

SILVER APPLES, ELECTRIC CIRCUS, ELECTRONIC ARTS, AND COMMERCE IN LATE 1960s NEW YORK

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ABSTRACT

It has often been a challenge to secure adequate financial and institutional support to present electro-acoustic music in appropriate physical spaces, with sufficient staffing and technical infrastructure. A handful of unusual opportunities arose in the late 1960s for partnerships between a business and artists. One of these was the Electric Circus, a discothèque in New York City, based upon an artistic conception by electronic composer Morton Subotnick in collaboration with visual artist Tony Martin. This paper explores the dynamics between artistic and commercial values at the Electric Circus and in a series of new music venues that ensued. It also offers as a counter example the highly non-commercial activity that flowed from Subotnick's open access studio housed at New York University, sparking the careers of a group of young composers of note.

1. INTRODUCTION

The balance between Art and commerce has long represented a perplexing challenge for electro-acoustic musicians. The explosion of youth culture in the late 1960s in the United States brought many questions came to the fore regarding whether, and if so, how creativity can be sustained within market-driven environment. The 1960s was an era when concert promoters, record companies, club owners and product marketers sought to make the most of the commercial potential of baby-boomers.

Centers of new music intersected with youth culture throughout the United States, particularly on the two coasts. On the West Coast, The San Francisco Tape Music Center was woven into that city's cultural life, an early home to psychedelic rock and roll. For instance, visual artist Anthony Martin's light projections were featured in both the Tape Music Center's productions and those at the Fillmore West, a leading rock hall. In search of financial support, the Tape Music Center accepted a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation that stipulated affiliation with a formal institution. At that point, a principal figure in the musical life of the Tape Center, Morton Subotnick, decided to move East to New York City. His relocation paved the way for the unanticipated development of a new center of creative musical activity in New York's

Greenwich Village, home to both New York University and the East Coast's major psychedelic culture. New York was also at the center of a nexus of creative endeavors including Fluxus, Alan Kaprow's "Happenings," Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), the free jazz of Ornette Coleman and others, and the musicians and artists associated with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, John Cage, David Tudor, David Behrman, Gordon Mumma. One manifestation of Subotnick's arrival in New York was the Electric Circus, a new multi-sensory venue that provided a testing ground for the question of whether creative Art and commercial interests could coexist in a manner that is mutually beneficial.

While it is beyond the scope of this presentation, it is worth noting that one of E.A.T.'s endeavors, the Pepsi Pavilion at the 1970 World's Fair in Osaka, Japan, addressed parallel issues. Seeking to promote Pepsi's image as youthful and energetic, the company engaged E.A.T.'s scientists and artists. An exciting and creative collaborative process ensued, yet one marred by divisions between Pepsi executives, the stronger voices supportive only of initiatives that directly marketed products. (Kluver, Martin and Rose 1972, Packer 2004).

2. MORTON SUBOTNICK IN NYC

During his time in San Francisco, Subotnick had composed music for Herbert Blau's Actor's Workshop and, when the company was invited to found the Lincoln Repertory Theater, housed in the newly opened Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center, he agreed to serve as musical director. The idea of New York intrigued Subotnick. After several years working in lively yet insular San Francisco, "when I was offered the job in New York, I decided it was worth the chance to find out if I could make it there." Robert Corrigan, founding dean at the NYU School of the Arts engaged two artists in residence, kinetic sculptor Len Lye, later replaced by Anthony Martin, and Subotnick. Subotnick accepted on several conditions: the studio, a year later organized as the Intermedia Program, had to be housed off campus; his only student obligation would be to allow visitors to watch and ask questions; and he would teach a single lecture course, an introduction to Music, for non-musicians. Subotnick then volunteered to teach a course for high school students at nearby Third

Street Music School, which launched the career of young composer Rhys Chatham. The new studio was located upstairs from the Bleecker Street Cinema, on a thoroughfare known for its cafes and folk venues. The studio was used to create Subotnick's first landmark works 'Silver Apples of the Moon' (1967) and 'The Wild Bull' (1968), Tony Martin's viewer participatory light sculptures and interactive installations (shown at the Howard Wise Gallery), and creative work by a cadre of young composers.

