

GREY ART NYU GALLERY

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A Feast of Astonishments: Charlotte Moorman and the Avant-Garde, 1960s–1980s

*First major exhibition devoted to critical but under-recognized figure
in postwar avant-garde, dubbed the “topless cellist.”*

**On view at Grey Art Gallery
September 8–December 10, 2016**

A Feast of Astonishments: Charlotte Moorman and the Avant-Garde, 1960s–1980s is the first exhibition to explore the vital contributions of one of the most overlooked figures of her generation. On view at **New York University’s Grey Art Gallery** from **September 8 to December 10, 2016**, the show illuminates how Charlotte Moorman (1933–1991) metamorphosed from a classically trained cellist into a barrier-breaking figure in performance art and an impresario of the postwar avant-garde. Included among the more than 300 items on view—artworks, film clips, music scores, audio recordings, documentary photographs, snapshots, performance props and costumes, ephemera, and correspondence—are 5 cello-based sculptural works that Moorman herself created.

For three decades beginning in 1960, Moorman’s dedication to a radically new approach to music and art took many forms, some extreme, from playing the cello while suspended by helium balloons over the Sydney Opera House to performing in the nude on an “ice cello.” Reflecting Moorman’s commitment to finding ways to bring new art to the broadest possible public, including producing events literally in the streets of New York, *A Feast of Astonishments* features dozens of photographs of Moorman’s performances from the 1960s through 1980s, ephemera related to her organization of the New York Avant Garde Festivals between 1963 and 1980, and sculptures and musical scores by Nam June Paik, her frequent collaborator. The vast majority of the objects in the exhibition have never before been exhibited. Together, they offer fresh insights into Moorman’s improbable career in the heady, event-filled decades of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

A Feast of Astonishments was organized by the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, in partnership with Northwestern’s Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, home to the Charlotte Moorman Archive.

“Some artists manage to uncannily embody in their work the key concerns of their times. Charlotte Moorman numbers among them,” notes **Lynn Gumpert**, the Grey’s director. “It’s very fitting that this show is presented at NYU’s Grey Art Gallery, as much of Moorman’s groundbreaking work took place here in New York City.” **Lisa Corrin** adds, “Charlotte Moorman is mainly remembered as a muse to Nam June Paik, but she was much more. In light of her influence on contemporary performance and her role as an unequalled popularizer of the avant-garde, appreciation of her role as a seminal figure in her own right is long overdue.”

Exhibition

A Feast of Astonishments is presented in four loosely chronological sections. **The Early Years** explores the beginnings of Moorman’s career in the early to mid-1960s. After moving to New York to study at the Julliard School in 1957, Moorman, who was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, became increasingly drawn to the experimental art and music of the avant-garde scene then evolving in SoHo. This section highlights her transformation from Julliard-trained cellist to radical artist. It includes photographs and publicity shots of her cello performances, as well as programs for recitals by cutting-edge artists working in downtown New York City. A flyer for Yoko Ono’s first major solo concert of experimental music lists Moorman, who helped produce the show and also performed in it, as “personal manager for Miss Ono.”

The second section, **Repertoire**, details the works Moorman performed repeatedly throughout her career. Providing context for John Cage’s *26’1.1499” for a String Player*—a seminal work that she played in venues ranging from orchestra halls to *The Tonight Show*—is Moorman’s heavily annotated score, which she used in performances for over 30 years. This personal copy has inscriptions prompting her to fry an egg, throw a cymbal on the floor, and “bomb,” or play a few bars on the practice bomb she transformed into a cello—actions that can be seen in a never-before-exhibited black-and-white television clip of Moorman performing the Cage piece in an appearance on *The Mike Douglas Show* (1967). This is paired with an affecting black-and-white photograph by Peter Moore (1965) showing her performing the “Human Cello” section of the piece, leaning over the artist Nam June Paik’s bare back, intensely strumming him with a bow. Another historic moment represented in the exhibition is the 1967 performance of Paik’s *Opera Sextronique*, which led to Moorman’s arrest on indecency charges.

