Mama’s Birthday Boy: Ten Short Essays on Arthur Russell

by

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table of contents

introduction 1
timeline & partial discography 7

essays
a catalog of names 9
critical reception 12
fluidity, echoes of queerness 19
the artist, deceased 24
building spaces 28
david byrne 34
baffled time 39
water and swimming 43
good morning, mr. orwell 48
final note 54

extras
appendix a: performance description 55
appendix b: performance personnel 59
appendix c: illustrations 60
appendix d: video stills 65
appendix e: performance photos 68
works cited 71
thank you to

the performance personnel
“all my friends”
duchampion & the shade
the wesleyan music department
eric charry
alex tatusian
grace kredell

this project is dedicated to the life and memory of arthur russell.

i will find
more to see
i will see
more to find
it's a two way, two way street
the more i look ahead
the more i see behind
Arthur Russell was born in Oskaloosa, Iowa on May 21\textsuperscript{st}, 1951 and died in New York City after a long battle with HIV/AIDS in 1992. He was just shy of 41 years old. In his lifetime, Russell wrote and recorded an incredibly diverse body of music, yet like some other pop stars, Russell’s music career has continued after his death. As of this writing, approaching twenty years after Russell lost his battle with AIDS, his music, after a number of delicately handled reissues, a filmic portrait, and a very recent scholarly biography, has begun reaching a significant audience and has gained notable critical attention. His catalog, intriguing in terms of music

composition, media distribution, and its relation to queerness, nevertheless presents a number of challenges in formulating a critical standpoint.

For many, Arthur Russell refuses to comfortably settle into any easy description, genre, or tendency. To give a very partial list, Russell wrote country/disco/avant garde music, participated in Christian Wolff performances, accompanied the oft-panned Elodie Lauten, toured Europe with an experimental theater group that once performed Philip Glass’ music for Samuel Beckett, and played with members of proto-punk band the Modern Lovers in at least two different ensembles. Russell’s catalog is full of apparent contradictions and quasi-formed recordings that have only recently become more widely distributed. Both scholars and casual listeners struggle with how to best describe Russell and his myriad musics.

Though a wide variety of authors have included descriptions of Arthur Russell in their work, most fail at creating a cohesive image of the cellist. Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton, in their history of the DJ, include a paragraph on Russell in their chapter on New York Garage. They write, “Russell, an avant-garde cellist with an obsession for echo...[He] was a crazy-eyed mystic who worked with everyone from

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2 Christian Wolff relates a humorous story about “ruining” a Merce Cuningham piece with a boisterous four man drunken choir rendition of a Woody Guthrie song. Arthur Russell was one of the singers. Patterson, David. “Cage and Beyond: An Annotated Interview with Christian Wolff.” Perspectives of New Music, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Summer, 1994), pp. 54-87
3 “Eloide Lauten, a composer and keyboardist, brought her homemade amplified lyre, the cellist Arthur Russell, some prerecorded tapes and gallons of pretension to her show at La Galleria at La Mama on Saturday. Standing with her “trine,” as she calls the instrument, head back as if in artistic ecstasy, with Mr. Russell dutifully sawing away at his cello next to her, she seemed like a National Lampoon parody of avant-garde art.” Watrous, Peter. “Music: Elodie Lauten.” New York Times. Feb. 16th, 1988. p. C16.
4 On meeting Beckett: “He asked to hear some of the music that Philip Glass had composed for cello for the piece. Arthur Russell, the cellist, sat down on the lonely, junky set and with real passion played beautifully for a few minutes. Beckett made no comment, nothing.” Akalatis, Joanne. TDR. Vol. 34, No.3 (Autumn, 1990). The MIT Press.
Allen Ginsberg (who he taught to play guitar), to Laurie Anderson and Philip Glass (and also CBS A&R legend John Hammond).” Simon Reynolds mentions Russell in his book on post-punk, *Rip it Up and Start Again*: “A gay avant-garde musician with hippie-mystic tendencies, Russell fell in love with disco at the New York club, the Gallery. Literally entranced by disco’s use of repetition, he spotted the parallels between the DJs’ endless unbroken mixes and the minimalist compositions of Terry Riley and Steve Reich. Russell co-founded the label Sleeping Bag and started recording surreal art disco tracks.” Peter Shapiro, author of the *Secret History of Disco*, tries a bit more heroically to include all aspects of Russell’s work. He writes,

If there was one artist, though, who truly characterized this peripatetic genre bending by spanning both the Kitchen and Studio 54 in a single bound, it was an avant-garde cello player by the name of Charles Arthur Russell, Jr. was born and raised in landlocked Oskaloosa, Iowa, where, as the son of a former naval officer, he became obsessed with the ocean. In 1968, Russell moved to San Francisco to join a Buddhist commune. He was forbidden to play his cello, so he played in his closet. Russell then studied Indian music with Ali Akbar Khan and played cello on several Allen Ginsberg recordings. In 1973, he moved to New York and played drums with Laurie Anderson and worked with Talking Heads, Peter Gordon, and David Van Tiegham before going on to curate the music program at the Kitchen. Sometime in the mid 1970’s, Russell went to the Gallery to see Nicky Siano spin. After his disco baptism, Russell immediately connected the dots.

Even Pitchfork Media, in their brief review of the posthumous Soul Jazz label collection *The World of Arthur Russell*, include the seemingly compulsory catalog of Russell’s various interests. Andy Beta writes,

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There was the world of Indian master-musician Ali Akbar Khan, in which Arthur used his cello to trance-inducing effect. There was the world where his cello shadowed the beat-poet Allen Ginsburg at readings, as well as the world of The Kitchen, where he premiered his peculiar minimal compositions while also rubbing elbows with composers like John Cage, Rhys Chatham, and Philip Glass. He was in the rock world, too, nearly joining the Talking Heads and forming the short-lived Flying Hearts with ex-Modern Lover Ernie Brooks. He even briefly produced quirky tracks in the rap world, frustrating young rapper Mark Sinclair who would one day go on to make it as the meat-headed action hero Vin Diesel. And then there was the world of disco music.  

Arthur Russell, as can be read above, made music in a number of genres and with an incredibly diverse array of collaborators. It is a confounding dilemma for scholars. In writing a book on mutant disco, need an author mention the cellist’s serious study of Indian classical music? In writing a book on early hip hop in New York City, need a researcher listen to Russell’s country rock? Similarly, listeners are presented with the unique situation that none of Russell’s releases sound anything like his other recordings. Each album and single remains almost totally distinct.

In addition to Russell’s impressive ability to fuse and embody various styles of music, his life, his story, and his demeanor are, for most fans of Russell’s work, incredibly endearing, so much so that his lovability seems to sentimentally distort writings on his music. His story contains many Hollywood plot points – a Midwestern kid escaping from his small town, discovering queerness, falling in love with disco, falling in love with lifetime partner Tom Lee, rubbing elbows at crazy New York parties, and, perhaps most compelling, struggling with HIV/AIDS before treatment or public awareness could really help. Russell also maintained a child-like,  

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innocent manner, often appearing in photos with a colorful, cardboard rabbit attached to his cello. Coupled with the cellist’s uncanny ability to create an aura of intimacy in his recorded works, Arthur Russell’s loveable image often wins him total sympathy with scholars.

This writing does not attempt to synthesize the various threads of Arthur Russell’s music nor the wealth of angles available to those interested in studying those various threads. Rather, this collection of ten short essays embraces the fractured nature of Russell’s works, taking a number of positions and focusing on a few facets of criticism. Each of the essays can potentially stand alone, but together, they illustrate one of the few strong constants throughout Russell’s work – an incredible diversity of musical identity.

Russell scholarship remains emergent – while writing this collection of essays, a new scholarly biography was released by cultural studies scholar Tim Lawrence, an all-day academic conference took place at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts, and, at some point this year, an audio documentary will air on Australian radio featuring unheard, unreleased material. A recent film portrait entitled Wild Combination was released in 2008. Additionally, there may be more Arthur Russell material to be released - Audika Records, current manager of the Arthur Russell catalog, put out another single while this paper was being researched.

