infinite forms until an author closed down those possibilities, reinforced his enthusiasm for dance culture. Drew Hemment has commented on “the multiplicity of indeterminate circuits through which electronic music passes, and that are composed by its passing,” and this analysis can also be applied to the predominantly non-electronic dance form of 1970s disco, in which spinners such as Michael Cappello, Steve D’Acquisto, Francis Grasso, Bobby “DJ” Guttadaro, Richie Kaczor, Larry Levan, David Mancuso, Howard Merritt, Richie Rivera, Tom Savarese, Tee Scott, Nicky Siano, Jimmy Stuard and Ray Yeats became specialists in picking out isolated records and recontextualizing them in a far-reaching narrative that either juxtaposed or blended sonic and verbal elements over several hours.¹⁰⁵ The inventiveness of these DJs culminated in the creation of a new format, the twelve-inch single, and although Russell remained suspicious of uncreative remixers who threatened to make his records sound more conventional (as was the case with Jimmy Simpson’s remix of “Kiss Me Again”), he was enthusiastic about the interventions of François Kevorkian (“Go

¹⁰⁴ Donald Murk interview with Tim Lawrence, 11 September 2005.

¹⁰⁵ Drew Hemment, “Affect and Individuation in Popular Electronic Music,” in Buchanan and Swiboda (eds.), *Deleuze and Music*, 78.

Bang”) and Walter Gibbons (“Let’s Go Swimming”), who took his recordings in new directions.¹⁰⁶ Nor was Russell bothered when the popularity of Larry Levan’s remix of “Is It All Over My Face?” prompted another group of musicians to call themselves Loose Joints and perform the same song on the New York club circuit; rather, he welcomed their work as offering another interpretation of the song. When the counterfeit Loose Joints was scheduled to appear alongside the original Loose Joints at a Brooklyn nightclub, Murk threatened to cancel, but Russell liked the idea of the two groups performing the same song back-to-back. Murk remembers the counterfeit band was tight, but Russell thought that “they sounded like a cover band, and that our group was making music.”¹⁰⁷

Russell was committed to expanding the concept of musicianship beyond the normative mode of the gifted composer (in art music) and the charismatic figurehead (in pop and rock), and he developed this ethos wherever he went. Whereas the recording studio has been described as a site where music is cut up, manipulated and therefore denaturalized, it remains the case that many engineers and producers attempt to make their recordings sound seamless and natural (as is the case with most art music recordings) or highlight the

¹⁰⁶ Whereas dub pioneers Lee Scratch Perry and King Tubby developed the concept of a studio version during the late 1960s, New York’s club DJs pioneered the remix according to the logic of dance culture, in which dancers demonstrated a preference for long songs. These could be found on albums, which were not restricted to the limited time format of the forty-five single, and DJs started to make their own extended versions of a single by working two copies on separate turntables, or alternatively making extended versions using reel-to-reel technology at home. Record companies started to finance the making of promotional twelve-inch singles in order to market seven-inch singles until Salsoul Records commissioned Walter Gibbons to remix the first commercial twelve-inch single in 1976. Although hip hop DJs such as Kool Herc were also developing extended beat sections by using two copies of the same record and mixing between the breaks, the principle of developing long records in which dancers could lose themselves did not receive the same emphasis as it did in disco. After applauding the work of Gibbons, Arthur Russell told David Toop that most remixers make his music sound “more ordinary.” (David Toop, “Past Futurist,” *Wire*, April 1995.) For more information, see Tim Lawrence, “Mixed with Love: The Walter Gibbons Salsoul Anthology” (Suss’d, 2004).

¹⁰⁷ Donald Murk interview with Tim Lawrence, 4 May 2006.

precision/skill/presence of key elements in the line-up. Russell, however, took an alternative approach and left experienced engineers in a state of amazement. “Arthur showed me that anything is possible, that music is a continuous flow or process,” says Bob Blank, who had always looked to make music symmetrical and encourage the ears to go to the part that were most important. “Music can evolve out of things. It’s not a form that you fit things into... Arthur taught me that the off-chance thing going on in the left hand corner can be as important as what’s happening in the middle.”¹⁰⁸ Russell approached the concept of musicianship in the same way: he encouraged R&B vocalists to sing in an off-kilter voice and orchestral musicians to improvise; he invited dancers to play musical instruments and sing on the Loose Joints sessions; during an overdub for Loose Joints he asked another “amateur musician” friend who had discovered a broken guitar to come in and record with the instrument; he took to leaving windows open during recording sessions so that the “musicianship of the street” would seep into the mix; and he worked with unconventional sounds, including those generated through the microtonal system of just intonation, which enabled the reintroduction of the non-western colours that had gone missing from Western art music.

Russell’s use of the cello was typical of his determination to explore sound from every possible angle. Although he practiced hard, Russell had no interest in developing the skill of a virtuoso musician, and played his cello in a range of intentionally unconventional ways that sought to unleash the instrument’s full range of sonic affects, one of which involved him holding it horizontally and plucking its strings with a coconut shell in order to generate a percussive sound. Taking the instrument out of its regular Western art music habitat, he played it across a range of Indian classical, folk and disco settings, and during this process he further dismantled the cello’s orchestral status by connecting it to an amplifier. At the same time, Russell came to view the instrument not so much as a piece of manipulable technology as an ally-agent of immanent affects. During his time in San Francisco he lived in a Buddhist commune for a couple of years

¹⁰⁸ Bob Blank interview with Tim Lawrence, 19 July 2004.



