

ABSTRACT

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CHOIR OF WIRES AND SONGS OF SILOS:
DEINDUSTRIALIZATION AND
EXPERIMENTALISM IN BUFFALO, NEW
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Noah Thomas Steele, Master of Arts in
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Thesis Directed By:

Associate Professor, William Robin, Musicology
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This thesis examines the relationship between deindustrialization and experimental musical practices in Buffalo, New York, from the 1960s to the present, comprising. It looks at three case studies: Maryanne Amacher's 1967 project *City-Links*, *WBFO*; a 1971 performance by the University at Buffalo's Creative Associates at Domus, a converted auto factory; and a 2024 performance by poet Fred Moten and bassist Brandon López inside of a repurposed grain silo. Guided by Isabelle Stengers's concept of cosmopolitics and utilizing the tools of actor-network theory, the thesis draws on archival research, oral histories, and ethnographic fieldwork to argue that deindustrialization and experimental music in Buffalo developed in a mutually constitutive relationship—each mediating the conditions through which the other became legible, valuable, and contested in the city's common world. This thesis further contextualizes Buffalo's avant-garde within the history of American experimentalism and contributes to the growing dialogue between music and urban studies.

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EXPERIMENTALISM IN BUFFALO, NEW YORK

by

Noah Thomas Steele

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Advisory Committee:

Associate Professor William Robin, Chair
Assistant Professor Kelsey Klotz
Assistant Clinical Professor Brendan Kibbee

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Urban historian and local restaurateur Mark Goldman characterizes Buffalo, New York as “a great, gray, muscular giant of a city, a city known for its blue-collar solidarity, its working-class neighborhoods—a shot and a beer town if ever there was one.”¹ Walking the streets of Buffalo reveals an abundance of rusted and abandoned factories, business offices, and even grain silos, a reminder that working people and industry *were* once here. The city itself can at times feel like a museum, its streets a curated exhibit that houses the remains of its heyday as a major industrial metropolis in the first half of the 20th century.

The 1959 opening of the Saint Lawrence Seaway allowed shipping to bypass Western New York and is widely seen as the starting point of Buffalo’s deindustrialization and late-twentieth-century economic decline.² In 1950, Buffalo’s population was at an all-time high of 532,000, but by 1980 the population had shrunk to 350,000.³ In the conclusion of Goldman’s 1983 monograph *High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York*, he expresses uncertainty for Buffalo’s future, confessing, “we do not have any models of graceful decline.”⁴ In the final pages of the book, he asks, “Is it possible for a declining city—a place where newspapers close and art galleries, historical societies, and art and cultural groups are threatened

¹ Mark Goldman, *City on the Edge: Buffalo, New York* (Prometheus Books, 2007), 221.

² In this thesis I choose to use the term “deindustrial” to describe Buffalo rather than “post-industrial.” The latter speaks to a specific theory of socio-economic reorganization which marks an ending point of industrial decline. Deindustrialization rather refers to the set of processes which make up and describe the relative decline. I interpret Buffalo as still being in a period of deindustrialization, as the processes of decline still mediate the urban condition today. Thanks to my friend and colleague Jacob Ludwig for his aid in thinking through this important distinction. See also W. F. Lever, “Deindustrialisation and the Reality of the Post-Industrial City,” *Urban Studies* 28, no. 6 (1991): 983–99.

³ Mark Goldman, *High Hopes: The Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York* (SUNY Press, 1983), 284.

⁴ Goldman, *High Hopes*, 295.

with daily existence—to be an innovative community incubator for new ideas, engines and enterprises?”⁵

In 1980, likely while Goldman was writing his book, local music critic John Dwyer published the first entry on Buffalo in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, making it one of only twenty-four U.S. cities to warrant its own entry.⁶ The entry establishes a history of Western art music in the city and foregrounds the work of the Center of the Creative and Performing Arts at the State University of Buffalo. Dwyer highlights the center’s achievements since its founding in 1964, establishing its rise throughout the following decade as one of the world’s leading hubs for new and experimental music.

Set beside one another, Goldman’s uncertainty and Dwyer’s celebration of Buffalo’s avant-garde arts scene suggest a striking tension in how Buffalo could be understood at the end of the twentieth century. On the one hand, the city was marked by industrial collapse, population loss, and doubt about its future; on the other hand, the same postwar period was significant enough to music history to merit international recognition as a cultural center.⁷ This contrast invites a broader set of questions: what makes a city legible as a musical city, and what role does the city itself play in that process? In Buffalo, how might experimental music and arts practices be understood not apart from the city’s deindustrialization, but in relation to it?

This thesis seeks to make legible the role of the city and its material conditions in Buffalo’s local music historiography. It places the city’s experimental avant-garde alongside its

⁵ Goldman, *High Hopes*, 295.

⁶ John Dwyer, “Buffalo, New York,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (Macmillan Publishers, 1980).

⁷ Goldman would later realize the significance of city’s arts scene in this period, including a full chapter on the arts and Buffalo’s avant-garde in his 2007 revised history of Buffalo. See Goldman, *City on the Edge*, 221.

history of deindustrialization, treating them as intertwined rather than separate narratives. Buffalo's avant-garde holds a strong association with the city's musical identity, particularly through the international reputation of the University at Buffalo's Creative Associates, a collective of composers and performers in residence at the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts. Their legacy positioned the city within broader currents of American experimentalism. The city's urban condition, despite being a defining factor of Buffalo at the end of the 20th century and having a lasting impact today, remains a footnote in discussions of Buffalo's historic avant-garde before this study.

To develop a dialogue between the musical and the urban, I stage three case studies—two historical and one contemporary—that foreground the negotiation between the city's deindustrialization and experimental artistic practice: composer and media artist Maryanne Amacher's 1967 project *City-Links*, *WBFO*; a 1971 performance by the Creative Associates at Domus, a former auto factory utilized by the university as a performance space; and a 2024 performance by poet Fred Moten and bassist Brandon López for Just Buffalo Literary Center's Silo City series in one of Buffalo's iconic grain silos. This thesis draws on archival materials, oral histories, and ethnographic fieldwork and situates that evidence in dialogue with scholarship in urban studies, musicology, sound studies, and memory studies. Drawing on the tools of actor-network theory and logics of Isabelle Stengers' cosmopolitics, I argue that deindustrialization and experimental music in Buffalo developed in a mutually constitutive relationship—each mediating the conditions through which the other became legible, valuable, and contested in the city's common world.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter, I will present a narrative history of Buffalo's Center for the Creative and Performing Arts and other adjacent organizations critical to

understanding experimentalism in Buffalo. I will then shift to a review of key literature from the fields of music and sound studies, sociology, urban studies, and science and technology studies that inform my approach to this study.

Pre-History: Buffalo's 20th Century Avant-Garde

Beyond the necessary context of Buffalo's musical avant-garde, this pre-history includes a discussion of adjacent arts institutions and organizations—in the visual and literary arts—for two reasons. First, they demonstrate that Buffalo's avant-garde network spans far beyond the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts, as the musicians had close colleagues in other departments who lived with them in the same artistic “scene.”⁸ Second, the avant-garde exists beyond the walls of the university. Though no explicit alternative music space took the Center's place after it closed in 1980, organizations like Just Buffalo Literary Center and Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center carried the mantle by including experimental music in their programming.⁹ By focusing on the urban condition shared by all artists and organizations in Buffalo, this thesis attempts to reveal the city's broader constellation of experimentalism: an ecology, people, practice, and space that connects these siloed disciplinary histories and demonstrates continuity between historical and contemporary practices. This expansive approach is reflected in the literature that informed much of this study, which I address later.

In the 1960s, the city of Buffalo underwent a significant change. Seymour H. Knox II, a

⁸ George Lewis makes the important distinction between “Eurological” and “Afrological” traditions in the discourse of experimentalism. My engagement with the experimentalism at the University at Buffalo is primarily concerned with a Eurological tradition and practice by focusing on the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts. While the focus of the Center tended towards Eurological experimentalism in the tradition of John Cage, the University was also home to Afrological experimentalists such as Amiri Baraka in the English department, Charles Mingus in the music department, and Archie Shepp in the African American studies department. See George E. Lewis, “Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,” *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (1996): 91–122.

⁹ The programming at artist-run spaces like Hallwalls and Just Buffalo Literary Center tended to include more of a mixture of Afrological and Eurological experimental practice, as I will address in Chapter 4.

local businessman, art collector, and philanthropist, led an expansion of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery to celebrate the city's premier art gallery's centennial.¹⁰ This expansion included 150 new acquisitions in the year leading up to the centennial, and, most notably, the addition of a 350-seat auditorium. Built by Buffalo-born architect Gordan Bunshaft, the auditorium was initially designed for lectures and exhibitions but became a frequent venue for chamber music. During the same time, Knox also made significant contributions to the University at Buffalo's music department, as the school began to grow after it became part of the State University of New York (SUNY) system in 1962. In collaboration with the new music department chair Allen Sapp, the two sought to reinvigorate the program with an emphasis on 20th-century music.¹¹

The Center for the Creative and Performing Arts was born of this initiative. Lukas Foss, then the director of the Buffalo Philharmonic, approached Sapp with a vision for creating an institute for new music as part of the university. The goal for the Center, according to Renée Levine Packer, was "to create at SUNY Buffalo an atmosphere dedicated to study, creation, and performance of new music and to bring together the best and the brightest young musicians, scholars, performers, and composers."¹² With the aid and endorsement of Knox, Foss and Sapp received a "start-up" grant of \$200,000 from the Rockefeller Foundation to develop the Center at

¹⁰ Knox II was a wealthy Buffalo banker, businessman, and philanthropist whose resources derived from the Knox family fortune and his leadership in firms such as Marine Midland Bank and the F. W. Woolworth Company. As one of the Albright Art Gallery's major twentieth-century benefactors, he helped bring key modern works into the museum's collection, including Arshile Gorky's *The Liver Is the Cock's Comb* (1944), Jackson Pollock's *Convergence* (1952), Franz Kline's *New York, N.Y.* (1953), and Mark Rothko's *Orange and Yellow* (1956). His family remained a fixture of the city throughout the 20th century as his son his sons Seymour H. Knox III and Northrup R. Knox were founding and principal owners of the Buffalo Sabres NHL franchise.

¹¹ Sapp was also appointed music advisor to the Albright-Knox Gallery. Renée Levine Packer, *This Life of Sounds: Evenings for New Music in Buffalo* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 19–20.

¹² Goldman, *City on the Edge*, 230.

the University at Buffalo.¹³ Part of these funds were allocated to the recruitment of Creative Associates, who were promised a stipend, performance opportunities, and resources. Additionally, no teaching was required in their post, making the position a sort of postdoctoral lab for new and experimental musicians and composers.

Creative Associate performances were presented at both the Albright-Knox Art Gallery auditorium and Carnegie Recital Hall in Manhattan. In addition, the group toured throughout the U.S. and internationally. The group performed over 700 works during their run, giving at least 19 world premieres. Some of their most notable work included: the premiere recording of Terry Riley's *In C* in 1968; Julius Eastman's infamous performance of John Cage's *Song Books* in 1970; one of the first performances of David del Tredici's Pulitzer-winning *Vintage Alice* in 1972; and a legendary 20-hour marathon performance of Eric Satie's *Vexations* in 1976, in which Robert Moog fell asleep underneath the piano during the performance.¹⁴ Despite its international recognition, entering the 1980s, the Center was on its last legs. During the previous decade, grants that paid the Creative Associates' salaries dwindled, and, every few years, lines were cut. Performances at Carnegie Hall had become too expensive, and most performances were held on the university campus. In light of broader university cuts imposed on the SUNY system mandated by the state Legislature in Albany, the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts officially closed its doors on June 9, 1980.

In avant-garde and experimental music scholarship, the history of the University at Buffalo's Center for the Creative and Performing Arts is ever-present, owing to the names of its

¹³ Packer, *This Life of Sounds*, 20. For more on the Rockefeller-adjacent organizations' postwar arts philanthropy, see Michael Sy Uy, *Ask the Experts: How Ford, Rockefeller, and the NEA Changed American Music* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹⁴ Levine Packer, *This Life of Sounds*, 141.

alumni and frequent guests, such as Morton Feldman, Julius Eastman, Terry Riley, and George Crumb.¹⁵ Yet the work of Renée Levine Packer in her book *This Life of Sounds: Evenings for New Music in Buffalo* remains the only substantial study of avant-garde music in Buffalo.¹⁶ Combining archival research, oral history, and her own firsthand accounts, Packer provides an invaluable insider perspective on the Center's sixteen-year lifespan from 1964 to 1980.¹⁷ While her account of Buffalo's avant-garde focuses on the new music center, the city's avant-garde network was far more expansive and interdisciplinary.

Take, for example, The University at Buffalo's visual and literary arts departments, which also shared a strong avant-garde sensibility and developed alongside the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts. In the 1960s, as part of the SUNY-era expansion and substantial state support for recruiting progressive artists across all disciplines, UB's English department developed a distinctive model in which major writers and poet-critics were hired into faculty roles. Some of these notable hires included Irving Feldman, Leslie Fiedler, Charles Olson, and Robert Creeley.¹⁸ The department helped foster a local context in which "poetics" was treated as both a scholarly method and artistic practice. They resisted narrow specialization in students' studies and pushed against disciplinary boundaries, encouraging students to engage with theater, music, art, dance, and other humanistic disciplines. As a result, there was a robust community of

¹⁵ See Matthew Goulish, "The Next Ten Minutes: Morton Feldman and Samuel Beckett," in *Beckett and Musicality*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2014); Uy, *Ask the Experts*; David Metzger, "Prisoners' Voices: Frederic Rzewski's *Coming Together* and Attica," *Journal of Musicology* 38, no. 1 (2021): 109–39; Matthew Mendez, "History beyond Recovery: Julius Eastman and the Challenge of the Heterological," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 77, no. 1 (2024): 163–222.

¹⁶ Levine Packer, *This Life of Sounds*.

¹⁷ Levine Packer, *This Life of Sounds*, 3.

¹⁸ In addition to the writers in the English department, the French department at Buffalo was also home to notable writers in this period such as René Girard and Michael Foucault.

local writers within the avant-garde, experimenting with independent publishing, zines, theater, and performance art.¹⁹ The formal Poetics Program was founded in 1991 by Charles Bernstein, Creeley, Susan Howe, Raymond Federman, and Dennis Tedlock, explicitly advancing a curricular innovation: poetry and poetics could be taught within a doctoral program by “non-academic poets.”

In 1975, Debora Ott, a student of Robert Creeley, founded the Just Buffalo Literary Center, a new institution that would serve as a cultural center for the literary arts beyond the university community, translating the networks and discourses of the University into year-round community programming. Ott’s vision for Just Buffalo was to appeal to the broad and diverse community of Buffalonians—particularly the city’s large African American population—through public programming and engagement.²⁰ There are many examples of early programs that explicitly celebrated Black and women’s art in Buffalo as well as events that were fundraising for social causes, like the Margaret Randell Defense fund in 1988.²¹ Beyond the literary arts, Just Buffalo has collaborated with filmmakers, WBFO (Buffalo’s public radio station), jazz and experimental musicians, and visual/media artists.

Founded in 1973 under Gerald O’Grady, the University at Buffalo’s Department of Media Study grew directly out of Media/Buffalo, a nonprofit center O’Grady established with a \$25,000 New York State Council on the Arts grant before media studies, as a discipline, had a formal place at the university.²² Located on Bailey Avenue in downtown Buffalo, Media/Buffalo

¹⁹ For more on the various facets of Buffalo’s literary arts scene, see Sean Pears, ed., *At Buffalo: The Invention of New American Poetry* (Lake Forest College Press, 2020).

²⁰ Pears, *At Buffalo*, 5.

²¹ “History,” *Just Buffalo Literary Center*, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://www.justbuffalo.org/about/history/>.

²² The phonebook-sized *Buffalo Heads: Media Study, Media Practice, Media Pioneers, 1973–1990* provides detailed accounts of the growths of media art in Buffalo, with first-hand accounts and essays from each of the media

offered workshops on image and sound experimentation, loaned video and audio equipment to the public, and hosted screenings, concerts, exhibitions, and discussions, making it both a community arts center and a proving ground for a new kind of interdisciplinary media education. After the center's early success, O'Grady agreed to direct the University at Buffalo's Educational Communication Center on the condition that the university allow him to create a Center for Media Studies, which soon became the Department of Media Studies with undergraduate and graduate programs.²³ Modeled in part on University at Buffalo's earlier support for practicing avant-garde artists through the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts, the department brought artists directly into the university and quickly became a major site for experimental film, video, sound, and emerging media, attracting figures such as Hollis Frampton, Tony Conrad, Paul Sharits, James Blue, Woody and Steina Vasulka, and Peter Weibel.

Founded in 1974 by Charles Clough, Robert Longo, Nancy Dwyer, and Cindy Sherman in a former ice-packing warehouse at 30 Essex Street in Buffalo, Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center was created to provide direct access to developing ideas in Art for Western New York and Southern Ontario.²⁴ The Hallwalls space was used for exhibitions, visiting artist/critic programs, and collaborative projects with other organizations involved in contemporary American art. The early years of the space were characterized by a grassroots and DIY ethos that fostered boundary-blurring practices across visual arts, performance, video, and sound. A great example of this would be DADADAY (1978), a satirical multidisciplinary celebration of the 60th

artists mentioned in this section. See Woody Vasulka and Peter Weibel, *Buffalo Heads: Media Study, Media Practice, Media Pioneers, 1973–1990* (MIT Press, 2008), 41.

²³ For more on O'Grady, see Howard Lindsay, "Gerald O' Grady: Medievalist of the Future-interview," *Educational Forum*, 36 no. 2 (January 1972), 159–67; John Minkowsky, "Interview with Gerald O'Grady," *The Reporter*, State University of New York at Buffalo, July 7, 1988, 15–16; and Karen Mooney, "Gerald O'Grady: The Perspective from Buffalo," *Videoscope* 1, no. 2 (1977): 6–12.

