THE KITCHEN
NEW YORK CITY'S *CENTER*
FOR EXPERIMENTAL ART
AND THE **AVANT-GARDE**
SINCE 1971

JOSIAH MCELHENY: *INSTRUMENT OBJECT*
SEPTEMBER 10—NOVEMBER 7, 2026

Instrument Object, an exhibition by artist Josiah McElheny pays homage to visionary musicians and composers from across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In works of sculpture, painting, installation, and drawing, ranging from 2014 to 2026 and never before exhibited in New York City, McElheny translates the work of ten musical artists into visual form. The exhibition is an experiment in animating the inanimate through sound and movement: transforming The Kitchen's loft space into an installation of image, sound, motion, and light, where works unpredictably activate, hum with the sound of motor gears, or encourage visitors to imagine an invisible music.

The exhibition draws on the legacies of pioneering voices with historical ties to The Kitchen such as Pauline Oliveros, Lucia Dlugoszewski, Julius Eastman, and John Cage, as well as other luminaries of the field including, Milford Graves, David Grubbs, Big Mama Thornton, Joe McPhee, Wes Montgomery, and Sun Ra. Across these works, McElheny creates visual allegories for fundamental investigations within experimental music: the mysterious nature of vibration, the relationship of rhythm to the circulatory system of the human body, and connections between freedom and unpredictability within improvisation.

The earliest works in the exhibition date from 2014, two of which feature rotating hand-blown glass as part of kinetic sculptures visualizing the overlapping roles of color, refraction, serendipity and chance. Later works, such as *Cosmic Blue Trumpet* (2018), made in honor of jazz instrumentalist Joe McPhee, derive from personal friendships with musicians. Central to the exhibition are three paintings from McElheny's From *Red Black to Blue Black* series (2023). These panel paintings depict an "expanded" version of sunlight's color spectrum and are embedded with black vibrating glass gongs that transmit musical sound signals specially composed by David Grubbs, becoming works of chromesthesia (the synesthesia of color and sound). Installed across The Kitchen's loft is *Heartline* (2023), an homage to percussionist and polymath Milford Graves. *Heartline* features a blood-colored, artery-like cable that passes through the space inside a series of glass tubes, transporting a synthesizer signal to a painted, hand-made "floor tom" drum, pulsing with a never repeating, heartbeat-like rhythm. This key work within the exhibition celebrates Graves' research into the relationship between sound, melody, and the human heart.

The exhibition also highlights five recent works made within 2026, including *Ladder Harp* and *Primordial Lift*, which pay homage, respectively, to the instrument designs of composer Lucia Dlugoszewski and to radical concepts of vibration and "deep listening" described by musician and author Pauline Oliveros.

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Bench for Archival Listening (also 2026), a minimalist plywood furniture sculpture, allows the visitor to sit and listen closely—through blue plate glass "speakers"—to the recently rediscovered lost recording of Julius Eastman's work *Not Spiritual Beings*, performed at the Kitchen in 1981. This mislabeled recording was discovered by Dustin Hurt, director of Bowerbird in Philadelphia, while searching for a recording of composer Lucia Dlugoszewski performing at The Kitchen. *Bench for Archival Listening*, demonstrates the function of institutional archives as more than retrospective, but also sites of recovery.

The exhibition is accompanied by a program of dialogues and performances that will take place both at The Kitchen and Giorno Poetry Systems across the arc of the exhibition. The schedule includes a special performance by composer and instrumentalist **Zeena Parkins** of *After Fire Fragile Flight*, a new work inspired by Lucia Dlugoszewski's 1973 composition for chamber orchestra, during the exhibition's opening September 10 at 7 PM. The next day, September 11 at 7pm, features a sunset duet between improvisor **Wendy Eisenberg** and composer and guitarist **David Grubbs**. On October 1, Giorno Poetry Systems and the Kitchen will co-host an experimental dialogue about music and "limb independence" between **McElheny, Raven Chacon, Jennie C. Jones, George Lewis**, and **Fred Moten**. The Kitchen will also organize a set of community programs during the run of the exhibition including family art-making workshops on September 19, September 26, and October 3 (at 11am and 12:30pm), October 3 a program featuring artist and musician **Cecilia Lopez** co-presented with **Artists & Mothers**; public walkthroughs with the artist, and a reading series that will be held on Wednesday evenings in October.

