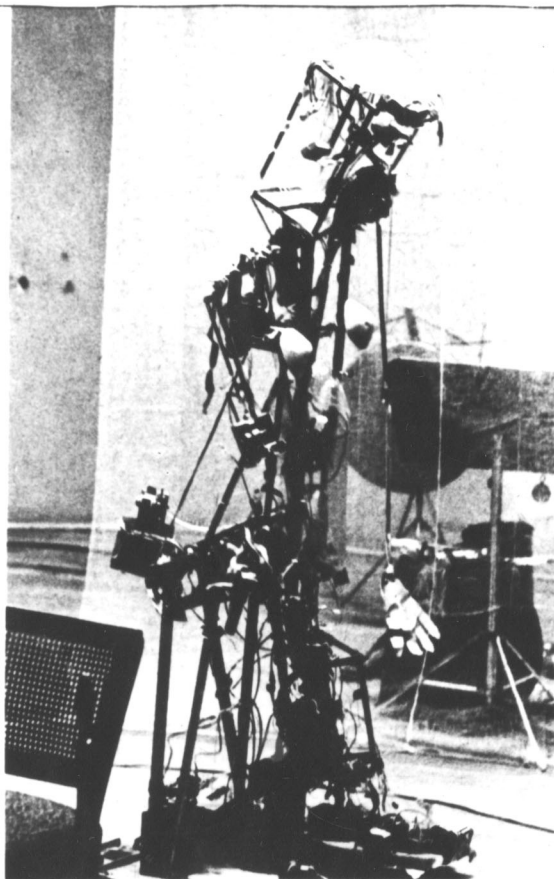
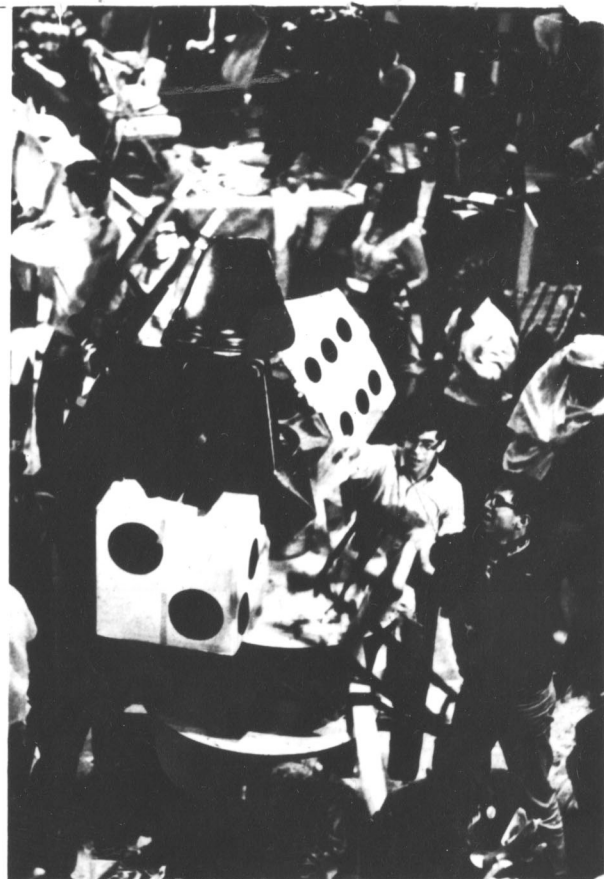




1964: Stockhausen's *Originale*, including Moorman and Kaprow (top), Ginsberg, Neuhaus, Paik, et al.



1964: *K 456*—Paik's robot, which walks, talks, twirls its left breast, excretes white beans, lights its eyes and lifts its hat.



1965: Allan Kaprow's *Push Pull*—the festival's raucous last appearance at Judson Hall.

The Avant Garde Festival: And Now, Shea Stadium

The 11-year-old Avant Garde Festival freely mixes its mediums—performance, poetry, dance, film, video, sculpture and music events—on “stages” ranging from concert hall to city park to armory, ferryboat, sidewheeler, railroad train and now—Nov. '74—a professional baseball stadium.