²⁴ "Timeline," *Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center*, accessed July 1, 2025, <https://www.hallwalls.org/timeline/>.

anniversary of Dada art, which included members of the Creative Associates and media studies program, along with Hallwalls Artists.²⁵ Art historian Sarah Evans understands the early work of Hallwalls as working with, not just from, the surrounding space, as the artist conceived the new from the familiar.²⁶ In his essay for the organization's twenty-year retrospective book, Tony Bannon describes the Hallwalls space as a "localized incubator" and a node within a larger network of alternative spaces.²⁷

Literature Review

Experimentalism and Groupings

Given the prominence of Buffalo's CAs and the Center in this project, literature on other experimental and new music centers, as well as other composer/performer collectives, lays much of the foundation of my work. Within this literature, scholars have paid increasing attention to how institutions *produce* experimental music, accounting for the various people and systems that mediate artistic production. For example, Georgina Born, in *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde*, focuses on the Institut de recherche et coordination acoustique/musique or IRCAM, taking seriously the various facets and discourses that actively produce what counts as "the avant-garde" within the prominent arts organization. Born's ethnography reveals how artistic outcomes emerge from the institute's

²⁵ See: Sarah Evans, "There's No Place Like Hallwalls: Alternative-space Installations in an Artists' Community," *Oxford Art Journal* 32, no. 1 (2009): 97–119; Larry Lundy, *Dadaday! #1*, video, 1976, Media Burn Archive, <https://mediaburn.org/videos/l-lundy/>.

²⁶ Evans, "There's No Place Like Hallwalls," 9.

²⁷ Ronald Ehmke and Elizabeth Licata, eds., *Consider the Alternatives: 20 Years of Contemporary Art at Hallwalls*, (Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, 1990), 117.

hierarchies, technical divisions of labor, and the administrative pressures of legitimacy and funding—making institutional form inseparable from aesthetic form.²⁸

George E. Lewis's *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* offers a collective history of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians that reads the group as an institution built through practice: mentorship, self-governance, and the long work of sustaining experimental scenes.²⁹ By assembling a cross-generational narrative from documents and participant testimony, Lewis demonstrates how “experimental music” is maintained through communal infrastructures—schools, concerts, standards of discourse—as much as through individual compositions.

In *Elite Art Worlds: Philanthropy, Latin Americanism, and Avant-Garde Music*, Eduardo Herrera reconstructs the Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales (CLAEM) at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella as a short-lived but highly consequential node that organized Latin American avant-garde music through fellowships, visiting faculty, and transnational networks.³⁰ Herrera's account foregrounds patronage and cultural diplomacy—especially philanthropic funding—as constitutive forces in the institution's aesthetic life, clarifying how “avant-garde” techniques traveled and gained meaning through elite infrastructures and geopolitical currents.

While these studies offer distinct vantage points, together they show how experimental music takes form through coordinated infrastructures: people, spaces, technologies, and

²⁸ Georgina Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde* (University of California Press, 1995).

²⁹ George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

³⁰ Eduardo Herrera, *Elite Art Worlds: Philanthropy, Latin Americanism, and Avant-Garde Music* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

organizational routines that make experimentation possible and sustainable. These scholars also model a methodological move beyond works and composers to the conditions that underwrite production, including funding regimes, administrative decisions, pedagogical networks, and the material sites where performance and listening take place. In this view, the “musical” does not stand apart from its supports; it emerges from the institutional and social arrangements that shape what can be made, who can make it, and how it becomes recognizable as experimental practice.

Studies such as these mark a shift from previous scholars’ approach to experimentalism. In 1974, Michael Nyman’s *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* offered one of the first comprehensive surveys of the American experimental tradition. Through examining John Cage’s influence on contemporaries such as Christian Wolff, Earle Brown, and Morton Feldman, Nyman demonstrates that experimentalism constituted not a singular style but rather a set of attitudes that challenged the fundamental premises of musical authorship and listening.³¹ While subsequent scholarship continues to engage Nyman’s account, the conversation moves beyond establishing linear genealogies or policing aesthetic categories.³² Benjamin Piekut instead treats experimentalism as a “working concept,” approaching defining what “experimentalism has been” by “attending to its fabrication through a network of discourses, practices, and institutions,” following more in the example of Born and Lewis.³³

³¹ Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (Schirmer Books, 1974), 1–36.

³² For an expansion on Nyman’s approach, see James Saunders, ed., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music* (Ashgate, 2009).

³³ Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits* (University of California Press, 2011), 7.

In *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits* (2011), Piekut reconstructs experimentalism as something *put together* and maintained through ongoing collective activity—extended through time not by a stable “ethos” but by the continuing performance of the network itself.³⁴ Through case studies of musicians, venues, and organizations in 1960s New York, he shows how experimentalism coheres through practical work (organizing events, sustaining institutions, circulating reputations) while also emphasizing its “limits.”³⁵ Piekut frames experimentalism as a kind of “composition” in its own right: a “putting together” of people, sounds, institutions, and discourse that produces the conditions of possibility for what can count as experimental music.³⁶

Alongside Piekut’s reframing of experimentalism as something assembled through networks of practice and institution, a broader cohort of scholars has pursued similarly situated, material, and socially attuned approaches to avant-garde and experimental music. This orientation crystallized in edited volumes such as *Sound Commitments: Avant-Garde Music and the Sixties* (2009), *Tomorrow Is the Question: New Directions in Experimental Music Studies* (2014), and *Experimentalism in Practice: Music Perspectives from Latin America* (2018).

Danielle Fosler-Lussier’s chapter in *Sound Commitments* shows how U.S. Cold War cultural-diplomacy programs, such as the State Department’s Cultural Presentations program, *structured* the international circulation of avant-garde music by determining who could tour and

³⁴ Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise*, 7.

³⁵ Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise*, 8.

³⁶ Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise*, 14.

where they would be sent.³⁷ She then argues that exporting the avant-garde depended on “intensive mediation”: sponsorship by the U.S. government, “efforts to explain and promote the music,” and a “host of other forms of mediation” that framed performances for local audiences and shaped reception.³⁸

Within *Tomorrow Is the Question*, Ryan Dohoney’s chapter “John Cage, Julius Eastman, and the Homosexual Ego” examines the 1975 June in Buffalo performance of John Cage’s *Song Books* by Julius Eastman as a flashpoint where experimentalism’s ideals of openness met the social regulation of sexuality and subjectivity within avant-garde networks.³⁹ He argues that Eastman’s presence presses against the normative boundaries that underwrite Cagean experimental openness, revealing sexuality as constitutive to experimental practice rather than only isolated to biography. By tracing how the event is narrated and how Cage’s own response redraws the line between acceptable freedom and disqualifying “license,” Dohoney makes clear that experimentalism is maintained through cultural and discursive mediation as much as through compositional technique.⁴⁰

“Performance, Resistance, and the Sounding of Public Space: Movimiento Música Más in Buenos Aires, 1969–73,” Andrew Dewar’s chapter in *Experimentalism in Practice*, examines an Argentine activist avant-garde collective that integrated public spaces and citizenry into their art

³⁷ Danielle Fosler-Lussier, “American Cultural Diplomacy and the Mediation of Avant-garde Music,” in *Sound Commitments: Avant-Garde Music and the Sixties*, ed. Robert Adlington (Oxford University Press, 2009), 232–33. See also Fosler-Lussier, *Music in America’s Cold War Diplomacy* (University of California Press, 2015).

³⁸ Fosler-Lussier, “American Cultural Diplomacy,” 233 and 242–43.

³⁹ Ryan Dohoney, “John Cage, Julius Eastman, and the Homosexual Ego,” in *Tomorrow Is the Question: New Directions in Experimental Music Studies*, ed. Benjamin Piekut (University of Michigan Press, 2014), 39–61. See also Renée Levine Packer and Mary Jane Leach, eds., *Gay Guerrilla: Julius Eastman and His Music* (University of Rochester Press, 2018).

⁴⁰ Dohoney, “John Cage, Julius Eastman, and the Homosexual Ego,” 49.

as a response to the oppressive Onganía regime. He demonstrates the roles of both civic politics and infrastructure in a conception of experimentalism by examining works such as *Música para colectivo línea 7*, in which performers used public buses in Buenos Aires as instruments in performance.⁴¹ Dewar suggests that the material civic conditions that fostered Movimiento Música Más's arts activism play a significant part in the legibility of the group's experimental practice.

These studies account for experimentalist "groupings," each a different assemblage or constellation, revealing ideas, connections, or conflicts that enrich discourse.⁴² They all exemplify the call from Richard Taruskin, who, in his *Oxford History of Western Music*, insists that no historical event or transformation should be asserted "unless its agents can be specified, critiquing narratives that invoke abstract categories like 'modernism' or the 'avant-garde' without accounting for the actors responsible for its mediations."⁴³ I pursue this path in this thesis, as my focus is not on the genealogy of Buffalo's avant-garde but on accounting for the various actors who were labeled, the cohort, and their musical practices. Where I differ from Taruskin is in what he constitutes an actor, as he attributes agency only to human beings. But as Piekut points out, in practice, Taruskin relies on mediations from non-human actors—such as texts, institutions, and technologies—that shape how historical agency is enacted. Piekut does not see this as a contradiction, but rather as an indication that Taruskin's historiographic commitments already gesture towards the inclusion of non-human actors, even if he stops short

⁴¹ Andrew Raffo Dewar, "Performance, Resistance, and the Sounding of Public Space: Movimiento Música Más in Buenos Aires, 1969–1973," in *Experimentalisms in Practice: Music Perspectives from Latin America*, eds. Ana R. Alonso-Minutti, Eduardo Herrera, and Alejandro L. Madrid (Oxford University Press, 2018), 295–96.

⁴² Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise*, 6-15.

⁴³ Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 1, *Earliest Notations to the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2005), xviii.

of naming them as such.⁴⁴ As I examine the deindustrialization in understanding Buffalo's avant-garde, I take seriously the agency of the non-human, which is reflected in the methodological approaches I adopt.

Actor-Network Theory

To approach various historiographical groupings, one recently-developed approach among music scholars is actor-network theory (ANT): a methodology that traces the emergence of relations that give actors—human and non-human—form and significance, as outlined in Bruno Latour's *Reassembling the Social* (2005).⁴⁵ ANT understands that associations among *actors* form a non-static *network* that materializes into certain realities. With ANT, actor refers to any entity—human or non-human—that makes a difference within a given network. Network describes the assemblage of these actors and the relational meaning that emerges from their interactions.⁴⁶ It sets aside explanatory frameworks; thus, it is concerned with “effect” rather than “cause.”⁴⁷ To this, Annemarie Mol writes, “the point is not to purify the repertoire, but to enrich it. To add layers and possibilities.”⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Piekut, “Actor-Networks in Music History: Clarifications and Critiques,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 11, no. 2 (September 2014): 197.

⁴⁵ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴⁶ The non-human refers to any species or entity that is not human. For more on the post humanist perspective in new materialist thought, see Subro Saha, “Introduction: New Materialism(s) and the Question of the Non-human,” *Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 1.

⁴⁷ For this reason, Latour and other scholars denounce the label of ANT as a theory. Instead, they insist that ANT is a set of guiding sensibilities, or tools, for assemblage-based research.

⁴⁸ Annemarie Mol, “Actor-Network Theory: Sensitive Terms and Enduring Tensions,” *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie Sonderheft* 50 (2010): 257.

ANT is grounded in case study work, focusing on the chains of translation, mediation, and negotiation that enable social and material worlds to temporarily cohere. In his article “Actor-Networks in Music History: Clarifications and Critiques” (2014), Benjamin Piekut clarifies the stakes of ANT in music studies.⁴⁹ He writes, “Whatever music might be, it clearly relies on many things that are not music, and therefore we should conceive of it as a set of relations among distinct materials and events that have been translated to work together.”⁵⁰ This statement is not only an argument for the use of ANT, but a unifying principle of much of the experimental music scholarship discussed thus far. Within his own work, Piekut utilizes ANT to inform assumptions about genre, agency, and power. In *Experimentalism Otherwise*, he seeks out the enacted realities of an experimental network, through the assemblage of discourses, practices, alliances, and material arrangements of actors such as scholars, composers, critics, journalists, patrons, performers, and venues—a combination of human and non-human actors.⁵¹

Michel Heller’s work on New York City’s 1970s loft-jazz scene provides a useful model for how to use the tools of ANT to account for the urban as an *actor* that helps organize rather than just venues for preexisting musical communities. In his book *Loft Jazz: Improvising New York in the 1970s* (2016), social ties run not only between musicians but also through the physical presence and financial accessibility of postindustrial buildings, which reshape how improvisers can gather, rehearse, and present work.⁵² Heller draws on Latour’s idea of enrollment to show how organizers’ labor in developing a particular space also binds them to a

⁴⁹ Piekut, “Actor-Networks in Music History.” See also Emily Dolan, “Musicology in the Garden,” *Representations* 132, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 88–94.

⁵⁰ Piekut, “Actor-Networks in Music History,” 191.

⁵¹ Piekut refers to this as “actually existing experimentalism.” Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise*, 7–8.

⁵² Michael C. Heller, *Loft Jazz: Improvising New York in the 1970s* (University of California Press, 2016).

wider network of people, resources, and other loft sites. When gentrification makes these spaces exponentially more expensive, the network frays because affordability itself had operated as a “usable technology” for performance.⁵³ ANT also helps him explain the scene’s decentralization: with audiences dispersed across many nodes rather than a single institutional hub, loft jazz sustains itself through a distributed infrastructure of small venues. Elsewhere, he links that infrastructure to practice by describing how loft environments afford distinct modes of performing and listening.⁵⁴ With the logics of ANT underpinning my research, I am able to bring the musical and the urban into dialogue, as urban actors—buildings, infrastructure, and property conditions—are non-human actors, not previously accounted for in the mediation of musical practice in Buffalo.

Music and Urban Space

Though earlier accounts do not explicitly evoke ANT, the importance of material space in music studies is not new, nor is it unique to Heller. Adam Krims’ foundational work *Music and Urban Geography* (2007) argues for understanding urban change and musical change as “mutual conditions of possibility” rather than through simple causal relationships.⁵⁵ Krims challenges both economic determinism and cultural autonomy by demonstrating how music functions as a “socializing agent” that shapes subjectivity within changing urban contexts.⁵⁶

Giacomo Bottà’s comparative study of punk and post-punk scenes in Manchester, Düsseldorf, Torino, and Tampere addresses music and space in the context of deindustrializing

⁵³ Heller, *Loft Jazz*, 123.

⁵⁴ Heller, *Loft Jazz*, 130.

⁵⁵ Adam Krims, *Music and Urban Geography* (New York: Routledge, 2007), xix.

⁵⁶ Krims, *Music and Urban Geography*, xix.

cities. Each case study demonstrates how music scenes actively helped translate industrial cities into post-industrial configurations, functioning as “catalytic agents” in these shifting landscapes.⁵⁷ Bottà’s analysis reveals how former factories, warehouses, and industrial facilities became active participants in creating what he terms the “industrial atmosphere” that defined these cultural experiences. The material agency of deindustrialized spaces—reverberant acoustics of large industrial spaces, the visual presence of exposed brick and metal infrastructure, and the symbolic weight of these buildings’ industrial past—contribute to shaping the musical encounters.⁵⁸

Johnathan Wynn’s ethnographic study of contemporary music festivals, in *Music / City: American Festivals and Placemaking in Austin, Nashville, and Newport* (2015), flips the lens, focusing on the effect of music events on their respective cities.⁵⁹ His book illustrates how cities strategically utilize these temporary cultural events to enhance their competitive positioning. Wynn’s analysis of how festivals mobilize and redistribute urban resources reveals their capacity to fundamentally alter the symbolic landscape of place. This work demonstrates how music events operate as powerful tools for spatial re-narration, enabling communities to craft new cultural meanings and identities that can supersede historical uses and established understandings of urban space.

Cosmopolitics

While the agency of the non-human infrastructure is taken seriously only in a sector of music studies, other fields—namely, sociology, anthropology, geography, and urban studies—

⁵⁷ Giacomo Bottà, *Deindustrialisation and Popular Music: Punk and 'Post-Punk' in Manchester, Düsseldorf, Torino and Tampere* (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2020), 178.

⁵⁸ Bottà, *Deindustrialisation and Popular Music*, 35–36.

⁵⁹ Jonathan R. Wynn, *Music / City: American Festivals and Placemaking in Austin, Nashville, and Newport* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

have adopted this assumption for much longer. Studies of cities have shifted away from political economy-centric readings of urbanization, now taking seriously “technologies, materials, and various life-forms” as “concrete and irreducible agents involved in urban life.”⁶⁰ This is referred to as *assemblage urbanism*, which is essentially an “ANT of the Urban.”⁶¹ Farías and Blok define this shift as “the key premise has been that cities do not amount to objects existing ‘out there,’ but they are made and unmade at particular sites of practice, brought into being via concrete relations, materials, knowledge, and engagements.”⁶²

The duo’s edited volume *Urban Cosmopolitics: Agencements, Assemblies, and Atmospheres* (2016) is a response to assemblage urbanism and its effects, having problematized previous conceptions of the urban and necessitating a new conceptual repertoire.⁶³ The volume adopts the term *urban cosmopolitics*, evoking Isabelle Stengers’ popularization of the term in the 1990s as part of her work as a philosopher of science, thinking with—and often against—the ways “politics” is framed as a purely human affair.⁶⁴ The term emerges from her long engagement with scientific practices: how claims about the world are made persuasive, how authority is assembled, and how material entities (scientific instruments, environments, technologies, chemicals, infrastructures) can force revisions in what people think they know.⁶⁵ In that context,

⁶⁰ Anders Blok and Ignacio Farías, eds., *Urban Cosmopolitics: Agencements, Assemblies, Atmospheres* (Routledge, 2016), 1.

⁶¹ Blok and Farías, *Urban Cosmopolitics*, 1.

⁶² Blok and Farías, *Urban Cosmopolitics*, 1–2.

⁶³ Blok and Farías, *Urban Cosmopolitics*, 2.

⁶⁴ Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I*, trans. Robert Bononno (University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

⁶⁵ Latour and Stengers share an attention to practice and to nonhuman participation in how claims hold, but they pursue different ends. Latour’s *Science in Action* offers a method for description—following actors through controversy before facts are stabilized—whereas Stengers’s cosmopolitics takes a related attentiveness to practice and redirects it toward the political problem of composition: who (and what) is allowed to count in the making of a “common world,” and how appeals to scientific authority can prematurely close negotiation. See Latour, *Science in*

cosmopolitics names a way of doing politics that refuses to treat non-humans as mere backdrop or passive objects of human decision.⁶⁶

Within the volume *Urban Cosmopolitics*, authors utilize the toolbox of ANT and assemblage urbanism to address the cosmopolitical questions inherent to these methods. For example, Hanna Katharina Göbel's chapter "The Aesthetic Composition of a Common Memory" approaches cosmopolitics through the redesign of Café Moskau in Berlin and asks how a building's past becomes something people can (or cannot) share.⁶⁷ She treats redesign as a struggle to compose a common world, showing how those conflicts work through atmosphere. Göbel argues that these affective and material operations do real political work—out of the contest over what the building should feel like emerges an "atmospheric agency" distributed across designers, preservation practices, materials, and the site itself.⁶⁸

Tironi and Calvillo's "Water and Air" demonstrates quite explicitly how cosmopolitics can foreground non-human agency in human planning. Their study tracks how tsunamis and air pollution—water and air in their "excessive and unwanted condition"—force experts to invent

Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society (Harvard University Press, 1987); Isabelle Stengers, "The Cosmopolitical Proposal," in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (MIT Press, 2005), 994–1003.