**Arthur Russell and his cello in the mid-1980s. Photograph by Tom Lee.
Courtesy of Audika Records.**

and took to retreating into a closet in order to play the cello, not because (as some have written) playing was forbidden, but because the acoustics were so powerful he was able to forget the distinction between himself and his instrument. That sense of being both decentered and expanded was set down on *World of Echo*, where voice and instrument twisted around each other in such an interactive, ethereal manner it is impossible to think of them as individual components. Capturing two live performances of these recordings on video, the experimental musician and filmmaker Phil Niblock kept his shots so tight that Russell's body is never seen in full, instead appearing as a series of interacting parts — the movement of the hands, the body of the cello, the meeting of the bow and the strings, the tilt of the head — as if providing a tour of the various components of the recording assemblage rather than a representation

of a complete and coherent artist.¹⁰⁹ Niblock might have been enabled by the music, which calls attention not to the transcendental genius of the author, but the material/molecular workings of the various parts of the musical machine, which are of equal worth. Andrew Murphie's description of popular music as "not necessarily art but as interactive artisanship" is clearly applicable to Russell.¹¹⁰

b. Audiences

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari warn that because the force of deterritorialization "is the strongest" in sound, sound also "effects the most massive reterritorializations, the most numbing, the most redundant."¹¹¹ Implicit is the idea that music, like other cultural forms, has the ability to behave conservatively as well as radically, to stop making rather than continue making connections. And when Deleuze and Guattari add that sound can also lead to a "black hole" as well as the "cosmos," it would seem that they are alluding to sound that is so obscure that it becomes disconnected and lacks any kind of audience. The suggestion is the avant-garde should go about its work with vigor, yet should always remember to check its audience every now and again, just to make sure someone is listening.

The presence or absence of an audience might not have been foremost among the concerns of serial composers, but the forerunners of minimalism decided that they cared. "We were performer-composers," explains Glass. "We were not academics who wrote treatises on the future of serial music. We made a clean break with the academic world, and the cleanest break you could make with the academic world was to go out and play music, because they didn't do that."¹¹² By aligning himself with the minimalist and post-minimalist composers who clustered around the Kitchen, the Experimental Intermedia Foundation and other downtown venues, Russell made it clear that he hoped to write music that could appeal

¹⁰⁹ Phill Niblock's videos were included as a companion DVD (titled *Terrace of Unintelligibility*) when Audika reissued *World of Echo* in 2004.

¹¹⁰ Murphie, "Sound at the End of the World As We Know It," 255-280.

¹¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 348.

¹¹² Philip Glass interview with Tim Lawrence, 19 November 2004.

to a non-specialist audience, and the fact that he helped pioneer the introduction of popular chords in his compositions made him a particularly bold experimenter in this regard. Yet it was in his engagement with pure pop — which ranged from booking pop acts to play at the Kitchen to joining pop bands such as the Flying Hearts — that his desire to reach a popular audience was most explicit. “The Flying Hearts was pointedly a pop group, and didn’t pretend to have any artistic aspirations,” says Gordon. “In fact, Ernie and Arthur repeatedly argued about what would be ‘too weird’ for pop music.”¹¹³

Even though he liked to experiment, Russell had no desire to remain obscure and worked hard to connect with an audience. While living in San Francisco, Russell became friends with Allen Ginsberg, and it was with Ginsberg, as well as Steven Hall, that he forged his plan to record a form of Buddhist pop music. “When I first met him, Arthur and I would talk about using Buddhism as some kind of force in pop music,” recalls Hall. “We wanted to write songs that used these ideas. Arthur was really passionate about this.”¹¹⁴ Having performed queer Buddhist mantra chants alongside Ginsberg and Hall, Russell pursued his dream of connecting with the popular by forming the Flying Hearts with Ernie Brooks, and the two of them studiously avoided anything that resembled experimentalism, even if Russell’s ultra-laid back stage persona and penchant for songs with gently shocking twists (“I Wish You Were A Girl”) undermined their potential to become a commercial success. Russell continued his pop quest by traveling to Italy to join up with Le Orme — this was a dream of sweetness and sunshine and simplicity — and when the band reacted badly to his arrival he returned to New York and started to focus on producing disco, where the connection with the public was immediate and powerful.

During this period and beyond, Russell never felt compelled to make a choice between the avant-garde and the popular. He wanted to be free to introduce interesting ideas, and this approach ended up frustrating John Hammond, who hoped to nurture Russell in the mould of Dylan/Springsteen only to discover that he thought (in the

¹¹³ Peter Gordon interview with Tim Lawrence, 18 February 2006.

¹¹⁴ Steven Hall interview with Tim Lawrence, 30 November 2004.

words of Tom Lee, Russell's future lifelong partner) "there were lots of singer-songwriter wannabes and that he didn't want to be another person in that world."¹¹⁵ Having paid for Russell to go into the studio, label reps from Sire and West End were also left frustrated that his recordings were not immediately recognizable. Yet in contrast to a number of avant-garde musicians situated in free jazz, art music and no wave, Russell did not fall into the trap of making the unpredictable predictable. While the Flying Hearts lacked a strong ego, the group's songs were deliberately modeled on the standard conventions of pop. In a similar vein, Russell's "Wax the Van" did not venture far beyond the parameters of conventional dance, while the less orthodox "Tell You (Today)" was unashamedly catchy. Although Russell often made music according to an overarching counterpoint, in which simple refrains gave way to complex periods of playing, his songs did not always develop along these lines, and as such he did not generate a new conformity of avant-garde complexity or lapse conversely into a straightforward populist commercialism. Lacking a label that understood his desire to straddle the popular and the experimental as well as a range of musical genres, Russell ended up co-founding his own imprint, Sleeping Bag, which became the publisher of *24 → 24 Music*. But when financial difficulties convinced Russell's partner, Will Socolov, that he had to assume sole control of the company because Russell's taste was insufficiently commercial, Russell's recordings started to pile up in the rejection box. Russell spent the rest of his recording life seeking out independent label bosses who trusted him to get on with his music and were happy with the idea that they would recoup their costs (if all went well).

c. Becoming-woman, Becoming-child, Becoming-animal, Becoming-cosmic

Although Arthur Russell made a point of emphasizing the collective, he started to use his own name more regularly from the early 1980s onwards. Philip Glass, who had cultivated a successful career by repeating an identifiable strain of orchestral music, was an important

¹¹⁵ Tom Lee interview with Tim Lawrence, 18 February 2004.