BY PETER FRANK

The tenth annual New York Festival of the Avant Garde, held December 9, 1973, aboard 20 Penn Central railroad cars on tracks 34 and 35 of Grand Central Station, seemed to mark the institutionalization of that which should not be institutionalized. It is widely and mistakenly believed that the Avant Garde Festival (as suggested by its title) gives exposure to all the newest manifestations of nontraditional art, that it is a kind of cyberneticized Salon des Indépendents. However, as organized by its creator and mastermind Charlotte Moorman, the festival is not a mere anthology of the Best New Art but a self-sufficient whole that is more than the serendipitous sum of its parts.

Since 1966, when the festival moved out of the concert hall and into public spaces, it has assumed a carnival atmosphere within which the various participants have presented their pieces like noncompetitive hawkers. The festival acts as a vehicle for conveying a “sense of new arts” to the audience; this sense—and the fact that it is created by the cooperation of many people doing many different things—is what causes problems for that segment of the audience which attends the festival with preconceived notions of what kind of art is truly advanced and/or how a large group presentation of such art should be organized. For the rest of the audience (including friends of the participants and those who arrive out of curiosity or by accident), the festival is a giddy, invigorating

Author: Peter Frank, associate editor of *Tracks*, contributes to many art magazines.

spectacle, hang the esthetic arguments.

The festival refuses to be tidy; it refuses to confine itself to a single brand of art work. Though dominated by intermedia, it also features poetry, film, video, dance and instrumental and electronic music. The degree of fame of an artist is absolutely no criterion for participation; the festival is neither a gathering of big names nor a roundup of new faces—or, rather it is both. And with no panel of curators sorting the wheat from the chaff but only Moorman inviting everyone she knows to participate, all qualities of work get in. The festival is wildly uneven in every sense.

Moorman began the festival in 1963 as a series of evenings to present the work of musicians involved in radically new ideas and materials, as well as that of their spiritual forebears. This aim reflected Moorman's own inclinations at the time: a promising young cellist doing post-graduate work at Juilliard, she had discovered an alternative—the work of John Cage—to the music she was bored with playing by rote in school. Though Cage was already well-known for his Zen-based philosophy of composing by random methods, the works of those he influenced and his own more radical inventions were receiving little attention. Enthusiastic over the conceptually liberating possibilities of Cage's ideas and procedures, Moorman resolved to bring his music and that of his circle to a worldwide audience.¹

“6 Concerts '63,” as the first festival was called, was held at

Judson Hall on 57th Street and included jazz, electronic and even nonsonic work, as well as more traditional compositions. The idea that music, as a performance art, had promising connections with other art forms ran through the series, as it did through much of the music itself. The inclusion of works by George Brecht, Sylvano Bussotti, Takehisa Kosugi, Joseph Beuys, Giuseppe Chiari, Ben Vautier and other "gestural composers" gives some idea of the heterogeneity of its scope. Cage's works (which dated back to his years at Black Mountain College in the early '50s), along with provocative antecedents by the Futurists, Dadaists and Surrealists, had spawned a generation here, in Europe and in Japan concerned with the possibilities of working *between* the traditional categories of the arts—creating not a combination of mediums, as in a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* where the various arts team up to assume specific primary or supportive functions, but "intermedia" work which in its very conception cannot be identified as, or broken down into, one art form or another.

The Happening, as practiced by Allan Kaprow, Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Whitman, Red Grooms, Wolf Vostell, Japan's Gutai group and many others, was such an interart form, and a group called Fluxus [for a recent discussion, see *Art in America*, July-Aug. '74], with branches around the world, soon emerged as a focus for Happening-related work. (Fluxus events, however, in their spareness and brevity, differed from the sprawling, expressionistic Happening form.) Variations on the intermedia attitude developed with the emergence of other artists from many esthetic backgrounds.

The implications of the various then-radical attitudes and procedures characterizing Moorman's initial series emerged more clearly in her second festival, again held at Judson Hall, in 1964.² This series lasted for two weeks: the first week featured concerts, including the first Edgard Varèse "retrospective" ever held; during the second week an American version of the Happening by German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen titled *Originale* was given nightly.