⁶⁶ ANT and cosmopolitics share a common orientation regarding the agency and importance of the non-human. The important distinction between the two lies in the fact that ANT does not propose a theory of the social that could be applied to different fields or cases. Cosmopolitics is a proposal bore out of an actor network approach, not just from Stengers but from Latour himself. See Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring Science into Democracy* (Harvard University Press, 2004); Latour, "Whose Cosmos, Which Cosmopolitics?: Comments on? the Peace Terms of Ulrich Beck," *Common Knowledge* 3 (2004): 450–62.

⁶⁷ Hanna Katharina Göbel, "The Aesthetic Composition of a Common Memory: Atmospheres of Revalued Urban Ruins," in *Urban Cosmopolitics: Agencements, Assemblies, Atmospheres*, ed. Anders Blok and Ignacio Fariás (Routledge, 2016).

⁶⁸ Göbel, "The Aesthetic Composition of a Common Memory," 181–82.

ways of knowing and governing that do not start from human-only publics but coexistence.⁶⁹

Tsunami modelling, for instance, runs up against overflow and “resistance”: when a tsunami arrives “larger than expected,” the model absorbs that rupture by redefining it as a new benchmark for future planning.⁷⁰ Rather than treating models as sufficient, the authors emphasize “cosmopolitical experiments” that assemble heterogeneous evidence and actors, working with the non-human in constructing their understanding of the common world.

While cosmopolitical thinking and studies have developed in fields such as urban studies, there are far fewer examples regarding the cosmopolitics of music, or that account for music within cosmopolitical other negotiations. Marcus Boon offers the sole account in his recent book *The Politics of Vibration* (2022).⁷¹ Boon treats music as a fundamentally cosmopolitical practice by tracing how musical sound emerges from vibrational relations that link human listeners, performers, instruments, and broader material forces. He argues that music does not simply represent social worlds but actively *assembles* them, bringing human and nonhuman actors into relation through sound. For Boon, musical practices “world” particular constellations of actors, making music a site where different ontologies and relations between human and nonhuman entities are negotiated.⁷² Based on Boon’s assessment of music as cosmopolitics, I suggest that much of the scholarship discussed in this literature review, particularly that which utilizes the tools of ANT, also stages cosmopolitical questions; as they, too, “world” relations and negotiations between human and non-human actors. My study engages with music as

⁶⁹ Manuel Tironi and Nerea Calvillo, “Water and Air: Territories, Tactics, and the Elemental Textility of Urban Cosmopolitics,” in *Urban Cosmopolitics*, 208.

⁷⁰ Tironi and Calvillo, “Water and Air,” 214–15.

⁷¹ Marcus Boon, *The Politics of Vibration: Music as a Cosmopolitical Practice* (Duke University Press, 2022).

⁷² Boon, *The Politics of Vibration*, 5.

cosmopolitics, in that it analyzes music and the arts as an assemblage, negotiated by both humans and urban conditions and infrastructure, both non-human actors. The city of Buffalo's deindustrial conditions and infrastructure enter into the negotiations through which experimentalism in Buffalo is legible.

Chapter Summaries

The three case studies that comprise this thesis are each allocated to their own chapter, each a separate assemblage in which Buffalo's urban condition mediates an aspect of experimental artistic practice. Chapter 2 examines one of the early Creative Associates at the University at Buffalo, Maryanne Amacher, and her 1968 work *City Links, WBFO*. The first of her "City Links" series, the piece used telephone wires and microphones to record the ambient sound of various sites around the city of Buffalo, which Amacher mixed and transmitted via Buffalo public radio station WBFO 88.7 FM. This performance came at a critical turning point in the city's history, the onset of deindustrialization, and the broad public backlash following failed urban renewal projects in the city's downtown. The urban population was decreasing, and the people of Buffalo viewed the city rather unfavorably. *City Links, WBFO*, acts as an overtly cosmopolitical staging as Amacher's instrument—the city itself—is negotiated as both a valuable artistic resource and the cause of the displacement and hardships of working-class people. Through a close reading of Amacher's writings on the piece, its critical reception in local newspapers, and local historiography, this chapter explores the negotiation between the soundscape of *City Links, WBFO* and the greater urban condition of 1960s Buffalo.

Chapter 3 is set between 1969 and 1972, as I focus on the performance venue Domus—a former automotive factory acquired by the University at Buffalo as an experimental performance space. I start by examining the architectural and industrial history of the former auto factory to

understand how the space is arranged and the impact of that configuration. I then analyze the Creative Associates tour program from 1971, which took place at both Domus and the Carnegie Recital Hall in Manhattan. I examine variations between these performances and how architecture and space mediated the program's performance and reception. By addressing the cosmopolitical aspects of these performances—the negotiation among performers, audience, and the materiality of space—this chapter highlights the role of the Domus's deindustrialized architecture in mediating the performance experience.

Chapter 4 jumps ahead to the year 2024 and examines the Just Buffalo Literary Center's "Silo City Reading Series": a multidisciplinary poetry and performance series held within one of Buffalo's abandoned grain silos. Despite the fact that the majority of the silos are no longer in use, they mark the city's history and identity as a former titan of industry. Drawing on perspectives from cultural geography and architectural criticism, the silos persist in part due to their provisional use by Buffalo's avant-garde arts community. I then focus on the Just Buffalo Literary Center and a reading series event I attended in the summer of 2024. I analyze a performance from that evening by poet Fred Moten and double bassist Brandon Lopez, accounting for the silo as an actor that mediates the performance. This chapter reveals both how performance plays a role in the preservation of deindustrialized sites and how sites, like the silo's, play a part in stabilizing Buffalo's contemporary experimental arts scene.

By accounting for the urban in the study of experimental music, this thesis demonstrates that the material conditions of a city participate actively in the formation of artistic practice. As I explore the relationship between deindustrialization and experimentalism in Buffalo, each case study reveals a different configuration of this entanglement: Amacher's microphones enroll the

city as instrument, Domus's factory architecture shapes what performance can sound and feel like, and the grain silos at Silo City sustain a contemporary avant-garde by lending their industrial weight to new artistic encounters. Taken together, these cases suggest that Goldman's question—whether a declining city can serve as an incubator for new ideas—was already being answered by the experimental practices unfolding around him. More broadly, this thesis proposes cosmopolitics as a productive framework for music studies, one that extends the field's growing attention to institutions, networks, and materiality by insisting that the non-human actors assembled in musical practice are constitutive participants in the negotiations through which music becomes legible, meaningful, and contested within a common world.

Chapter 2: Choir of Wires

On May 16, 1967, Western New Yorkers tuning in to 88.7 FM may have thought their radios were malfunctioning or that they had left a window open, as they heard the ambient, everyday sounds of their commutes, workplaces, and neighborhoods coming through their speakers. The University at Buffalo's public radio station, 88.7 WBFO, was airing the inaugural performance of *City Links*, *WBFO*, by composer and media artist Maryanne Amacher.⁷³ Amacher, a Creative Associate in residence at the University at Buffalo, used microphones to transmit the sounds of eight disparate locations around the city into one radio broadcast for the people of Buffalo to tune in and out of for twenty-eight hours. As Amacher described this "event of the city," in the WBFO's May program guide:

I hear the city waiting to be celebrated in the joy of its resources; it waits to be acknowledged much as wood waited in the beginning. Holding it close—beginning to carve, man celebrated wood that had been in his surrounding environment as trees, warmth, and shelter—the resources of everyday availability had become a resource of his joy.⁷⁴

A resource of joy was hardly how most Western New Yorkers viewed the city at this moment. The 1960s marked the beginning of Buffalo's slow and ultimately devastating population decline and deindustrialization. Throughout the decade, the city's major industries—grain, steel, and manufacturing—faced a steady contraction, and a mass exodus began as citizens

⁷³ Beginning on April 2, 2025, 88.7 WBFO-NPR rebranded as Buffalo Toronto Public Media (BTPM-NPR). In part this was to further acknowledge interconnected cultural and economic relationship between the Western New York and Southern Ontario regions and establish unity among their listenership. BTPM claims that more than half to BTPM members are Canadian residents and much of their content is Canadian produced. For clarity I use WBFO in this thesis as to not cause confusion with the station's reference in archival material and interviews with interlocutors; Buffalo Toronto Public Media, "BTPM Stations Rebrand to Unify Identity," *Buffalo Toronto Public Media*, April 1 2025, accessed November 6 2025, [https://help.btpm.org/support/solutions/BTPM Stations Rebrand to Unify Identity](https://help.btpm.org/support/solutions/BTPM+Stations+Rebrand+to+Unify+Identity): Buffalo Toronto Public Media/articles/73000651464-btpm-stations-rebrand-to-unify-identity.

⁷⁴ "WBFO Program Guide" (WBFO, 1967) quoted in Cimini, *Wild Sounds*, 93.

fled the city.⁷⁵ A city once defined by its blue-collar spirit and tightly-knit, working-class neighborhoods was losing many of the jobs that had anchored families to the region, including those at companies such as Bethlehem Steel, Republic Steel, Ford, General Motors, and General Mills.

This chapter examines Maryanne Amacher's *City Links, WBFO* (1967) and writings from her Buffalo period in relation to the early effects of failed urban renewal and deindustrialization. Amacher's conception of the city as a site of sonic potential contrasts sharply with the growing disillusionment of working-class residents facing economic decline and displacement. I argue that this contrast is cosmopolitical: it reflects competing ways of constellating the urban condition—one aesthetic and future-oriented, the other shaped by present material loss and uncertainty. I begin by reconstructing the socio-economic conditions of 1960s Buffalo through archival press accounts and the work of urban historian Mark Goldman, showing how deindustrialization and the failures of urban renewal spurred mass out-migration and eroded faith in the city's future. I then turn to archival materials, oral histories, and the scholarship of Amy Cimini to examine *City Links, WBFO* and Amacher's own understanding of the work. Through a close reading of her writings alongside contemporaneous press reception, I suggest that the piece articulates an idealized auditory image of the city, a creative-class imaginary largely detached from the socio-economic realities confronting working-class Buffalonians.

⁷⁵ "Buffalo Tonnage Down," *New York Times*, January 20, 1960, 62.

Urban Renewal and Public Disillusionment

In 1959, with the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway, jobs began to slowly leave Buffalo. Now that grain shipments from the Midwest could bypass Buffalo, the city's manufacturing, storage, and shipping capabilities would slowly become obsolete. Though this would unfold over the next two decades, citizens were well aware of this reality. A 1959 article in the *Buffalo Courier Express* titled "Grain Shippers Bypass City" summarizes the inclement loss of revenue and work, as City Traffic Commissioner Frank Catanzarite told the paper, "Buffalo could be out of the export business."⁷⁶

This same year, the Buffalo Redevelopment Foundation—lured in by the growing federal funding for urban renewal—hired the Arthur D. Little Company to devise a plan to redevelop the city's downtown. The 1960 "Little Report," composed by the company, became the blueprint for what local historian Mark Goldman characterizes as the most massive development project in the city's history, diagnosing downtown as having problems with what Little called "image and vitality."⁷⁷ The report's recommendations were deeply inflected by racial anxieties, expressing concern about "the presence of large ethnic groups [clearly a reference to African Americans]" and worrying that "marginal retail establishments" catering to African-American customers created "an unsightly appearance."⁷⁸ Cooperation among a local coalition of banks, politicians, real estate companies, lawyers, and the press sold the idea of redevelopment to the public,

⁷⁶ Francis J. O'Connell "Grain Shippers Bypass City," *The Buffalo Courier Express*, April 12, 1959, 46.

⁷⁷ Mark Goldman, *City on the Edge: A History of Buffalo* (Prometheus Books, 2007), 191; Arthur D. Little, *Downtown Buffalo Study: A Report to the City of Buffalo and the Greater Buffalo Development Foundation* (Arthur D. Little, Inc., 1960), 112.

⁷⁸ Goldman, *City on the Edge*, 192; For perspectives on the effects of urban renewal and deindustrialization on Buffalo's Black community, see Henry Louis Taylor, "African Americans and the Rise of Buffalo's Post-Industrial City, 1940 to Present," (*Buffalo Urban League*, 1990).

garnering the full support of the City's Common Council in 1963.⁷⁹ During this period, the press mediated the changing landscape for its readership, working to garner support for redevelopment. For example, *Buffalo Evening News* reporter Bob Watson described in 1964 "the wonderful sounds peculiarly identified with old buildings coming down and new buildings going up finally filled the air in downtown Buffalo," painting an encouraging picture of the ongoing demolition, even though actual development had not begun.⁸⁰

Two of the most destructive projects of this decade were highways: the Kensington Expressway and the Scajaquada Expressway. The Scajaquada destroyed growing white middle-class ethnic neighborhoods, causing many families to retreat to more of the Eastern suburbs. The Kensington displaced Black residents on Buffalo's East Side. This population in the 1960s had far less housing mobility than the white ethnic groups displaced by the Scajaquada, so, rather than retreating to the suburbs, residents were confined to other sections of the East Side.⁸¹ These communities lost many community services and institutions like banks and grocery stores.⁸²

William Siemering, the director of the college radio station—and eventual NPR station—WBFO Buffalo, amplified local perspectives through community-engaged journalism with programs such as *People to People* and *To Be Negro*.⁸³ These programs were recorded at

⁷⁹ The City of Buffalo Common Council is the legislative branch of government for Buffalo, comprising council districts, each lead by its own popularly elected District Council Member. These districts are Delaware District, Ellicott District, Fillmore District, Lovejoy District, Masten District, Niagara District, North District, South District, University District.

⁸⁰ Bob Watson, "New Buildings Changing Downtown Look of City," *The Buffalo Courier Express*, January 4, 1964, 1.

⁸¹ Neil Kraus, *Race, Neighborhoods, and Community Power: Buffalo Politics, 1934–1997* (SUNY Press, 2000).

⁸² For more on the lasting effects of the construction of the Keniston and the displacement caused by urban renewal, see Anna Blatto, *A City Divided: A Brief History of Segregation in Buffalo* (Buffalo, NY: Partnership for the Public Good, 2018).

⁸³ Marc Fisher, *Something in the Air: Radio, Rock, and the Revolution That Shaped a Generation* (Random House, 2007), 173.

WBFO's satellite studio on Jefferson Ave. on the East Side, with the aim of amplifying the voices of the city's Black residents.⁸⁴ The hardships imposed by urban renewal projects on locals were prominently featured on WBFO, as Western New Yorkers became more aware of the human cost of these projects.

As the decade progressed, the press's tone began to shift more broadly. Speaking to the conditions of the city's Ellicott District, reporter Dick Hirsch described the neighborhood as "a 72-acre wasteland. Not one new cellar has been dug, not one new brick has been set in place."⁸⁵ This is after the city allocated \$13 million in federal funds for the neighborhood's renovation and renewal. Even the Little Report acknowledged "there is, at best, a considerable measure of speculation involved in such a project," yet demolition proceeded.⁸⁶

Reporter Dick Baldwin documented the emotional toll on Buffalonians as he wrote, "Tears were shed...when the corner stores, the neighborhood taverns and the other small businesses fell under the wreckers' ball."⁸⁷ By 1967, citizens' cries were heard, and the city council began to voice concern about urban renewal as development failed to materialize and displacement grew. The *Buffalo News* reported on June 28, 1967, "Several councilmen voiced strong criticism of the apparent failure of urban renewal programs to make it possible for displaced persons to return to the community where they formerly lived."⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Similar perspectives from residents on Buffalo's east side were present in Buffalo's Black newspapers, specifically the *Buffalo Criterion*.

⁸⁵ Goldman, *City on the Edge*, 201; Dick Hirsch, "City Fails to Get Approval of Project," *The Buffalo Courier Express*, June 25, 1963, 7.

⁸⁶ Little, *Downtown Buffalo Study*, 112.

⁸⁷ Dick Baldwin, "What Goes Up... Comes Down," *Buffalo* 43, no.7 (1968), 15–18.

⁸⁸ "Urban Renewal Plan for Home Ownership on West Side Urged," *The Buffalo Courier Express*, June 28, 1967, 38.

It is against this backdrop of growing public reckoning with broken promises of civic growth and renewal that Amacher's *City Links*, *WBFO* must be situated. Just one month after the 1967 broadcast, city council members were publicly declaring urban renewal a failure; yet the May *WBFO* program guide had invited listeners to celebrate the city "in the joy of its resources."⁸⁹ What were these resources? Certainly not the grocery stores, banks, restaurants, parks, and homes lost to urban renewal, or the shipping and manufacturing jobs that left as industry contracted.

City Links, WBFO

The impetus for Amacher's *City Links*, *WBFO* came from her growing frustration with the sonic-spatial constraints of the concert hall. After arriving in Buffalo in the fall of 1966, she premiered her first work as a creative associate, *Adjacencies* (1966), in which she began to establish compositional techniques for exploring how sound—and, by extension, spaces—might receive, interpret, and transform one another.⁹⁰ Amacher's goal for this work was to "connect sonic worlds," as she writes in her program notes:

I made Audjoins [the suite from which "Adjacencies" comes] so that worlds of sound could be joined. They receive each other, interrupt, interact, and bring the unexpected to each other. What previously could not have happened simultaneously in the same place, either because of distance, as in the case of countries, or within one composition because of sound levels in one room, is now possible through electronic means.⁹¹ Amacher would later call this concept "long distance music." She defines this in her manifesto of the same name from the early 1970s after leaving Buffalo: "Long-distance music is developing occasions where boundaries of 'ONE-PLACE' situations can begin to vanish. Some involve

⁸⁹ "WBFO Program Guide" (WBFO, 1967)

⁹⁰ Cimini, *Wild Sounds*, 52.

⁹¹ Cimini, "Some Sound and Shapes: Maryanne Amacher's *Adjacencies*," *Blank Forms* 2 (2017): 246–69.

electronic links; some do not.”⁹² *City Links*, *WBFO* would be Amacher’s first attempt at long-distance music, as she connected eight remote soundscapes from around Buffalo into a single central feed and transmitted it to an audience on 88.7 FM *WBFO*.