Subotnick studio, active although short-lived, welcomed any who were interested in working, and it attracted a remarkable group of composers. Centered around one of the first Buchla synthesizers, the studio, home to New York University's Intermedia Program, witnessed some of the earliest work in minimalism and drone music by Charlemagne Palestine, Rhys Chatham, Eliane Radigue, Ingram Marshall, and others. Maryanne Amacher was involved in early explorations into sound and perception. Serge Tcherepnin began to develop circuitry that pointed to his design of the Serge synthesizer after he, along with some of the others moved to the California Institute of the Arts. Other composers who cultivated their craft in Subotnick's studio and its successor 'Composer's Workshop', also at NYU, included Michael Czajowsky, David Rosenboom, Brian Fennelly, Laurie Spiegel, William Bolcom, and Bea Witkin. Mort Subotnick recalls: "I needed help in the studio and Charlemagne Palestine and Ingram Marshall arrived and became my assistants, just as I use student assistants now. Since there was no other electronic music studio around where people could just work, I offered them some time in the studio in exchange for doing work [for me. For instance]... several of the people did some editing on the commercials I was doing at the time. The studio functioned in a loose way like a kind of collective." It had a great impact on its participants. Maryanne Amacher remembers the studio as "a fabulous [and...] open place that worked out just beautifully. People would just come there." Ingram Marshall adds: "It was amazing."

3. THE ELECTRIC CIRCUS

Mort Subotnick's association with the New York Repertory Theater lasted the single year of Herbert Blau's tenure as director. However, an unexpected opportunity quickly manifested. Shortly after his arrival, Subotnick was visited by rock music promoters, Jerry Brandt from the William Morris Agency and Stan Freeman, who brought with them amorphous ideas about opening an unusual discothèque. Subotnick drew upon a concept he first pondered in San Francisco, "the ecstatic moment. Music becomes not a tune or a rhythm, but part of your sensory experience ... adding visuals" to craft a conception for an "Electric Circus."

The owners opened their well-financed multi-sensory environment in 1967 with investor support and commercial sponsorship by the American Coffee Foundation. Subotnick designed a multi-sectional musical model for a typical evening at the Circus, which began in a musically abstract manner, shifting to a low frequency pulse, and then to a more rhythmic feel akin to side two of "Silver Apples of the Moon." This would give way to recorded rock dance music and then entertainment events like fire-eaters, tightrope walkers and jugglers. This was followed by more recorded dance music played by DJs including Rosenboom and Michael Sahl, and then a live band. Throughout, strobes and other lighting would provide a visual analog to the music. The opening event was a media splash that attracted New York's cultural and political elite including members of the Kennedy family, who danced to an early version of "Silver Apples." Life Magazine referred to the Circus as "a mind bender that ... combines life and art in a way that has never been done before. The medium, the message and the audience are all in the same bag – just calling it audience participation is a flagrant understatement." (Stickney 1967)

Anthony Martin, also a principal figure at the San Francisco Tape Music Center, developed the Circus's visual environment, utilizing sixteen carousel slide projectors, six 16mm film projectors, and eight overhead projectors. Martin drew upon the work of liquid projection artist Elias Romero to develop his own approach to projecting light, color and shape using slides, liquids and dry materials. Don Buchla was commissioned to design a multi-media control system for the lights and projectors. David Rosenboom, then an assistant at the Circus, recalls: "You could actually compose for the room, as if it were an instrument. You could play it like an instrument or you could compose pre-programmed shows [by recording the control voltages]."