Originale incorporated parts of Stockhausen compositions, both performed and electronic, but its basic material extended well beyond music. Included in it were parts for "poet" (Allen Ginsberg reading), "artist" (performed on alternate evenings by Robert Delford Brown and Ay-o doing "Action Painting" with eggs, flour and other substances tossed from the top of a ladder), "animal" (played by a chimpanzee), "director" (Allan Kaprow), "conductor" (James Tenney), "newspaper boy" (Alvin Lucier), "model/stripper" (Olga Kluver), "sound engineer" (David Behrman), "film-maker/video artist" (Robert Breer), "percussionist" (Max Neuhaus), "cellist" (Charlotte Moorman), "actor" (Jackson MacLow), "actress" (Gloria Graves) and "Nam June Paik" (a role which, unlike the others, could be performed by one person only—Nam June Paik, whose participation was a condition given

by Stockhausen for the American performance. Moorman's reaction, "What's a Nam June Paik?," marked the auspicious beginning of a partnership that has lasted for over ten years.) The various mediums in *Originale* were more distinct than is usual in an intermedia work (Stockhausen tends to be rather Wagnerian in his thinking), but the performance strove for a homogeneous realization.

The 1965 festival was to be the last at Judson Hall. It, too, featured Happenings, including a performance of Cage's open-ended *Theater Piece*. Allan Kaprow's *Push Pull* turned so ram-bunctious (with people scavenging in the streets for material to incorporate into the ruckus) that Judson Hall would have no more. Moorman was not upset; she had been planning a move anyway. The expansive nature of "post-musical" work demanded larger spaces—and spaces not isolated from everyday life. The Avant Garde Festival was ready to take to the landscape.

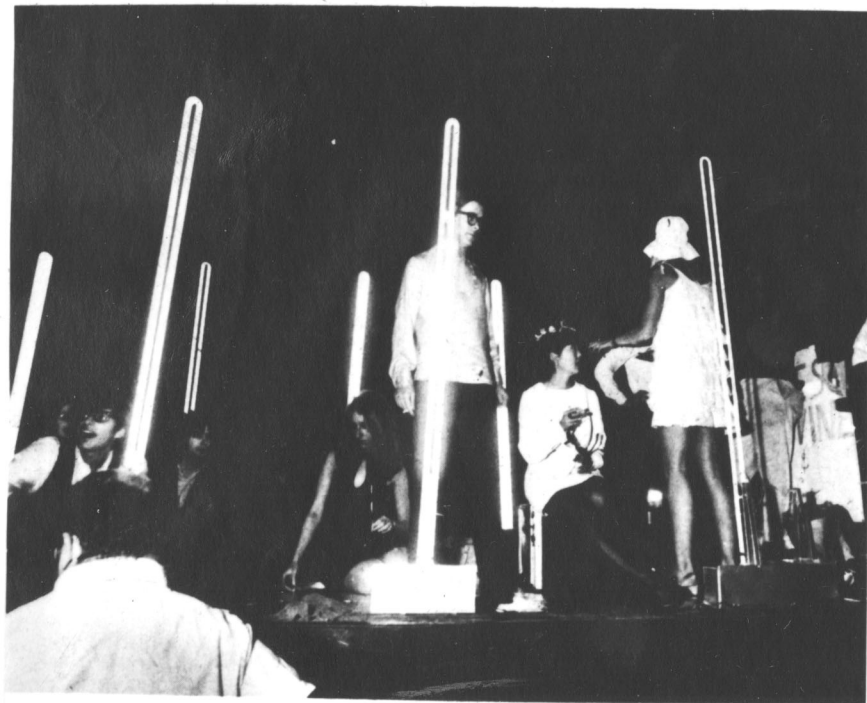
In 1966, the New York City Parks Department proved quite willing to allow and even to help Moorman and her crew use Central Park (it was the first year of the Lindsay administration). The first plein-air festival was organized as an all-day affair, from dawn to midnight. A loose schedule of events took place, along with various continuous and repeated performances. This format of multiple, simultaneous programming became the structure to which the festival still adheres. With this form and with the move into public spaces, the Avant Garde Festival truly became an integral public experience that could attract passersby who would not have known about a more formal indoor event.