influence in persuading him to use the “I” more boldly. Russell went on to release two orchestral album — *Instrumentals* (Les Disques du Crépuscule, 1983) and *Tower of Meaning* (Chatham Square, 1984) — under his own name, and had little choice but to repeat the approach on his solo voice-cello album, *World of Echo* (Upside Records, 1986). After that he used his name one more time on the twelve-inch single “Let’s Go Swimming” (Logarhythm, 1986), while “School Bell/Treehouse” (Sleeping Bag, 1986), which was released more or less simultaneously, was attributed to Indian Ocean. Compared with the spiraling egos of the mainstream pop acts of the 1980s, Russell’s hesitant “I” hardly amounted to an act of uncontrollable narcissism. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s comment that they used their names on the cover of *A Thousand Plateaus* “purely out of habit” and because “it’s nice to talk like everybody else” springs to mind, as does their comment that they hope to reach “not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I.”¹¹⁶

Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis of becoming-woman, becoming-child and becoming-animal sheds further light on Russell’s reluctance to assume a kind of singular and persistent “I” presence. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, woman, child and animal are contrasted with man, who is “majoritarian” (rather than “minoritarian”) not because there are more men than there are women, children or animals, but because he enjoys a “state of domination.”¹¹⁷ Deleuze and Guattari add that all becomings must pass through becoming-woman — because this revolves around the decentering of the mode of masculine modernity. And they also warn that women, children and animals do not necessarily occupy a position of becoming because they can reterritorialize on a majority state, so women, children and animals must deterritorialize (become-woman, become-child and become-animal) in order to serve “as the active medium of becoming.”¹¹⁸ The authors comment that “there is no medium of becoming except as a deterritorialized variable of a minority,” and

¹¹⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 3.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 291.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

point out there can be “no becoming-man because man is the molar entity par excellent, whereas becomings are molecular.”¹¹⁹ Finally, none of these becomings involve the act of imitation of a woman, a child or an animal, but (in the words of Ronald Bogue) “an unspecifiable, unpredictable disruption of codes that takes place alongside women, children, and animals, in a metamorphic zone between fixed identities.”¹²⁰

Russell was able to become-woman not by becoming an actual woman (through a sex change) or attempting to pass as a woman (through drag), but instead through a series of cumulative practices. The contours of Russell’s becoming-woman can be traced to his physical proximity to a series of scenes and, in particular, his avoidance of comparatively macho music cultures that were not only dominated by men (something that defines many music scenes) but perhaps more importantly by men behaving in a masculine way. In the field of art music, Russell steered clear of serialism because of the music’s denial of bodily pleasure and emotional expressiveness, as well as its insistence on molar hierarchy, impermeable aesthetic borders and social stratification. Instead he gravitated to the field of minimalism/post-minimalism, which was more open to female composers (including Maryanne Amacher, Laurie Anderson, Jill Kroesen, Anna Lockwood and Charlemagne Palestine); was non-phallogentric in its deployment of tangents, repetition and circularity; and anti-patriarchal in its willingness to dismantle the mind/body binary and give value to the exploration of the non-rational (both bodily and spiritual). Russell’s engagement with the pop/rock terrain followed a similar pattern. He appears to have avoided psychedelic rock in San Francisco because of the culture’s tendency to valorize masculine virtuosity and individuality, after which he co-founded a band whose very name, the Flying Hearts, suggested a form of becoming-woman-ness in its emphasis on emotional connectivity. Lacking a lead vocalist and developing a lulling aesthetic, the Flying Hearts contrasted sharply with the precise, linear, aggressive contours of punk and new wave. And when Russell joined the Necessaries he

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 292.

¹²⁰ Bogue, *Deleuze on Music, Painting, and the Arts*, 35.

became unhappy with the band's tougher sound and heavy reliance on lead singer Ed Tomney, who occupied rock's well-honed position of man/leader/poet/figure of cool. Meanwhile Russell showed no interest in the angry and sometimes intimidating aesthetic sensibilities and performance rituals that became the hallmark of downtown's ear-splitting no wave scene.¹²¹

Russell was drawn to music scenes that were affirming, inclusive and positive, so while he repeatedly tried to find his niche in pop and rock, he was far happier operating in the world of downtown dance and, more specifically, the black gay downtown dance scene, which was far more socially inclusive and musically disparate than the homogeneous, mono-cultural white gay scene, which evolved in so-called "A-list" venues such as the Tenth Floor and Flamingo.¹²² Russell had already started to write songs that articulated non-hegemonic forms of gender and sexual behavior before he became immersed in downtown disco. Sung by a man, "I Wish You Were A Girl" gestured towards an unsettled gay subjectivity, while "Don't Forget About Me" gave permission to a lover of a non-specified sex to leave for another man ("You know you know you are free / But baby don't forget about me"). It was the experience of dancing at downtown dance venues such as the Gallery and the Loft, however, that inspired Russell to write a series of songs that brimmed with sexual innuendo — including "Is It All Over My Face?," "Pop Your Funk," "Go Bang," "Clean On Your Bean," "Wax the Van." These songs were queer rather than gay thanks to their willingness to shock (which was never the intention of Hot 100 gay artists such as

¹²¹ Simon Reynolds provides a detailed account of New York's No Wave movement in *Rip It Up*, 50-72.

¹²² Black gay venues were more open than white gay venues because of the non-dominant position of black gay men in gay culture. Indeed most black gay venues were owned by white gay or bisexual men, which made them more likely to be open in terms of race than their white gay counterparts. For a detailed analysis of the homogeneity of the white gay scene and the heterogeneity of the black gay scene, see Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*.

