Arthur Russell, Downtown and the World — NYU — 10 October 2009

I'm very happy to be here, of course, and I'd like to begin by thanking Sukhdev Sandhu for initiating the conference and inviting me to speak. I'd also like to extend my thanks to Peter Gordon, who along with Sukhdev and myself has worked hard to make it all happen. Many people have had to make a special effort to be here today. Of those, I'd like to extend a special welcome to Arthur's family — Arthur's parents Chuck and Emily, his sisters Kate and Julie, as well as the extended family — Eric, Emily, Beau and Rachel. Tom, we're also especially pleased you could make it today — I know it hasn't been straightforward. There are others I should probably mention, but perhaps I could *say instead* that today is a special day because it amounts to a coming together of so many people who were close with Arthur. Arthur wrote many great songs, which contained many great lines. The one that resonates today is: "I want to see all my friends at once."

The idea to write a biography of Arthur was hatched ten years ago when I interviewed a DJ called Steve D'Acquisto for my first book, *Love Saves the Day*. During the interview Steve could barely contain his enthusiasm for Arthur. As he told me: "Arthur wrote classical music, avant-garde dance music, rock and roll, R&B and sometimes country, too. How can I explain it? He was like Picasso. He was a fantastic artist." Steve urged me to write a biography about Arthur, and I started work on the project when *Love Saves the Day* went into production in the summer of 2003. (In fact my first big interview was with Peter.) I remember there being a degree of scepticism about the viability of a biography, but I pressed on with the research. Then, six months later, and coinciding with the launch of *Love Saves the Day*, Audika and Soul Jazz released two Arthur compilations, and these compilations prompted David Toop, Ben Ratliff and Sasha Frere-Jones to publish high-profile features about Arthur in the *Wire*, the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*. Arthur had never received this level of critical acclaim while he was alive, and the new wave of interest in all things Arthur also put an end to doubts about the viability of a biography.

When I set out to write the book, my main concern was to pull together the details of Arthur's rather crazy life, because that's the primary task of the biographer. So I tried to chart his relationships with women and then men, the previously murky details of his time in Iowa City and San Francisco, the story of his surprise move to Italy in the summer of 1977, his response to the news he had contracted HIV and then AIDS, and so on. I also attempted to log his musical life — his performances and recordings, as well as the development of the elements that came to make up his sound — the amplified cello, the wispy voice, the Buddhist sensibility, the turn to the unexpected and the unconventional.

As these elements came together, however, I began to realise that it was just as important to explore the context of Arthur's life — the way in which different scenes and sounds might have influenced him, the way in which he might have influenced them, and the bigger question of what all of this might mean. Sometimes I had doubts about this line of enquiry, and sometimes others had doubts on my behalf. It was easy to understand why:

Arthur was such a quirky and unusual figure he sometimes seemed to exist in his own dimension, as if the outside world wasn't there, or was merely an obstacle to the task of making music. However, I was even more struck by the way Arthur was continuously driven to work collaboratively, rather than alone, and the social settings that attracted him were also too compelling to be ignored — and so I embraced this element of Arthur's life because ultimately Arthur did, too.

Of course Arthur had no say on the Oskaloosan setting into which he was born, yet that chance event still resonated. It's generally accepted that the 1950s was a largely conservative decade, and although Arthur was born into an open-minded family, his Iowan surroundings were in many respects typical of both Middle America and the values that were driving US culture. Arthur's decision to run away first to Iowa City and then San Francisco was equally resonant, for it was here that the countercultural movement attempted to set out its progressive riposte to conservatism. Then, when that movement began to dissipate, Arthur moved to New York at the very moment the city was about to embark on an extraordinarily intense period of musical creativity.