Central to this work was Amacher’s collaboration with both the Bell Telecommunications Company and *WBFO*. Securing their support for this project was no easy task, as Levine Packer remembers the logistics of *City Links*, *WBFO* as “an endless headache, fraught with difficulty.”⁹³ She recalled Amacher securing the support of Bell independently, enrolling the company and its staff to install 15 kHz telephone lines between the composer’s specified sites to ensure continuous transmission of sound to Amacher’s central mix.⁹⁴ Levine Packer’s comment highlights the fact that this was a large and complex request from Amacher, which pushed the limits of the resources available to her at the university. Nonetheless, the wires did go up, each equipped with microphones to capture sounds from Bethlehem Steel, a tower at Niagara Mohawk Power Company, the Buffalo International Airport, Allegany Air Runway, the Pillsbury Flour plant, Main Street, the surrounding area of the old Erie canal, exhaust pumps at Central Gas Plant, and in the old grain mills area.⁹⁵

The collaboration with *WBFO* came about much more naturally, as there was already an established relationship between the station and the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts.

⁹² Cimini and Dietz, *Maryanne Amacher*, 23.

⁹³ Renée Levine Packer, interview with the author, April 2, 2025.

⁹⁴ Telephone lines with a bandwidth of 15 KHz transmit sound in FM radio quality. In the initial report of this performance the frequency was written about in terms of “kc = kilocycles,” a dated scale, now replaced by Kilohertz.

⁹⁵ Liam T. Dougherty, “Conceptual Music: New Media and Frontiers in Maryanne Amacher’s *City-Links* Series,” *Tempo* 78, no. 307 (2024): 66; Tobi Maier, Micah Silver, Robert The, and Axel Wieder, “Maryanne Amacher: *City-Links*,” booklet for exhibition *Maryanne Amacher: City-Links* (Ludlow 38 Künstlerhaus Stuttgart Goethe Institut, 2010).

In fact, in 1967, the creative associates and WBFO shared a home at Barid Hall—now Allen Hall—on the university's south campus. Levine Packer emphasized the relationship between these neighboring departments: “before they [WBFO] moved to the student union, his [William Siemering’s] studio abutted the Creative Associates rehearsal room.”⁹⁶ In conversation, she even referred to Siemering and the station as “their [the center’s] neighbors,” attesting to the familiarity between the two departments.⁹⁷ Beyond his passion and advocacy for social justice, Siemering believed in uplifting and collaborating with experimental artists and musicians. He gave a platform to the creative associates in their early years, conducting regular interviews with them about their music, and, at the Jefferson Street station, collaborated with local avant-garde jazz artists in the area, providing them with consistent airtime.⁹⁸ All of this is to say that Siemering was supportive of Amacher, granting her access to WBFO’s on-campus station to facilitate her central mix, serve as a connection point for the telecommunication wires, and broadcast the transmission to their audience.

⁹⁶ Levine Packer, interview with the author.

⁹⁷ Levine Packer, interview with the author.

⁹⁸ Fisher, *Something in the Air*, 173; For more on Siemering and the role of public radio in American experimental music, see Louise Elizabeth Chernovsky, “Voices of New Music on National Public Radio: *Radio Net*, *RadioVisions*, and *Maritime Rites*” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2012).



Figure 2.1. Maryanne Amacher at her audio console. Osterreicher, Mickey, “Maryanne Amacher, composer at console,” *Digital Collections - University at Buffalo Libraries*, accessed November 19, 2025, <https://digital.lib.buffalo.edu/items/show/18251>.

The broadcast itself lasted 28 hours, beginning on May 16, 1967. Siemering recalled waking up “in the middle of the night to listen, checking on the sounds of the city,” and hearing “the bells that signaled the changeover of workers’ shifts at General Mills and the campus tower chimes, specifically.”⁹⁹ *City Links*, *WBFO* wove together the sounds of industry, the chatter of people shopping, car horns and fire sirens, planes taking off, and the ambient noise of the city, developing a sound world which was well received as a musical piece. In the *Evening News*,

⁹⁹ Cimini, *Wild Sounds*, 91.

Radio and TV columnist J. Don Schlaerth described the performance as a “symphony of sounds,” a surprising metaphor that ascribed the urban sounds the perceived “prestige” of Western art music.¹⁰⁰

Schlaerth later extended this framing in a September 1967 article titled “Portrait of Buffalo Planned by Ch. 17,” announcing an upcoming educational telecast in which Amacher’s recordings from *City Links*, *WBFO* were paired with photographs and moving images of the city by WNED employee Bob Lehman. Similar to the “symphonic” comparison, the word “portrait” indexes artistic and aesthetic value. Schlaerth continues, characterizing Amacher’s sonic material as having captured the “rhythms of industry, a Thruways interchange, Buffalo Airport, and modern family life,” describing the production as both “realistic and impressionistic.”¹⁰¹ *City Links*, *WBFO* is covered again one year later, in 1968, when *WBFO* received an award from the Ohio State Institute for Education by Radio-Television for the *City Links* broadcast. This award, widely regarded as the “Oscar” of educational media, was reported on by both the *Evening News* and the University at Buffalo’s newspaper, *The Spectrum*.¹⁰² Both reports acknowledge the artistry and innovation of the broadcast on both the part of *WBFO* and Amacher, through their language and recognition of the prestigious award.

The press reception of *City Links*, *WBFO*—a work that explicitly foregrounds the city—remains strikingly disconnected from the material conditions shaping that city. Following historian Mark Smith, I read these accounts as evidence not simply of what was heard, capturing

¹⁰⁰ J. Don Schlaerth, ‘27 Hours of Sounds—A Unique Experiment,’ *The Buffalo Evening News*, May 25, 1967, 50.

¹⁰¹ Schlaerth, “Portrait of Buffalo Planned by Ch.17,” *The Buffalo Evening News*, September 5, 1967, 6.

¹⁰² “UB Station Wins a Coveted Award,” *The Buffalo News*, February 16, 1968, 2; Charles Zeldner, “WBFO Receives National Award,” *The Spectrum*, February 16, 1968, 3.

“what these sounds meant to the various constituents of the time.”¹⁰³ In this case, urban sound is consistently reframed as an aesthetic object: a “symphony,” a “portrait,” an “impressionistic” rendering of modern life.

This reframing depends on a crucial separation. The sounds of industry, traffic, and everyday life are detached from the conditions that produce them—from the loss of industrial labor, the displacement of communities, and the erosion of neighborhood infrastructures. What remains is a sonic surface, available for aesthetic appreciation but stripped of its social referents. Steven Feld describes this process as *schizophonic mimesis*: a process in which reproduced sounds do not merely lose their original context but undergo a “renegotiation of identity,” acquiring new meaning through their altered conditions of reception.¹⁰⁴ In *City Links*, the telephone lines detach the sounds from Main Street, Bethlehem Steel, and Grail elevators from their sites of production. The WBFO broadcast then reframes them within the aesthetic context of a composed work. A listener hearing the shift whistle at General Mills through their home radio encounters that sound under fundamentally different conditions than a worker on the factory floor—conditions that render the sound available for appreciation as textural or timbral rather than as an index of the labor. It is through this process that the sounds which might otherwise index the urban condition—declining jobs, industry and neighborhoods—come to signify something else entirely. What the sounds of *City Links*, *WBFO*, say about the city is clarified through Amacher’s writings from the period. These writings reveal how she herself understood and interpreted these sounds.

¹⁰³ Mark M. Smith, “Echo,” in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Duke University Press, 2015), 55.

¹⁰⁴ Steven Feld, “pygmy POP A Genealogy of Schizophonic Mimesis,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 28 (1996):13.

In City Writings

The fall after *City Links*, *WBFO*, Amacher presented her next project: *In City, Buffalo* (1967). Taking place October 20-22, the project was an experimental festival encompassing a wide variety of interdisciplinary art events, with a goal similar to *City Links*, *WBFO*: to orient the people of Buffalo to the artistic beauty of their material environment. Critic John Dwyer wrote, “She [Amacher] intends to transform Buffalo into an artifact, using everyday materials, such as newsprint, downtown buildings, streets, sounds, colors, motion picture film, and radio waves.”¹⁰⁵ Participants experienced light projected across building facades, coordinated storefront displays along Main Street, collaborative artmaking in Delaware Park, and sound pieces similar to *City Links*.¹⁰⁶

Between *City Links* and *In City*, Amacher composed an essay, also titled *In City, Buffalo 1967*, in which she describes in poetic prose her works in relation to the city. In it, she equates the city’s infrastructure to musical instruments, writing, “Resources are our instruments, we PLAY them as INSTRUMENTS. Radio, TV, newspaper, department store windows, city streets, lakes, [and] canals. TUNING them to LIFE, TIME, AND ITS MUSIC.”¹⁰⁷ Taking this assertion seriously, Amacher understands the city as a coproducer in her music. She continues, explaining how she hopes an audience might experience the city through her music:

¹⁰⁵ John Dwyer, “‘In City’ Concert Honors Grand Old Architecture,” *Buffalo Evening News*, October 21, 1967.

¹⁰⁶ Terry Doran, “Avant Garde Music is Part of Week- end Art Experiment,” *Buffalo Evening News*, October 20, 1967. For more details on *In City* see Cimini, *Wild Sounds*, 94–103.

¹⁰⁷ Amacher reprised *City Links* as part of the festival. Cimini and Dietz, *Amacher*, 55.

To find them we VISIT. Instigating possibility. Go as though we've never been there before. RECEIVE. See within us a SENCE. Just like eye, ear. This is what we communicate. Why we are here.

To play them we need MUSIC. It is the network. WIND IN THE GARDEN. Moving in city. The MUSIC OF CHANGES. The air we breathe. Appearing in the midst. Coordinating places and spaces like we know sound. Bringing the unexpected home, car, central commercial district, and special locations in city.¹⁰⁸

By equating “MUSIC” with “the network,” she frames sound as a system that temporarily binds disparate urban elements—“home, car, central commercial district, and special locations”—into contingent assemblages. Her directive to “VISIT...Go as though we've never been there before. RECEIVE” suspends habitual assumptions about what the city is or how it ought to be encountered; it invites an openness to relations that have not yet been composed.

Through writing, Amacher advocates a reorientation of the relationship between the audience and the urban, seeking to develop some kind of relational attunement between humans and the city. Her insistence that one must “VISIT...RECEIVE” and for the “Coordinating places and spaces like we know sound” suggests an orientation in which urban space is continually reconfigured through perception and mediation. Much as in *City Links*, *WBFO*, where geographically distant sites are sutured into a single auditory field, her writing constructs a city that coheres through aesthetic attunement rather than through shared social or economic conditions.

This orientation, however, depends on a crucial abstraction. The relations Amacher foregrounds are primarily sensory and infrastructural; they emphasize connectivity, simultaneity, and potentiality while suspending the material inequalities and historical forces that structure those same networks. To “go as though we've never been there before” is, in effect, to bracket the accumulated knowledge of loss, displacement, and economic contraction that shaped life for

¹⁰⁸ Cimini and Dietz, *Amacher*, 55.

much of Buffalo in the 1960s. Through *City Links*, *WBFO* and *In City, Buffalo* Amacher is constellating, or, in her own words, “networking” an urban imaginary, which foregrounds creative and aesthetic possibilities, while largely detached from the socio-economic conditions of the city; or to borrow from sociologist Richard Florida, what I term a *creative class imaginary*.

Though an imperfect sociological theorization, I co-opt Florida’s term “the creative class” to help define Amacher’s urban orientation.¹⁰⁹ Florida conceives of the creative class as a group “whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology, and/or new creative content.” Whereas the working class is bound to the material fortunes of industry—its contraction meaning the loss of livelihood, community, and place—the creative class is largely unencumbered by such decline, oriented instead toward generating novel ideas and experiences. By developing a conception of the city that celebrates its infrastructure as aesthetic resource—as “instruments” to be “played,” as a “network” to be “tuned”—rather than engaging with the conditions of industrial contraction and displacement, Amacher’s *City Links* and *In City* articulate a creative class imaginary: an orientation toward the urban that foregrounds creative and perceptual possibility while remaining detached from the socio-economic realities structuring the city around it.

To frame Amacher’s practice in this way is not to diminish its significance, nor even criticize its shortcomings, but to situate it within a broader cosmopolitical tension. Her work composes one possible city—a networked, resonant, open-ended environment available to those positioned to hear it as such. This stands in stark contrast to the city experienced by working-

¹⁰⁹ Florida’s *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) describes a post-industrial formation that had not yet fully cohered in the 1960s. I use the term heuristically, not as a sociological classification of Amacher, but to name the orientation her work articulates. The institutional conditions Florida would later theorize were already present in embryonic form in programs like the Creative Associates, making the term less an anachronism than a retroactive naming of a structural position already in formation. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (Basic Books, 2002), 9.

class Buffalonians, for whom those same infrastructures indexed not sonic potential but instability, displacement, and the erosion of economic security. *City Links, WBFO* does not simply translate the sounds of Buffalo: it mediates what those sounds can mean and, in doing so, participates in a broader contest over how the urban condition is to be sensed, valued, and composed.

Amacher would continue her *City Links* series after leaving Buffalo, bringing it to Boston in 1967 while in residence at MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies, and later to Chicago, Paris, and other cities over the following decades. Each iteration was site-specific, not merely performed *in* a different city but composed *through* it, enrolling distinct infrastructures, institutions, and people. The Boston *City Links* drew on the sounds of Boston Harbor and the city's waterfront; in each case, the particular assemblage of microphones, telephone lines, broadcast infrastructure, and urban soundscapes produced a work irreducible to any other. No two *City Links* could be the same, because no two cities offered the same network of actors to be enrolled.

This site-specificity is precisely what makes the Buffalo iteration legible as a cosmopolitical document. By tracing the assemblage through which *City Links, WBFO* came into being, this chapter has shown how the work did not merely represent the city but actively composed a version of it. That composed city, however, was not the only one available. It existed alongside, and in tension with, the city being lived by those for whom the sounds of industry signaled not aesthetic potential but precarity. The workers whose shifts were marked by the very bells at General Mills that Siemering heard through his radio at night, the families displaced by the Kensington and Scajaquada Expressways, the neighborhoods reduced to what Dick Hirsch

called “a 72-acre wasteland”: these constituencies inhabited a Buffalo that *City Links* could transmit but not account for. The cosmopolitical intervention of this chapter, then, is to hold these two compositions of Buffalo in view simultaneously, not to adjudicate between them, but to show that what counts as “the city,” what it sounds like, what it means, and who it is for, was already in 1967, a site of contestation. *City Links*, *WBFO* is one entry in that contest, powerful in its aesthetic vision and revealing in what it renders inaudible.

More broadly, this chapter begins to establish that experimentalism in Buffalo did not simply occur alongside deindustrialization but was structurally entangled with it. The same postwar institutional investments that brought Amacher and the Creative Associates to the city were, in part, responses to the economic anxieties already reshaping it; the university’s expansion and its cultural programs offered an alternative vision of Buffalo’s future at the very moment its industrial present was contracting. The infrastructures Amacher enrolled in her work, the telephone lines, the radio waves, the factory sites, were shared with the urban processes her aesthetic orientation could not fully absorb. This entanglement suggests that experimental music in Buffalo cannot be adequately understood as an autonomous artistic development housed at the university; it must be read in relation to the material conditions that made the city simultaneously a site of creative possibility and lived dispossession. With *In City, Buffalo*, Amacher went further than composing the city herself; she invited her contemporaries to take up the urban environment as material for their own work, staging a collaborative festival that oriented fellow artists toward the city beyond the university. In this sense, her practice helped establish a precedent. As deindustrialization deepened in the decades that followed, Buffalo’s post-industrial landscape would figure with increasing prominence in the work of experimental artists in the region, not as backdrop but as an active participant. The chapters that follow trace this trajectory.

Chapter 3: Evenings for New Music in a Daylight Factory

Around 8:30 pm on Sunday, May 3, 1970, the then-28-year-old Meredith Monk and her dance company gave their Western New York debut on Elwood Avenue in Buffalo, NY. For the penultimate stop on her 1969–1971 tour, Monk and company performed “Tour 7: Factory,” a site-specific work designed for their venue that evening, Domus, a former automotive factory recently acquired by Buffalo’s avant-garde community to be used as a performance space. The events of “Tour 7: Factory” occurred around the open factory floor, as Monk’s company filled the space: on one side of the room, a dancer moving around furniture at an unhurried pace, while on the other side, dancers scurried, stomped, and fell, all as the audience roamed among them. The room’s high ceilings allowed the group to create a second suspended stage, where, as critic Carol Steiner described, the dancers performed the “lento movement of card players.”¹¹⁰ With ample vertical space in the room, dancers sat on suspended swings above the elevated stage, in partial stillness. There was no seating configuration, as the audience sat or stood alongside and around the performers.

Performances like that of Monk were precisely what prompted the creation of the Domus Center in 1968. In his review for “Tour 7: Factory,” *Buffalo Evening News* critic Tony Bannon remarked that, “No question about it, without those 6000 square feet of airplane hangar-like space to count on, much of the experimental arts scene here[...] and Miss Monk— probably would have gone lacking a suitable performance area.”¹¹¹ Bannon’s observation points to the fact

¹¹⁰ Carol Steiner, “Dynamic Artists Electrifies a Special Dance Creation,” *The Buffalo Evening News*, May 4, 1970, 31.

¹¹¹ Tony Bannon, “Monk’s Dancers Prove the Point in Domus Work,” *The Buffalo Evening News*, May 15, 1970, B-9.

that the city's primary home for the avant-garde, the Albright-Knox Gallery recital hall, could not accommodate the style of experimentation that Monk and company practiced.

In the winter of 1968, Lukas Foss and Lejaren Hiller, co-directors of the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts, began planning a new performance space that would extend beyond the limits of the Center's existing venues. Hiller was adamant on incorporating more interdisciplinary works, inviting more "intelligent experimentation," he told the *Buffalo Courier Express*, "With art forms from all media."¹¹² Domus was intended to expand the Center's operations into larger projects beyond the current boundaries of its previous programming, to include projects like Monk's program. The duo developed the plan for Domus alongside Calvin G. Rand, associate director of the University's Office of Cultural Affairs, who was already well connected in the city's broader arts community, to lead the initiative as chairman of the University Committee for Domus.¹¹³ Funding for the space came from a combination of allocated university funds, a grant from the Buffalo Foundation, and support from the New York State Council on the Arts.¹¹⁴

Though Domus had a relatively short run in Buffalo, operating between 1969 and 1972, its occupation of a former Pierce-Arrow automotive factory offers a concentrated view of the pressures and aspirations shaping the city's avant-garde at the end of the 1960s. The decision to situate experimental performance within a deindustrialized site was not incidental, but indicative

¹¹² Putnam, "New UB Center is Up in Old Pierce Arrow Plant," *The Buffalo Courier Express*, November 16, 1969, 14

¹¹³ The committee for Domus included Gray MacArthur, Lejaren Hiller, J Benjamin Townsend, Joseph Krysiak, Cristine Lawsom, Billie Kirpich, Ward William, William Austin, Donald A. Ross, and Calvin G. Rand as chair to the committee; Doran, "Domus Will Provide a New Home for the Performing Arts," *The Buffalo Evening News*, November 8, 1969, B-9.