The Electric Circus became one of the first public multi-media sound and image social environments, a commercial enterprise that remained in business for four years. It very briefly operated a sister club in Toronto. Some viewed the discothèque setting, with its immersive environment and lack of fixed seating, as signaling a seismographic shift in musical culture. An NYU Professor of Psychology Ted Coons declared in an unpublished 1969 letter: "The big concert hall is now essentially a museum for the symphonies of the past... Today's art is more nearly total theatre where all the senses are involved, and from every-which direction. The discothèque in which one can move about as one pleases and sample this total theatre as the spirit moves you is the ideal place." Coons became the impetus behind two multimedia performances sponsored by the Circus that mixed early music and rock music, "Electric Christmas" and "Electric Easter." Reviewing "Electric Christmas," New York Times critic Harold Schonberg opined: "I had the nagging notion that there was the music, the art form, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of

the future... The electronic component is of special importance. For the first time, electronic music is breaking away from the professors and pedants. The kids are beginning to use it in a loose manner... I can only cheer." (Schonberg 1968)

4. ELECTRIC EAR AND OTHER VENUES

These special events provided the impetus for a two-year new music series at the Electric Circus, "Electric Ear," conceived by Morton Subotnick and produced by Thais Latham and Ted Coons. Programs were given by electronic music luminaries John Cage, Mel Powell, Alvin Lucier, David Behrman, Lejaren Hiller, Pauline Oliveros, Terry Riley, Salvatore Martirano, Robert Ashley, Morton Subotnick and Anthony Martin, David Rosenboom, and others. This type of programming continued in venues that included Intermedia at Automation House, New Images of Sound at Hunter College, the WBAI Free Music Store, and the Music Program at The Kitchen, founded by Rhys Chatham. Eric Salzman, one of the original producers of the Electric Ear, founded the Hunter and WBAI series. Eric Salzman's interests centered around an expanded concept of musical performance, what he terms "Music Theater," explored further in the Space for Innovative Development on 39th Street and 9th Avenue. The Intermedia programming included Gordon Mumma's 'Communication in a Noisy Environment,' "a musical and social ensemble" featuring David Behrman, saxophonist Anthony Braxton, and artist Robert Watts; David Rosenboom's first display of brainwave music, 'Ecology of the Skin;' and the premiere of Morton Subotnick's 'Sidewinder', presented with light projections and films. An attempt by Thais Latham to continue this creative programming by founding a multimedia center in Brooklyn did not succeed.

5. COMMERCIAL VENUES IN NEW YORK

In some ways the activity surrounding Subotnick in Downtown New York was an extension of the San Francisco Tape Music Center, especially in its openness, informality and multi-sensory forms of expression. However, New York's own distinct flavor and character as a commercial center, contrasted with the intimacy and insularity of San Francisco, conditioned the way things unfolded. From its inception, the Electric Circus served a dual master and an uneasy coexistence of conflicting values. From this perspective, it is noteworthy that the Electric Ear and parallel series were able to provide a vehicle for creative musical performance in conjunction with image, movement and theatrical elements. The influence of commerce on the Electric Circus, however, severely hampered creative exploration in that venue. Within two weeks, the business partners turned up the audio volume and intensity and insisted that music exclusively support dancing rather than focused listening.

A \$200,000 remodeling in 1969 resulted in an even more upscale, commercial environment. In an unpublished 1974 interview, Martin and Subotnick bemoaned what Martin felt had become: "just a commercial entertainment hall. Essentially what Mort and I had for a year was just a job." Subotnick added that despite many lovely moments during the "Electric Christmas," "we were just totally disgusted when the whole thing was over." Martin concluded that the merging of the senses championed by the San Francisco Tape Music Center and briefly continued in the Electric Circus was not possible in an environment where commercial values dominate. "We saw the Circus as a money income-producing way to survive in New York City." Ultimately, Subotnick resigned and focused more on his work at the NYU studio and on other outside projects. The Electric Circus in the post-Subotnick and Martin era became more a rock hall than the richer "ultimate legal entertainment experience" that was advertised.