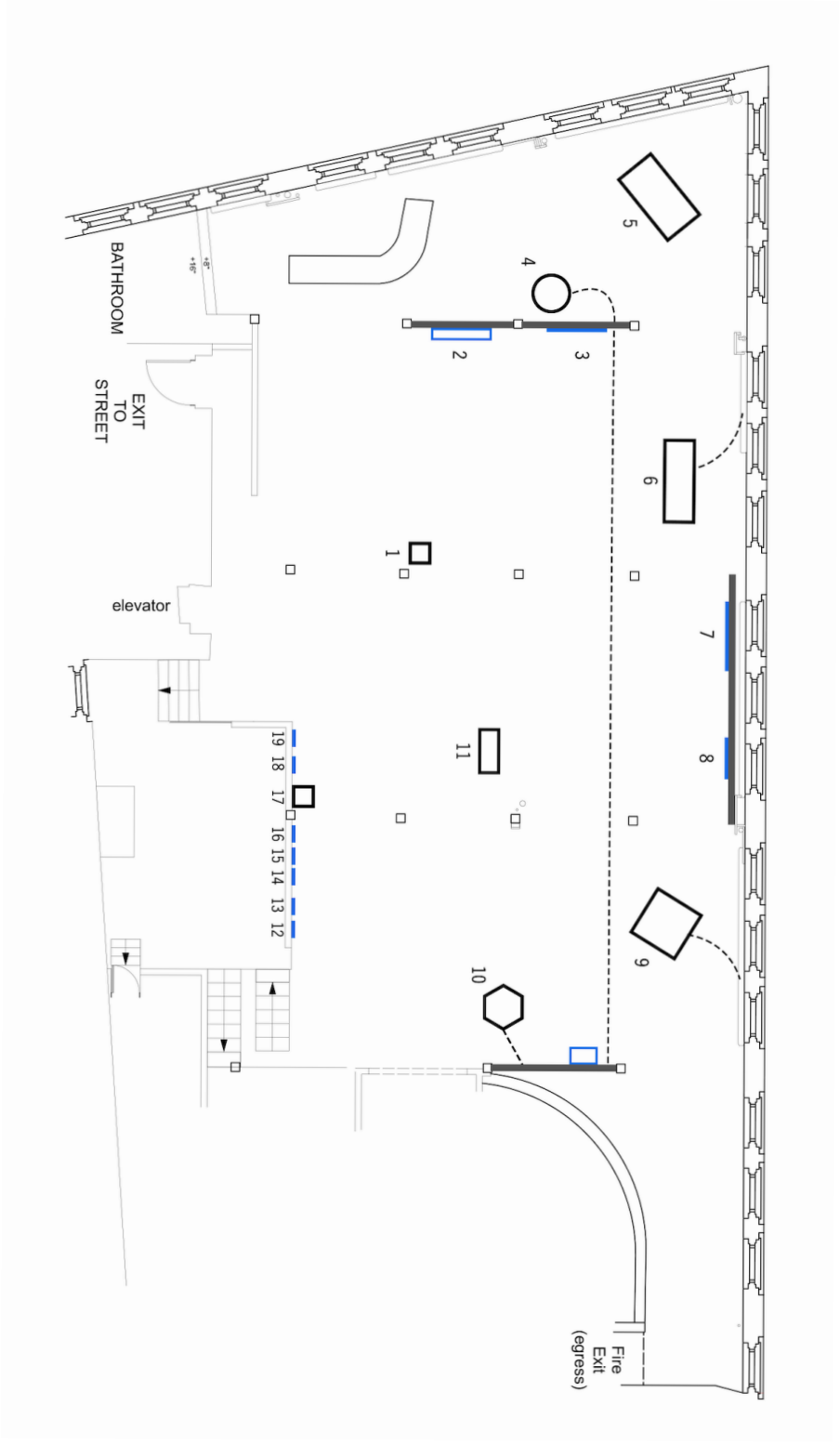
The culminating event of *Instrument Object* is a two-day symposium, *Improvisation, Archive and Homage* featuring musicians and composers on November 7 and 8 with MacArthur Fellows **Claire Chase, Mary Halvorson, Ikue Mori, Tomeka Reid, Jason Moran**, and **Craig Taborn**, moderated by music historian and gallerist, **John Corbett**. A closing reception for the exhibition, hosted by the MacArthur Foundation and honoring symposium participants, will be held in the evening on November 7. **This program is supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, as part of *Defying Boundaries: MacArthur Fellows at 45*.**

Josiah McElheny: *Instrument Object* is organized by Robyn Farrell, Senior Curator and Director of Curatorial Affairs with support from Fernanda Escalera Zambrano, Operations Manager, Angelique Rosales-Salgado, Assistant Curator. Production by David Riley, Senior Production & Exhibitions Manager, and Tassja Walker, Production Supervisor.