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13 The “Come to Life” single, released on Terrible Records
Full of contradiction, Russell was of the plains, but of the ocean, placing his cello in as many incongruous settings as possible, loving pop but living in and among the avant garde of New York City, remaining Buddhist but always, always neurotic and paranoid about his work. One wants to understand his compulsions, to assess his queerness (as some of his collaborators have done), and to understand and categorize all of his collaborations and projects. Yet Russell left his work unfinished. To make overarching statements about his output is to comment on something incomplete: music and objects mediated by post-mortem collaborators. Here, this collection attempts to gather a few facets of criticism, to employ some critical approaches – whether musical or cultural – and hopefully contribute to a growing body of work on Arthur Russell and his music.
timeline & partial discography

1951  Arthur Russell born in Oskaloosa, Iowa

1968  Russell moves to San Francisco, discovers Buddhism, meets Allen Ginsberg, studies with Ali Akhbar Khan and part-time at the San Francisco Conservatory

1973  Russell moves to New York

1975  Russell serves as music director of the Kitchen, records with Colombia talent scout John Hammond, performs Instrumentals in April

1976  Russell records First Blues with Allen Ginsberg, an album of the poet’s Americana harmonium songs

1977  Russell discovers disco in Nicky Siano’s the Gallery, begins going to the Loft and the Paradise Garage

1978  Sire releases Dinosaur’s “Kiss Me Again,” the first of many of Russell’s dance records

1981  Sleeping Bag Records, co-founded by Russell, releases 24-24 Music, the only album of entirely disco/dance material released by Russell during his lifetime

1983  Chatham Square releases Russell’s Tower of Meaning, the incomplete score to Robert Wilson’s Medea

1984  Chatham Square releases Instrumentals, a fragment of Russell’s 48-hour modular, minimalist R&B composition

1986  Russell releases World of Echo, an album of solo cello and voice, on Upside Records

1987  Russell is diagnosed with HIV. His health gradually declines, but Russell records many home demos, including the material for Calling Out of Context

1992  Arthur Russell dies of complications related to AIDS

1994  Point Music, a label run by Philip Glass, releases Another Thought, an album consisting primarily of Russell’s cello compositions

2006 Audika releases *Springfield*, an EP of later dance material remixed by DFA and *First Thought, Best Though*, a CD collecting both *Instrumentals* and *Tower of Meaning*.

2007 Traffic Entertainment reissues 24-24 *Music*.

2008 Audika releases *Love is Overtaking Me*, a collection of Russell’s country/folk rock. Matt Wolf releases the film *Wild Combination*.

2009 Tim Lawrence publishes *Hold on to Your Dreams*, NYU holds the *Kiss Me Again* Arthur Russell symposium.
a catalog of names

Born Charles Arthur Russell, Jr. and better known as “Chucky” while growing up in Oskaloosa, Iowa, Russell took quickly to adopting pseudonyms and continued to do so for the rest of his life. His first name change came at an early age. He dropped Charles to become Arthur, showing a need to differentiate himself from his father (Charles, Sr.) and perhaps a desire to make “Art” an incorporated part of his first name. Over the course of his lifetime, Russell assumed many different publishing, performing, and ensemble names. This list of names itself is impressive and gives a fairly accurate portrait of Russell as a tireless collaborator. The names themselves, however, also provide insight regarding the nature of Russell’s music and Russell’s own personality.

Dinosaur L, the name of one of Russell’s disco bands, is perhaps the pseudonym best associated with Russell’s musical legacy. Dinosaur L’s 24->24 album is the original source for Russell’s most well-known dance track, the Francois Kevorkian remix of “#5 (Go Bang).” Often displaying a fondness for animals, Russell here chooses the name of an extinct, extremely large, and aggressive creature. Dinosaur L’s sound is clearly different from some of Russell’s more quiet or acoustic music: compared to the cello album World of Echo, “Go Bang” really does sound like a ferocious Jurassic predator. Additionally, dinosaurs are endlessly fascinating to children, another posture maintained by Russell. Choosing the name of an extinct

14 In reality, Dinosaur L is an amalgam of studio musicians and many hours spent at the mixer by Russell, not an actual performing band
animal could also potentially be a comment on the clichéd nature of Disco – still early in Russell’s appreciation of dance music, the 24-24 release seems to have some amount of camp. For some, embracing disco was not hip, thus, a name from ancient history.

Dinosaur L, though, is not the only assumed name in Russell’s disco forays. The cellist released another dance track, “Is it All Over My Face?”, under the name Loose Joints. While the song title intimates a sense of sexual promiscuity or play, the name of the band apparently came from drug dealers wandering up and down the streets of New York offering pot pre-rolled in joints. Though the band name reinforces the fact that the patrons of disco clubs in the late 70’s consumed many, many drugs, the name also inextricably associates the sound of the ensemble with New York, at least for those New Yorkers familiar with the street drug dealers. Also, it should be noted that Russell left home after a fight with his father over his high school pot-smoking habit. The name Loose Joints still has a tinge of teenage rebellion.

One of Russell’s last official releases as a disco recording artist, a 12” single including a B-side remix by Walter Gibbons called “School Bell/TreeHouse,” came under the name Indian Ocean. This name should come as no surprise – much of Russell’s music is permeated with images of the ocean and water and Russell spent a lifetime appreciating the music of India. The name also underlines just how strange and underwater this record sounds. A murky synthesizer and drum machine odyssey

15 Lawrence, 165
with a constantly shifting pulse and Russell’s distinctively muddled vocals seems a far cry from the 4-on-the-floor insistence of Dinosaur L. The name Indian Ocean, then, evokes this disco difference. Quite “wet” with reverb, listening to “Schoolbell/Treehouse” sounds like diving in to some foreign body of water, not a campy rehash of an extinct species.

Killer Whale, another name used by Russell, bridges the gap between dinosaurs and oceans. Killer Whale receives a number of credits, including editing many of Russell’s singles. The name again brings to mind a giant, ferocious animal. The Killer Whale, however, is endangered rather than totally extinct.

These four names, including Arthur as a pseudonym, represent the majority of Russell’s output. In addition to these names, though, Russell played with a number of interestingly named ensembles: the Flying Hearts, conjuring images of old-fashioned chivalry and sentimentalism: the Singing Tract9ors, harking back to Russell’s Iowan past: and Sailboats, an obvious reference to Russell’s fascination with the sea. Sailboats was also known as Palo, Blue Green, and Bright and Early.\textsuperscript{16} Burdened by an inability to focus on or complete music with a single ensemble or project, Russell left behind a long list of collaborations and (to his ear) unfinished music. Strange and various, the names themselves illustrate the fractured, chaotic nature of Russell’s work.

\textsuperscript{16} Lawrence, 264
critical reception

In our "parting glance" last week to Arthur Russell, who died April 4 of complications due to AIDS, we mistakenly referred to him as Charles. We apologize for any confusion this error may have caused. 17

Though certainly a player in the downtown music scene, Russell only garnered a mild amount of press during his life as a recording artist, and even less in his career as a performer. Additionally, what was written about Russell failed to provide an interesting or even cohesive critical standpoint, though each individual contemporary article related at least some interesting detail. In comparison, the critical reception of Russell’s posthumous output – notably aided by the advent of the Internet - is almost uniformly exultant of the cellist’s musical ability. Russell is well loved and well represented in the current music press, becoming more visible on more websites every day. Though this is also certainly attributable to Russell’s ability to create emotionally resonant music as well as Audika’s intelligence as a label, Russell’s presence is heavily reliant on the Internet. The story of Arthur Russell’s rise to prominence, then, is one intimately tied to the changing realities of digital music distribution.

A number of live performance reviews appeared in the New York Times in the seventies and eighties. After a concert of Russell’s “Instrumentals” held at Phil Niblock’s Experimental Intermedia Foundation, Robert Palmer made the claim that, “the music of the SoHo minimalists and progressive rock may be compatible,” later

adding “This is a fascinating direction, one that demands further exploration under more controlled circumstances.” In a fairly unfavorable review from 1984, Jon Pareles wrote of a Kitchen performance, “Mr. Russell seemed after a backwoods informality with electric instruments, but the average Neil Young song is more evocative and more concise.” Writing on a later performance at the Kitchen in 1987, Robert Palmer again provided a much more complimentary opinion. He writes, “At the Kitchen, this solo music was ethereal but never bland. Mr. Russell’s singing was fragile, liquid, long on vowels and short on consonants, apparently casual but with superb intonation.” A review that appeared shortly before Russell’s death in 1992 made a somewhat clumsy Paul Simon comparison, but provided little else in terms of criticism.

Russell’s scant live review catalog can likely be attributed to the fact that he rarely played outside of New York. During his lifetime, though, Russell had a number of his releases reviewed by various regional publications, both domestic and international. J.D. Considine of the Washington Post reviewed the initial release of Tower of Meaning: “Russell's approach is more harmonic than rhythmic, for he uses repetition to shuffle and reshuffle the possibilities within the chordal sequences. As such, his ‘Tower of Meaning’ is gentle and cloud-like, recalling Messiaen but without

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22 This may have been a bit of a compulsion: Ernie Brooks often relates the story of Russell jumping out of his car on the approach to a tunnel out of the city on the way to a show in Washington, DC.  
23 Russell’s international distribution was managed by Rough Trade Records, with whom Russell’s estate still maintains a distribution agreement.
the severity.” Writing for London’s Sunday Times in 1986, David Toop appears puzzled by Russell’s “Let’s Go Swimming:” “Arthur Russell is a New Yorker responsible for some of the more bizarre records to come out of the underground disco scene. Let's Go Swimming is typically dreamy and unfocused.” Lynden Barber of the Sydney Morning Herald is particularly fond of Russell’s recorded works – the Australian mentioned World of Echo in no less than three articles in 1987. Russell even garnered a mention in Spin Magazine, then still a young publication. From a review of two of the cellist’s singles: “So neither record makes any goddamn sense, but they entice and invite you in.”