Sylvester and the Village People) as well as their availability to different-sex interpretations.¹²³

Plurality and openness were central tenants of New York's earliest black gay dance formations, where crowds were openly mixed and the dance floor was conceived as a space of open-ended community, non-normative expression and body-sonic transformation. Although a number of these possibilities would be closed down by white gay disco (as articulated at the Tenth Floor and Flamingo) and mainstream straight disco (as represented in *Saturday Night Fever*), Russell frequented venues where the drive to gay congregation and liberation did not close down more expansive notions of community and sexuality, and this was reflected in his songwriting. "Arthur was inclusive in a way that even some early gay pride pioneers were not in terms of straight sexuality, and he was also informed by his experiences with women," comments Hall. "It is limiting to think of his music through the gay prism."¹²⁴ Gruff male voices provided some of these songs with a homoerotic undertone, while female vocalists (including Lola Blank, Jill Kroesen and Melvina Woods) were encouraged to sing in unconventional (drunken, demented, little girl, etc.) voices. The cumulative result suggested that sexuality, as Deleuze and Guattari write, "is the production of a thousand sexes, which are so many uncontrollable becomings."¹²⁵ For listeners who were not in the know, and maybe were not ready to know, non-sexual readings were also readily available, so a song like "Pop Your Funk" could be interpreted as nonsense wordplay around music genre. Even when they were received in a more puritanical fashion, however, the experience of listening to these records was hardly reassuring because Russell's non-hegemonic meanings were not simply articulated in the lyrics, but also in the sonic structure of the recordings. Producing music that avoided the molarizing features

¹²³ I discuss the queerness of Arthur Russell's dance tracks in "I Want to See All My Friends At Once?: Arthur Russell and the Queering of Gay Disco," *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 18, 2, 2006, 144-66. This piece focuses on Russell's dance records of the late 1970s and early 1980s and is distinct from the rhizomatic analysis developed in this essay.

¹²⁴ Steven Hall interview with Tim Lawrence, 23 January 2006.

¹²⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 278.

of teleology or stable form, but instead moved in tangents, loops and grooves while slipping across generic boundaries, Russell's dance tracks were almost always in a state of becoming-woman.

The downtown dance floor also provided Russell with a space that was open to becoming-child. Thanks to their private status, venues such as the Loft were able to sidestep the regulations laid down by New York's licensing authorities, and as the parties acquired marathon-like proportions, participants left behind the outside world of measured, regulated time and replaced it with an alternative world in which time was unmeasured and unregulated (thanks to the absence of clocks, the non-applicability of mandatory closing times, etc.). Guided by the flux and flow of the music, and supported by the disorienting effects of drugs and lighting effects as well as the unfixing vectors of darkness and proximate bodies, dancers lost their sense of teleological time and entered into a block of time that fused past, present and future — a time, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, of "Aeon" rather than "Chronos." In this environment, dancers would not experience memories of being a child (a fixed point in time that precedes adulthood) so much as open up to the experience of becoming-child (an unfixed line of becoming).¹²⁶ When dancers started to whoop and scream under a ceiling of birthday-party balloons, it revealed not that they had regressed into actual childhood, nor that they were attempting to imitate being a child, but that they were transcending the fixed-time of their adult selves and replacing it with a transversal time. Russell also introduced child-like motifs to his dance recordings: the monosyllabic accessibility of "Pop Your Funk," the call to play of "Go Bang," the pubescent sexuality of "Clean On Your Bean," the child-like spontaneity of "Let's Go Swimming" and the symbolic memories of "School Bell/Treehouse." On "Wax the Van," Russell went so far as to ask Lola Blank's seven-year-old son to contribute vocals.

Russell also attempted to capture the pre-socialized spontaneity of the child during a number of recording sessions, which he ran according to the principle that the first take was the best take because it was the most unselfconscious take. (When Audika released a

¹²⁶ Ibid., 262, 293-94.

compilation of Russell's orchestral works, the album was titled *First Thought Best Thought*. The phrase "first thought best thought" comes from William Carlos Williams and was adopted by figures such as Allen Ginsberg.)¹²⁷ Chogyama Trungpa's *The Myth of Freedom and the Way of Meditation*, a book recommended to Russell by Ginsberg, reinforced his belief that the moment of inspiration was a heightened moment of poetry and that expressions of child-like innocence and spontaneity should be treasured. Russell took to playing recordings to his nephew in the hope that he would either like them or reveal what was required to make them more appealing to young people. When Beau expressed an appreciation of the hard rock of Van Halen, Russell was disappointed, but he continued to address the minority grouping of children as well as encourage adult listeners to abdicate the sensibility that came with their position of power. "Hiding Your Present from You" evoked the familiar scene of a parent preparing for a child's birthday (or, just as plausibly, an adult hiding a present from another adult and becoming-child in play); "Get Around to It" contained lyrics about childhood sexual experimentation ("Show me what the girl does to the boy"); "Cornbelt" [sic.] called to mind the rolling Midwestern cornfields that surrounded the town in which he grew up; the name of the Singing Tractors repeated the reference to his rural roots; "Wild Combination" contained lines that referred to childhood holidays by the Minnesota lakes; and "Calling All Kids" was a childhood manifesto ("Calling all kids, calling all kids / Entering in binocular mode / Calling all kids, calling all kids / Grown-ups are crazy, crazy, crazy"). Regarded as a strange outsider as he grew up in Oskaloosa — his childhood came to an abrupt end when he ran away from home before completing high school — Russell was unable to look back on his younger years through the soft lens of nostalgia, and the sonic strangeness that runs through these songs underlines his non-romantic outlook. Rather than idealizing a lost era that cannot be retrieved, Russell sought to create

¹²⁷ Thanks to Steve Knutson for pointing out William Carlos Williams as the original source. Steven Hall notes that William Carlos Williams was himself indebted to Jack Kerouac.

a connection with the affective sensibility of play that lies within all adults in order to realize a form of freeing alterity.

Russell was also drawn to becoming-animal (as well as fish). Hand-made flyers featured child-like sketches of birds and antelopes; a bunny rabbit stared out from the front of his cello (perhaps because Russell identified with the sweetness of the animal, or perhaps because his approach to making music was similar to living in an underground warren); a koala bear appeared on the logo for Sleeping Bag; and songs such as “Eli,” “Tiger Stripes” and “Deer In the Forest” developed animal themes. Russell even took on the cause of the minority within the minority when he evoked endangered and extinct species: Dinosaur and Dinosaur L appeared as artist names, and he also assumed the producer-moniker of “Killer Whale” on a number of his records. Taken individually, Russell’s animal references were not rhizomatic, in the way that identifying or having a relationship with a pet is not rhizomatic. But taken together, his cumulative references to animals and fish foregrounded a rhizomatic outlook in which Russell identified with the becoming-animal characteristic of, to quote Deleuze and Guattari, moving in “a pack, a band, a population, a peopling, in short, a multiplicity.”¹²⁸ The hungry, roving composer/musicians who lined up for each other in downtown concert after downtown concert were also fundamentally pack-like in their behaviour.