Arthur's move to New York overlapped with a set of generic developments that continue to dominate the sonic spectrum. It was during the 1970s that disco, new wave and hip hop broke through to reshape the contours of popular music in the Western world. At the same time, minimalism and what came to be known as new music rose to challenge atonal serialism as the dominant practice within the field of compositional music. This was a tumultuous, highly creative period, and it was enough to persuade Arthur to remain in the city. "New York is where it's happening," he told Chuck in the summer of 1973, just before he began studying at the Manhattan School of Music. "San Francisco is nicer, but New York is where it's happening."

Far from obscuring the "real Arthur", these contexts revealed the depth and significance of his work. Arthur demonstrated a remarkable openness to sound while he lived in San Francisco where studied simultaneously at the Ali Akbar College of Music and the San Francisco Conservatory while writing folk songs for the guitar and cello. When he arrived in New York, Arthur continued to pursue these sounds in the downtown compositional scene, especially at the Kitchen and the Experimental Intermedia Foundation. Yet he also submerged himself in the new wave scene that was unfolding at venues such as CBGB's and the dance scene that was being pioneered at the Loft, the Gallery and the Paradise Garage. He was also fascinated by hip hop, which he followed at the Roxy, and he went around telling doubters that hip hop was going to be the next big thing.

Arthur had been socially and spiritually happy in San Francisco, and he'd also found a great deal to satisfy him musically in that city as well. But he opted to stay in New York in order to embed himself within the music scenes that were flourishing there during the 1970s and early 1980s. Indeed, Arthur's openness to the sonic innovations of these scenes and his *unrivalled* willingness to travel between them was so marked it became one of his enduring characteristics. It follows, then, that it's only by understanding Arthur within the milieu in which he worked that we can fully appreciate his importance, for he was

nothing less than one of the most mobile, open and engaged musicians to live in New York — and this during what might have been the city's most influential period in its musical history. It follows that those of us who want to understand more about this hugely important era in music history can attempt to do this by thinking about Arthur, because more than any other musician he came to embody the era through his itinerant engagements.

It's important to add, of course, that Arthur didn't enter any of these scenes to simply grasp their groundbreaking innovations and merely repeat them. He also brought his own aesthetic preferences—his amplified cello, his mobile voice, his Buddhist lightness, his irrefutable funk—into these contexts. As a result, when he produced compositional music or new wave or disco or hip hop-inflected pop, it sounded distinctive and Arthur-like. Guided perhaps by a Buddhist willingness to seek out connections, Arthur also worked not only within genre but also between genre. As a composer, he helped pioneer the eventually prolific dialogue between orchestral music and pop/rock, and he reached out to black dance with more energy than any of his downtown composer peers. His use of classical Indian, western orchestral and jazz techniques helped him establish the future coordinates of mutant disco and 1980s dance music. And although his introduction of a skittish syncopation into his twelve-inch repertoire was deemed to be undanceable by some, the sound went on to be popularised by broken beat and then dubstep years down the line. Anticipating the emergence of Indie music, Arthur also developed a strand of folk-oriented pop that was emotionally honest and delicately vulnerable. By the time Indie had established this style as its own, he was busy introducing a black funk and hip hop sensibility into his electronic pop. While many of his contemporaries found his vision unconvincing, history has demonstrated he was simply ahead of his time.

The ability to move without inhibition — to record and listen without prejudice — was pivotal to Arthur. As if to demonstrate the mutability of sound, he enjoyed rolling the same set of lyrics over a range of instrumental backdrops, and ended up moving with such freedom it became impossible to associate him with a single style. This set Arthur apart from other notably open-minded downtowners such as Rhys Chatham and Philip Glass, who worked across art music, rock and jazz, yet were ultimately rooted in the compositional scene. It also set him apart from Laurie Anderson and David Byrne, whose eclecticism could be located in experimental pop. No navigation system could pinpoint the whereabouts of Arthur. As Philip Glass told me: "[Arthur] was way ahead of other people in understanding that the walls between concert music and popular music and avant-garde music were illusory, that they need not exist. He lived in a world in which those walls weren't there."