The Kitchen thanks Gerry Eastman and Wise Music for their generous permission to feature Julius Eastman's work *Not Spiritual Beings* in this exhibition.

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1. JOSIAH MCELHENY
Primordial Lift, 2026
Hand-blown and polished glass, metal armature, amplifier, audio player, speakers, and sound composition
13 x 8.5 x 8.5 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Paying homage to composer Pauline Oliveros and her concept of "deep listening," *Primordial Lift* centers the Earth's resonant frequency rising from 7 to 13 hertz. Inside a polished glass sphere, a 45-minute sound composition translates this frequency shift into an immersive musical experience, referencing Oliveros's groundbreaking 1987 accordion performance in Houston and her 1994 collaboration with David Grubbs and Tony Conrad.

2.
Imaginary Landscape No. 2, 2014
Handblown and polished glass, sitka spruce, instrument gear motors, electric wiring, hardware
23 x 54 x 12 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Inspired by John Cage's pioneering turntable compositions *Imaginary Landscape No. 1 and No. 2*, from 1939 and 1940, this work uses Cage's turntables as a starting point to explore rotational motion, altered optics, and sound generation. The sculpture utilizes "instrument" motors designed in the 1940s—still in production today—and built by the classic Chicago motor company Bodine, who produced some of the first audio record turnable motors. The mechanical hum celebrates Cage's proposal that all sound can be experienced as musical. These exposed motors operate in unison like a chorus while glass cylinders—patterned through coin-toss chance operations—expand irregularly to refract light and project an illusory, changing landscape across the surrounding gallery walls.

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3.
From Red Black to Blue Black (Two Centers), 2023
Acrylic paint on panel, wood frame, hand-blown glass gong, transducers, amplifier, audio player, wiring, electrical cable and plug, sound composition by David Grubbs
37 1/2 x 28 1/2 x 1 3/4 in., cabling dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

In this work, the composition by musician and composer David Grubbs follows a conceptual structure suggested by the title: two centers, one tone leading to another central tone. As a series, these panel paintings each depict an expanded version of sunlight's color spectrum, originally drawn in 1864 by color chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul during his pioneering research on light and color perception. McElheny suggests that this 19th century object demonstrates that within light itself there exists a "blue-black" and "red-black" at the very edges of the visible spectrum, hence the title of the works. Integrated into the panels are vibrating black glass gongs that periodically transmit Grubbs's custom sound work, creating an experience of chromesthesia (the synesthesia of color and sound). The series also draws inspiration from Milford Graves's *Earth Resonance*, a sound-activated painted gong from 2020, and the Ondes Martenot, a microtonal instrument built in an attempt to improve the earlier Theremin, the more famous electronic instrument invented in the 1920s.

4.
Heartline, 2023
Acrylic paint, wood, vintage optical color filters, fused colored glass, drumhead, transducer, rayon-covered electrical cable, borosilicate glass tubing, Serge Paperface synthesizer, amplifier, timers, wood hardware, electrical cables and outlets, sound composition by David Grubbs
26 x 21 x 21 in. (drum); 18 x 18 1/2 x 10 in. (synthesizer); electrical cables and tubing infinitely expandable
Courtesy of the artist

An homage to percussionist and polymath Milford Graves, *Heartline* celebrates the infinitely variable natural rhythms of the human heart, creating an installation that traverses the entire exhibition, from a sculpture-as-floor-tom drum, connected to a synthesizer console across the room. An artery-like, blood-red electrical cable passes through clear glass tubing suspended above our heads in the gallery space, carrying an audio signal from a 1972 Serge "Paperface" synthesizer to the handmade painted drum with colored glass "filter" mirrors. The drum pulses with a constantly shifting heartbeat-like cadence, reflecting Graves's groundbreaking research into the melodic, irregular, organic motion of the heart and celebrating his research into the living heart as the origin of rhythm, specifically non-Western polyrhythms.

5.
Ladder Harp, 2026
European Beech wood, hand-formed and polished glass
46 x 44 x 24 in.
Courtesy of the artist

An homage to the pioneering instrument designs of composer Lucia Dlugoszewski, who performed at The Kitchen in 1980, this sculpture reimagines some of her formerly lost wooden instruments, the "ladder harps", instruments made of thin wooden slats plucked like strings. In 2018, while researching for the Carnegie International, Josiah McElheny, John Corbett, and Jim Dempsey located these historical pieces in a storage locker in New York City and were able to restore them to the artist's estate. Transforming Dlugoszewski's all-wood originals into a material hybrid made of European Beech wood and glass, this sculpture features rods of translucent blue and white glass that radiate with silent energy. Invoking the notion of an imaginary instrument capable of producing impossible sounds, the work stands as a luminous object imbued with potential.