Becoming-animal did not involve Russell actually becoming an animal, but rather engaging with the deterritorializing status of an animal, which for Deleuze and Guattari implied not so much becoming-animal as becoming-non-human. It follows, then, that Russell’s evocation of a range of environments in his music and performances can be considered to be a parallel move towards becoming-animal. *Instrumentals* was played against a backdrop of nature slides taken by his San Francisco Buddhist teacher, Yuko Nonomura, while images of the sky, light and clouds, as well as water, rain and the ocean, ran through songs such as “In the Light of the Miracle,” “Let’s Go Swimming,” “Lucky Cloud” and “Platform On the Ocean” as well as artist names such as the Sailboats and Indian

¹²⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 239-40.

Ocean. Russell lived in New York City because he calculated that that was the best place for him to make music, but he regularly headed to the peers that ran alongside the Hudson River because he needed a regular fix of water. And although a lack of money stopped him from traveling further westwards, he regularly dreamed of the mountains of San Francisco. Russell, in other words, was concerned with the lines that ran from the animal to the mineral and the geological, and it made good sense to pursue this interest through music, for as Deleuze and Guattari argue, “musical expression is inseparable from a becoming-woman, a becoming-child, a becoming-animal that constitute its content.”¹²⁹

From a young age, Russell attempted to immerse himself in a range of musical environments (environments that are conducive to becoming-woman/child/animal) to the extent that music became the primary medium through which he experienced life. When he locked himself away in the closet on the Buddhist commune in San Francisco, the claustrophobic, darkened space enabled him to merge into music, and the immersive rooms of downtown dance culture functioned as a more accessible zone in which music became one’s life for an eight or a ten or a twelve-hour period. Russell also engaged with becoming not one form of music (genre) but music itself (something close to the full range of musical sound), and his outlook became so resolute that after he was diagnosed as being HIV-positive in 1986 he deliberately avoided completing an album that had been commissioned by Rough Trade in order to make sure he always had something to work on, as well as eke out additional advances that could help him develop a nest-like home studio. “I began to understand that his being ill was one reason it was taking him so long,” recalls Geoff Travis, the head of Rough Trade. “It gave him a reason to live, and I was glad about this.”¹³⁰ Writing an obituary for Russell in the *Village Voice*, Kyle Gann commented, “His recent performances had been so infrequent due to illness, his songs were so

¹²⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 299.

¹³⁰ Geoff Travis interview with Tim Lawrence, 22 July 2004.



Arthur Russell in his home studio, 1990. Photograph by and courtesy of Tom Lee.

personal, that it seems as though he simply vanished into his music.”¹³¹

Russell, in short, was intent on becoming-music, and his work regularly involved him engaging with the cosmic. In a postcard written in September 1973, Ginsberg applauded Russell’s “precision in words” and the way he would show both “courage” and an “understanding of basic reality” to “rely on so delicate a fact and persevere with confidence in memories drawn from actual rather than idealized life.” Russell’s work, added Ginsberg, reached the “final loveliness and Buddha smallness of the Actual,” and the Beat poet concluded, “Staying with the real... is a rare art you have.”¹³² As described by Ginsberg, Russell’s transcendental materialism intersects with Deleuze and Guattari’s call for “the people and the earth” to “be like the vectors of a cosmos that carries them off; then the cosmos

¹³¹ Kyle Gann, “Square Rhythms,” *Village Voice*, 28 April 1992.

¹³² Allen Ginsberg postcard to Arthur Russell, 15 September 1973.

will be art.”¹³³ Russell’s journey was barely mappable, consisting as it did of a blur of projects, sounds and collaborations, and his refusal to stand still or be readily identifiable might have further recommended him to the authors.¹³⁴ “Produce a deterritorialized refrain as the final end of music, release it into the Cosmos — that is more important than building a new system,” Deleuze and Guattari write of Schumann, and might have written of Russell. “Opening the assemblage onto a cosmic force.”¹³⁵

5. Strategic Consequences of Arthur Russell’s Rhizomatic Politics

Arthur Russell was no more than partially successful in his attempt to open up the downtown assemblage to the cosmic. He managed to draw a line between the compositional and pop/rock scenes, but his efforts to persuade the rest of downtown to take disco seriously were less successful. Just as scenesters did not always grasp the scope of Russell’s work, so the chroniclers of downtown — including Kyle Gann, Bernard Gendron, Tom Johnson and Marvin Taylor — have not been drawn to his presence.¹³⁶ Was Russell’s elision from these and other historical accounts of downtown the inevitable result of his determination to pursue so many sounds simultaneously (and often anonymously)? Did Russell’s rhizomatic musicianship undermine his ability to make an undeniable impact in any single genre of popular music, or downtown culture more generally?

¹³³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 346.

¹³⁴ “Arthur didn’t want to be widely regarded as such-and-such if that was only part of what he did,” explains Murk. “I adopted the attitude that you have to define yourself or people won’t buy you.” At that point, Arthur answered with an emphatic, “I will not be defined.” Donald Murk interview with Tim Lawrence, 11 September 2005.

¹³⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 350.

¹³⁶ Gann, *Music Downtown*. Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*. 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. Reprinted as a digital book in 2002. Taylor (ed.). *The Downtown Book*. By way of contrast, dance historians have devoted considerable space to Russell. See, for example, Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 256-58.