It's tempting to believe that each time Arthur picked up a musical instrument or entered a recording studio, he paused to wonder what would happen if he tried to do things differently. Arthur devolved the responsibilities of the conductor to his musicians during rehearsals for an orchestral performance; he shepherded a bunch of percussion-happy dancers into Blank Tapes Studios in order to capture their energy on vinyl; he opened windows to let the "musicianship of the street" feed into his mixes; he encouraged gospel-trained vocalists to unlearn what they had been taught in order to become more

expressive; and when he spotted an old school friend playing a broken guitar, he whisked him into the studio because, as Donald Murk (a companion from that moment) notes, he believed that "everybody has a voice". As Arthur explored the limits of musicianship, accomplished collaborators gleaned ideas about how they could develop their practice. As the percussionist Mustafa Ahmed told me: "Arthur played a 'classical/acoustic' instrument, yet embraced and experimented with every new electronic gadget he could afford or get his hands on. Whenever he learned about a new drum machine or synthesizer, he would tell me about it. In spite of my initial opposition, he purchased electronic drum pads and gave them to me to use when I performed with him. That forced me to learn the new technology, and I eventually came to incorporate these new devices into other aspects of my music."

Whenever he could, Arthur worked along the non-hierarchical, interconnected, tangential lines of the rhizome — the horizontal root structure evoked by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari — and in so doing established the framework for an egalitarian, cooperative music practice (what I've described elsewhere as a rhizomatic musicianship). He created music within a range of collaborative networks, and emphasised the group over his own individual presence when it came to releasing music. He democratised the music-making process by encouraging his co-musicians and vocalists to improvise. He immersed himself in editing, establishing a discontinuous universe of takes, tracks and effects. He recorded several versions of the same song in order to dismantle the idea of the definitive version. He prioritised the open process of live performance above the closed circuit of the commodified recording. He made music that was aesthetically decentred, loosely structured, non-hierarchical and non-teleological. He explored orchestral music, folk music, pop and new wave, as well as disco and dance music, and usually worked on these sounds simultaneously. He immersed himself in cultures that were socially inclusive rather than exclusive, and prioritised the strains of orchestral music, pop, dance and hip hop that were associated with the feminine, the black and the gay (or the non-dominant). Finally, he made connections between sounds and scenes that were to varying degrees segmented. He had plenty of opportunities to stay with one sound in order to build a career, or to emphasise himself above his collaborators, or repeat himself in order to make more money — but rejected these opportunities repeatedly.[1]

It would have been forgivable if, considering the extraordinary breadth of Arthur's ambition, his music sounded like the work of an amateur idealist, but in fact his contributions were consistently notable. As an orchestral musician he worked as Music Director at the Kitchen, the groundbreaking venue for experimental composition, and recorded pieces for the pioneering composer Philip Glass and the avant-garde theatre director Robert Wilson. In the pop/rock sphere Arthur put together demos for the legendary Columbia A&R executive John Hammond, who believed he had the potential to become the next Bob Dylan or Bruce Springsteen, and he also played with the Necessaries, a new wave band signed to Sire, the label that broke the Ramones, Richard Hell & the Voidoids and Talking Heads. Exploring the outer reaches of dance, he recorded a series of twelve-inch singles that blazed a trail between disco and house, working with pioneering engineers, producers and remixers such as Bob Blank, Walter Gibbons, François Kevorkian and Larry Levan. As he deepened his work, he cultivated a

critically acclaimed voice-cello aesthetic that drew on orchestral music, dub, folk and dance. Along the way he co-founded Sleeping Bag Records, one of the most influential independent labels for 1980s dance and hip hop.