Though anecdotally interesting, these reviews do not ultimately converge in any sort general opinion. It cannot be said that Russell was beloved by critics or that he received a uniformly lukewarm reception. If anything, there is merely a trend of bafflement among Russell’s contemporary critics, but no predominant line of thought. In the 18 years following his death, however, widespread critical opinion has galvanized in defense of Russell’s abilities.

Various Internet and traditional print sources now consider Arthur Russell not only an accomplished recording artist, but also a column of influence. Essentially, within the last 8 years or so, Russell and his music have become part of the musical zeitgeist, gaining more and more credibility with each published reference. This is

due largely to Audika Records’ shrewd management and Russell’s talents, as well as the filmic portrait *Wild Combination* and the book *Hold On to Your Dreams*.

As of this writing, every single day, at least one new link containing the cellist’s name appears on the Internet,\(^{28}\) whether on somebody’s blog documenting their various mixtapes\(^{29}\) or as part of the publicity surrounding the upcoming debut of John Connell’s Australian Broadcasting Company audio documentary (he is planning an overnight camping party/screening/concert on an island off the coast of Australia that is only accessible by ferry).\(^{30}\) Russell’s name is casually mentioned in even the briefest of articles, as in a recent review of a concert by the banjo player Sam Amidon. Matthew Everett, writing for the website Metro Pulse, compares the two musician’s voices: “Amidon’s an interesting banjo player and his voice often resembles that of the late avant-disco composer/cellist Arthur Russell.”\(^ {31}\) Russell is also featured in any number of quasi-legal file sharing websites,\(^ {32}\) as well as services such as LaLa, YouTube, and MySpace.

Additionally, a significant number of popular independent artists have either recently covered the work of Arthur Russell or have become directly involved in presenting his work to the public. Perhaps most notably, in 2007, Swedish crooner

\(^{28}\) This is a literal assertion - evidence provided by Google’s Alerts service.


Jens Lekman covered one of Arthur Russell’s songs on a four-track EP. Just a few weeks ago, Frankie Rose, drummer for the hip Brooklyn garage band Dum Dum Girls, released a cover of “You Can Make Me Feel Bad” on her MySpace profile. Furthermore, two notable current musicians – James Murphy of LCD Soundsystem and Chris Taylor from Grizzly Bear – were actually involved in producing and remixing part of Russell’s catalog for Audika. Murphy worked on the Springfield EP and Taylor oversaw the release of Love is Overtaking Me. Taylor also just recently released a 7” split single with Arthur Russell under the name Cant.

Concerning critical opinion, the ever-controversial Pitchfork Media seems to have led the trend in asserting Russell’s genius. The music website has reviewed everything released after Russell’s death (excepting the original release of Another Thought) with generous amounts of praise. Writing on Love is Overtaking Me, Mia Clarke finds comfort in the fact that Russell’s music is beginning to reach a wider audience. The review reads, “Now, through the care of Audika and the genuine love of fellow musicians and fans that have recognized his prodigious talent, Russell is finally getting the acknowledgment his honest, powerful, and most remarkable music deserves.”

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36 Terrible Records Website
Thought, Jess Harvell claims its genius: “The previously unreleased ‘Instrumentals Volume One’ is a masterpiece.” 39 Harvell, writing later on The Sleeping Bag Sessions, finds fault in the compilation album for having only a few works of genius. The review reads, “But these are well-established works of genius, for-certain cornerstones of Russell's tricky canon. The rest is padding at best, disco and downtown semi-obscurities given a profile boost thanks to Russell's late-decade burst of acclaim.” 40 Writing on Calling Out of Context, Andy Beta makes a perplexing comparison: “The disc proves Russell to be a changeling artist whose only parallel might be Miles Davis, constantly placing his individual sound in new contexts, constantly searching.” 41 Additionally, a Phil Niblock video documenting a live performance by Arthur Russell received critical treatment in one of the website’s columns. 42

The websites and reviews included here, though seemingly thorough, do not begin to fully enumerate Arthur Russell’s Internet presence, or his position in the world of music at large. As can probably be assumed about most music discussed and disseminated on the Internet, each review likely results in various, untraceable exchanges of music, as in listeners burning CDs for each other or swapping material from their hard drives. This practice of music exchange, too, predates the Internet –

Russell was incredibly fond of the Walkman, an early technology for music duplication, and Ryan Doheney, musicologist at Columbia University, described receiving a taped copy of Russell’s *World of Echo* as a formative moment.  

Russell’s ever growing aura, then, is attributable to a confluence of factors – the ease with which the Internet allows listeners to exchange music and ideas about music, the artful, savvy reissues of Audika and Soul Jazz, and Russell’s powerful ability to resonate with listeners across decades.

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fluidity, echoes of queerness

“Yeah. It wasn’t like Arthur and I were in some gay disco world, getting dressed to go out to the club and dancing the night away. We’d go to CBGB, we’d go to Max’s Kansas City, we’d go to Tier 3 but we’d listen to the group and then go home. For him it was about the daily grind of actually playing music.”

Tim Lawrence, author of the recent Russell biography *Hold On to Your Dreams* and the current academic authority on Russell’s work, published an earlier article in the Journal of Popular Music Studies exploring the differences and relationship between gay and straight disco.

Essentially, in Lawrence’s view, Disco, a once “pure” expression of gay male masculinity and brotherhood as simulated by belting divas and driving R&B grooves, gained enough cultural momentum to see itself reworked into a straight, mass-market phenomenon. John Travolta’s performance in *Saturday Night Fever*, then, as well as its glossy, widely sold soundtrack, are the epitome of straight disco. Music such as Larry Levan’s selections in the Paradise Garage represent gay disco.

In one sense, these two interpretations of disco were diametrically opposed. Writing in *The Joy of Gay Sex*, Edmund White elucidates the threat of disco going mainstream: “Now hundreds of gays troop into big, spacious, luxurious discos where the dancing, the sounds, the lights and the company are great. In fact, the main

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45 “Disco, it is commonly understood, drummed its drums and twirled its twirls across an explicit gay-straight divide… I want to refract this popular analysis through a queer lens… but, more importantly, the way in which both the dance floor experience and disco’s musical aesthetics could be said to be queer (rather than gay).” Lawrence, Tim. “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. Print.
46 See “Building Spaces” Essay
problem the gay discos face is how to keep straights from moving in and elbowing out the original gay clientele.”

At the same time, disco in all of its forms was united under violent backlash, most famously culminating in the Disco Sucks riot in Chicago in July of 1979, organized by a local rock format DJ. Musically intertwined, the distinction between gay and straight disco can best be understood in terms of distribution – gay disco remained an urban, underground phenomenon driven by cottage industry 12” singles while straight disco generally sold millions of albums.

Furthermore, the gay disco of downtown New York remained local and isolated. It is in this pop-music-informed, site-specific, gay community activity that Russell participated.

Though this gay/straight divide certainly informs Russell’s disco, Lawrence asserts that the cellist’s music, in its openness, fluidity of gender, and strangeness, sought to queer the actually quite rigid form of gay disco, a genre that maintained as many musical conventions as its straight counterpart. Russell, in his many pseudonyms, eschewed a constant 4/4 beat, traditional R&B instrumentation, and even logical word choices. In this way, his gay disco, or dance music made to be enjoyed at clubs such as the Loft or the Paradise Garage, can be considered queer – both, more literally, in its oddness as well as in its sexual inclusiveness.

Lawrence, however, considers only Russell’s dance music and its relative queerness. When taking Russell’s entire oeuvre into account, another more unified
theory of his musical queerness begins to emerge. Additionally, there are facets of Russell’s music itself \(^{49}\) that further inform notions of Russell’s pervasive queer musical identity.

Primarily, Russell’s genre bending across his entire catalog indicates his musical queerness, echoing both the gender play of drag performance and a fluidity or flexibility of performative identity. Tellingly, the classic drag performance documentary *Paris is Burning* \(^{50}\) features the female vocal version of the Loose Joints single “Is it All Over My Face?” Though Lawrence laments the final decision to have a woman sing the lead vocal, \(^{51}\) this performance can be taken less literally. That is, in light of its inclusion in the preeminent film on drag performance, “Is it All Over My Face?” can be interpreted as a form of camp play.

Semi-parodic play can also be seen in Russell’s country music, a body of work that often uses signifiers of genre (such as slide guitar or a twangy inflection) to create something that – on its surface – resembles more traditional forms of country music. Furthermore, the fact that Russell was able to simultaneously exist in these two musical worlds demonstrates his desire to experiment and craft a multiple musical identity. His fusion of genres in other works indicates liminality, or a need to trouble conventional notions of genre.

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\(^{49}\) Instead of the various textual signifiers that Lawrence focuses on – lyrics, performed gender, etc.

\(^{50}\) *Paris is Burning*. Dir. Jennie Livingston. 1991. Miramax. DVD.