¹¹⁴ For more on the granting and philanthropic conditions under which the Center for the Creative Performing Arts was able to fund Domus, see Uy, *Ask the Experts*.

of a growing alignment between the kinds of projects Buffalo's artists sought to pursue and the material conditions such spaces made available. Domus marks an early instance of a broader tendency that would become more visible across the 1970s, as arts organizations developed within vacated factories, warehouses, and other industrial properties. Attending to this relationship between experimental practice and deindustrialized architecture, this chapter demonstrates how cosmopolitical relations emerge through the interaction of built form, institutional practice, and performance. I begin by introducing the critical dichotomy between space and place, as defined in sociology and cultural geography. Drawing on the scholarship of musicologist Michael Heller and his work on New York City's 1970s loft jazz scene, I use these terms as a clarifying tool to describe the meditative possibilities of architecture in a performance setting. I then shift to the site of Domus, 1695 Elmwood Avenue, Buffalo, NY, exploring the building's history as the former Pierce-Arrow automotive factory and describing the material properties of its architecture. Finally, I examine how the building, as a material actor, became musically consequential through a descriptive analysis of an Evenings for New Music performance at Domus. Ultimately, this case study offers an early example of how a deindustrialized site acts within a musical assemblage, while also illuminating the previously unexplored history and impact of Domus on Buffalo's avant-garde.

Performance Space and Place

From their inception, the Creative Associates had found homes for their performances in Buffalo at the Albright-Knox Gallery Recital Hall and in Manhattan at Carnegie Recital Hall.¹¹⁵ Each venue provided fixed amenities for performance, such as a stage, audience seating,

¹¹⁵ Carnegie Recital Hall was renamed in 1987 and is known today as Weill Recital Hall.

technical resources, and social expectations, all of which were standard fare for recital halls presenting Western art music. So, with two prominent and well-funded venues at their disposal, why did the Center bother seeking out additional funding to lease a former factory floor?

In his work on New York City's loft jazz scene, Michael Heller traces the emergence of the city's downtown loft jazz scene through musicians' occupation of deindustrialized space. One of the earliest, Heller notes, was Ornette Coleman's Art House, established in 1968 inside his home at 131 Prince Street in SoHo.¹¹⁶ Art House was initially intended as a rehearsal space, but by the 1970s it had become a public concert venue: open to musicians to perform and free for audiences to attend.¹¹⁷ Coleman conceived of the unrehearsed loft space as a "blank space in which an avant-garde musical community could come together to rehearse and perform."¹¹⁸ Heller emphasizes the practical affordances these environments offered working artists. Loft spaces mattered not simply because they were former industrial sites, but because they provided room—material, social, and sonic—for experimentation. Their openness and adaptability positioned space itself as both a precondition for and an active element within musical practice. Heller draws on Michel De Certeau's distinction between "place" and "space" when describing the role of deindustrialized sites within the networks of New York loft jazz.¹¹⁹ Heller understands "Space" generally refers to an open, abstract grid, an unfilled medium that stretches out indefinitely but

¹¹⁶ Heller places the official beginning of the Loft Jazz scene in the 1970s but notes that jazz events in lofts date back as far as the 1950s. See Heller, *Loft Jazz*, 34.

¹¹⁷ Heller, *Loft Jazz*, 35. See also Alex Hoyos Twomey, "'Living Big in a Loft': Collaboration, Community, and Co-Operatives in SoHo, New York," *FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts*, no. 29 (December 2019).

¹¹⁸ Twomey, "'Living Big in a Loft,'" 7.

¹¹⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 1984), 117. See also Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

can be varied into smaller units. Place connotes an actual set of objects at a location and a particular moment in time.”¹²⁰ Art House and similar loft spaces gave artists *space* to perform, while traditional clubs, with their relatively fixed configurations and social norms for both performance and hospitality, merely provide a place for performance. *Place* connotes a sense of fixity, while *space* is characterized by freedom, transition, and changing relationships between objects.

Regarding Domus, René Levine Packer told the *Buffalo News* in 1969 that the new venue was the “answer to the versatile space young composers are looking for.”¹²¹ Space in this case can be taken quite literally. While the Albright-Knox and Carnegie Hall provided a performance *place* for the Creative Associates, these venues lack the freedom and flexibility of a performance *space*.¹²² This is not dissimilar from Heller’s assessment of loft spaces in New York City’s jazz scene. He suggests that the value of loft spaces for musicians and artists came from their malleability, their ability to be reimagined “as a blank slate, an empty canvas that allows for the creation of new types of experiences.”¹²³ In other words, artists sought the promise and opportunities offered by *space* rather than just a *place* to perform.

Unlike Heller’s examples from New York City, the former factory that became Domus would not be considered a formal loft space, although the site was chosen as a venue for the same reasons: the promise of *space* for performance. When asked about why they chose the

¹²⁰ Heller, *Loft Jazz*, 133.

¹²¹ Doran, “Domus Will Provide a New Home for the Performing Arts.”

¹²² Throughout this chapter, I italicize *space* and *place* when invoking their rhetorical meanings within the discourse of cultural geography, following Heller’s distinction, in order to distinguish these uses from more general references to physical location or venue.

¹²³ Heller, *Loft Jazz*, 133.

former factory, Rand told the *Buffalo Courier Express* that it was “available and accessible,” further adding, “it gave us a beautiful space to work in. It is what we call high, good space, giving us plenty of room.”¹²⁴ In evaluating the site, Rand placed value on many of the same spatial conditions that Heller identifies as central to loft spaces.¹²⁵ In this same interview, when asked about changes or upgrades to the site, Rand said that they would refrain, as “That would defeat the purpose for the facility.”¹²⁶ Rand’s comments link Domus’s purpose directly to the building’s material condition. The decision not to renovate or formalize the site was not an aesthetic refusal but a practical one, as alteration would have stabilized the building as a fixed performance *place*, rather than a resource for artistic experimentation. Read alongside Heller’s account of loft jazz, this rhetoric clarifies the value of deindustrialized sites for experimental music. Such buildings accommodate *space* rather than fixing performance within a predetermined set of spatial and social expectations. The missing piece to this puzzle is a question of cosmopolitics: how and why do these deindustrialized sites mediate a sense of *space*? In the section that follows, I address this question by examining the Domus site in its initial assemblage, as a former industrial site, to assess the role of the site’s material design in its use.

Pierce-Arrow: 1695 Elmwood Avenue, Buffalo, NY

Domus Center was located at 1695 Elmwood Avenue—on the corner of Elmwood and Great Arrow—just a few blocks north of the Albright-Knox Gallery, in what was a former

¹²⁴ Putnam, “New UB Center is Up in old Pierce Arrow Plant.”

¹²⁵ Heller writes “The openness and rawness of the [loft] spaces was consistently presented as one of their most valuable qualities.” In addition, he emphasizes that their availability and affordability played a significant role in their enrollment by New York’s jazz musicians; Heller, *Loft Jazz*, 133.

¹²⁶ Putnam, “New UB Center is Up in old Pierce Arrow Plant.”

Pierce-Arrow automobile factory. Built between 1904 and 1906, the facility was designed by Albert Kahn a prominent turn-of-the-century American architect best known for collaboration with brother Julius Khan on the design and construction of the Ford River Rouge automobile complex in Dearborn, MI.¹²⁷ Just like the Ford plant, the Pierce-Arrow space was designed in Kahn's signature style as a 'daylight factory.' This design style is characterized primarily by multistory, reinforced-concrete industrial buildings with large window spans, enclosing a spacious grid of concrete columns on each floor.¹²⁸ Architectural critic Reyner Banham describes the distinctive interior of the daylight style: "exposed concrete frames, filled in only by transparent glazing; buildings like X-ray images, their very bones on public display."¹²⁹ With a focus on natural light, the building's interiors were well-lit, and the large windows were suitable for a range of uses. Similarly, the concrete frames were intended to give the space versatility, acknowledging that its utility may change with the rapid pace of industrial innovation.¹³⁰ These aspects of design are evident in the Elmwood Ave. facility in both Figures 3.1 and 3.2.

¹²⁷ Reyner Banham, *A Concrete Atlantis: U.S. Industrial Building and European Modern Architecture, 1900–1925* (MIT Press, 1986), 20.

¹²⁸ Jennifer L. Mortensen, *Reclaiming the Daylight Factory: The Significance of Versatility in the Preservation of Early Twentieth-Century Concrete Frame Industrial Buildings in Dayton, Ohio* (MS thesis, University of Washington, 2015), 1–2.

¹²⁹ Banham, *A Concrete Atlantis*, 20.

¹³⁰ Mortensen, *Reclaiming the Daylight Factory*, 1.



Figure 3.1. Pierce-Arrow Building interior in 2018. Photograph by Mike Desmond / WBFO News, “*Pierce-Arrow Building Being Re-Purposed with Area’s Largest Geothermal System,*” *Buffalo Toronto Public Media*, August 2, 2018.



Figure 3.2. Barrel vaulted ceiling of the Pierce-Arrow Building interior in 2018. Photograph by Mike Desmond / WBFO News, “*Pierce-Arrow Building Being Re-Purposed with Area’s Largest Geothermal System,*” *Buffalo Toronto Public Media*, August 2, 2018.

In the early years of the factory's operation, automobiles were handcrafted by teams of workers, with a strong emphasis on craftsmanship, attention to detail, and durability. The workmanship of these luxury vehicles was recognized nationwide; in 1909, President Howard Taft requested two Pierce-Arrows to serve as official cars of the White House, and Pierce-Arrows served as vehicles for many prominent U.S. figures—William Howard Taft, Franklin D. Roosevelt, John D. Rockefeller, and even Babe Ruth.¹³¹ At the onset of the United States' entry into World War I, Pierce-Arrow received the largest government contract in the country to produce trucks for shipment to Europe. During the wartime period, the factory began to incorporate a modified assembly line in its production, shifting away from its team-based construction.¹³² This shift in product from luxury automobiles to military trucks also led to increased demand, necessitating the integration of the assembly line approach. The factory's adaptability was not incidental to Kahn's design but fundamental to the daylight factory as an architecture. As Jennifer Mortensen observes, "From its very conception, the daylight factory was designed to accommodate industrial advancement. [...] Further, the concrete frame made the space robust, and ideal for replanning and rearranging when technology or industrial processes changed. In addition to providing a robust space, concrete also possessed both flexibility and structural strength."¹³³ Architectural critic Grant Hildebrand emphasizes that circulation was a prime consideration in the planning of the Pierce-Arrow plant, noting that the factory was organized to facilitate continuous horizontal movement of materials and labor across contiguous

¹³¹ *National Register of Historic Places and National Historic Landmarks Program Records: New York*, National Register of Historic Places reference no. 74001234, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD, NAID 75317673, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/75317673>.

¹³² Goldman, *City on the Edge*, 85.

¹³³ Mortensen, *Reclaiming the Daylight Factory*, 144–45.

buildings rather than to confine production to vertically stacked floors.¹³⁴ Hildebrand describes the plant's layout as one in which work progressed gradually from process to process, minimizing friction, congestion, and unnecessary handling through a rationalized spatial flow. Rather than fixing production to a single method, the daylight factory's wide spans, roof lighting, and flexible structural modules allowed circulation patterns—and by extension industrial practices—to be continually reconfigured in response to changing demands.

As part of its industrial assemblage, the material engineering of the daylight factory mediated and sustained changes in workflow, because the design was not fixed to a singular style of production. Considering the architecture of 1695 Elmwood Avenue in this way foregrounds the building's role as an actor within its industrial assemblage. Looking ahead to Domus, this same architecture was enrolled into a musical assemblage, where it became part of new negotiations between a new set of actors.

Domus: 1695 Elmwood Avenue, Buffalo, NY

The importance of the industrial design and history of 1695 Elmwood Avenue was evident even before the venue opened its doors to the public. Take, for example, the venue's logo depicted in Figure 3.3. In this ad for the venue's inaugural performance, the organization's logo consists of the venue's name—*domus*—appearing in all lowercase letters, centered within a semicircle. This semi-circular form functions as an icon of the space, as it bears a relation of resemblance to one of the venue's most distinctive architectural features, its barrel-vaulted ceiling.

¹³⁴ Grant Hildebrand, "New Factory for the Geo. N. Pierce Company, Buffalo, New York—1906," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 29, no. 1 (March 1970): 51–55.

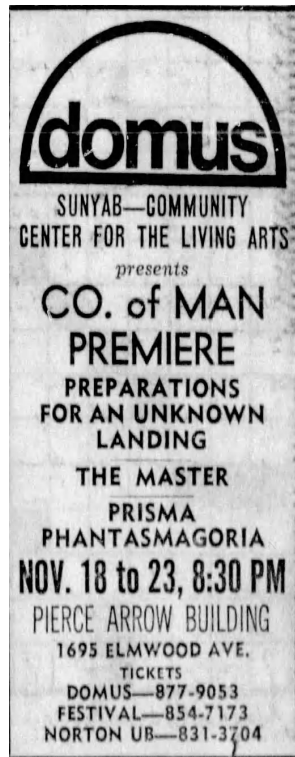


Figure 3.3. Advertisement for inaugural performance at Domus featuring the semi-circle logo. Source: Buffalo Evening News, November 15, 1969.

In addition to the venue's address, the ad labels it as located at the “Pierce-Arrow Building.” This inclusion indexes the site’s prior industrial use. Even as the space was reconstituted as Domus, the continued use of the Pierce-Arrow name preserves the building’s prior identity, signaling that architectural history remains operative within the venue’s musical assemblage. I now turn to demonstrate how aspects of the material design from the site’s industrial design persisted in how the space was used in performance.

The March 1971 Evenings for New Music Concert took the form of a collage of multiple works unfolding simultaneously rather than a single sequence of pieces.¹³⁵ Combining theater

¹³⁵ There is evidence suggesting that this program also occurred at SUNY Stony Brook University on Long Island March 21, 1971, but no confirmation of this performance in the form of reviews or recordings. Levine Packer recalled difficult weather that March and suggested that the performance was likely canceled for that reason. Based on conversations with my interlocutors about previous performances given at SUNY Stony Brook, the venue the Creative Associates performed in was the university’s recital hall, mirroring the conditions of the Carnegie Hall version of this program.

pieces with musical compositions, the program departed from earlier Evenings for New Music concerts, which had largely emphasized linear programs built around discrete concert works, in a format long-standardized in Western classical music. The first rendition of this unconventional program took place at Carnegie Recital Hall on March 18, 1971, where pieces were divided amongst the green room, the main recital hall, adjoining hallways, and even outside the building. By all accounts, it was not an effective approach; John Dwyer notes that “the ingenious disarray of it all prompted the [*New York*] *Times* critic not to write anything, rather than report devastatingly on a Buffalo group he’d admired in print for other presentations in Manhattan.”¹³⁶ Levine Packer remembered the performance more as a party, likening the experience of the program to that of one of Allan Kaprow’s “happenings” rather than a recital—a style of performance not traditionally accepted at the Midtown venue.¹³⁷

Dwyer contrasted this reception to the presentation of the same program at Domus on March 25, 1971; “They were at home,” he wrote, “not competing in the world of innovation market, enjoying themselves.”¹³⁸ At Domus, the performances extended beyond the main auditorium, with its vaulted barrel ceiling, into hallways and the venue’s smoking area. While Carnegie offered a *place* for this performance, the program conflicted with the configuration and with its standards and expectations. Alternatively, this same conflict was not reported with the presentation at Domus. I suggest that this is in part due to the venue’s spatial organization and its periodization of *space*, as the architecture of the former Pierce-Arrow complex shaped the conditions under which this program was produced, navigated, and evaluated.

¹³⁶ Dwyer, “Old New Music Fun for Fans,” *The Buffalo Evenings News*, March 26, 1971, 14.

¹³⁷ Levine Packer, interview with the author, February 26, 2026.

¹³⁸ Dwyer, “Old New Music Fun for Fans.”

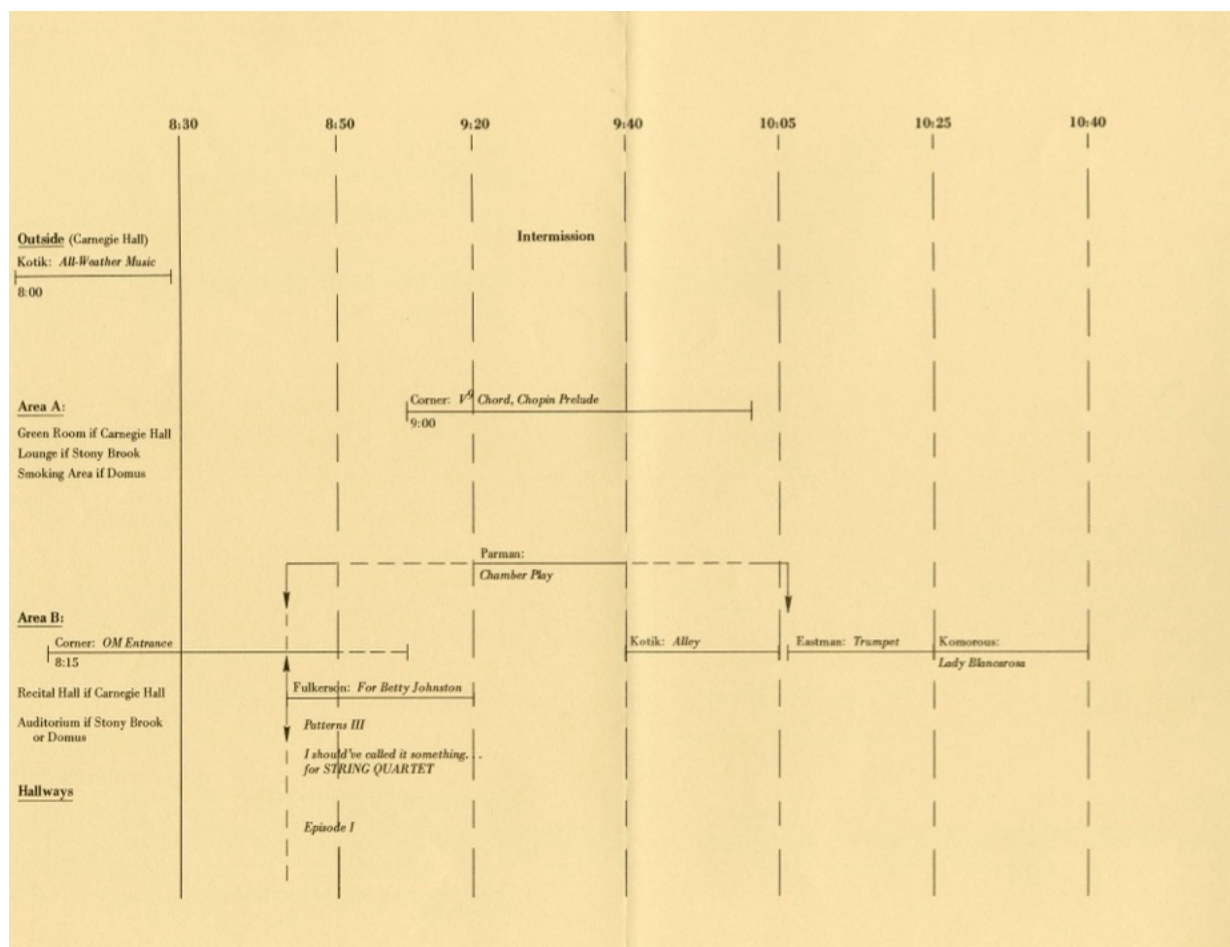


Figure 3.4 Graphic program for the March 1971 Evenings for New Music Tour. Source: *Julius Eastman Clippings Database, 1968–1979*, Music Library, State University of New York at Buffalo, Digital Collections, University at Buffalo Libraries, accessed December 5, 2025.