The festival has continued to blossom at odd places around New York City since 1966. In '67 it was a 24-hour event on the Staten Island Ferry. The following year it became a nighttime parade down Central Park West. It lasted for a week on two islands in the East River in 1969. After a year's hiatus (during which Moorman was seriously ill), it reappeared in November 1971 in the 69th Regiment Armory—where, 59 years before, the Armory Show had injected the first wholesale dose of avant-garde art into the American vein. In '72 the festival occupied the *Alexander Hamilton*, a Hudson River sidewheeler, moored at the South Street Seaport Museum. In 1973 it invaded Grand Central Station.

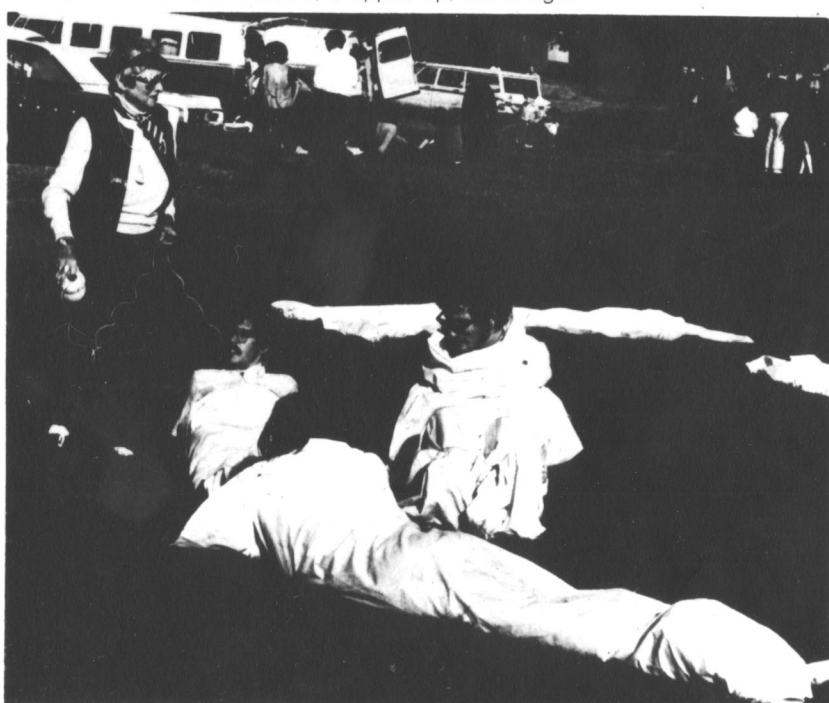
The festival is a tribute to the organizational capabilities of the indomitable Moorman and those like electronic-art impresario and former gallery-owner Howard Wise who assist her. Moorman's skills at dealing with the powers-that-be were taxed to their fullest before the 1973 festival. The event was postponed well over a month, and she wound up having to pull a vast web of strings, some of which extended as far as the Governor's mansion. Even during the festival she continually had to prevent petty bureaucratic foolishness from thwarting some of the artists' projects.

The technical side of each festival is, inevitably, a potential nightmare. With so much to go wrong, much does. Fuses blow

1968: *Photon Two*, a float of neon sculptures by Les Levine in the Central Park West parade.