\(^{51}\) Lawrence argues that this decision dilutes the composition’s initial queerness – sung by a woman instead of a man, the implied image of the vocalist’s face covered in semen reads as misogynistic instead of shockingly queer.
Though this toying with genre is not exactly equivalent to toying with gender or sexuality, there are similarities. Take, for instance, the well-documented tendencies of sub-dividing various categories of drag in the competitions depicted in *Paris is Burning*. Some performers aim for male business dress in the category known as “Executive Realness,” some performers attempt to capture an image of the “High Fashion Parisian,” while others emulate military dress. These performers are rated in regards to how reasonably they “pass” for whatever identity they’ve assumed. In a way, though this should not be seen as a discredit to the cellist’s work, Russell’s genre play can similarly be read as various attempts at “passing.”

Further comment should be made on how Russell embodies queerness musically. This musical queerness is most obviously seen in Russell’s proclivity for odd instrumentation. Given Russell’s chameleon-like transformation of the cello and his ubiquitous inclusion of Peter Zummo’s trombone, one could make the argument that Russell sought to queer these instruments by including them in a number of non-standard musical contexts. Similarly, Russell’s sometimes stubborn tendency to eschew categorization in his work leads to a queerness of form. Though certainly connected to some of Russell’s more straight-ahead dance music, the 13 minute opus “In the Light of the Miracle,” for instance, does not confine itself to any one particular genre – simultaneously bringing to mind religious music, disco, 80s synth pop, and minimalism, “Miracle” maintains an illegibility of form and a fluidity of genre.
Ernie Brooks, friend and collaborator of Russell, has communicated his feeling that Russell “wasn’t actually gay,” that he had merely chosen to live “as a gay man.” 52 Elodie Lauten, composer and amplified autoharp performer, echoed this sentiment. Ultimately, though, these comments are not only somewhat narrow minded, but also irrelevant. Whether or not Russell, in his heart of hearts, was “truly gay,” does not change the lifestyle he chose to lead or the music he chose to make.

In reality, queerness, with its allowances for flexibility and subversion, is a much better lens for analyzing Russell’s entire catalog of music as well as for speculating on the truth of his feelings and personal life. Fluid, indeterminate, as well as subversive, to say that Russell’s music is “gay” is as short sighted as to force a rigid definition on his sexuality – in both his craft and his personal life, Russell persistently flowed.

52 Discussed at length at Tisch Arthur Russell symposium
As is the case with many artists who die young or in a bout of creativity, their posthumous output often becomes a subject of controversy. Tupac Shakur, for instance, continues to live on years after his murder, gracing the covers of numerous CDs, some of which may, perhaps, tarnish the emcee’s legacy. The author David Foster Wallace left behind the gargantuan innards of an unfinished novel: *The Pale King*, due out very soon, is what editors and publishers were able to cobble together after Wallace’s suicide. Anything unreleased relating to the life of Kurt Cobain now has the potential to create a huge stir.

It is an uneasy situation. On the one hand, tragic deaths cause fans of artists in mourning to beg for more material. Conversely, artists surrender their creative authority in passing, leaving often-crucial decisions to those in charge of their estate. As with Tupac, as more time and distance from the original artist accrues, the previously unreleased work often loses its aura of personality.

Arthur Russell died tragically in 1992. Though he was not young, Russell left behind a vast wealth of unreleased recorded material and, according to many of his friends, never lived up to his market potential as an artist. Much of this previously unreleased material has now been compiled, released, and re-released by several

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55 This sentiment repeated multiple times in *Wild Combination* as well as comments made during the Tisch Symposium
different record labels: Sleeping Bag Records, Soul Jazz, Phillip Glass’ Point Music, and Audika Records, which works directly with Russell’s live-in partner Tom Lee.

Russell’s legacy, however, seems to have evaded the common trappings of the artist who dies young. This is partially due to the fact that all of the record labels that have released posthumous material have done a surprisingly cohesive job of compiling records. Each of the posthumous releases maintains some semblance of theme and a consistency of sound. Calling Out of Context reads as an album of cello hip-hop fusion whereas Love is Overtaking Me is now Russell’s definitive collection of country folk, though both were released by Audika. Glass’ Another Thought focuses on Russell’s less-experimental cello song compositions and The Sleeping Bag Sessions collects Russell’s various hip-hop forays. Soul Jazz’s collection The World of Arthur Russell features primarily Russell’s dance music. Each of these records provides a relatively cohesive listening experience. Furthermore, those releasing Russell’s music have been tasteful in their mixing and collaborations with other artists. The well-respected contemporary dance production team DFA provides one remix on Audika’s Springfield, and Chris Taylor of the beloved band Grizzly Bear contributed mixing and mastering to Love is Overtaking Me. Compared with Tupac’s sometimes questionable string of posthumous collaborators, this can hardly be seen as a violation of Russell’s legacy.

Though certainly tasteful, this partitioning of Russell’s ideas and approaches does contribute to a listener’s necessarily schizophrenic appreciation of the cellist’s output. A listener could not possibly gather, for instance, that the artist responsible for
the pastoral, folksy *Love is Overtaking Me* is also the mastermind behind any of
Russell’s dance material, or the modular “Instrumentals.” Though there are persistent
stylistic choices throughout Russell’s oeuvre, as well as his distinctive singing and
cello playing, any casual listener would have difficulty cobbling together a cohesive
notion of the cellist’s work at large. His interests are simply too broad, and the
curatorial choices made by various labels following Russell’s death contribute to this
disjointed artistic presence.

Additionally, Russell’s posthumous catalog was released to the public amidst
an almost total change in music distribution. Russell himself utilized the then-
revolutionary Walkman to endlessly tweak and critique his own recordings while
riding the Staten Island Ferry or jogging through downtown. More than a decade
later, Russell’s tirelessly reworked catalog was released to a world more familiar with
mp3s than cassettes. Previously limited to small runs of twelve inch singles with his
dance music, almost everything that Russell has ever had released is now available on
Amazon.com, iTunes, or for the more savvy, through quasi-legal file sharing services
and album blogs. Furthermore, much of Russell’s music has been made available for
listening on YouTube by fans. Audika records, as well, has done a thorough job of
publishing Russell’s re-releases on various social networking platforms: as of this
writing, Russell’s profile on MySpace has over 8,000 friends.

In assessing Russell’s catalog, many fans and collaborators discuss how “far
ahead the curve” Russell seemed to be, as if the rest of the music world had to wait 15

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56 This is discussed at length in Wolf’s *Wild Combination*
years to catch up. This, however, assumes a rather narrow view of the changes that have occurred since Russell’s death. It is far more accurate to assert that music distribution has developed such that a figure like Russell, far from being a label-backed star, is able to reach a wide and unprecedented audience of people. Rather, YouTube and the mp3 created a more fitting avenue of distribution for Russell’s myriad recording projects. Casual listeners may at first be confused by Russell’s stylistic schizophrenia, but as easily as a digital copy of any of his other records are available through the Internet, so too is a wealth of magazine articles and album reviews. Music itself as well as any type of extra-musical information are both instantly and readily available. Though Russell relinquished distributional control of his music in passing, the Internet has allowed Audika to create a strong, if fractured, presence.

57 This sentiment is prevalent in *Wild Combination* and was present at the Tisch Arthur Russell Symposium
Illustration from a flyer advertising the Paradise Garage’s “Construction Night”

Russell’s disco was not the Beegees’ infamous soundtrack to *Saturday Night Fever* or the music of drug-laden VIPs found at Studio 54. Russell instead participated in making gay or queer disco, a format that embraced the cellist’s predilection for musical oddness.

Gay/Queer disco also embraced the spirituality of dance music. Russell, working as Dinosaur L, Loose Joints or, later, Indian Ocean, prescribed to the notion

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59 Queer disco as defined in Lawrence, *Journal of Popular Music Studies*
60 For further discussion on queerness in disco, see “Echoes of Queerness”
of Saturday night mass, or the notion that the dance floor provided access to sexual autonomy and bodily abandon that bordered on religious ecstasy. Russell sought to construct this ecstatic space—both in musical and literal, physical terms.

Positing Russell’s project as a matter of building space brings to mind a specific trope in the gay male community. Though often the subject of campy play, the sexy construction worker, as seen in the Village People, is actually a useful lens for understanding this branch of Russell’s music.

Building and construction make sense in consideration of the types of spaces for which Russell’s “mutant disco” records were made. Take, for instance, legendary DJ Larry Levan and his club, the Paradise Garage.  

Levan was a fan of Arthur Russell’s and often spun The Loose Joints track “Is it All Over My Face?” Thousands of dancers flocked to the Paradise Garage and its formidable sound-system, yet as a building—as a piece of architecture—the Paradise Garage is remarkable in just how inconspicuously it presented itself. The name is not a clever pun—the Paradise Garage was literally located in a garage.