The layout of the performance is shown in Figure 3.4, which outlines each piece of the program, where it was performed, and its duration. The Domus iteration of the collage program began in the auditorium around 8:15 pm, with Philip Corner's *OM Entrance*. Critic Thomas Putnam described the piece as "a single tone whose interest comes from intonation variances of winds, strings, and voice."¹³⁹ Corner's piece was intended to orient listeners to subtle aspects of

¹³⁹ Thomas Putnam, "Concert Given at Domus," *The Buffalo Courier Express*, March 26, 1971, 7; the Carnegie performance began at 8pm and began with Petyr Kotik's *All-Weather Music* a piece for piano performed outside the building on the sidewalk of 57th Street. Levine Packer described Kotik in gloves, playing an upright piano as a snow fell from the sky during this performance. She assumes that this piece was not performed at the Buffalo program due to more severe weather but could not recall for certain. Levine Packer, interview with the author, February 26, 2026.

musical production, particularly the attention to pitch and resonance that performers typically cultivate in rehearsal. About 30 minutes into “OM Entrance,” around 8:45 pm, Frank Parman’s *Chamber Play*, a theater piece, began, overlapping with the last 10 minutes of the Corner Piece. Opening the theatrical portion of the night, a nude man walked around the main auditorium of Domus, dressing and undressing himself in pairs of red, green, and blue tights.¹⁴⁰

Nudity was not foreign to performance art, particularly in New York during the 1960s and 70s, but such performances were not typical of Carnegie Hall's programming. Pieces such as Benjamin Patterson's *Lick Piece* (1962) or Charlotte Moorman’s infamous performance of Nam June Paik’s *Opera Sextronique* (1967) were not typically performed in concert halls, but in downtown loft spaces.¹⁴¹ In conversation with Levine Packer, she speculated that the “flashing” would have been a likely reason for the poor reception and lack of coverage from *Times* critics, though she could not say for sure.¹⁴² I then asked her, “Would nudity have been more appropriate for Domus than Carnegie?” She replied, “I think so, and I think it was a little bit of a cliché at that point.”¹⁴³ The theatrics of *Chamber Play* conflicted with the conventions of a performance *place* like Carnegie Recital Hall. While a performance *space*, like Domus, was not bound by strict or premediated social or performance expectations.

¹⁴⁰ Putnam, “Concert Given at Domus.”

¹⁴¹ In 1977, Moorman and Paik would recreate this performance at Carnegie Recital Hall. Critic Robert Palmer acknowledges that this would have not been appropriate at Carnegie in past years, writing “Times have changed, of course. Theaters are advertising live sex acts within 15 blocks of Carnegie, where Miss Moorman and Mr. Paik staged a recreation of their original presentation.” See Robert Palmer, “*Topless Raid Against Cellist Is Recreated*,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1977, 13. For more on Patterson and *Lick Piece* see George E. Lewis, “Benjamin Patterson’s Spiritual Exercises,” in *Tomorrow Is the Question: New Directions in Experimental Music Studies*, ed. Benjamin Piekut (University of Michigan Press, 2014), 9. For more on Moorman and Paik’s *Opera Sextronique*, see Sophie Landres, “Indecent and Uncanny: The Case against Charlotte Moorman,” *Art Journal* 76, no. 1 (2017): 48–69; Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise*, 140–76.

¹⁴² Levine Packer, interview with the author.

¹⁴³ Levine Packer, interview with the author.

Around the same time, four works by James Fulkerson began in the same space: “Patterns III,” a work for solo tuba riddled with extended breath techniques and Doppler-like tones; *I should’ve called it something... for STRING QUARTET*, a work for string quartet; and a theater piece, *For Betty Johnson*, in which dancer/performer Mary Fulkerson walked around asking questions of the audience while putting shaving cream in her hair. In the halls connecting the smoking area and auditorium, another Fulkerson dance piece, *Episode I*, also began. At 9 pm, from the smoking space at Domus, Philip Corner’s *Dominant 9th Chord Chopin’s Prelude* could be heard, inviting audience members to venture beyond the auditorium. This piece for solo piano is an exploration of a singular Dominant 9th chord extracted from Frédéric Chopin’s Prelude in D. Dwyer recalled that at this point in the performance, Peter Yates, then chairman of the music department at Buffalo State College, wandered into Domus, making his way to the smoking area, and played the C# pitch for a portion of the work.¹⁴⁴ By 9:20 pm, the four Fulkerson works all concluded, and the auditorium began its “intermission.” But throughout the 20-minute break, Corner’s Dominant 9th chord continued to sound from the smoking area.

The first half of the program thus unfolded as a dense accumulation of simultaneous musical, theatrical, and ambient activity. Comparing how this busyness was organized and encountered at Carnegie Recital Hall versus at Domus reveals how spatial configuration shaped the conditions under which simultaneity could be perceived, navigated, and meaningfully engaged. At Domus, audience seating consisted of folding chairs that were not oriented toward a single focal point within the space. There was no expectation that listeners remain in one location for the duration of the performance; audience members moved freely between the auditorium,

¹⁴⁴ Dwyer, “Old New Music Fun for Fans.”

hallways, and the smoking area. This mobility allowed listeners to shape their own engagements with the collage. Those less interested in the absurdity of theatrical works unfolding in the main space could relocate to the smoking area, where Corner's sustained harmonic work continued, distancing themselves from both visual activity and ambient chatter.

Carnegie Recital Hall presented a markedly different spatial configuration. Seating in the hall was fixed, with the audience oriented toward a single stage, and the conventions of concert listening would have reinforced sustained attention to activity occurring at that focal point. Within this setting, the simultaneous presentation of multiple works resulted in overlapping sounds that reached the audience from other parts of the building while visual attention remained anchored to the stage. Performances taking place in adjacent rooms were heard but not directly accessible, limiting the audience's ability to reposition themselves in response to competing sonic events and constraining how the collage could be navigated. Levine Packer recalled much of the audience "chatting" and "visiting" upon realizing the program's dispersed, free-form nature.¹⁴⁵ The recital hall did not mediate immersion in the performance, as Levine Packer described the Carnegie performance as "disheveled," attesting to the lack of engagement she observed among patrons, and her feeling of viewing the performance at the midtown venue.¹⁴⁶

Fine arts scholar David Ryan offers a useful way of understanding the spatial conditions at stake in this contrast. Writing about the integration of experimental music into gallery contexts, Ryan notes that such spaces bypass the conventions of the theater, cinema, and concert hall—contexts in which works are expected to cohere over time and to be apprehended as unified wholes. In gallery settings, by contrast, time becomes less regulated: audiences may enter and

¹⁴⁵ Levine Packer, interview with the author.

¹⁴⁶ Levine Packer, interview with the author.

exit freely, attend selectively, and never perceive the entirety of an event.¹⁴⁷ A similar logic emerges in the Domus presentations of this program. Whereas the typical recital hall, like Carnegie, features fixed seating and a frontal orientation that encourages listeners to apprehend performances as complete and bounded works, Domus's architectural openness and informal circulation invite exploration and audience agency, allowing listeners to navigate overlapping activities across multiple rooms without the expectation of witnessing the performance in its entirety.

As Ryan demonstrates, differing venue configurations mediate how audiences experience and engage with a program. Buffalo critic Thomas Putnam described how the experience at Domus differed from the usual Evenings for New Music performances held in the Albright-Knox Recital Hall, calling it "more down-to-earth."¹⁴⁸ Recital halls such as the Albright-Knox and Carnegie operated as socializing architectures: their spatial and behavioral conventions trained audiences to conform to established norms of concert listening, even when the repertoire itself might have resisted those conventions. Domus, understood as a performance *space*, did not impose such norms, as its design and lack of fixed infrastructure did not prescribe audience behavior. This allowed social practices to emerge contingently through use, producing an informal atmosphere that facilitated curiosity and engagement for such an experimental program.

As the program continued, the flexibility of the Domus space was further exercised as the configuration of the performance shifted. At 9:40 pm, the second half of the performance began

¹⁴⁷ David Ryan, "We Have Eyes as Well as Ears...", in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music*, 196.

¹⁴⁸ Putnam, "Domus to Offer a Collage on March 25th," *The Buffalo Courier Express*, March 10, 1971, 7.

in the auditorium while Corner's piece still persisted in the smoking room.¹⁴⁹ Petr Kotik's *Alley*, a book of independent pieces for any number of performers and unspecified instrument, began in the auditorium. This realization of the work consisted of an overlapping string quartet and a concerto for piano and small orchestra.¹⁵⁰ Halfway through this work, the music stopped in the smoking area, and the performance was then contained exclusively in the auditorium, where the multiple nodes of *Alley* were performed. At 10:10 pm, *Alley* ended, and the premiere of Julius Eastman's *Trumpet* began. Performed by an assortment of wind instruments—trumpets, oboe, tenor sax, and clarinet—the piece was composed in a quasi-minimalist style, as small disparate 'cells,' limited in range, converge and dispense among the seven voices.¹⁵¹ The Eastman work concluded at 10:25 pm, at which time Rudolf Komorous's pocket opera *Lady Blancarosa*, was sung by Adrienne Tworek, Eastman, and Terry Moore. The libretto of this work consisted of a collage of lines from the work by the Czech poet and writer Jana Z. Vojkovic, and singers were accompanied by a tape piece.¹⁵² Packer described the finale at Domus as "Brilliant!" recalling specifically Julius Eastman's performance, "Julius pops out of this armoire. Oh, it was just brilliant! It was so much fun."¹⁵³ The program concluded at 10:40 pm.

¹⁴⁹ This second half of the performance was recorded on tape by the staff at Center for the Creative and Performing Arts; *Evenings for New Music Concert 75*, March 25, 1971, compact disc, ENM075, CD 58, Box 2, Evenings for New Music Collection, Music Library, State University of New York at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY.

¹⁵⁰ Performers: Julius Eastman, piano; Mark Sokol, Rhoda Gena, violins; Diane Williams, viola; Douglas Davis, violoncello; Petr Kotik, flute, conductor; Ellis Wean, tuba; James Fulkerson, trombone; Jan Williams, piano; Donald Montalto, Kenneth Hafner, Andrew Ploch, trumpet; Jeff Silberman, tenor saxophone; Ronald Richards, oboe; Roberto Lanieri, bass clarinet.

¹⁵¹ Performers: Frank Collura, Donald Montalto, Kenneth Hafner, Andrew Ploch, trumpet; Jeff Silberman, tenor saxophone; Roberto Lanieri, clarinet; Ronald Richards, oboe; Jan Williams, conductor.

¹⁵² "Rudolf Komorous: *Lady Blancarosa* (evropská premiéra)," Musica.cz, accessed January 15, 2026, <https://www.musica.cz/rudolf-komorous-lady-blancarosa-evropska-premiera/>.

¹⁵³ Levine Packer, interview with the author.

This second half of the performance transitioned into a more linear “concert” format. As the music from the smoking area stopped, the collage of sounds condensed to either end of the auditorium. By the time Eastman’s composition began, the program had only one point of focus through the end of the Komorous opera. There was no change to the venue; the performance itself guided listeners toward a new configuration. This is evidenced by the fact that the three reviews of the performance all discuss these last three works, while their accounts vary regarding the pieces they mention in the first half. Levine Packer also had more to say about the back half of the performance, answering, “I may not have been in that room” when she didn’t remember a piece from the first half.¹⁵⁴

This transition exercises the rhetoric of *space*, as the venue accommodated changing relationships between objects in the move from a dispersed collage of performances to a more linear concert format. This mode of transition aligns with the design logic of the daylight factory. The architectural features of 1695 Elmwood Avenue—its open spans and absence of fixed internal divisions—were intended to accommodate shifting patterns of work without structural modification. Being that the interior of Domus maintained this layout, these same conditions allowed the organization of performances to change throughout the Evenings for New Music program. The deindustrialized space played a role in translating the performance, as the former industrial logic embedded in its design facilitated the Creative Associates’ experimentation with space in this program.

Taken together, this Evenings for New Music performance demonstrates that the industrial design of deindustrialized venues shapes the artistic practices they come to support. At Domus,

¹⁵⁴ Levine Packer, interview with the author.

the daylight factory's open spans, concrete frame, and lack of fixed internal divisions did not simply provide a backdrop for experimentation: they mediated it. Originally designed to accommodate changing industrial processes, the building's architecture later enabled new relations among performers, audiences, and sound, allowing the March 1971 Evenings for New Music program to shift between dispersed simultaneity and linear concert form without requiring the space itself to be remade. Reading the material history of 1695 Elmwood Avenue alongside its use as a performance venue reveals the site's cosmopolitics: the building participated in the negotiations through which Buffalo's experimentalism became legible. Although Domus closed in 1972, the relations it made visible did not end there. They persisted as Buffalo artists increasingly turned to the city's abandoned industrial structures not merely as available shelter, but as active conditions of artistic production.

Chapter 4: Songs of Silos

Toward downtown Buffalo on the I-190, just past Exit 5 at Hamburg Street, the grain silos come into view along the Buffalo River, their concrete forms staggered against the water and sky. They rise before the office towers fully register, forming the city's so-called "second skyline." In their scale and presence, the grain elevators mark Buffalo's history as a Great Lakes grain port and mark its enduring identity today as a deindustrialized city shaped by the infrastructures that once powered it. Just off the riverfront, one cluster of grain elevators stands wrapped in a massive blue-and-white Labatt Blue beer logo, designed to look like a giant six pack of beer (Figure 4.1): an absurdist advertisement for the Canadian beverage company, whose only U.S. brewery is in Buffalo. Farther down the river, another row of silos keeps its blank, concrete skin—weathered and stained from years of use. Some nights throughout the summer, though, the word POEMS is stretched across their walls in projected light, inviting people to a space they might have assumed abandoned (Figure 4.2).



Figure 4.1. The “6 Pack” Silo’s at Buffalo River Works Campus. July 30, 2020. *The Buffalo News*
https://buffalonews.com/news/local/article_fdf5fb38-d101-11ea-a556-1b7fbdc083a.html.

Founded in 2013, the Silo City Reading Series is a multidisciplinary seasonal performance series that brings together poetry, music, visual art, and community within the Marine A silo—a 120-foot-high, century-old grain elevator along the Buffalo River. What began as an experimental literary gathering has developed into a recurring summer tradition, with writers and musicians performing inside the cavernous concrete structure and audiences gathering along the river’s edge. Over the past decade, the series has become a staple of Buffalo’s contemporary avant-garde arts community while also contributing to the city’s broader cultural profile, drawing nationally and internationally recognized artists into a setting that places Buffalo’s deindustrialized landscape at the center of its present artistic life.

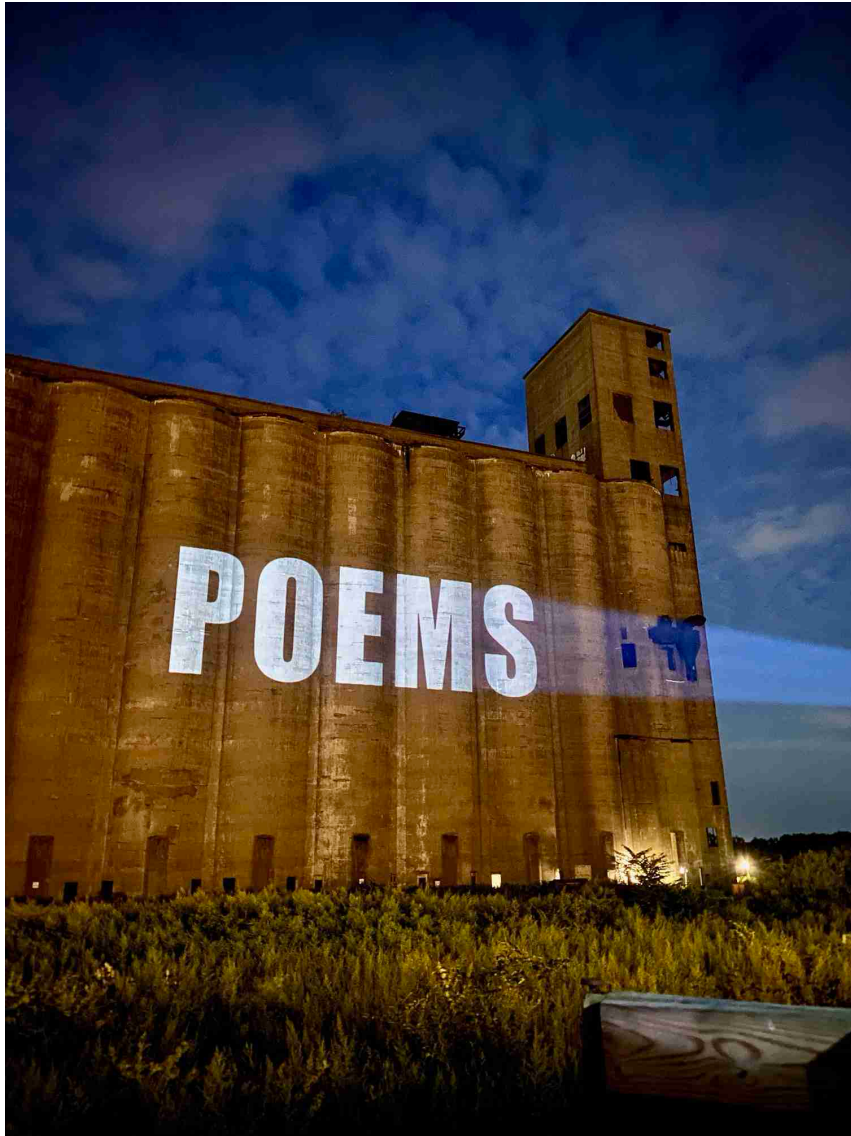


Figure 4.2. Projection of the word “Poems” on the Silo City Campus. Just Buffalo Literary Center, <https://www.justbuffalo.org/literary-events-in-buffalo/silo-city-reading-series/>.