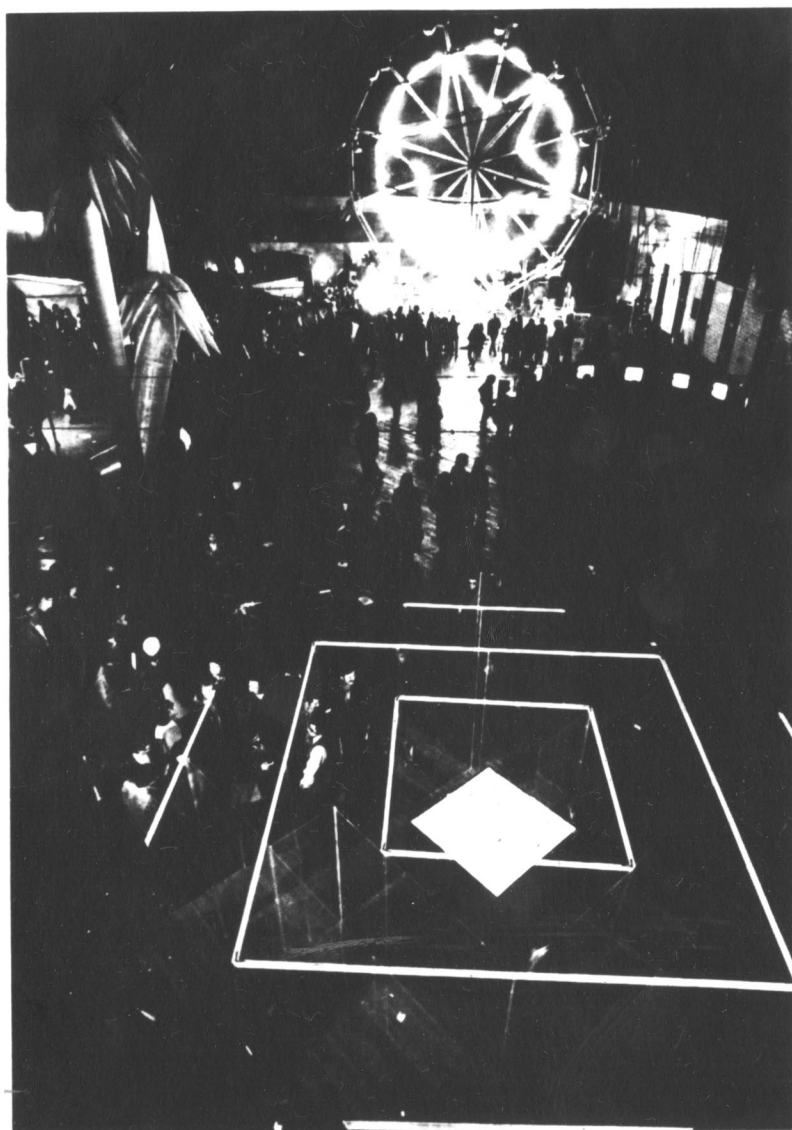
1969: Lil Picard [left] and her piece *Bedsheet Dance* on Ward's Island; the author of this article, wrapped up, sits at right.





1972: Jim McWilliams' *The Intravenous Feeding of Charlotte Moorman*; Moorman performs with her cello submerged in a tank.

1971: At the 69th Regiment Armory, Yoko Ono's *Human Maze* (lower right); Otto Piene's inflatable flowers *Red Rapid Growth* (upper left); Shirley Clarke's *Video Ferris Wheel* (top).



machines break, vandalism takes it toll. Nevertheless, Moorman and festival chairman Frank Pileggi somehow manage to structure every festival so that the hundreds of works presented actually *work*. In addition, many works get swallowed up in an atmosphere of continual noise and activity. Criticism of the carnival-like format is most telling here; smaller, more modest works do tend to get overwhelmed, and facilities for viewing film and video are not usually optimum (though they do reflect the desire of participating video artists and film-makers to escape the movie-theater context). But Moorman arranges for a minimum of interference between chaotically competing works.

Ultimately, participants have to think in terms of contributing to the festival itself; the festival was never meant to be an elegantly staged, expertly selected amassment of exemplary work. Rather, it is itself a *Happening*, a vast *mélange* of works selected and presented by the artists themselves and unified only by the festival environment. While the individual works of the various artists can still be discerned in this *bouillabaisse*, it is, finally, the entity of the festival that counts—on the levels of both art and entertainment (which are far from mutually exclusive).

One often hears the complaint that the festival is essentially the same old blowout, year after year. This may have significance if it reflects the dulling of the viewer's enjoyment of the spectacle, but given the variation in location from year to year, this is not too likely. And as an esthetic argument, this charge represents an appetite for constantly new formats that should be discredited by now after the wasteful faddishness of the 1960s.