What allowed the Paradise Garage to fully embody the notion of Saturday Night Mass was both Larry Levan’s seemingly superhuman ability to work a crowd and, quite simply, the painfully loud but wholly immersive sound system. Levan, in addition to being an incredible DJ, was also a notorious audiophile. Simon Reynolds

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61 “Levan is almost universally revered as the greatest DJ of all time.” Shapiro, 267
63 “The Garage sound system is reckoned by many to have been the greatest of them all.” Broughton & Brewster, 272.
64 More Levan praise: Broughton & Brewster. Online.
describes Levan’s custom subwoofer (the “Larry Cone”) and the DJ’s practice of slowly upgrading the quality of cartridge in the DJ booth as the night progressed. Music broadcast at extreme volumes, especially in a reverberant, undecorated garage, becomes inescapable, a phenomenon literally felt throughout the body (Shapiro describes the system as “bowel-loosening”). The Paradise Garage’s sound system allowed listeners to literally immerse themselves in a repetitive, sexually charged music.

A similar atmosphere of abandon pervaded the more upscale disco clubs of the time, but much of their popular appeal came from lavish decorations, extraordinary dance floors, and fashionable patrons. Instead of adorning the space with superficial accoutrements, the Paradise Garage filled it with physically present music. Larry Levan built the space from scratch as each new track met the DJ’s needles, creating a nebulous, fluid, pulsing heap of bodies and drums. After participating in a few “Saturday Night Masses,” Russell began to imagine orchestrating these ecstatic events, and, similar to the way in which these raptures had to take place in a constructed, fluid space, the records Russell would eventually produce for the dance floor would require an extremely complex process of sonic construction.

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66 Shapiro, 267
Russell had the biggest “hit” of his career with the Francois Kevorkian remix of the track “#5 (Go Bang)” from Dinosaur L’s album 24->24. During the production of the original “Go Bang,” Russell recorded a wide range of improvised tracks. The hard, session grooves of the Ingram brothers, the downtown organ and vocals of Julius Eastman, a former James Brown backup singer, and Peter Zummo’s slurred trombone all clash with Russell’s weirdo keyboard comping. In post-production, Russell mixed these long, improvised takes together using two 24-track tape machines (thus the name of the record). The original mixed version, though it loosely follows a song structure, can’t seem to decide on a key. The vocalist, as well, was famously intoxicated, producing an unsure sound in the traditionally strong lead vocals. Though it gives the impression of a live ensemble recording, it is in fact an already heavily constructed illusion.

Francois Kevorkian further mixed Russell’s work, though his contribution to the piece can more appropriately be thought of as deconstruction. Kevorkian paired down much of the instrumentation, spread out the clangor, and highlighted a single distinctive trombone line. He also removed much of the singing, leaving only Russell’s spoken “I wanna see all my friends at once,” Lola Blank wildly repeating “Bang,” and a crazed Julius Eastman singing “Go Bang” in an orgasmic, slow ascension. Russell’s original mix, a wild collection of studio improvisations later

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67 Hit in terms of ubiquity in the New York Club scene, not in terms of album sales
68 “Krosen wasn’t in a fit state to buy a pint of milk…” Lawrence, 217.
mixed into a cohesive track, sounds as if it was recorded at a New Year’s Eve party – Kevorkian’s paired-down take on the original studio footage is sleek and maintains a campy aloofness, though the remix also retains a driving drum and bass groove.

Given Kevorkian’s expert, surgical treatment, the already illusory “Go Bang” became an anthem at clubs like the Paradise Garage. Though Kevorkian’s remix is eminently danceable, it also demonstrates the complex process of building a record. Take, for instance, the many complex layers of performance at work in this recording: Kevorkian’s more popular treatment is the remix of an already extremely complex mix that was probably mixed again in-between other singles by DJs when it was actually played live in clubs.

1977 marked the first year that Arthur Russell came in contact with New York’s budding queer disco scene. 1977 also marks the year that the Village People formed. An in-joke that has perhaps now (in well past its 30th year) gone on for too long, the Village People were originally a knowing parody, a loveable spoof of downtown gay male disco. The group was made up of frustrated chorus line participants and former patrons of the YMCA who allowed their musical performances to become vehicles for embodying various queer archetypes – the hunky but taboo Indian Chief and his equally taboo counterpart the Cowboy, the cartoonish Leather Daddy, casting a knowing wink to BDSM fetishists, the two men in uniform, Police Officer and Military Man, both actively queering notions of power politics and, finally, the Construction Worker, alternatively known as the Builder. David Hodo, the real name behind the construction archetype, explained this
character in an interview with Spin Magazine: “I had just finished a musical about the Grand Ole Opry, and I had a mustache. It was Christmastime, and I needed money. They wanted a cowboy, and I had just finished a western -- perfect. But when they said they wanted me to be the construction worker, that was my dad's dream come true. I'm handy, but I've never built anything of consequence.”

Though coyly riffing on his (presumably traditional, straight) father’s wishes, Hodo here taps into the heart of the trope of the sexy, gay construction worker. An image of industriousness and know-how, the construction worker represents the queer community’s need to build a space separate from the paint-can-swinging world of John Travolta and the BeeGees, in the same way that the Police Officer indicates a need to enforce a new code of laws. The construction worker is totally empowered and literally equipped – with hammer, nails, and other sundry tools, the builder can create and delineate space. The idea represents more than vacant campiness – the construction worker is a political mascot. Unsurprisingly, as seen in the graphic above, the Paradise Garage, the site of an incredibly rich maze of constructed musical meaning, put on a weekly construction-worker themed night, an evening that likely featured the complex records on which Arthur Russell put his various names.

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Friends and fans of Arthur Russell often struggle with explaining away his relative obscurity. Russell, too, seems to think that he was destined to become well recognized or to at least make a decent living.  

Frustrated by a lack of notable acclaim, Russell often worried about his music, especially in mixing and pressing. At times, Russell crossed the border of mere anxiety into plain paranoia. Especially concerning his disco, Russell often complained of colleagues and strangers stealing his ideas.

David Byrne, Talking Heads mastermind, apparently received much of Russell’s paranoid targeting. The thought of David Byrne plagiarizing Russell should seem a bit ludicrous as Byrne has, with his multitude of projects and accomplishments, proven himself an original thinker. Yet, the music of Talking Heads was subject to influence. Additionally, Arthur Russell very nearly became a member of Talking Heads in 1977. The deluxe reissue edition of *Talking Heads: 77* includes a demo of the hit “Psycho Killer” featuring Arthur Russell on cello. The band’s last studio record *Naked* also includes Russell’s playing. Puzzlingly, the documentary *Wild Combination* features archival footage of Russell and Byrne playing together in tiny cowboy hats. Russell also roomed with Talking Heads’

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71 He relied on his parents and partner Tom Lee for most of his career as a musician
72 Much of this information gleaned from observations of friends – heard in both *Wild Combination* and at the Tisch Symposium
drummer Chris Frantz and bassist Tina Weymouth for a summer. The cellist’s presence, then, appears noteworthy.

There are many less substantive comparisons that one can draw between these musicians. For instance, Talking Heads also sought to popularize (among the artistic crowd) the demonized form of disco. This quotation appeared in Rolling Stone: ‘‘The big difference between us and punk groups is that we like K.C. and the Sunshine Band and Funkadelic/Parliament,’ says Frantz. ‘You ask Johnny Rotten if he likes K.C. and the Sunshine Band and he’ll blow snot in your face.’’ 74 Surely, Frantz makes a blasphemous claim as member of a punk band in 1977, but this is an idea that aligns the band with Russell’s penchant for combining genres. Other details seem to further illustrate alignment. David Byrne’s version of “Psycho Killer” from the concert film Stop Making Sense bears Russell’s watermark in its instrumentation of acoustic guitar and drum machine. The writing process of Speaking in Tongues, one of Talking Heads’ most popular records, also smacks of Russell – Byrne slowly wrote the lyrics to the album by repeatedly singing gibberish until a song emerged, a process similar to the phoneme improvisations of Russell’s solo cello music, such as the nonsense song “Tone Bone Kone.” The summer that Russell lived with Frantz and Weymouth, they reportedly complained of the endless repetitions of Russell’s rehearsing – Byrne would later comment that he loved the rhythm section’s ability to play the same thing endlessly, like a drum machine. 75

Surely, these smaller similarities probably irked Russell – he played on a version of one of the band’s biggest hits but ultimately failed to capture that large of an audience himself. There is, however, a more significant, ideological parallel between Russell and Byrne.

Talking Heads are an eminently urban group. Educated at RISD, Byrne, Weymouth, and Frantz all moved to New York to join former Bostonite and Modern Lover Jerry Harrison. They and their stilted dance music are of the city. Though almost certainly done with tongue in cheek, these urbanites penned a song early in their career that voiced a ridiculous dismissal of the part of America that doesn’t contain a coast. In the song “The Big Country” off of *More Songs About Buildings and Food*, Byrne sings,

> Then we come to the farmlands, and the undeveloped areas.  
> And I have learned how these things work together.  
> I see the parkway that passes through them all.  
> And I have learned how to look at these things and I say,  
> I wouldn't live there if you paid me.