This chapter examines how the atmosphere of Silo City becomes a site of negotiation between Buffalo’s industrial past and its contemporary avant-garde. Drawing on perspectives that take seriously atmosphere in the negotiation of an urban common world, I analyze the deindustrialized Silo City campus as a network in which competing meanings meet and are reworked in practice.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ See Ben Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” *Emotion, Space and Society* 2, no. 2 (2009): 77–81.

I begin with a brief history of the grain elevator and its entanglement with Buffalo's civic and economic identity, situating the silo as both technological innovation and emblem of industrial modernity. Narrowing to the Silo City campus, I draw on cultural geography and architectural criticism to show how practices of "preservation through use" mediated the material and political conditions that allowed the site to take on renewed meaning and foster artistic production. Rather than framing preservation as passive protection, I demonstrate that programming, stewardship, and limited intervention maintained the elevators as materially present and publicly accessible, keeping them open to future inscription.

The chapter then turns to the Just Buffalo Literary Center and its long-running Silo City Reading Series. Drawing from fieldwork, interviews, and press accounts, I analyze how Just Buffalo's programming recomposes the site's atmosphere. In Göbel's terms, atmosphere mediates how material form becomes collectively meaningful. At Silo City, the silos provide more than just background: they are actively part of the performance through their acoustics, scale, and visual presence, transforming the silos from industrial residue into artistic infrastructure. Ultimately, I argue that experimental performance at Silo City recomposes the atmosphere of the deindustrialized site, giving it renewed meaning within Buffalo's urban common world. This atmospheric recomposition keeps the elevators enrolled in the city's urban assemblage, preserving their relevance and buffering them from total redevelopment. At the same time, it stabilizes and extends Buffalo's experimental scene by embedding artistic practice within ongoing negotiations over the city's deindustrialized condition.

Grain Elevators and Silo City

The grain elevator was born in Buffalo. Invented by Joseph Dart and engineer Robert Dunbar in 1842, the first steam-powered elevator mechanized what had previously been slow,

labor-intensive dock work.¹⁵⁶ Prior to Dart's invention, grain was unloaded manually from lake vessels, a process that created a significant bottleneck in Buffalo's rapidly expanding grain trade. Dart's insight was to apply steam power to a vertical conveyor system—Dunbar's "marine leg"—which lifted bulk grain directly from a vessel's hold into storage bins and then redistributed it efficiently into canal boats. This technological innovation emerged in response to Buffalo's strategic geographic position at the western terminus of the Erie Canal and the easternmost navigable point on Lake Erie, which had already begun to channel massive quantities of Midwestern grain through the city. By dramatically increasing speed, storage capacity, and reliability, the elevator enabled Buffalo to become the world's largest grain port by the late nineteenth century.

As grain traffic intensified, elevators multiplied along the Buffalo River and Lake Erie, forming a dense industrial corridor that defined the city's waterfront. By the late nineteenth century, dozens of elevators lined the harbor, giving Buffalo the nation's largest grain storage capacity. These structures were not isolated industrial buildings but infrastructural anchors that organized rail lines, docks, warehouses, and labor systems around them. The elevators reshaped the urban condition by concentrating economic activity at the water's edge, linking lake transport, canal systems, and rail networks into a single integrated transshipment landscape. Buffalo's identity as the "City of Grain Elevators" emerged directly from this built environment.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Lynda H. Schneekloth, ed., *Reconsidering Concrete Atlantis: Buffalo Grain Elevators* (The Urban Design Project, School of Architecture and Planning, University at Buffalo, State University of New York), 26–27.

¹⁵⁷ Schneekloth, *Reconsidering Concrete Atlantis*, 27.

The decline of Buffalo's grain elevators followed shifts in transportation infrastructure during the twentieth century. The requirement for transshipment at Buffalo was first weakened by the opening of the Welland Canal in 1932 and decisively undermined by the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959, which allowed ocean-going vessels to bypass Buffalo entirely and ship grain directly from the Midwest to eastern and European ports. As a result, grain no longer needed to be unloaded, stored, and transferred at Buffalo's elevators. By the late twentieth century, most of the elevators had ceased operation, standing "silent and abandoned" as remnants of a vanished industrial economy.¹⁵⁸ By 2006, only two elevator complexes remained in operation, owned by General Mills, one of the city's few remaining factories. What had once been the infrastructural core of a transnational grain system became instead a monumental relic of the city's deindustrialization.

In 2006, Rick Smith, owner of the metal fabrication company Rigidized Metals, purchased four tightly-grouped elevators along the Buffalo River: the American, Perot, Lake and Rail, and Marine A. His initial motivation was economic. Smith sought access to the freight rail lines running through the properties and simultaneously formed River Wright Energy, a partnership intended to convert the elevators' storage capacity into the basis for an ethanol-refining facility.¹⁵⁹

That vision quickly unraveled. The proposed ethanol plant faced neighborhood opposition, rising corn prices, increased refining competition, and the collapse of the ethanol market. By 2008, Smith sold the Lake and Rail elevator to a Minneapolis-based hedge fund after

¹⁵⁸ Schneekloth, *Reconsidering Concrete Atlantis*, 15.

¹⁵⁹ Daniel Campo, "Historic Preservation in an Economic Void: Reviving Buffalo's Concrete Atlantis," *Journal of Planning History* 15, no. 4 (2016), 323–24.

investing in renovations, but retained ownership of the American, Perot, and Marine A.¹⁶⁰ With the failure of River Wright, the site's future could no longer be anchored to large-scale industrial reintegration. The elevators remained, but the economic logic that had justified their purchase had dissolved. Even prior to the collapse of the ethanol venture, Smith had allowed University at Buffalo faculty affiliated with the Buffalo Grain Elevator Project to access the site for research and studio work.¹⁶¹ Their documentation and historical framing helped inventory and interpret the elevators as architectural and cultural resources rather than obsolete industrial assets. These relationships proved consequential once Smith began rethinking the property's trajectory.

From roughly 2012 forward, the site's identity shifted toward incremental and experimental cultural programming. Smith rejected comprehensive master plans and large capital campaigns, insisting instead that "you don't have to spend millions to make things happen."¹⁶² Development proceeded in small phases rather than through wholesale adaptive reuse. For a time, Smith explored adapting Marine A for climbing gyms, event spaces, and other interior uses, but by 2015, he redirected attention toward renovating the smaller on-site office building as a functional headquarters for gatherings and programming. He described this evolution as discovering "where the heart of the site wants to be," allowing the buildings themselves to guide investment decisions.¹⁶³ Crucially, Smith began to articulate a philosophy that treated the elevators as "essentially ruins" that resisted full intervention but could still be activated in their

¹⁶⁰ Campo, "Historic Preservation in an Economic Void," 324.

¹⁶¹ This partnership culminated in *Reconsidering Concrete Atlantis*, which provides extensive bibliographic information regarding the silos. Schneekloth, *Reconsidering Concrete Atlantis*.

¹⁶² Campo, "Historic Preservation in an Economic Void," 325.

¹⁶³ Campo, "Historic Preservation in an Economic Void," 328.

“abandoned” state.¹⁶⁴ He decided to keep the silos in their “as is” condition, preserving their scale, acoustics, and monumental interiors as settings for theater, music, festivals, and public events.¹⁶⁵ In doing so, Silo City emerged neither as a conventional adaptive reuse project nor as a formally registered heritage park, but as an incremental, improvisational model operating outside standard preservation market frameworks.¹⁶⁶ Silo City’s collaborative partners include: Explore Buffalo, which offers both ground and vertical tours of the grain elevators; Just Buffalo Literary Center, whose Silo Reading Series brings visiting and local poets to perform in the silos; Torn Space Theater, which stages site-based theatrical works; and Squeaky Wheel Film & Media Art Center, which situates experimental media residencies on site.

In 2017, Friends of Silo City, Inc. was founded as the 501(c)(3) nonprofit steward of Silo City and its programming.¹⁶⁷ The organization advances a mission that links progressive urban ecological practice with site-responsive art and community collaboration. Executive Director Maris Grundy—an ecologist and ethnobotanist by training—coordinates partnerships among artists, educators, ecologists, and regional heritage organizations, framing the silos as a project of “holistic urban regeneration,” in which the team considers the shared relationships among urban spaces, humans, and other species.¹⁶⁸ Friends of Silo City’s plan for realizing this mission relies on “inspiring through example the activation of post-industrial landscapes,” and, to carry out this

¹⁶⁴ Campo, “Historic Preservation in an Economic Void,” 328.

¹⁶⁵ Campo, “Historic Preservation in an Economic Void,” 329–30.

¹⁶⁶ Campo, “Historic Preservation in an Economic Void,” 331.

¹⁶⁷ ProPublica, *Nonprofit Explorer: Friends of Silo City Inc*, accessed January 17, 2026, <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/822584517>.

¹⁶⁸ Silo City’s official mission statement is: “To advance progressive urban ecological practices, engage with our regional heritage, and collaborate in our unique environment to present performance, visual, and installation arts.” *Silo City*, “Who We Are,” accessed January 17, 2026, <https://www.silo.city/who-we-are>.

goal, they prioritize “ecological restoration (ecology), community engagement (culture), site-responsive arts (arts), and in particular the intersections of the three.”¹⁶⁹

The mission adopted by Friends of Silo City reflects the findings of architectural critic Daniel Campo in his 2016 study of the planning and evolution of Silo City. Campo ascribes “preservation through use” as the discernible strategy practiced by Smith and Silo City.¹⁷⁰ He observes that programming, restoration plantings, and experimental performances stabilize the structures through regular stewardship and public presence, allowing the silos to remain materially intact while continuously reinterpreted. In the terms of actor-network theory, the enrollment of Silo City, as an actor, within various other urban assemblages—politics, tourism, Buffalo’s arts scene, and environmental preservation—mediates the preservation of the silos and the campus as a whole.

The language adopted by Friend of Silo City makes clear the site’s cosmopolitics. Silo City persists not because its meaning has been settled, but because the assemblage of actors continue to enact the campus as viable. Campo’s formulation thus reveals preservation at Silo City as a negotiation over what the elevators are permitted to become without resolving the site into a single, fixed identity or function. Despite lacking a singular or stabilized identity within Buffalo’s broader urban assemblage, the silos accrue value and meaning through the conditions generated by their continued activation. Their significance emerges less from the site’s history or a completed redevelopment plan than from the ways use recalibrates how the site is sensed, inhabited, and remembered.

¹⁶⁹ *Silo City*, “Who We Are.”

¹⁷⁰ Campo, “Historic Preservation in an Economic Void,” 339.

Sociologist Hanna Göbel's analysis of urban ruins provides a useful conceptual bridge. In her study of Berlin's Café Moskau, a former East German modernist congress hall built in 1964, later neglected after reunification and eventually restored as an event venue, Göbel argues that ruins are revalued through the aesthetic composition of "atmosphere."¹⁷¹ Göbel understands atmosphere as a relational field that organizes "bodies, their perceptual capacities, and the spatial realm."¹⁷² It can be used to describe the affective and spatial conditions produced through the interplay of architecture, light, material decay, sound, embodied movement, and programmed activity.¹⁷³ It mediates between material form and collective memory, enabling a shared experience without resolving meaning into a single interpretation.

Silo City can also be understood through this lens, operating at the level of atmosphere. The silo's scale, echo, ruderal ecology, and monumental concrete interiors generate a sensory environment that resists conventional preservation categories and redevelopment plans. Instead, it exists more as a sort of "curated decay," as programming works within these conditions, composing new atmospheric arrangements through repeated activation.¹⁷⁴ The variety of community events and experiential performances on the site collectively recalibrate how the silos are encountered. In this sense, preservation "through use" unfolds as aesthetic recomposition.

¹⁷¹ Hanna Katharina Göbel, "The Aesthetic Composition of a Common Memory: Atmospheres of Revalued Urban Ruins," in *Urban Cosmopolitics: Agencements, Assemblies, Atmospheres*, ed. Anders Blok and Ignacio Fariás (Routledge, 2016), 171–74.

¹⁷² Göbel, "The Aesthetic Composition of a Common Memory," 171.

¹⁷³ Göbel, "Aesthetic Composition of a Common Memory," 176–81; Göbel's conception of atmosphere draws from the work of German philosopher Gernot Böhme. See Gernot Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," *Thesis Eleven* 36, no. 1 (1993): 113–26.

¹⁷⁴ Geographer Caitlin DeSilvey advocates for modes of heritage practice that allow material transformation and decay to unfold rather than imposing restorative closure, reframing preservation as a negotiated temporal process. Caitlin DeSilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

The site's cosmopolitics take shape through the atmospheric negotiation of what kinds of past and future can be collectively inhabited.

To trace how this atmospheric recomposition unfolds in practice, I turn to Just Buffalo Literary Center's Silo City Reading Series. The founding of the series underscores the site's openness to community use and clarifies the role of arts programming within Silo City's preservation model. More than a cultural supplement, the reading series operates as a recurring mechanism through which the silos are activated, engaged, and collectively inhabited. It provides a sustained example of how atmosphere is composed through use.

Just Buffalo's Silo City Reading Series

Similar to the site itself, the Silo City Reading Series began without a formal institutional plan. As Noah Falck—poet and director of the series—explained, “It was kind of on a whim that whole series started.”¹⁷⁵ I interviewed Falck in October 2025 to discuss the series' history. It began with a plan to throw a party for the release of local poet Joe Hall's book *The Devotional Poems* in the spring of 2013.¹⁷⁶ Falck had recently visited the Silo City campus and suggested a reading and party inside the silo. He reached out to Rich Smith, who agreed and, notably, did not charge Falk or Hall for the use of the site.

The first event was simple. “It was just going to be a party, we bought a cake, read some poems, played some music, hung some photographs, that's it,” Falck said.¹⁷⁷ The series was not meticulously planned; rather, it grew from this first event. Falk recalled Smith dropping by

¹⁷⁵ Noah Falck, interview with the author, October 27, 2025.

¹⁷⁶ Joe Hall, *The Devotional Poems* (Black Ocean, 2013); Falck, “A Reading Series Hosted in an Abandoned Industrial Silo: Reading Across America: Buffalo's Silo City Reading Series,” *Literary Hub*, March 22, 2018, <https://lithub.com/a-reading-series-hosted-in-an-abandoned-industrial-silo/>.

¹⁷⁷ Falck, interview with the Author.

Hall's book release, without much of an idea of what was happening. But after the event, Smith approached Falck and encouraged him to host something similar in the future. Smith said to Falck, "if it feels good, keep doing it."¹⁷⁸ We see here an example of Smith's openness to experimenting with the site, on display, years before that openness was established as a "mission" by Friends of Silo City.

From the beginning, Falck intended the series to be interdisciplinary. He emphasized that music was built into the event's structure from the start. His goal was not to create "just a poet's reading to other poets," but to create a gathering that included musicians and artists across all disciplines. As he explained, music expands the audience: it becomes "more than 'hey, I'm going to a poetry reading.'"¹⁷⁹ A consistent model emerged early on: a typical evening might include a local poet opening, a local musical group, and a visiting poet, with visual artists either setting up installations or simply showing their paintings on concrete walls.

Over time, the series became more intentional. Artists began receiving payment, and the event curation sharpened over the years. Falck identified August 13, 2016, as a turning point for the series, when essayist and poet Ocean Vuong came to read.¹⁸⁰ Vuong had just released his first book, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016), and was widely visible, including being featured in the *New York Times Book Review*.¹⁸¹ Falck described this event as the real "lift off" of the series.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁸ Falck, interview with the Author.

¹⁷⁹ Falck, interview with the Author.

¹⁸⁰ A recording of a portion of this evening is posted on YouTube. JustBuffaloLit, "Ocean Vuong Reads 'Headfirst' at the Silo City Reading Series," YouTube video, 5:00, March 21, 2019, <https://youtu.be/DXPNEQL1ReE?si=-u43ANa-47yldhSo>.

¹⁸¹ Michiko Kakutani, "Review: 'Night Sky with Exit Wounds,' Verses from Ocean Vuong," *The New York Times*, May 10, 2016, C1.

¹⁸² Falck, interview with the Author.

Vuong compared the venue to an “ancient Roman forum,” and that particular event drew a large audience.¹⁸³ At that time, admission was not ticketed, and attendance exceeded what felt safe for the space. The reading marked a shift in scale and recondition.

The series began ticketing after Vuong’s visit. They had prices of \$10, but over time the price increased to approximately \$25 in 2026. Falck reflected openly on the tension between financial sustainability and accessibility. He stated that he wants “community people,” young people, and people without significant means to attend.¹⁸⁴ Though almost all the reading series’ events sell out, there is a concerted effort to keep prices intentionally lower than those of many comparable events. Financially, the series has operated through a mix of funding sources. Early on, Falck secured modest funding from the Just Buffalo Literary Center, Falck’s employer and host of the series. Over the years, Falck and Just Buffalo have kept the series going with grant funding from the Cullen Foundation of Western New York, NYSCA, and River Grants from the City of Buffalo’s Local Waterfront Revitalization Program.¹⁸⁵

This funding structure and inclusive positioning matter for Buffalo’s arts community because they draw experimental literary and musical performance into the policy language of waterfront redevelopment. As it has developed, the Silo City Reading series has become a recognizable component of the Buffalo River’s deindustrialized future. The series therefore circulates within the same administrative and economic networks that support ecological restoration, river access, and heritage tourism. In terms of cosmopolitics, the series is part of the same urban assemblage as its venue and is thus an actor enrolled in the negotiations of the city’s

¹⁸³ Falck, “A Reading Series Hosted in an Abandoned Industrial Silo.”

¹⁸⁴ Falck, interview with the Author.