6.
End of a Love Affair, 2014
Handblown and polished glass, Douglas fir, speakers, amplifier, industrial audio player, electric wiring, cut and polished blue sheet glass, brass control knobs, felt, hardware
55 x 43 x 23 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Crafted from heart pine, using stylistic details inspired by the woodwork of American sculptor and printmaker H.C. Westermann (1922-1981), this sculpture appears to be a midcentury-style sliding-door liquor cabinet, accessible from both sides. Within are handblown blue glass bottles that hide their true nature as "bottle speakers," not holding liquid but emitting sound. An invention of the artist, these unusual loudspeakers are custom fitted into the cabinet, they produce a hollow, crystalline tone. The work periodically comes alive, as something like a jukebox,but the jukebox only plays Wes Montgomery (1922-1968) instrumentals from the 1960s, a period of the guitarist's work that is often disparaged as commercial. Infused with humor and warmth, the work enlivens a static domestic object with audio, serving as a deeply personal reflection of the music McElheny encountered during his childhood.

7.
From Red Black to Blue Black (Cassiopeia), 2023
Acrylic paint on panel, wood frame, hand-blown glass gong, transducers, amplifier, audio player, wiring, electrical cable and plug, sound composition by David Grubbs
46 5/8 x 58 1/2 x 1 3/4 in., cabling dimensions variable.
Courtesy of the artist

8.
From Red Black to Blue Black (Self), 2023
Acrylic paint on panel, wood frame, hand-blown glass gong, transducer, amplifier, audio player, wiring, electrical cable and plug, sound composition by David Grubbs
30 x 26 1/4 x 1 3/4 in.
Courtesy of the artist

The titles of these works record aspects of McElheny's collaboration with Grubbs: the music in *Self* focuses on a vibrations around a single tone and *Cassiopea* explores a chord, echoing the five stars in the constellation. As a group, these panel paintings each depict an expanded version of sunlight's color spectrum, originally drawn in 1864 by color chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul during his pioneering research on light and color perception. McElheny suggests that this 19th century object demonstrates that within light itself there exists a "blue-black" and "red-black" at the very edges of the visible spectrum, hence the title of the works. Integrated into the panels are vibrating black glass gongs that periodically transmit a custom sound composition by musician and composer David Grubbs, creating an experience of chromesthesia (the synesthesia of color and sound). The work also draws inspiration from Milford Graves's *Earth Resonance*, a sound-activated painted gong from 2020, and the Ondes Martenot, a microtonal instrument created in 1928, a descendent of the more well known electronic instrument, the Theramin.

9.
Bench for Archival Listening, 2026
Laminated marine-grade plywood, blue industrial sheet glass, transducers, amplifier, audio player, metal hardware, electrical cable and plug, recorded sound from an archival source
56x 34 5/16 x 30 5/32 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Bench for Archival Listening is a minimalist plywood furniture sculpture that lets the visitor sit and listen closely—through blue plate glass "speakers"—to the recently rediscovered lost recording of Julius Eastman's work *Not Spiritual Beings*, performed at The Kitchen in 1981. Dustin Hurt, director of Philadelphia's Bowerbird, discovered this previously mislabeled item while searching for a recording of composer Lucia Dlugoszewski performing at The Kitchen. As this is the only surviving record of the work, *Bench for Archival* Listening demonstrates the function of institutional archives as sites of recovery.

Music courtesy Gerry Eastman and Wise Music

10.
Color Time – Model One, 2014
Handblown molded and polished glass, marine plywood, red oak, AC gear motor and inverter, Variac control knob, electric lighting, electric wiring, sheet glass, mirror, hardware
32 1/2 x 24 x 29 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Inspired by Sun Ra's assertion that White people's music is metronomic while Black people's music is swing time, McElheny explored whether color could measure time. For this work, the artist created a rainbow-colored pyramid atop an hexagonal structure—referencing Sun Ra's interest in Egyptian symbolism—that casts colored light. Lines atop the box point towards an unusual time signature. At the same time, mirrors and dials evoke a record player, allowing one to theoretically mark a beat each time a color crosses a line. Grounded in a drawing by Sun Ra (1914-1993) and influenced by the woodworking techniques of H.C. Westermann, the sculpture imagines changing color as a system for telling time.