77 He continues, “It's not even worth talking/About those people down there.” Though they managed to embrace disco, Talking Heads would not go as far as embracing the Midwest.

Eventually, however, Byrne’s attitude changed almost completely. His directorial debut, the film *True Stories*, can be seen as a sort of perverse love letter to the Midwest. Peppered with pedal steel and images of gas stations and malls, the

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76 Reynolds, *Rip it Up*, 158-180  
film gazes in wonder at the idiosyncrasies of “the Big Country -” Texas, in this case. Instead of dismissing from above, Byrne, playing himself, wanders within the town of Virgil while the other members of Talking Heads gleefully lipsynch. In one of the final shots of the film, a camera moves steadily along a suburban cul de sac, showing garage after garage. Byrne’s voiceover comments “Look at this. Who can say it isn’t beautiful?”

This pastoralization of the Midwest, of course, summarizes Russell’s whole approach to breezy, acoustic pop music. Frequently photographed with both trucker hats and actual tractors, Russell eventually came to embrace Iowa after he ran away from it. Tall grass, the state’s name, and a sense of openness appear in many of his songs. 79 Similarly peppered with pedal steel, songs such as “Big Moon” and “Habit of You,” both included on the folky compilation Love is Overtaking Me, utilize many of the same textures as later Talking Heads. It seems fitting, then, that Russell contributed to the final Talking Heads album, a record put out shortly after the release of True Stories.

This essay does not attempt to point fingers or somehow claim that Arthur Russell got ripped off. Russell’s participation in this very popular ensemble seems to be merely underrepresented. Byrne seems to have had at least some effect on Russell’s work, as well. A few years after the release of the Brian Eno/David Byrne collaboration My Life in the Bush of Ghosts, Jerry Harrison and Arthur Russell worked on a song under the name Bonzo Goes to Washington that similarly samples

79 “Close My Eyes” and “What’s It Like” both explicitly mention Iowa’s grass, the songs collected on the Springfield CD were originally intended for an album tentatively called Corn
an infamous speech made by Ronald Regan. If anything, these parallels do, however, further illustrate the intertwining dilettantism of the downtown New York scene in the late 70s and provide, once again, an instance of Russell nearly gaining popular recognition during his lifetime.

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80 Released on *Sleeping Bag Sessions*
baffled time

Because of the delayed compiling and re-release of much of Russell’s music, the critical reception to this output has often encountered contemporary critical standards. Music that was originally recorded twenty years ago is considered alongside music that could have been recorded this week. Surprisingly, however, Russell’s music seems to evade being dated easily. Jens Lekman comments in the film *Wild Combination* that, when he first heard Arthur Russell, he thought that it had been recorded that week (in the year 2007). Aside from the occasional synthesizer that has perhaps become more dated over the years, Russell’s music, in both production and content, does not seem to be of an easily discernible era.

There are a number of explanations for this phenomenon. The first and most obvious has to do with the compiled nature of much of Russell’s output – almost everything available by Russell as a solo artist is a compilation spanning as far back as the 70s and into the 90s. The track listings on his compilation albums, as well, are not necessarily organized by date. Russell also recorded in a number of different settings – at home, in Bob Blank’s downtown studio, with Columbia’s John Hammond, - creating no cohesive sonic signature or sense of recorded place.

The content of Russell’s music also avoids fitting easily into any genre or trend. Though his use of synthesizer and drum machine on *Calling Out of Context* would typically indicate that he worked in the 80s, the addition of the cello gives the
recordings an anachronistic quality that eludes a concise description. There is no genre per se that fits Russell’s typical instrumentation.

Additionally, Russell does seem to possess an uncanny ability to have predicted trends in the independent music scene of the 2000s, when much of his music was re-released. Given this ability, it only figures that his output would sound “modern.” His folk music, for instance, seems to have predicted the rise of groups such as Wilco and alternative country at large. His dance music, coupled with many of the other No Wave bands like Liquid Liquid and ESL, \(^{81}\) seems to have had a deep influence on the resurgence of downtown dance music in acts such as !!! and LCD Soundsystem. \(^{82}\) Even more recently, some of Russell’s drum machine programming, his use of synthesizer, and his slurred singing predates the new crop of “chill wave” musicians of late 2009/early 2010 – Washed Out, Toro y Moi, Memory Tapes, Neon Indian, etc. \(^{83}\) These influences, however, are fairly well-noted, as in Jens Lekman’s cover of “A Little Lost.” Lekman released his kalimba version of the song in October of 2007 on a four-song tribute EP which has cemented Russell’s place as a contemporary reference point for a variety of musicians.

One genre, however, that seems to have gone unrecognized in relation to Russell is the 90s rise and fall of shoegaze, a style of music characterized by incredibly loud and often very processed guitars, a hazy or fuzzy production style,  

\(^{81}\) Reynolds, 261-279
\(^{82}\) “The Arthur Russell grooves that have been James Murphy’s bread and butter.” James Murphy is the main creative force in LCD Soundsystem. Molnar, Chris. “Caribou: Odessa.” Coke Machine Glow. 1 March 2010. Web.
and a breathy, almost sleepy vocal effect. The Scottish band My Bloody Valentine recorded the crown jewel of this trend with their album *Loveless* released in 1991. Yet Russell, working on his never-released album *Corn* (later compiled on the *Springfield* CD), somehow managed to predict My Bloody Valentine’s sound in his “You Have Did the Right Thing When You Put That Skylight In,” a song described by Audika Records as featuring “heavy metal cellos.” The harsh bow strokes of Russell’s playing, though, bring out the drones and overtones apparent in the interplay between the two main cello tracks. His playing here has much more to do with the work of Tony Conrad than Black Sabbath, and coupled with his typically breathy voice, the song comes across as proto-shoegaze. Tellingly, the silly-sounding name of the genre in question comes from the tendency of its performers to stare at their feet while they manipulate various effect pedals – a posture often maintained by Russell in his solo cello performances.

Much of Russell’s catalog was released after the advent of Internet, but as this essay begins to demonstrate, another significant, parallel technological development has contributed to the cellist’s growing cultural status. Home recording – an art that Russell explored extensively – has become totally viable for any musician with a computer. “Amateurs” are now able to write, record, and distribute a song instantly. Russell, because he was never able to fully capitalize on the pop opportunities presented to him, remains essentially a home-recorder. Across the years, with many

current artists looking backwards in time, Russell’s music is now open to an immediate distribution network and his catalog, often unpolished, genuinely delivers a non-professional affect. Russell was, perhaps unintentionally, looking forward. His recordings, now a pillar of comparison in some contemporary music critique, maintain a strong disorientation of time.

\[85\] As evidenced by chill-wave
\[86\] See “Critical Reception” essay
water and swimming

“There’s something about water that does it to me.”

Born in the vast, flat expanse of the American Midwest, Russell eventually found artistic and sexual freedom in parts of the country bounded by water. Running away from dry Iowa found Russell confronting the Pacific while much of his time spent in New York involved endlessly riding the Staten Island Ferry listening to music on headphones. Russell’s ashes were scattered off the coast of Maine, another frequent site of contemplation and inspiration. Unsurprisingly, the Russell family at large also found escape in bodies of water – their summer vacations often revolved around Minnesota lakes and, in response to Arthur’s flight from home, his

87 the Fader
88 Arthur Russell as quoted in Lawrence, 264
89 This is a visual trope in Wolf’s Wild Combination – an actor credited with playing “Adult Arthur” is seen on the Staten Island Ferry a number of times
90 Lawrence, 19
parents purchased a boat. Eventually, perhaps due to these escapist, meditative associations, water became one of the central themes in Russell’s music and a powerful signifier of pure benevolence and freedom from sexual repression.

Water manifests itself in a number of ways in Russell’s work, but his lyrics most readily betray his fascination. In “Platform on the Ocean,” Russell describes standing on a platform above the ocean, hearing the sound of whitecaps, and looking at fish. In “A Little Lost,” Russell portrays a person struggling to stay afloat “out on the ocean surf.” The dance anthem “Let’s Go Swimming” praises a brother for “jumping out” and pleas with the listener to join in. Similarly, “That’s Us/Wild Combination” finds Russell singing wooingly to a lover “That’s in you in pool, you’re a swimmer. What a winner.”

This thread of fascination continues in Russell’s many pseudonyms – the song “Schoolbell/Treehouse” was released under the name Indian Ocean, and Russell credits a number of his edits and remixes to Killer Whale. Russell’s work with guitarist Steven Hall was collected under the name Sailboats. There are other bits of the aquatic throughout Russell’s life – he performed in a 1987 concert at the Kitchen with percussionist Arto Lindsay entitled “Music…It’s the Ocean,” and once wrote to his parents that he wanted to put “Casios on sailboats.”