The answer is, “Yes, but...” for while Russell’s position in the radical middle made and continues to make him hard to capture — as Deleuze and Guattari write, the “middle is not an average; it is fast motion, it is the absolute speed of movement”¹³⁷ — his rhizomatic practice has also contributed to his durability. The muted loneliness of Russell’s voice-cello songs resonated with the height of the AIDS crisis in the first half of the 1990s; his groundbreaking post-disco recordings opened him to an audience that was beginning to explore the forgotten terrain of disco as well as search for the missing links that led to the emergence of house in the second half of the 1990s; his off-kilter dance tracks from the mid-1980s caught the imagination of the early followers of Broken Beat in the late 1990s and early 2000s; and the recycling of the electronic pop cannon from the first half of the 1980s has made his unreleased recordings for Sleeping Bag and Rough Trade sound premonitory in the early to mid-2000s. All of this percolating interest came to the boil in 2004, when Soul Jazz released *The World of Arthur Russell* and, more or less simultaneously, Audika launched *Calling Out of Context*. Since then, Russell has enjoyed a level of media adulation, record label interest and commercial sales success that has easily surpassed anything he achieved while he was alive — a testament, if ever one was needed, to the durability of a rhizome.

Although the recent chronicling of the disco era combined with the newfound interest in the “downtown era” of 1974-84 has enabled a contextual reading of Russell’s work, there should be no confusion that a return to the past is either possible or straightforwardly desirable.¹³⁸ “*It’s senile. And it wasn’t all that,*” the downtown graffiti/conceptual artist Jeff Harrington wrote in a recent thread on the history of downtown. “I think today’s more chaotic, less holy, more eclectic and poorer scene is a lot more interesting.”¹³⁹ While a

¹³⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 293.

¹³⁸ The main books that chronicle disco are my own *Love Saves the Day*, as well as Shapiro’s *Turn the Beat Around*. Taylor’s edited collection, *The Downtown Book*, and Reynolds’s detailed analysis of postpunk, *Rip It Up*, have contributed to the broader historicization of downtown.

¹³⁹ Jeff Harrington comment on www.sequenza21.com. Retrieved from <http://www.haloscan.com/comments/jbowles/113950581534970678> on 7 August 2006.

degree of nostalgia might permeate the histories of New York music culture in the 1970s and 1980s, anyone who pines for a return to the so-called heyday of downtown longs after an era in which Russell did not find acceptance — or at least nothing like the kind of acceptance that makes him such a relevant figure more than twenty years after his death. Importantly, Russell's new band of listeners do not appear to be driven by nostalgia, but instead by the fact that his music sounds so contemporary — so chaotic, unholy, eclectic and grassroots.¹⁴⁰ Considered historically, the act of listening to Russell indicates not an act of nostalgia but a commitment to an atemporal music culture that confounds chronology and brings together the past, the present and (hopefully) the future.

Russell is also enjoying a powerful revival because his wide-ranging approach to music makes such good sense in the digital era, in which forms of musical fusion are proliferating and music collections are accumulating and broadening at an unprecedented rate. Of course fusions have always taken place: twentieth century music was in many respects an epoch of a twisting, accelerating hybridity, especially from the late 1960s onwards. And if the 1980s began to close down the move towards eclectic experimentation — in the United States the contest between white rock and black/Latin hip hop became entrenched, while in Europe rock was figured as the last bastion of resistance to black dance — by the beginning of the new millennium a growing band of music listeners had become tired of these alliances, as well as the hyperbolic exchanges that seemed to fuel their sense of purpose. The willingness of these listeners to travel beyond a primary generic allegiance was aided by the spread of burning, downloading and file-sharing. As the digital era accelerated, listeners increasingly defined their taste in music as being “eclectic,” and this paradigm shift resulted in an increasing number of listeners being equipped with the kind of open-mindedness that was required to assimilate the full range of Russell's musical repertoire.

¹⁴⁰ Grassroots refers to the way Russell cobbled together his musicians, eked out studio time whenever he could, developed a deliberately non-slick aesthetic, and so on.

Russell might not have been the first musician to produce a broad range of styles and sensibilities, yet he was and remains an exemplary figure with regard to this kind of practice, and it is possible that his newfound appeal is tied to the complexity of the present historical moment. “Unless one likes complexity one cannot feel at home in the twenty-first century,” writes Rosi Braidotti in *Metamorphoses*. “Transformations, metamorphoses, mutations and processes of change have in fact become familiar in the lives of most contemporary subjects.”¹⁴¹ Russell’s profound complexity, which resulted in him resisting all forms of categorization, proved to be impossible to translate beyond the limited confines of downtown New York during the 1970s and 1980s, but is becoming comprehensible in the contemporary era of mutation, speed and transformation. If Norah Jones’s *Come Away with Me* became a timely soundtrack for the United States in the aftermath of 9/11 thanks to its soothing simplicity, spirituality and sweetness, Arthur Russell’s *Another Thought*, *World of Echo* and *Calling Out of Context* offered all of those qualities along with restlessness, difficulty and edginess. That might not have appealed to listeners who wanted to stay with the reassuring sound of musical chloroform, or those who rejected Jones in favor of a pumped-up sound that put them in the mood to conduct a xenophobic war against evil. But for listeners who wanted to grasp the complexity of the new millennium, Russell’s catalogue resembled a prescient time capsule from a bygone era.

In a strange twist, Russell’s apparent incoherence — the thing that made the major music companies so reluctant to sign him during the seventies and eighties — has become the foundation of his recent success. Although it might have become unexceptional for mainstream artists to record across a range of genres, this practice often takes place not because it is creatively or ethically interesting, but because it offers artists a chance to renew a jaded career, or reach out to a wide range of niche markets. Digital technology has made it easy to cobble together a twelve-inch single that features a range of mixes (R&B, hip hop, rock, dance, etc.) in order to reach as many

¹⁴¹ Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 1.

audiences and sell as many copies as possible. Yet the resulting productions tend to be forgettable because they are often produced in the slipstream of a digitally enabled tourist trip of musical genre that looks to tick off the lowest common denominator of sound — a manifestly liberal engagement that can result in an arborescent mode of music-making whereby the producer reterritorializes sound (everything starts to sound the same) rather than deterritorializes sound (by developing new lines of flight). A radical artist who explored difference by taking it seriously and finding points of intersection, Russell offers an alternative ethos of musical and social engagement. Listeners cannot help but fall in love with the idea of his music, never mind the music itself.