¹⁸⁵ Falck, interview with the Author.

urban condition. Through its recurring activation, the reading series draws experimental literary and musical performance into the same institutional and funding networks that support ecological restoration and waterfront redevelopment. In doing so, it aligns avant-garde practice with stewardship, positioning artistic production as integral to the site's continued viability rather than peripheral to it. The reading series participates in conversations about "revitalization," sustainability, public access, and positioning poetry and music as active contributors to how the waterfront is imagined and funded. Whereas, in Chapter 2, Maryanne Amacher's musical engagement with the city was largely detached from the conditions, the development of the Silo City Reading Series clarifies how arts programming mediates the site's evolving urban position.

What began as an improvised gathering gradually entered grant networks, waterfront redevelopment language, and institutional partnerships, situating the silos within Buffalo's broader negotiations over revitalization and public access. Through this process, the reading series helped stabilize the elevators as a viable civic space without fixing their identity. Its recurring activation draws the structures into conversations about sustainability, culture, and community use, making experimental performance legible within the policy and economic frameworks that shape the riverfront.

This mediation operates not only administratively but atmospherically. The series provides a recurring occasion through which the silos are collectively inhabited and recalibrated. Rather than treating programming as an external addition to the site, the reading series functions as one of the mechanisms through which the elevators remain present within the city's urban assemblage. To understand how this occurs at the level of experience, I now turn to the performances themselves, examining how a single event composes an atmosphere that binds structure, sound, and audience into a provisional common world.

June 15, 2024, Silo City Reading

The Reading Series on June 15, 2024, began at 7:00 pm, and like all previous events, the performance was sold out. Tickets were \$15, and the program followed the typical structure of such events: it featured local visual artist Bree (Briann) Gilliam, who showcased her paintings on the venue's concrete walls, and the opening act was local poet Nina (Christina) Vega-Westhoff (Figure 4.3).¹⁸⁶ The visiting act that followed comprised poet Fred Moten and double bassist Brandon Lopez, who improvised while Moten read his work aloud. Focusing on the Moten/Lopez set, this section will analyze the role of performance itself in the urban assemblage of Silo City.¹⁸⁷



Figure 4.3. Bree Gilliam's work on display at the Silo City Reading Series, June 15, 2024. Photograph by Pat Cray. Just Buffalo Literary Center, <https://www.justbuffalo.org/silo-city-reading-series-2024-06-15/>.

¹⁸⁶ For more on these artists, see Newell Nussbaumer, "Art Talk: Bree Gilliam," *Buffalo Rising*, December 8, 2022, <https://www.buffalorising.com/2022/12/art-talk-bree-gilliam/>; Cory Perla, "Spotlight: Nina Vega-Westhoff," *The Public*, September 27, 2017, <https://www.dailypublic.com/articles/09272017/spotlight-nina-vega-westhoff>.

¹⁸⁷ For a recording of this performance see JustBuffaloLit, "Fred Moten + Brandon Lopez perform at the Silo City Reading Series," YouTube video, 25:58, June 15, 2024, <https://youtu.be/EkxJV8YlhXY>.

As their set began, Moten took his seat at a folding table draped in black cloth. On its surface lay a pair of glasses, an open laptop, and a can of beer, which the local audience would most definitely recognize as from the microbrewery Community Beer Works. Lopez stood slightly in front of the table with his double bass and bow. Both performers were set up between two PA speakers and identical red banners with the Just Buffalo Literary Center logo, behind which colored lights illuminated upward toward the dark ceiling of the silo. Moten and Lopez appeared in hooded sweatshirts and jeans, matching the informal summer attire of most of the audience. Some of the audience stood while others sat in folding chairs, relatively close to the performers. Despite the series' institutional structure, the actual event still had a distinct DIY feeling (Figure 4.4).



Figure 4.4. Brandon Lopez and Fred Moten performing at the Silo City Reading Series, June 15, 2024. Photograph by Pat Cray. Just Buffalo Literary Center, <https://www.justbuffalo.org/silo-city-reading-series-2024-06-15/>.

Moten opened the performance by stating, “This ain’t Poetry. Poetry is a musical accident,” in a way proclaiming the experimental nature of the performance. In the set, Moten

read a mix of material written for the performance and what I picked out as selections from his book *Little Edges* (2015), while Lopez improvised a mix of minimalistic drones, grooving pizzicato passages, and noisily percussive extended techniques, both responding to and accompanying Moten's words.¹⁸⁸ Though Moten's prose often appears abstract, even improvisatory, it remains acutely responsive to its setting; as critic Gerónimo Sarmiento Cruz observed, in an assessment of *Little Edges*, "Moten's poetry so often takes the form of a latent aurality that assumes not only listeners and interlocutors but also other contrapuntal voices and sounds beyond the purview of the text itself."¹⁸⁹ Moten writes toward an already populated soundscape. His language presumes accompaniment.

One of the primary ways Moten stages these interlocutors is through the evocation of cultural memory. He frequently invoked historical figures—what might seem like casual "name-dropping," but in practice functions as a compositional memory. These invocations layer the present performance with sedimented artistic lineages. During the performance, for example, he remarked, "They never go to sleep, they span time like Morton Feldman..." and later, "Parchman's general intellect is a blues, for Julius Eastman, count off."¹⁹⁰ Invoking Morton Feldman and Julius Eastman—two composers closely associated with the University at Buffalo's Creative Associates—folds Buffalo's experimental history into the present performance. Moten was performing palimpsestic memory.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ Fred Moten, *The Little Edges* (Wesleyan University Press, 2015).

¹⁸⁹ Gerónimo Sarmiento Cruz, "Fred Moten, *The Little Edges*," *Chicago Review* 60, no. 3 (2017).

¹⁹⁰ These lines are extracted from Moten's poem, *jaki byard, blues for smoke*, in *The Little Edges*. Moten, *The Little Edges*, 45-57.

¹⁹¹ Lucy Bond, Stef Craps, and Pieter Vermeulen, "Introduction: Memory on the Move," in *Memory Unbound: Tracing the Dynamics of Memory Studies*, ed. Lucy Bond, Stef Craps, and Pieter Vermeulen (Berghahn Books, 2017), 6.

Moten also expanded the category of interlocutor to the non-human. He addressed the physical environment itself, acknowledging the decaying silos as participants in the event. When he spoke of having “gone up in grain, the cathedral inside the organ,” the line reframed the grain elevators as resonant chambers—architectural bodies capable of vibration. Similarly, his phrase “the decreasing permanence of the wall in open air” registered the structure’s erosion as both material and conceptual condition. The silos no longer functioned simply as industrial remnants; they entered the performance as sounding bodies marked by time, weather, and entropy.

Moten and Lopez engaged this interlocutor as a contrapuntal voice, incorporating the silo’s seven-second echo into the performance. In one instance, Lopez vamped a repetitive pizzicato line while Moten vocalized and released short hums toward the silo’s ceiling, tilting his head back to look up into its cavernous height as he did so, allowing the echoes to reverberate back and drawing attention to the silo’s song. Later, Moten let out “doo” and “boo” sounds while Lopez percussively slapped the strings of his bass, filling the silo with sound.

About halfway through the performance, Moten released a falsetto “ooh” while Lopez vamped a polymetric pizzicato line, producing two pitches—one high on the fingerboard and one below the bridge of the instrument. This time, Moten invited the audience to join in, declaring, “Come on now, y’all know y’all want to do it.” The audience responded, sending staggered short “oohs” into the silo; one patron chuckled, and both Lopez and Moten smiled.

These moments from the performance speak to Cruz’s observations about Moten’s poetry, assuming interlocutors beyond the text itself. At Silo City, that interlocutor includes the

silo's echo. By vocalizing into the chamber and allowing the reverberation to return, Moten and Lopez foreground the building as an active participant in the performance (Figure 4.5).¹⁹²



Figure 4.5. Fred Moten singing inside the Marine A grain silo during the Silo City Reading Series, June 15, 2024. Photograph by Pat Cray. <https://www.justbuffalo.org/silo-city-reading-series-2024-06-15/>.

Regarding the series, Falck told *The Buffalo News*, “poems just resonate in that space like it was built for it.”¹⁹³ Reporter Johanna Summer similarly writes that the echo of the space elicits “a sense of wonder,” describing “the sound created by the silos” as one of “unlikely grandeur,

¹⁹² For more on the agency of acoustic space see Brandon LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life* (Continuum, 2010).

¹⁹³ Joanna Sommer, “Concrete Grandeur: 10 Years of the Silo City Reading Series,” *The Buffalo News*, July 17, 2023.

like in a church or cave.”¹⁹⁴ In Göbel’s terms, atmosphere mediates how material form becomes collectively meaningful. These iconic comparisons are evidence of a changed atmosphere. The language of cathedral, church, and cave does not merely describe acoustics; it registers a shift in perception produced through the performance. The elevators are not exclusively framed as industrial remnants but as resonant spaces capable of grandeur. The altered atmosphere becomes legible in the very metaphors used to describe it.

As the Silo City Reading Series has grown, the negotiations traced in this chapter have become legible beyond Buffalo. Coverage in national outlets such as *The New York Times* and *The Boston Globe* frames the site as a model of artistic innovation within a deindustrialized landscape, even as a draw for cultural tourism.¹⁹⁵ In that framing, the silos enter a broader discourse about how deindustrialized cities might reimagine their waterfronts. Yet the language used by those closest to the site resists a simple narrative of revitalization.

When Swannie Jim—the groundskeeper of Silo City—told *The New York Times* in 2018, “We call it regeneration, not restoration... We don’t want to be Williamsburg or anything like that... I have a growing appreciation that a building has a life just like a human being and that slow decay is sort of interesting as long as it’s safe,” he articulated the same cosmopolitical orientation examined throughout this chapter.¹⁹⁶ The silos are not treated as inert relics awaiting correction, nor as blank canvases for redevelopment. They are understood as participants in an

¹⁹⁴ Sommer, “Concrete Grandeur.”

¹⁹⁵ Jada Yuan, “Buffalo, N.Y.: Art, Refugees, Silos and Wings,” *The New York Times*, June 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/19/travel/buffalo-ny-art-refugees-silos-wings.html>; Miles Howard, “Old Urban Landmarks Are Not Just Portals to Our Past but Glimpses of Our Future,” *Boston Globe*, October 23, 2025, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2025/10/23/opinion/franklin-park-zoo-revitalization/>.

¹⁹⁶ Yuan, “Buffalo, N.Y.: Art, Refugees, Silos and Wings.”

ongoing process—structures with temporal depth, limits, and demands of their own.

Regeneration, in this sense, names a negotiation rather than a solution.

Similarly, when Dan Shanahan remarked to *The Buffalo News* in 2023 that performing at Silo City is “about having a long relationship with a space, and the space itself being monumental,” he described the lived dimension of what Campo calls preservation through use.¹⁹⁷ Monumentality here does not arise from restoration or formal designation; it accrues through repeated activation. The reading series, the performances, and the audiences sustain the silos’ presence by entering into relationship with them over time.

Taken together, these perspectives clarify what this case contributes to the broader argument of this thesis. Cosmopolitics in the deindustrialized city unfolds through ongoing coordination rather than resolution. Built form, artistic practice, and community discourse remain in active relation, each conditioning the others’ possibilities. The arts do not stand apart from urban transformation; they participate in the processes through which space acquires meaning and endurance over time.

¹⁹⁷ Melinda Miller, “Torn Space Theater Keeps Pushing Boundaries, Evolving with ‘Generation,’” *The Buffalo News*, August 2, 2023.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the entanglement of experimental music and deindustrialization in Buffalo, New York, across three case studies spanning nearly six decades. By placing Maryanne Amacher's *City Links*, *WBFO* (1967), the Creative Associates' use of *Domus* (1969–1972), and the Just Buffalo Literary Center's Silo City Reading Series (2013–present) alongside the city's ongoing economic transformation, it has argued that Buffalo's experimental arts practices and its deindustrialized condition developed in a mutually constitutive relationship. Rather than treating the city as a backdrop against which artistic innovation occurred, each chapter traced how urban infrastructure, industrial architecture, and material decay entered into the negotiations through which experimentalism became legible, meaningful, and contested. In doing so, the study has surfaced dimensions of Buffalo's musical historiography that existing scholarship has left largely unexamined. Renée Levine Packer's *This Life of Sounds* remains the essential account of the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts, but its focus on the institutional life of the Center necessarily brackets the wider urban ecology in which that institution operated. This thesis has worked outward from that foundation, attending to the city beyond the university: to the displaced neighborhoods and failed renewal projects that shaped the sonic material Amacher broadcast, to the factory architecture of *Domus* that mediated how one of the Creative Associates' most adventurous programming was received, and to the grain elevators whose continued activation by arts organizations sustains an experimental scene decades after the Center closed.

Methodologically, the study has demonstrated what a cosmopolitical approach offers music studies. Actor-network theory has gained traction in music scholarship as a means of

tracing how experimental practices are assembled through human and non-human actors alike, and this thesis has drawn on that tradition throughout. But cosmopolitics, as developed by Isabelle Stengers and elaborated in urban studies by Blok and Farías, presses beyond description toward the question of composition: who and what is permitted to count in the making of a common world, and how are those negotiations conducted? Each case study staged this question differently. In 1967, Amacher's aesthetic enrollment of the city's infrastructure as compositional resource stood in tension with the lived experience of residents for whom those same sounds indexed displacement and economic precarity—a contest over what the city could mean that the broadcast itself could transmit but not resolve. At Domus, the former Pierce-Arrow factory's material design did not merely house performance but actively shaped what kinds of performance could cohere, revealing that the building's industrial past persisted as a condition of its artistic present. At Silo City, atmosphere emerged as the medium through which competing claims on the grain elevators—as an industrial relic, an ecological site for restoration, a heritage landmark, and an artistic venue—were held in provisional relation rather than settled into a single identity. In each instance, cosmopolitics provided a framework for analyzing not only how networks form but what is at stake in their formation.

The thesis has also traced a significant shift in how Buffalo's experimental community relates to the city's deindustrialized condition. Amacher's work, for all its innovation, composed a version of Buffalo largely detached from the socioeconomic realities structuring life beyond the university. Her creative-class imaginary celebrated the city's infrastructure as an aesthetic resource without reckoning with the material losses that infrastructure indexed for working-class residents. The trajectory that followed, from Domus through Silo City, marks a gradual but consequential reorientation. By the time the Silo City Reading Series emerged in 2013,

experimental practice had become embedded within the administrative and funding networks of urban redevelopment, ecological restoration, and community stewardship. The arts no longer operated adjacent to urban transformation; they participated in the processes through which deindustrialized space acquired new meaning and viability. This arc suggests that the relationship between experimentalism and the city is not static but historically contingent, shaped by the changing terms under which artists, institutions, and urban actors negotiate a shared world.

As I consider the possible gaps and areas for expansion beyond this study, I first acknowledge that an assemblage-based approach to historiography, while productive for tracing the relations through which experimental practice takes form, carries its own limitations. By attending to the networks that bind human and non-human actors, such an approach risks distributing agency too evenly across a given assemblage and can at times flatten the very real asymmetries of influence, access, and power that structure who participates and on what terms. The three case studies presented here have foregrounded how urban infrastructure mediates experimental practice, but in doing so, they have necessarily privileged certain nodes within Buffalo's broader experimental ecology—particularly those connected to the University at Buffalo and its institutional resources. I would advise that future accounts of experimentalism in the city would need to reckon more directly with the uneven distribution of influence within these networks and with the actors and communities whose contributions a university-centered narrative risks obscuring.

Chief among these are Buffalo's artist-run organizations: Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, the media arts community that grew out of Gerald O'Grady's Media/Buffalo, and the

Just Buffalo Literary Center. While each appears in this thesis, they figure primarily in relation to the university's avant-garde rather than as subjects of sustained analysis in their own right. This is a significant gap I hope to address in future research. Less dependent on university funding and less tethered to the institutional rhythms of academia, these organizations have proven more durable than the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts, remaining active fixtures of Buffalo's cultural life for decades. Their longevity alone warrants closer study, but so does the breadth of practice they have supported. Hallwalls, in particular, has historically programmed across a wide disciplinary and aesthetic range, hosting work that moves well beyond the boundaries of what university-affiliated new music centers typically recognized as experimental. Future work on the history of Buffalo's experimentalism should follow these organizations on their own terms, tracing the distinct assemblages they have composed and the ways their programming has responded to and reshaped the city's cultural landscape.

Doing so would also bring into view forms of musical practice that this thesis has not addressed. Historically, Buffalo's new wave, punk, and hip-hop scenes all bear relationships to these artist-run spaces, yet they fall outside the scope of this study. These vernacular musical practices represent another dimension of the entanglement between music and deindustrialized space in Buffalo. Future work that takes these scenes seriously as experimental practice, rather than cordoning them off as separate traditions, would enrich the picture considerably and challenge the implicit boundaries of what counts as experimentalism in the city's historiography.

This expanded scope carries a further imperative. The organizations and scenes just described have been historically far more engaged with Black artists and communities in Buffalo than the university-centered avant-garde examined here. Just Buffalo's founding mission

explicitly sought to uplift the city's African American population, and Hallwalls' programming has long reflected a commitment to artists across racial and cultural lines, particularly those working on the East Side. Buffalo's contemporary experimental scene, too, is considerably more inclusive than the mid-century avant-garde from which this study departs. By devoting further study to these organizations, future scholarship would account for a fuller spectrum of people and experiences that constitute experimentalism in Buffalo, rather than reproducing the narrower institutional frame that existing historiography has inherited.

Ultimately, this research demonstrates that experimental artists and arts organizations do not simply endure changing socioeconomic conditions—they adapt through them, working with the materials, spaces, and institutional arrangements that a shifting urban landscape makes available. In Buffalo, the trajectory from the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts to Silo City reveals a pattern of resourceful reorientation: as one set of conditions dissolved, new assemblages formed, enrolling different actors and finding different terms of viability. Understanding these practices in relation to the ebbs and flows of the city itself—its periods of investment and disinvestment, its cycles of demolition and provisional reuse—offers more than a local history. It offers a framework for thinking about how artistic communities sustain themselves under precarious circumstances.

At a moment when arts funding faces severe contraction, when government support for cultural institutions is increasingly uncertain, and when the broader infrastructure sustaining creative work is under sustained pressure, the question Mark Goldman posed in 1983—whether a declining city can serve as an incubator for new ideas—resonates well beyond Buffalo. The

cases examined here suggest that the answer depends not on the resilience of individual artists alone, but on the relationships they cultivate with the spaces available to them, the organizations they build, the communities they serve, and the cities they inhabit. By attending to how those relationships have formed and reformed across Buffalo's deindustrial history, we gain a clearer understanding of what it takes for creative practice to survive, and what stands to be lost when the ground beneath it shifts.

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