It is a fact, however, that since '66 the festival has not changed much, either in its main participants or in the kind of work they have shown. An increasing reliance on technological equipment, or at least the increasing participation of those who depend on it, is about the most evident new development, and one that peaked around '71. There is an ebb and flow in the roster of participants, with many names appearing time and again. It is the dependable old-guard festivalers, above all, who provide the event with a valuable consistency—and who invariably realize the pieces most in tune with the format and spirit of each year's event.

The artist with whom Moorman has worked most closely is the Korean-born Nam June Paik, a Fluxus-related musician and visual artist whose training in the electronic media led him to create what were among the first—and are still among the most original—video art works. Paik has made various television devices for Moorman, including a *TV Bed*, *TV Glasses* and *TV Bra*. And he recently made her a *TV Cello*, which consists entirely of functioning television monitors. Paik's works focus on absurdities in Western society as well as on the formal properties of the video medium, and he tends especially to mock American hangups about sex.³

Paik's *Robot Opera* was the hit of the 1964 festival with K 456, its endearing mechanical androgyne, parading up and down in front of Judson Hall and performing with Paik and Moorman on stage.

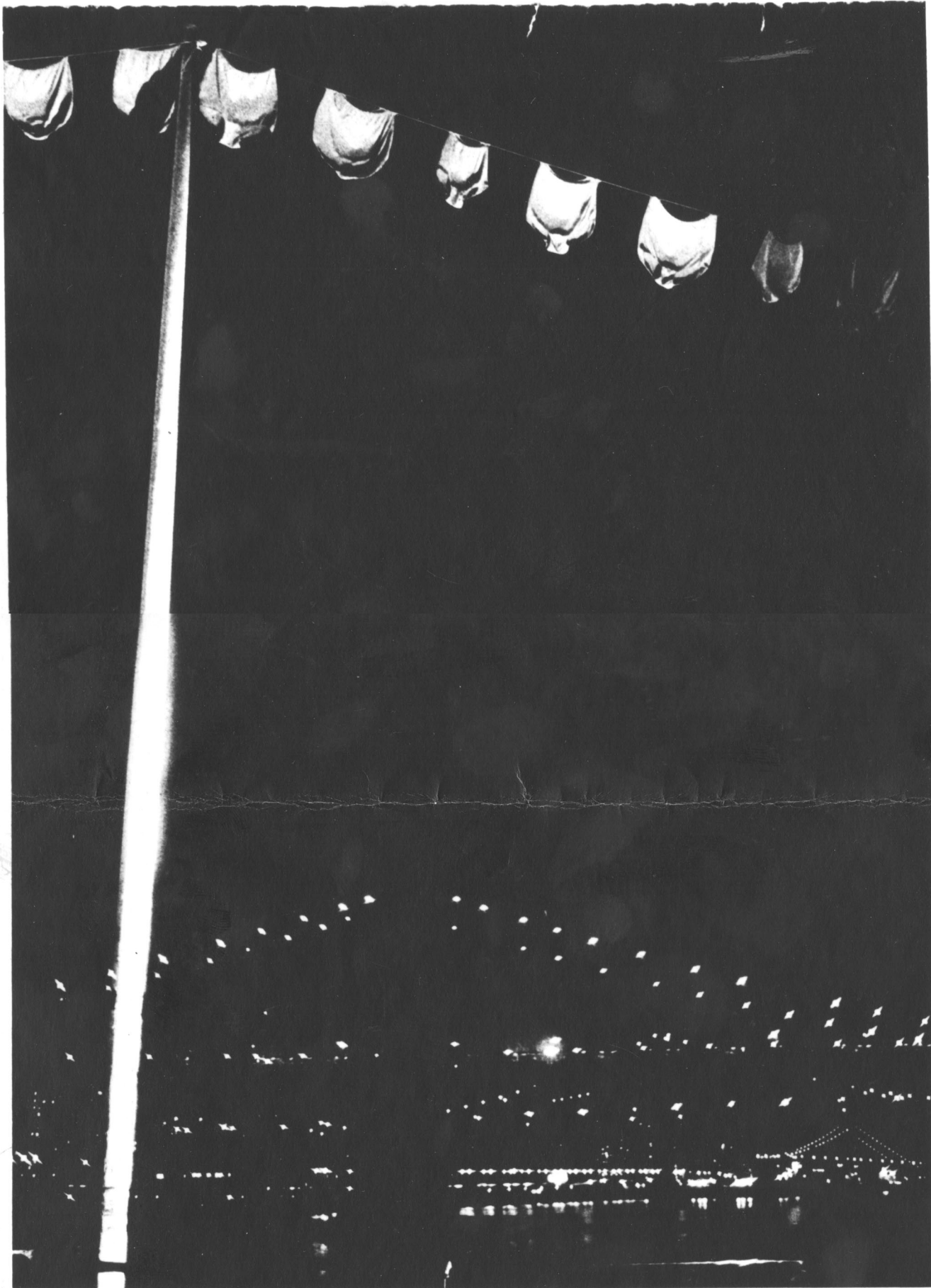
Certain other works by the festival's oldtimers have also branded themselves indelibly onto this spectator's memory. These demonstrate the diversity and range of festival fare:

Geoffrey Hendricks' *Sky Kite*—painted depictions of cloud-filled blue sky hung on a clothesline in Central Park. Five years later, he made an event for the festival in which he sat silently on a mound of dirt in the Armory, mourning the end of his marriage (his wedding ring was at the bottom of the mound).

Alison Knowles's interviews with people about their shoes at the Central Park festival. In 1972, she served *Identical Lunches*—tuna fish on whole wheat with lettuce, butter and a secret ingredient—to festival visitors.

Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* in Central Park, in which members of the audience were invited to come up and cut away the black bags and clothing the performers were wearing. For *F Art*, 1973, she filled a railroad car with empty boxes labeled with names of parts of her physical and psychic anatomy.

Lil Picard's vignettes, which have ranged from her *Sweet Peace*



1972: The Hudson River sidewheeler, *Alexander Hamilton*, bedecked with Ay-o's Rainbow Streamers.

lollipops and peas on the Staten Island Ferry to *Bedsheet Dance*, in which volunteers were wrapped in bedsheets during the Ward's Island festival.

Jackson MacLow's tapes of his long, electrifying word works, often accompanied by him and others reading aloud.

Joe Jones's madcap music machines—suspended garlands, bicycles and pull toys of working musical instruments—which have become a festival favorite.

Al Hansen's toilet-paper festoons of Central Park trees. For the parade festival, he filled the air with balloons.

Dick Higgins' *Danger Musics*, as he bellowed himself hoarse while having his head shaved in Central Park, at the Conservatory Pond. Later, in the Armory festival, he released white mice into the crowd while soliciting responses to the question, "And how are some of the ways you go upstairs?"

Jim McWilliams' 24 hours spent dressed in a diver's suit, slowly dragging himself around the deck of the Staten Island Ferry in '67. During the 1972 festival on the *Alexander Hamilton*, he had Moorman immerse herself, complete with cello, in a huge tank of water.

Other veteran contributors include film-makers Jud Yalkut, Stan Brakhage, Takahiko Iimura, Michael Snow, Storm De Hirsch, Stan VanDerBeek, James Broughton, Francis Lee, Tony Conrad, Robert Breer, Paul Sharits, Bruce Conner, Lawrence and Sheila Booth, David Wise, Si Fried, Bruce Baille, Henry Niese, Carl Linder, Doris Chase, Red Grooms, Arthur and Corrine Cantrill; dancers Yvonne Rainer, Meredith Monk, Elaine Summers, Marilyn Wood, Edith Stephen, Judith Scott; video artists Shirley Clarke, Woody and Steine Vasulka, Ed Emshwiller, Bill and Louise Etra, Ralph Hocking, Global Groove, Media Bus, Andy Mann, Frank Gillette, Shigeiko Kubota, Ira Schneider, Douglas Davis, Susan Milano, Shridhar Bapat, Aldo Tambellini, Jackie Cassen, Bill Viola, Edin Velez; mixed-media composers and artists Philip Corner, James Tenney, Benjamin Patterson, Bob Watts, Ray Johnson, Alvin and Mary Lucier, Bici Forbes, Lette Eisenhauer, Carolee Schneemann, Joey Skaggs, David Behrman, Yoshimasa Wada, Liz Phillips, Max Neuhaus, Tony Martin, Gary Harris, Fred Stern, Nelson Howe, Wolf Vostell, David Nunemaker, Walter Segal, Gregory Battcock, Bob Wood, the late Ken Dewey; jazz musicians Jimmy Guiffre, Ornette Coleman, Don Heckman, Ed Summerlin, Sun Ra, Cecil Taylor; destruction artists Ralph Ortiz, Jean Toche, Jon Hendricks; sculptors Christo, Tal Streeter, Oliver Andrews, Marta Minujin, Otto Piene, Gilles Larrain, Ernst Lurker, Antoni Miralda, Antoni Muntadas, Jean Dupuy. And others.