Russell's engagement with radical difference is reminiscent of the late 1960s, in which the rainbow coalition of civil rights activists, gay liberationists, feminists and anti-war demonstrators organized around a range of local issues — racism, homophobia, sexism and war — and also discovered the commonality and interconnectedness of their struggles through the countercultural movement. Russell was loosely connected to this movement. As a teenager, he read the Beat Poets, he grew his hair long, he took LSD, he ran away from home to live in Iowa City and then San Francisco, he went to live on a Buddhist commune, he studied Indian classical music, and he became good friends with Allen Ginsberg. In contrast to Ginsberg, however, he displayed no interest in participating in the overtly political end of the countercultural movement, so he showed no interest in joining the anti-war campaign, and he remained equally uninterested in the gay liberation movement, even after he came out as a gay man. Why?

In the late 1960s, Russell was a young man who might have been overly (yet understandably) invested in being different. Having grown up in a small Midwestern town where he felt like an outsider, he experienced a period of acute angst during his teenage years, and was only sixteen years old when he ran away from home in 1967 (a few months after the Summer of Love). By the early 1970s, the relative failure of the countercultural movement would have confirmed his view that the moment for an alternative form of politics — one that was less ambitious, less purist, less activist and less Utopian — had arrived. “I saw the fallout of the drug scene that resulted in the

broken promises of freedom and free love,” says Steven Hall. “The heavier drugs such as speed and heroin resulted in a dissipation of creative energies and the deaths of artists and writers. The countercultural movement failed politically because of a loss of focus and lack of long-term vision.” Along with Russell, Hall became interested in developing a local form of lived politics. “The desire was to express ourselves through our work,” he comments. “The radical lifestyles we led were enough, and presenting our lifestyles in our work was our political activity. We had no time for overt political work and a subtle bias against political art, which we felt was compromised by its stridency.” Russell and Hall did not so much disagree with Ginsberg’s public stand on a range of issues as seek to go about creating a political reality according to a less ambitious set of criteria — a set of criteria that were concerned with working collaboratively, forming a non-hierarchical community, developing a radical and expressive form of art, and enacting a local politics of liberation. “We thought that we would rather play music and live out the principles Allen taught as a matter of praxis,” adds Hall. “To write a song about men having sex was just as political as protesting for freedom of speech.”¹⁴²

By the early 1970s, skepticism about the countercultural movement had become widespread. Manuel DeLanda has noted the way in which the activists of the 1960s “thought they were going to achieve everything within the 60’s — and what they wanted was not achievable, period.”¹⁴³ Russell turned to Buddhism when his own attempt to breakthrough too quickly (via LSD) did not result in the transformation of his daily experience, and that philosophical-religious framework continued to frame his view of the world when he moved to New York, not because he was especially devout, but because the precepts of Buddhism provided him with an explanatory framework of how he already related to the world. Having settled in Manhattan, Russell continued to forge networks of collaborative musicians, yet hoped to do so while earning enough money to support himself (just as other more dedicated countercultural activists

¹⁴² Steven Hall interview with Tim Lawrence, 5 August 2007.

¹⁴³ Erik Davis, “DeLanda Destratified,” *Mondo 2000*, Winter 1992.

also decided it was time to “grow up” and get a job). Along with many other downtowners, Russell appreciated that there was no position “outside” of capitalism, and at times he even hoped that being on the inside — of, say, CBS or Warners — could help him survive as a musician while spreading a message of hope. During these and other projects, Russell retained his commitment to developing communal relationships and producing a form of ethical, adventurous art. Like many of his peers, he did not talk about changing the world through campaigning politics, but instead restricted himself to the less declarative business of “doing.”

All of this made doubly good sense because by the middle of the 1970s it had become unclear what an activist politics might achieve. The disintegration of the civil rights movement closed down one possible avenue of involvement, while the successes of the gay liberation movement (in terms of enabling gay men and lesbian women to congregate legally) appeared to lessen the need for action. Instead of divorcing himself from the concerns of black and gay politics, however, Russell made music that engaged with black and gay aesthetics and forged inter-communal relations. This kind of work should not be taken for granted: it did not exist on the periphery of the organized leftist during the 1970s, and downtown’s investment-minded artists also opposed it when they campaigned against the presence of venues such as the SoHo Place and the Loft (because they believed that an increased presence of ethnic gay men in the neighborhood would deflate the value of their properties). Russell knew that his work was not going to change the world; as far as he was concerned, forging a progressive community was quite enough to be getting on with.

Russell’s interest in affective communities — in communities that were organized around musical sound and bodily sensation — intersected with the some of the most compelling philosophical interventions of the 1970s. Michel Foucault’s investigation into the way in which discursive power is exercised through the regulation of sexuality and the body marked a significant break with the traditional leftist preoccupation with class and exploitation, as did Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s emphasis on the importance of developing a non-linear, decentered politics that is organized around

affective, non-hierarchical relationships.¹⁴⁴ Meanwhile poststructural feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous analyzed the relationship between sexuality and language, and argued for the development of a feminine writing and, in the case of Irigaray, an acknowledgment of the importance of the pre-Oedipal child's bodily contact with the mother. There is no reason to believe that Russell read these authors, but his concern with creating a series of communities through the experience of music, often in relation to the body, marked a parallel trajectory. He was practicing what these critics were theorizing, and he was joined by other downtown musicians from new music, new wave and disco in the quest to experience a form of transcendence through sonic repetition and social ritual.

Twenty years later, in an era of deepening inequality, neo-colonial war and looming environmental catastrophe, this project risks looking inadequate, if not negligent. "The next generation of gay boys was more overtly political because after the onslaught of AIDS two things happened," notes Hall. "The focus shifted from the bacchanal, crazy, nonstop sex-drug parties, and the burgeoning gay culture represented by mentors like Allen Ginsberg and Andy Warhol was decimated. Political engagement bypassed our generation and was taken up by the next generation with groups such as ACT-UP."¹⁴⁵ There is no knowing if Russell might have become explicitly critical of neoliberal conservatism if he had lived beyond 1992, or if the collaborative practice that he helped forge will contribute to the eventual emergence of an alternative society that is organized around community rather than the individual. Judith Halberstam commented recently that the "problem with any search for alternatives may well be one of scale — nothing seems big enough, grand enough, expansive enough." Halberstam proposed a turn to the "small, the local, the anti-monumental... the tiny steps that lead to transformation rather than the grand gesture that pronounces it as a *fait accompli*," and the tiny steps taken by Russell and his downtown peers — their focus on getting a good sound and forming productive

¹⁴⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.