Cellos representative of Moorman’s career made from various materials are also featured, including two *Bomb Cellos* (1965/1990). These painted metal bombs, to which Moorman added strings and played as part of John Cage’s *26’1.1499”* beginning in the early 1960s, are striking examples of how Moorman’s interpretations of that piece changed with the times, accreting new props and ideas with unceasing imagination. This section also displays key mixed-media works by Paik, including *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* (1969), *TV Cello* (1971/1990), and *Charlotte Moorman II*, an homage to Moorman created in 1995, after her death.

Moorman Abroad, the show’s third section, examines her role as an instigator and key participant in the transatlantic avant-garde. Moorman embarked for West Germany with Paik in 1965, participating in the *24 Hours* festival in Wuppertal, where in multiple venues she interpreted Cage’s *26’1* as “a kind of pop music,” with a gong, phone chimes, and radio sounds.

Later performances in West Germany are also amply documented in *A Feast of Astonishments* by, among other items, photographs of Moorman laying upon a bed of large TV monitors on a sidewalk, bowing her cello as she is observed by a crowd of onlookers (Nam June Paik's *TV Bed*, 1972); a hand-drawn poster created by Jörg Immendorff for a concert in Düsseldorf (1966); and a felt cello cover emblazoned with a red cross, used by Moorman in performances of *Infiltration Homogen for Cello*, the only work Joseph Beuys ever created for another artist.

This section also features a score and video of Moorman performing Giuseppe Chiari's *Per Arco*. In Moorman's interpretation, this composition consisted of five minutes of the recorded sounds of bombs falling during World War II, one minute and forty seconds of silence, and six minutes of her reaction to the sounds of war with her cello and bow.

The final section, **Avant Garde Festivals**, is devoted to the fifteen Annual Avant Garde Festivals Moorman organized in New York between 1963 and 1980. In providing a detailed look at these almost-forgotten extravaganzas, *A Feast of Astonishments* supplies an important missing chapter in the history of contemporary art. Drawing on the talents of New York's vanguard community, these festivals were held first at Judson Hall on West 57th Street and later in such public spaces as Central Park (1966), the Staten Island Ferry (1967), Grand Central Terminal (1973), and Shea Stadium (1974).

From a letter in which Ray Johnson describes his performance action *Hot Dog Drop* to a telegram from Mayor John Lindsay politely declining Moorman's invitation to ride in a hot air balloon, an array of correspondence—typed, hand-written, or drawn and scribbled on scrap paper—is assembled to reveal Moorman's utterly personal approach to festival organization. Objects on view include the recently rediscovered hoop and costumes used in *Noise Bodies*; Carolee Schneemann's wonderful but little-known collaborative performance piece with composer James Tenney; a photograph of Takehisa Kosugi's *Piano '66*, in which the instrument floats on the model boat pond in Central Park; a grainy 16mm film clip documenting performances on the Staten Island Ferry; and Styrofoam blocks used by Moorman in planning an artist parade for the 1968 festival held on Central Park West.

Photographs capture striking moments in that festival: Allan Kaprow's "metallic ballet," which sent oil drums rolling down Central Park West; Les Levine's float—a glowing grid of neon tubes; Joseph Beuys's mute piano, wrapped in gray felt; and, pulling up the rear, the Bell Labs and Experiments in Art and Technology (EAT) float generating a computer printout of a "five mile poem."

A Feast of Astonishments presents the largest number of images by photographer Peter Moore seen in an exhibition to date. Similarly, it acknowledges the achievements of Jim McWilliams, creator of some of Moorman's most audacious performances, with examples of the posters he designed for the Avant Garde Festivals. Finally, the exhibition includes images and accounts—some unexpected—from a wide range of influential figures of the time, such as Ay-O, John Cage, Johnny Carson, Christo, Ornette Coleman, Philip Corner, Simone Forti, Merv Griffin, Geoff Hendricks, Dick Higgins, Jörg Immendorff, Ray Johnson, Allan Kaprow, Billy Klüver,

Alison Knowles, John Lennon, Les Levin, Mayor John Lindsay, Alvin Lucier, George Maciunas, Meredith Monk, Max Neuhaus, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, Otto Piene, Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneemann, David Tudor, Robert Watts, and La Monte Young.