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91 Wolf, *Wild Combination*
92 Lawrence, 264
94 Lawrence, 281
Water, too, provides a convenient aural metaphor for understanding many of the production choices made by Russell. His music is soaking “wet” with reverb. His choice of synthesizers, generally heavy with chorus and tremolo, give an impression of light reflecting off and into water. Heavy reverb and delay as well as a tendency to play with stereo panning – especially on the solo cello album World of Echo – can make his music sound as if it is coming from deep in a dark, wet cave or from under a bath full of water. He even goes as far as recalling the blast of a foghorn when distorting the sound of his cello.

Russell further displays a fondness for water in certain fluid aspects of his compositions. This can best be seen in the song “Platform on the Ocean,” the second track off of Calling Out of Context. The song, a dirge-like psychedelic exploration that lyrically details staring at water from a platform, drones on for over eight minutes. In those eight minutes, Russell’s voice, heavily processed with reverb and delay, bounces bird-like up and down various scales and modes as two tracks of cello continuously bow a low E. Paired with a drum machine loop also tuned to E, the instruments form a sort of container or shoreline – Russell’s “wet” voice sloshes back and forth. Here can be seen a synthesis in Russell’s multiple interests in water – lyrics featuring images of water, “wet” production techniques, and fluidity of musical expression or composition.

These various utilizations of both wetness and water can be taken literally – Russell is indeed making music about, in one sense, swimming. The many repetitions
of the theme, however, seem to indicate that water and swimming are in fact signifiers of something more personal.

“Let’s Go Swimming” saw a number of incarnations – the hushed version featured on *World of Echo*, the popular Walter Gibbons remix, and the earlier “See My Brother, He’s Jumping Out” later featured on the *Springfield* CD. Many facets of the piece change from version to version, but a few key phrases persist. First, Russell sings mysteriously about “the islands I am swimming to.” The title of the song, as well, remains as a sort of spoken mantra, repeated many times in a chant with a campy, lisped “s.” Finally, Russell indicates that the listener should “see his brother – he’s jumping out.” Taken together with the major key - the celebratory feel of the chords and melody - the various incarnations of the song create an image of joy and abandon.

The liminal posture between submersion and dry shore, or between jumping in and not jumping in to water, has parallels in both “Platform on the Ocean” and “A Little Lost.” The first song, in its own surrealist manner, finds Russell considering the ocean from a safe, dry place – looking at the water and “hearing the sound of the whitecaps,” Russell never mentions the possibility of going swimming. He is merely contemplating the water itself, attempting to discern its meaning. In “A Little Lost,” Russell sings from the point of view of someone who is overwhelmed with the reality of being alone in an immense ocean. He must “pull [him]self together.” Both of these songs, however, are sung almost within Russell’s interior monologue – there is no

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95 This single was well-distributed. It was reviewed in Spin Magazine, as well as newspapers in London and Sydney.
imperative tense, no other person to consider. For Russell, the act of swimming should be a communal experience to be shared by a group indulging in abandon together. Thus, in one of Russell’s more ambitious compositions, he implores the listener to join him in careless fun – “Let’s Go Swimming.”

This sense of wild abandon grows even more vivid in considering Russell’s biography – the cellist did not in fact have a biological brother. Russell did find love and camaraderie, however, between other men in the various communal experiments he participated in – Buddhist collectives, dance clubs, the Kitchen, and musical ensembles. It seems, then, that the subject of “Let’s Go Swimming” is another man involved in some sort of quasi-familial group, not a literal brother – someone both aligned with Russell and a target of his admiration. Russell longs to be like the brother “jumping out” and longs, as well, to have the listener join him. For Russell, this act of “jumping out,” alternatively known as swimming or floating in the ocean, is representative of the abandonment of one’s hang-ups. In the same way that dancers found the music of the Paradise Garage to be loud, rapturous, and immersive, Russell symbolically views water as total commitment to ecstatic, queer, group activity. Swimming means getting wet – again related to Russell’s production style – and surrendering to the forces of water and nature. Truly, the ability to swim is one of the facets that Russell lovingly describes in the lyrics of “That’s Us/Wild Combination.” Russell coos, “That’s you in the pool, you’re a swimmer/what a winner.” Here, Russell finds virtue in reckless, child-like abandon.
good morning, mr. orwell

Allen Ginsberg & Arthur Russell in “Good Morning, Mr. Orwell”

On New Year’s Eve 1983, Nam June Paik organized an international arts celebration to ring in the New Year. Called “Good Morning Mr. Orwell,” Paik aimed to counteract the dystopian vision of Orwell’s novel *1984* with a celebration of technology, communication, and collaboration. Using satellite links on live TV, an incredible array of musicians, dancers, and video artists collaborated with each other live over satellite. The list of performers included: John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Laurie Anderson, Peter Gabriel, Oingo Boingo, the Thompson Twins, Allen Ginsberg, and, as Allen Ginsberg’s accompanist, Arthur Russell.

96 Still from “Good Morning, Mr. Orwell,” currently available on UbuWeb. Paik, Nam June. “Good Morning, Mr. Orwell.” 1984.
Russell’s performance is essentially unremarkable – barely heard over the din of Ginsberg’s singing, Russell acts as more of a set piece than a central component. Yet Russell’s participation provides insight into his use of music technology as well as his ever-peripheral place between worlds of music.

“Good Morning, Mr. Orwell” is very much a celebration of new broadcast, video, and music technologies. Most of the performances, with the notable exception of Ginsberg’s typical acoustic-instrument hullabaloo, are augmented in strange ways by some sort of technological gimmick. The program begins with Laurie Anderson and Peter Gabriel lip-synching in front of a rudimentary green screen – later on, Laurie Anderson performs a selection from United States with heavy use of a vocoder. Live from San Francisco, the new wave group Oingo Boingo performs their appropriately themed song “Wake Up (It’s 1984),” with prodigious use of synthesizers and, again, a very dated green screen. Merce Cunningham, cheekily introduced as “the first man of the new year to dance with himself,” moves in front of his own delayed image while John Cage, located somewhere else in the world, makes music with contact mics and feathers.

Essentially, these dancers and musicians, grouped under the supervision of Nam June Paik, technologically augment their standard performances in order to communicate notions of positivity and futurism. Orwell envisioned a future in which technology led to surveillance. The world of 1984 is one of external observation and an institutionalized gaze. For these performers, though, technology was not something to fear, but rather an avenue in which to broadcast, explore and, in the case
of Cunningham, literally multiply one’s self-expression. Advances in electronics and video allowed people to turn their gaze inwards and to often literally interact with an echo or image of themselves. Russell, though his performance here with Ginsberg was entirely acoustic, seems to have later adopted this techno-positive navel gazing attitude. This can be seen in Russell’s prodigious use of drum machines and synthesizers, but is more present in Russell’s solo cello album *World of Echo*, a document of any and all possible combinations of music production technology, Russell’s voice, and his amplified cello.

*World of Echo* finds Russell alone, occupying impossible rooms and singing softly through his ricocheting cello. The album contains only these two instruments, processed and recorded in a hundred different ways. First released in 1986 and re-released by Audika Records as a special edition package in 2004 and a regular CD in 2005, *World of Echo* remains one of Russell’s most original and impressive recorded statements. Russell here both demonstrates his creative process, showing the cellist’s fingerboard as the anchor of all his compositions. Russell both re-records disco songs (as in this album’s version of “Let’s Go Swimming”) and improvises plaintive, quiet pieces that seem to vanish from thought as soon as Russell forms the words.

Though the strictly musical aspects of the record are certainly compelling, the key to understanding and, indeed, finding resonance within *World of Echo* is in its production – a mode of music recording that seems related to the video experiments featured in *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell*. First, Russell’s two most idiosyncratic recording tendencies are severely amplified in these sessions. Russell’s voice is
incredibly close-mic’ed, a technique that captures more of Russell’s mouth sounds and body resonance than any projected tones. For much of the record, Russell seems eerily close, positioned as if sharing a bed or whispering a secret. Russell’s cello, as is heard throughout much of his work, is recorded through a piezo pickup on the body resonance, on sound captured through the body of the cello, not the sound of the room. Russell, who by 1986 was undoubtedly familiar with the linguistic metaphors used in describing audio production, finds meaning in these terms – “close” to mean intimate, “warm” to mean friendly, and “wet” to mean fluid. Russell uses both the sound and the aural metaphors of these techniques to create the “World” of the album’s title. The two bodies, recorded in similarly “unreal” ways, resonate and play together.

Russell, of course, further manipulates these sounds (and these metaphors) by using carefully orchestrated echo, distortion, and reverb. Already a key component in making Russell’s dance music “mutant,” Russell uses these recording effects here to reflect and prolong musical events. This approach has a number of effects. First, musical events are prolonged and repeated, allowing the album to sound much more lush than it’s dual instrumentation would normally allow. Secondly, especially in Russell’s use of reverb, the production deconstructs the listener’s notions of space and place. As a song progresses, its “room sound” can change at any moment – Russell works the utilization of reverb into his playing, turning off and on various settings in time. This technique likely contributes to the popular conception that this
album is related to space travel, but it also shows Russell’s knack for deconstructing orthodoxy in the recording studio. By dramatically altering the room sound of *World of Echo*, Russell dismantles the illusion of a live performance. Finally, the studio effects allow Russell to relate back to himself through the use of technology. Like Merce Cunningham, Russell makes music with himself, gazes inward, and responds to his own musical choices as the room changes around him. Though much more than a document of the *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* techno-positivism, *World of Echo* uses the same types of techniques as those found in the Nam June Paik event.