After the departure of Subotnick and Martin, a new lighting design team Pablo Lights sought to renew artistic values within what was now more of a distinctly rock music context. Influenced by East Coast figures Rudi Stern and Jackie Cassie, Gerd Stern and the multimedia artist collective USCO, Pablo aimed for a well rehearsed yet improvisatory, visually more representational aesthetic. The redesign of the Circus didn't allow for the rear projection they needed and the constantly driving rock beat did not allow the kind of nuanced delicacy Pablo found working with jazz and classical musicians. Eventually, this group became disenchanted with The Electric Circus and departed. The conversion of the Circus into a dance hall was furthered when Sly and the Family Stone became the house band. Drug use increased, with speed and downers replacing psychedelics. The Circus's advertised multi-sensory social environment was becoming less artistic and more destructive. A bomb blast in March 1970 presaged the end of the road.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The Electric Circus provides a fascinating example of what happens when artistic and business values coexist, a phenomenon that is of increasing relevance in the media-soaked, sometimes corporate environment of artistic creation in the 21st Century. Former staff member Robert Traynor observes that while The Electric Circus displayed "an incredible spirit of creativity," it "represented a dichotomy of two worlds. There was Jerry and Sly, the people who wanted to come and dance, and the speed freaks, and then there was the cultural world of Mort Subotnick... Yet unlike Mort Subotnick and Tony Martin, who were creative artists at the top of their game, Jerry was basically interested in making money... The Electric Circus was a commercial enterprise and not grounded in any real spiritual intention or steeped in any kind of moral

consciousness....” It is not complete Hollywood fantasy that the writers of two films, *Midnight Cowboy* and *Coogan’s Bluff*, used the Electric Circus as a symbol and setting for the excitement and psychedelia, yet corruption and dislocation, experienced by visitors to New York’s Greenwich Village.

The Electric Circus demonstrated the artistic potential of a populist immersive environment, yet pointed to the difficult balance between artistic and commercial values, particularly when the owners’ priority was in fact commercial. Like E.A.T.’s Pepsi Pavilion at the 1970 Osaka World’s Fair, what was initially a wildly expressive and imaginative process of creation gave way over time to the prominence of commercial values. The priority for those paying the bills was selling products rather than sponsoring the creative arts. To its credit, the Circus sponsored the artistically expansive Electric Ear series, spawning multimedia explorations at venues throughout New York City. The short-lived NYU Intermedia Program studio represented a counter-example to commercialism, a triumph of non-institution and non-commercial values, fostering creativity and exploration. Subotnick’s legacy in New York unfolded in the careers of his studio’s participants and in the many venues where their work was shown. The search for a healthy balance between sustainability and free ranging creativity remains a challenge today, in all places where artists work.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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8. REFERENCES

Except where noted otherwise, all quotations are from interviews conducted by the author: Maryanne Amacher,

December 15, 2008, in Kingston, New York; Joel Chadabe, December 8, 2008, in Albany, New York; Rhys Chatham, May 31, 2008, in Paris; Michael Czajowsky, March 29, 2008, in New York; Ted Coons, in New York, February 14, 2008, followed by email correspondence; Brian Fennelly, December 15, 2008, in Kingston, New York; Richard Friedman, December 14, 2008, by telephone, followed by email correspondence; Ingram Marshall, March 8, 2008, by telephone; Anthony Martin, March 21, 2008 in Brooklyn, New York, followed by email correspondence; Jay Moss, December 27, 2008 and January 9, 2009, by telephone; Gordon Mumma, November-December 2008 and January 2009, by email; Charlemagne Palestine, March 8-9, 2008, by telephone; Bob Quinn, December 24, 2008, by telephone; Eliane Radigue, November 16, 2008, by telephone; David Rosenboom, March 4, 2008 by telephone; Eric Salzman, November 16, 2008 by telephone; Laurie Spiegel, March 8-14, 2008, by email; Morton Subotnick, May 8, 2008, in New York; October 4, 2006, August 25 and November 19, 2008 by telephone; October 3, 2006 by email; Serge Tcherepnin, June 26, 2008, by telephone; Robert Traynor, November 24, 2008, by telephone.

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