In the end Arthur spread himself across too many scenes and worked with too many musicians to build up a major reputation in a single genre. Yet Arthur's lack of commercial success cannot be attributed solely to the music industry's distrust of eclecticism. Arthur's perfectionism was peppered with bloody-mindedness. As Arthur's Oskaloosan friend Kent Goshorn commented at Arthur's memorial service: "When it came to music, if you liked something [Arthur] would change it because it was too easy. If you didn't like it he would harass you on the phone for days trying to find out exactly what you didn't like." Arthur turned being difficult into an art form. On one occasion he spent a whole day fine-tuning the sound of a kick drum while his co-musicians waited to begin, and collaborators became so accustomed to his protracted methods they learned to stop asking what they were working on, or when a certain piece might be finished. The Walkman contributed to Arthur's indecisiveness inasmuch as it enabled him to switch between two versions of a demo recording again and again as he tried to decide which was superior. But although Arthur found it easy to become embroiled in a cycle of introspection, his recordings rarely suffered from the attention to detail. Like an accomplished improviser, the ease of his sound masked the prodigious amount of work that went into its making.

There was something beautiful about Arthur's reluctance to decide on a final mix for many of his works. Playing, recording and mixing amounted to a process of possibility, with every route a choice almost too tempting to resist, and the prospect of deciding on a final version — when a song would become static and therefore experience a form of death — was often too painful to take. Instead Arthur preferred to see music as a process that could reproduce itself in infinite ways and, in so doing, hint at the complexity and innate possibility of the universe. When he wrote orchestral music Arthur was drawn to the "generative" or "open form" approach championed by Christian Wolff (one of his mentors) because it allowed the musicians to embark on an uncharted exploration of sound. Dance music appealed in part because the practice of remixing allowed songs to experience several lives. Opportunities to release multiple versions of the same song were otherwise scarce, yet Arthur generated something like a thousand reel-to-reel tapes of recordings. Because much of that music was unfinished, it contained the promise of future life.

Nevertheless Arthur's perfectionism and philosophical resistance to finishing shouldn't be allowed to obscure the fact that his output was substantial before he died of complications arising from AIDS in 1992. In addition to his twelve-inch singles, Arthur released four albums of his own music and two albums with the Necessaries, and he managed all of this even though he didn't release any of the music he recorded during the last five years of his life — a period of apparently deliberate procrastination. Arthur also laid down enough electronic pop, folk-oriented rock, acoustic songs and off-the-wall dance tracks to fill four posthumous albums of previously unreleased material — *Another Thought*, *Calling Out of Context*, *Springfield* and *Love Is Overtaking Me* — while another

posthumous release, *First Thought Best Thought*, included fresh compositional pieces.[2] If Arthur was a serial procrastinator, as he is reputed to be, he was certainly a prolific one.

Whether they nestled within or between the coordinates of genre, Arthur's recordings always sounded particular. Innocent yet sophisticated, light yet serious, smooth yet angular, Arthur's songs, orchestral compositions and dance recordings contained seemingly irreconcilable contradictions, something that the Loft host David Mancuso captures when he describes Arthur as being "Dylan and Coltrane rolled into one." In short, Arthur could connect with the soul, and do so while embracing risk. Having worked with Captain Beefheart and Jeff Buckley, the guitarist Gary Lucas remains captivated by Arthur, with whom he worked in the 1980s. As Gary told me: "There was the Corn belt-transplanted-to-New-York sensibility, the gay sensibility, the Buddhist sensibility — everything was in the mix. That's what the best artists do. They give you a striking sense of personality."

The task of listening to that personality is one thing; writing about it is quite another. In contrast to the archetypal all-action heroes and anti-heroes about whom biographies are regularly written, Arthur was a bashful, complicated musician whose career could double as a tutorial in the frustration of narrative. Subdividing into a series of unresolved tangents, Arthur's life and work lacked a defining arc, and because his overwhelming concern was to get the music right, moments of commercial promise ended in argument or anti-climax. In the end Arthur died a marginal figure because he wasn't sufficiently self-centred, competitive or coherent to convince the marketing departments of New York's record companies to embrace his vision. But for those who judged him according to his ability to work collectively, creatively and with contradiction, all without recourse to materialism and celebrity, his subjugated story suggests an alternative way of working in the world.