Though technology seems to be a definite component of the zeitgeist of the television broadcast, the collection of performers provides another interesting comment on the popularization of the avant garde. Oingo Boingo and the Thompson Twins both had a number of hits – the first with their theme to the movie *Weird Science*, and the second with “Hold Me Now,” performed here. Further fraternization can be seen between the worlds of pop and art music in the collaboration between pop star Peter Gabriel and avant darling Laurie Anderson, though the duo is not as simple a merger as it may appear. Anderson had in fact scored a pop hit in the UK with “O Superman” in 1981. “Good Morning, Mr. Orwell,” then, further illustrates the fact that Russell was neither too “out” to become popular nor popular to become a pillar of the avant garde. Take, for instance, Russell’s 1986 mention in Spin Magazine in which two of Russell’s singles are reviewed alongside Cameo (of “Word Up” fame)

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98 Reynolds, 194-195
and Falco (performer of “Rock Me, Amadeus”). His failure to achieve wide recognition in either field, then, as often lamented by his friends and collaborators, can only be owed to some personal trapping. That is, Russell was in fact not institutionally excluded from anything he sought.

99 Leland, “Singles”
There is a decided mythology to Arthur Russell. An oddball genius, full of contradiction, he made thousands of hours of resonant, various, and beautiful music but was serially under-appreciated during his tragically short life. In 2004, following the first new release of Russell’s music, this myth began a dissemination. In reviews, in magazine profiles, in blog posts, in Matt Wolf’s *Wild Combination* and in Tim Lawrence’s *Hold On to Your Dreams*, this story was repeated and adopted. So often and with so much conviction was this myth repeated that it now bears revision: under-appreciated during his lifetime, Russell, more than a decade after his death, found a new life and audience thanks, in part, to advances in communication.

This revision serves Arthur Russell well. The cellist almost always eschewed normalcy in his art, in his personal life, even in his manner of dress. It is fitting, then, that his music distribution has become relatively atypical. Additionally, there is something wonderfully circular about Russell’s posthumous presence – a devout Buddhist for most of his adult life, Russell’s current diffusion across communication networks is a kind of reincarnation. Russell’s spiritual notions are then fulfilled by the distribution of his music.
appendix a

performance: description

As part of my music thesis work at Wesleyan University, I organized a large-scale concert performance on March 26th, 2010. The concert, entitled “Love is Overtaking Us,” featured a number of new musical realizations of Arthur Russell compositions, some of my own music, and extensive illustrations and video art. The concert, an hour in length, was performed in Wesleyan University’s CFA Hall, an auditorium formerly used as a film screening room.

A number of musicians and video artists contributed to the performance: a full listing of personnel can be found in Appendix B. Selections from the visual component of the performance can be found in Appendices C, D, and E. This section describes the performance and also serves as a record of the various thoughts and challenges encountered. These various performance components, while not necessarily pieces of academic music criticism, should further color the fractured portrait of Arthur Russell that these essays form.

Loosely, I organized the entire program around Russell’s use of water and swimming – if not the literal aquatic theme, then the cellist’s conception of swimming as a place of loving abandon. This concept also pervades my own compositions included in the program. Fluidity, as well, provided the framework for the video artists – the projections, screened on to the performers themselves, liquefied the visual performance space. Additionally, the videos were controlled live via computer

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100 See “Water & Swimming” essay
software, allowing the animations to ebb and flow in correspondence with the music. Finally, sound design also contributed to the unifying concept of water – as often as possible, various instruments were made to be “wet” with reverb.

The concert program was divided up into 4 sections. The first section featured two Arthur Russell songs – “Arm Around You” and “Habit of You”\textsuperscript{101} – performed for electric guitar and voice. Inspired by Russell’s soft dismemberments of his disco material on \textit{World of Echo}, these renditions attempted to distill the two songs into their most basic components. Played out of time, the boundaries between verse and chorus, as well as between songs, became blurred. Notably, I did not use a standard guitar tuning. Attempting to emulate Russell’s harmonic choices, I tuned my guitar to be in the same configuration as a cello – C, G, D, A – with the two highest strings reserved for droning on B and E. I also processed my guitar, as was Russell’s tendency, with a slap-back delay and spring reverb.

The second section of the performance consisted of two original songs off of an EP titled \textit{Pacific Radio Fire}\textsuperscript{102} plus Russell’s “Platform on the Ocean.” For this three-song set, I augmented the electric guitar with performers on electric bass, another guitar, two drum sets, an electronics rig, a synthesizer, and timbales. The ensemble also featured three additional vocalists.

One of the challenges in performing Russell’s music in a live context involves taking what are obviously studio creations out of their recorded context. Arthur Russell’s record of “Platform on the Ocean” is extremely heavy on production,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[101] Both songs are the subject of essays in this collection
\end{footnotes}
writing, and electronic instrumentation. In concert, we were unable to use any of these techniques. Instead, using traditional rock band instrumentation and timbales, we focused on the driving rhythms and melodic possibilities. Similarly, I recorded my own compositions on a laptop and utilized heavy digital processing. Performing these studio creations live required rethinking orchestration.

The third section focused on Russell’s disco music, featuring renditions of both “Let’s Go Swimming” and the Francois Kevorkian remix of “Go Bang #5.” Using techniques of singing and beat deconstruction from the first section of the performance, I attempted to demonstrate musically how Russell’s solo cello playing is related to his blowout dance music. Essentially, the third section was an attempt to re-construct Russell’s disco from its World of Echo fragments. Beginning with a guitar and voice version of “Let’s Go Swimming,” pounding drum machine eventually faded in over my guitar playing. Finally, live drums, played at an entirely different tempo, faded in over the electric guitar and drum machine. Once the live drums had established a steady beat, the entire ensemble played a largely improvised version of “Go Bang #5.” These crossfades, while also demonstrating the interconnectedness between Russell’s various modes of music, also aurally referenced the culture of DJ performance so inherent in the cellist’s dance music.

Finally, the concert ended with a solo electric guitar and voice performance of Russell’s “A Little Lost.” This song most thoroughly represented the various meanings of water I hoped to communicate and, conveniently enough, happens to

103 The “Water and Swimming” essay contains specific information on this song
be one of Russell’s most beloved compositions. Its inclusion at the end also signaled a unification of the entire concert.

I personally found the concert successful in many ways – despite a number of potentially disastrous technical difficulties in both performance and rehearsal, the musicians and visual artists maintained a professional air and played with joy. I hope that the performance instilled at least a curiosity in those uninitiated to Arthur Russell’s music and that this collection of essays will help pay further and more well-researched tribute to the cellist’s life of work.
appendix b

performance personnel

Music Team:

Christina Boyd – Voice, Percussion
Ben Bernstein – Keys
Alex Tatusian – Timbales
Katherine McDonald – Voice, Percussion
Madeline Caldwell – Voice
Ian Staub – Trumpet, Electronics
Duchampion:
Asa Horvitz – Guitar, Voice
Jake Nussbaum – Drums
Will Brant – Guitars
Ben Seretan – Guitar, Drums, Voice

Video Team:

Rod O'Connor – Software Architect/Technical Advisor
Grace Kredell – Illustrations
Dan Obzejta – Animations
Jeff Rovinelli – Mixer/Video Consultant

Technical Team:

Mary Longley – Sound
Andrew Gladstone – Videographer
Sam Mahoney – Videographer
Matt Green - Videographer
appendix c

Illustrations

As part of the video production of this performance, Grace Kredell illustrated a number of “characters” based on the life of Arthur Russell. Some are real, some are archetypal, and some are anthropomorphized objects. Included here are a few samples:

Larry Levan, legendary DJ at the Paradise Garage and supporter of Russell’s dance music
An image of Buddha, Russell’s spiritual guide
One of two lifeguards: the embodiment of water and swimming as a “safe space”
A 70’s punk, connecting Russell to CBGB’s and the Talking Heads
Russell himself
appendix d

video stills

Using the above illustrations, Dan Obzejta created digital animations. These loops of video had three distinct visual themes – grains of wood, a reference to Russell’s cello, a photograph of the ocean, an obvious inclusion of water, and abstracted bars of color, representing the intense sensory experience of club music. These videos were then mixed live. These animations create fluidity in the visual space of the performance - they also helped distinguish the various sections of the program and tied the concert to Nam June Paik’s “Good Morning, Mr. Orwell.” Included here are some stills of the mixed animations:
appendix e

performance photos

A team of three videographers documented the performance. Included here are stills from their footage provided by Andrew Gladstone:

Solo performance
Will Brant with timbales

Jake Nussbaum
Asa Horvitz

Ensemble with projections
works cited


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