¹⁴⁵ Steven Hall interview with Tim Lawrence, 5 August 2007.

relationships — might provide a handy guide to current and future interventions.¹⁴⁶

Of course no political system, however aggressive and regressive it might be, is ever totally hegemonic, or can ever wholly close off alternative ways of living. That has proved to be the case during the period of militaristic neoliberalism in the US, during which time downtown continues to offer the promise of creativity, community and dissent, even though it has been gentrified beyond recognition. The highpoint of downtown might have been dated as running from the mid-1970s through to the mid-1980s, but there has been no decisive end, however damaging the Giuliani era might have been for nonconformist, oppositional culture. In a sign of downtown's resilience, radical outposts — including the Kitchen, the Experimental Intermedia Foundation, and the Loft, to name three venues that Russell visited regularly — continue to forge an alternative milieu. Nor should an examination of downtown be restricted to New York, because equivalent downtowns exist and are emerging all over the world.

By the end of 2007 one in two of the world's population will be living in a city, and it would require an act of extreme Anglo-American centrism to assume that the only downtowns that matter are or will be those that exist in New York and London (where Shoreditch stands as an ex-down-and-out equivalent to TriBeCa).¹⁴⁷ Although global downtowns have and will continue to forge a range of distinctive artist-community formations, it is possible that some protagonists will look to New York and maybe even Arthur Russell for lessons and inspiration. Wherever they crop up, downtown communities are likely to survive as locations where artists converge, exchange ideas and perform, if only because the global economy is so reliant on creative ideas and cultural production. Exorbitant property prices might force many artists to live in relatively cheap and

¹⁴⁶ Judith Halberstam, "Losing Hope, Finding Nemo and Dreaming of Alternatives," unpublished keynote paper delivered at the Cultural Studies Now conference, University of East London, 19-22 July 2007.

¹⁴⁷ The figure is drawn from the Global Cities exhibition at the Tate Modern, London, 20 June to 27 August 2007. For more information, visit: <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/globalcities>.

peripheral neighborhoods from which they can commute to their nearest downtown, and this form of semi-dispersion will make it harder for artists to work with each other. Then again, the rise of the internet as a place of meeting and exchange could compensate for this loss by establishing an alternative platform for a global network of downtown practitioners. As the web helps generate a decentralized, file-sharing, user-centered economy in which entertainment corporations make less and less money from their artists, it is even possible to imagine the entertainment sector reverting to an artisan-style economy in which local producers survive by performing and selling their work across a range of interconnected rhizomatic networks. In this scenario, the star system that has dominated the thinking of the music industry for so long will be unsustainable and the original ethos of downtown — the creative, non-materialistic, communitarian ethos forged by Arthur Russell and his friends — will thrive on an international scale.

The story of downtown, then, does not have to be a story of disappointment and loss. Instead it can stand as a reference point for a series of alternative cultural practices that develop a politics through their style of work — work that is communal and networked, and that avoids egoism and materialism. It is no longer clear this kind of work is sufficient, because for all the failings of the countercultural movement of the 1960s, downtown's disengagement from national politics hardly enhanced its ability to survive. If it might be naïve to suggest that a more activist engagement would have deflected the forces of global capitalism away from downtown New York, the extreme rightwards shift that has occurred during the first decade of the new millennium suggests it is no longer an option to ignore mainstream politics — unless downtowners are content to be perpetually reactive, seeking out new spaces to meet whenever an old space is closed down. Irrespective of this shying away from activism, however, the recent surge of interest in downtown New York of the 1970s and 1980s suggests that its rhizomatic practice might sustain and inspire new groups of artists as well as new forms of expression. That would be welcome, because this essay's focus on Arthur Russell is not supposed to describe a past life, but rather offer a present understanding of a past life that continues to cut across time.



Select Discography and Filmography

This discography includes the published singles, twelve-inch singles and albums cited in this article. “Calling All Kids,” “Calling Out of Context,” “Deer In the Forest,” “Get Around to It” and “The Platform On the Ocean” are not cited but appear on the posthumous Arthur Russell album *Calling Out of Context*. “Eli” has yet to received a release.

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Interviews

The core material regarding Arthur Russell's biographical story has been derived from interviews with Alan Abrams, Mustafa Ahmed, Bob Blank, Lola Blank, Joyce Bowden, Ernie Brooks, Rhys Chatham, Don Christensen, Steve D'Acquisto, David DePino, Arnold Dreyfuss, Barry Feldman, Muriel Fujii, Colin Gate, Jon Gibson, Philip Glass, Peter Gordon, Kent Goshorn, Steven Hall, Steven Harvey, François Kevorkian, Steve Knutson, Jim Kohn, Jill Kroesen, Elodie Lauten, Sister LaVette, Mary Jane Leach, Tom Lee, Robbie Leslie, Eric Liljestrang, Gary Lucas, David Mancuso, William Allaudin Mathieu, John Moran, Bill Morgan, Donald Murk, Sydney Murray, Phill Niblock, Thomas R. O'Donnell, Toni Pagliuca, Bob Rosenthal, George Ruckert, Chuck Russell, Emily Russell, Julie Russell, Kate Russell, Bill Ruyle, Larry Saltzman, Alison Salzinger, Roger Sanchez, John Scherman, Carlota Schoolman, Nicky Siano, Jim Smith, Will Socolov, Robert Stearns, Ned Sublette, Elias Tanenbaum, Todd Terry, Geoff Travis, "Blue" Gene Tyranny, David Van Tieghem, Leon Van Weelden, Paul Waldman, Danny Wang, Jennifer Warnes, Jeff Whittier, Christian Wolff, Ellen Ziegler, Robert Ziegler and Peter Zummo. All of the interviews were conducted for my forthcoming biography of Arthur Russell, which will be published by Duke University Press.

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