After its presentation at the Grey, *A Feast of Astonishments* will travel to the Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Austria, where it will be on view from March 4 to June 18, 2017.

Exhibition Curators

A Feast of Astonishments was curated by a collaborative team from the Block Museum: **Lisa G. Corrin**, the Block Museum's Ellen Philips Katz Director and curator of modern and contemporary art; **Corinne Granof**, curator of academic programs; and **Michelle Puetz**, Pick-Laudati curator of media arts; along with **Scott Krafft**, curator of the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Libraries; **Joan Rothfuss**, consulting curator and author of *Topless Cellist: The Improbable Life of Charlotte Moorman*; and **Laura Wertheim Joseph**, consulting curatorial associate.

Companion Presentation

Don't Throw Anything Out, a companion exhibition drawn from the Charlotte Moorman Archive at Northwestern University's Charles Deering McCormick Library, will be on view at **NYU's Fales Library** concurrently with *A Feast of Astonishments*.

Don't Throw Anything Out will frame the scope of the Charlotte Moorman Archive with a selection of objects and media ranging from her double-barreled, heavily notated Rolodex to audio recordings of greetings and voice messages saved from her telephone message machine, both by personal relations, including her mother, and by such legends of the era as John Lennon. While *A Feast of Astonishments* traces Moorman's achievements and influence within the broad context of the art and culture of her time, *Don't Throw Anything Out* provides a look at the private Moorman, the Southern belle who rather implausibly became an instigator and ambassador for vanguard art.

Exhibition Catalogue

A Feast of Astonishments: Chalotte Moorman and the Avant-Garde, 1960s–1980s, the exhibition catalogue, is published by Northwestern University Press and features new scholarship from art historians, musicologists, and experts on the 1960s and 1970s, including Hannah B. Higgins, professor in the School of Art and Art History at the University of Chicago; Kristine Stiles, France Family Professor of Art, Art History, and Visual Studies at Duke University; and Kathy O'Dell, associate professor of art history and museum studies, University of Maryland, Baltimore County. It also features essays by emerging scholars in the field. The volume extends and complements Rothfuss's biography and existing scholarship on the period by illuminating the artistic activities of Moorman and her circle within a broad social and aesthetic context.

Sponsorship

A Feast of Astonishments is organized by the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University, in partnership with Northwestern University Libraries. The exhibition is supported by major grants from the Terra Foundation for American Art, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional generous support is provided by the Elizabeth F. Cheney Foundation; the Alumnae of Northwestern University; the Colonel Eugene E. Myers Foundations; the Illinois Arts Council Agency; Dean of Libraries Discretionary Fund; the Charles Deering McCormick Fund for Special Collections; the Florence Walton Taylor Fund; and the Block Museum Science and Technology Endowment. The presentation at the Grey Art Gallery is made possible in part by a grant from the New York University Arts Council. Additional support provided by the Abby Weed Grey Trust; and the Grey's Director's Circle, Inter/National Council, and Friends.

About the Grey Art Gallery

The Grey Art Gallery is New York University's fine arts museum, located on historic Washington Square Park in New York City's Greenwich Village. It offers the NYU community and the general public a dynamic roster of engaging and thought-provoking exhibitions, all of them enriched by public programs. With its emphasis on experimentation and interpretation, and its focus on studying art in its historical, cultural, and social contexts, the Grey serves as a museum-laboratory for the exploration of art's environments.

Exhibitions organized by the Grey have encompassed all the visual arts: painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking, photography, architecture and decorative arts, video, film, and performance. In addition to producing its own exhibitions, which often travel to other venues in the United States and abroad, the Gallery hosts traveling shows that might otherwise not be seen in New York and produces scholarly publications that are distributed worldwide.

General Information

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Hours

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday: 11 am–6 pm
OPEN LATE Wednesday: 11 am–8 pm
Saturday: 11 am–5 pm
Sunday, Monday, and major holidays: Closed

Admission: Suggested donation: \$3; NYU students, faculty, and staff: free of charge