Despite the recent media attention, Arthur remains a relatively marginal figure in accounts of the downtown era, which tend to focus on the white and the masculine, and in so doing emphasise individuals such as Glenn Branca, James Chance, Rhys Chatham and Richard Hell, as well as groups such as the New York Dolls, the Ramones, Sonic Youth, Suicide, the Swans, Talking Heads and the Velvet Underground.[3] Arthur lived in a neighbourhood that was heavily Latin, went to clubs that were predominantly gay and black, worked with women who were drawn to the ethereal, and wrote songs with men who were interested in the sublime. As Peter Zummo told me: "Arthur was always the one to bring in people from different backgrounds — blacks, gays, people from Brooklyn and the Bronx. To him there was no question that these people could be drawn into the white downtown avant-garde scene." No other downtowner engaged with the visceral, creative, transcendental world of black gay aesthetics to the same degree as Arthur, and the results could be heard in his performances and recordings. Writing in the *New York Times*, Ben Ratliff recognised as much when he commented: "Many New York artists around that time were using aggression and anxiety in their work. Russell's work had no aggression in it whatsoever, but patience and kindness instead; this is one of the reasons it doesn't now feel stuck in its time."[4]

Arthur's ability to transcend time aligns him with a small but precious group of artists, composers, musicians and writers whose engagement with the world and with art was so advanced they only came to be appreciated after their passing. Our biggest regret must be that Arthur, a sweet and unassuming visionary, isn't around to receive the applause, and even spent his last years wondering if he had failed in his objectives. As Jon Gibson said of an encounter he shared with Arthur towards the end of Arthur's life: "I ran into him on the street and he told me, 'Well, I didn't get as far as I wanted to, or make the impact I wanted to. I didn't make the right moves at the right time. I blew it.'"

Yet having barely existed at the margins of US culture, Arthur can now be seen to have reverberated at its centre — the awkward kid from the Corn Belt who crossed the country to become a low-key, high-energy figure in one of the most prolific periods in New York's music history. The evidence for that is growing, and includes the beautifully crafted CDs that have been released by Audika, Matt Wolf's eloquent and moving documentary film *Wild Combination*, the cover versions of Arthur songs that are being performed and released by other musicians, the conference we're staging here today, and hopefully the book I've written, too. Taken together, this resolute and dedicated activity makes it clear that Arthur didn't do "it all wrong", as he feared at the end of his life, but instead got most things right, as he had hoped for so long. As Steven Hall told me: "Arthur was convinced that he would reach a wider audience eventually. He used to joke that everything he did would be recognised a decade later." Give or take a year or two, that forecast has turned out to be impressively accurate.

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[1] While critics such as Ronald Bogue, Jeremy Gilbert, Drew Hemment, Tim Jordan and Simon Reynolds have applied Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's critical framework to music in their examination of composers who work within a single genre, or genres that feature rhizomatic aesthetics, the question of how a musician might work according to these principles has yet to be addressed. Russell suggests how a musician might work rhizomatically, not just in terms of the final structure of the music but also in terms of how that music is created. This argument is developed in more detail in Lawrence, *Connecting with the Cosmic*, which was published as an on-line monograph in *Liminalities*, 3, 3, October 2007, 1-84, http://liminalities.net/3-3/russell.htm. For earlier writings on the relevance of Deleuze and Guattari to music, see the articles by Bogue, Gilbert and Hemment in Buchanan and Swiboda (eds.), *Deleuze and Music*; Jordan, "Collective Bodies", 125-44; and Reynolds, *Energy Flash*.

[2] Point Music released *Another Thought* in 1994. Audika Records released *Calling Out of Context* in 2004, *First Thought Best Thought* and *Springfield* in 2006, and *Love Is Overtaking Me* in 2008.

[3] Such as Tom Johnson's *The Voice of New Music*, Marvin Taylor's edited collection *The Downtown Book*, the Soul Jazz publication *New York Noise*, Kyle Gann's *Music Downtown*, and so on.

[4] Ben Ratliff, "The Many Faces, and Grooves, of Arthur Russell", *New York Times*, 29 February 2004.