The work in the festival has long stood apart from gallery-exhibited and stage-performed art that receives general *dernier-critique* acceptance. Only recently, as the influence of the festival's founding mothers and fathers makes itself felt in the written, video and performance works of Conceptual, body and process artists, has the Avant Garde Festival gained any recognition in the art world—and then uneasily.

There is finally but one way to judge the success of these festivals in anything like critical terms: does each one work, as an entity, in its year's environment? In retrospect and from my personal point of view, only the 1968 and '71 festivals have not been up to snuff. In the former, the continuous mobility of the parade format seemed destructive to the individual pieces—the viewer should have been allowed the tempo of his own delectation of all the works; and in '71, the Armory interior proved too vast, noisy and confused even by the festival's own standards. But all the festivals have been marvelous in their manageable ungainliness, thanks almost entirely to Charlotte Moorman's skill at making order out of chaos.

Her Avant Garde Festivals are grandiose and temporary celebrations, likely but not certain bellwethers for the newest in—and between—the arts, with good times to be had by all. □

1. The concerts began specifically as a means of giving pianist Frederic Rzewski a New York concert. Discussions with concert manager Norman Seaman and composers Cage, Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, David Behrman and Edgard Varèse led to the organization of the whole series.

2. That year the term "avant garde" was introduced into the title despite the misgivings of Moorman and the other founders of the festival, who believed that the term indicated "art of the future," while the festival was dedicated to the art of the present (cf. Varèse's dictum: "The modern artist is not 50 years ahead of his time, the modern audience is 50 years behind"). But the term had to be included to prevent further public misunderstandings of the series' aims. The first year, a wealthy matron attended a Cage performance unprepared for the amplified barrage of sound that assaulted her. Claiming that this experience "permanently impaired" her hearing, she initiated a lawsuit against Moorman. It was ultimately unsuccessful, but Moorman had no desire to take further chances; hence the inclusion of the distasteful but effectively forbidding denomination "avant garde."

3. Dwelling on this subject backfired on Paik and Moorman during a New York performance of his *Opera Sextonique*, Feb. 9, 1967. The four-"aria" composition written for Moorman, which had already been presented in Europe (and even in Philadelphia), calls for her to perform in various stages of undress. The New York performance was halted by the police at the beginning of the second "aria"; a long legal case ensued, and Moorman and Paik were convicted of indecent exposure, among other charges, and were given suspended sentences. The brouhaha made Moorman and her festival somewhat dubious in the eyes of the controversy-shy politicians with whom she must negotiate every year, despite the fact that Paik's opera was an event separate from the festival. Since that time Moorman informs all participants that their only restrictions are "no politics and no nudity," as she is liable for all offenses and is the more vulnerable for her previous skirmishes.

Through the cooperation of the Mets, the Jets, the Yankees and the Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Administration of N.Y.C., this year's festival will take place Nov. 16 (rain date Nov. 17) at Shea Stadium. The lineup so far: Otto Piene has the playing field, Yoko Ono the top tier, Ay-o all the flagpoles, with poetry on the scoreboard, electronic music over the P.A. system and various works indoors on three levels. Planes passing over, heading for nearby airports, will announce the festival to their passengers.

1973: Moorman and Paik performing his *Music is a Mass Transit too—So is the Bra* on Paik's "train cello," inspired by the festival's locale, tracks 34 and 35 of Grand Central Station. All photos courtesy of Peter Moore.