11.
Cosmic Trumpet, 2018
Handblown and formed blue glass, gold-plated brass hardware, oiled walnut
12 h. x 27 x 7 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Cosmic Trumpet is a sculptural tribute to jazz instrumentalist Joe McPhee, inspired by his friendship with McElheny and his 1970 album *Cosmic Love*. Crafted from handblown blue glass, oiled walnut, and gold-plated brass, the piece reimagines a natural, keyless trumpet. While theoretically playable, the sculpture acts primarily as an evocative object—a visual vessel designed to capture and celebrate the boundless power of music.

12.
Magic Square (version III), 2026
Archival LP record cover, hand embossed, magic marker, Sun Ra album and sleeve
Courtesy of the artist

13.
Magic Square (version IV), 2026
Archival LP record cover, hand embossed, magic marker, Sun Ra album and sleeve
Courtesy of the artist

The Sun Ra Arkestra—as well as Sun Ra's own record label, Saturn Records—often put out albums with unique hand-drawn covers for every copy. For this exhibition, McElheny created two imaginary or possible album covers by Sun Ra, based on two of his "magic square" Xerox drawings (his distribution method) that follow Dürer's magic square, where all the numbers add up to 34. Numerology was a key theme for the Arkestra and Sun Ra, who often called his music "mathematics."

14.
Color Time Signatures Blue/black over Blue, 2014
Graphite and sumi ink on notebook graphing paper
11 x 8 1/5 in. (paper) 13 1/4 x 10 3/4 in. (framed)
Courtesy of the artist

15.
Color Time Signatures Purple/black over Red, 2014
Graphite with sumi and colorfast ink on notebook graphing paper
11 x 8 1/5 in. (paper) 13 1/4 x 10 3/4 in. (framed)
Courtesy of the artist

16.
Color Time Signatures Green/black over Yellow, 2014
Graphite and colorfast ink on notebook graphing paper
11 x 8 1/5 in. (paper) 13 1/4 x 10 3/4 in. (framed)
Courtesy of the artist

Complementing the *Color Time* sculpture, the three drawings titled *Color Time Signatures* explore how color can serve as a system for measuring musical time. Inspired by Sun Ra's use of the ancient "magic square" grid concept in xerox drawings, McElheny created designs that re-imagine time signatures through color pairings—such as "Blue/black over Blue." Instead of traditional numerical beats, the work suggests that distinct color combinations can express rhythmic structure, turning visual art into a unique way of marking time.

17.
Cosmic Elixir, 2014
Handblown glass bottle, cork and wax sealed
Edition number pressed into glass exterior
Bottle edition stamped #68 containing a liquified version of the Big Mama Thornton song "Ball and Chain," recorded by her in 1968
12 3/4 in.
Courtesy of the artist

This handblown glass bottle, numbered 68 in a potentially endless series, "Purple Blue," contains the essence of a song, distilled into liquid. In this case, "Ball and Chain" (the original 1968 version by Big Mama Thornton, also the author of "Hound Dog"). Drinkable at one's own risk, this work is intended as direct evidence of the massive power of music, something like radiation but, in this case, an elixir to cure.

18.
The Album: Cosmic Elixir – Distillations in Sound, 2018
Blue silk screen in on paper "tipped on" handmade, archival blank vinyl record cover, Edition of 99
12 3/8 x 12 3/8 in., 15 1/4 x 15 1/4 x 1 1/2 in. (framed)
Courtesy of the artist

Next to the bottle is an album cover for an imaginary band, *Cosmic Elixir.* The cover photo depicts the imaginary distillation apparatus that created the *Cosmic Elixir* bottle and visualizes the fantastical process of turning music into a physical liquid. The group's album, "Distillations in Sound," contains subtle references to Sun Ra. The artwork presents sound as a potent, secret technology—a mysterious elixir that humorously promises to either cure or harm the listener.

19.
World's First Solid Blue Record, 2018
Press-cast and polished blue glass, engraved brass, architectural blue mirror, museum glass, walnut frame
14 5/8 x 11 5/8 x 1 1/2 in.
Courtesy of the artist

A homage to jazz musician Joe McPhee, this piece grew out of Josiah McElheny's frustration with traditional gold and platinum record awards, which are often pressed with blank white noise instead of real music. In response, McElheny crafted a precise, double-sided glass record containing the actual grooves of McPhee's 7" record . Encased in a display frame, the luminous glass record serves as a lasting tribute to McPhee's pioneering artistry on the tenor saxophone and "space organ" (which McPhee named in honor of the visionary spirit of Sun Ra).

All works courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago.

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ARTIST BIO

Josiah McElheny (b. 1966) has exhibited widely, including solo shows at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA (2024); the Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University, CA (2019); Moody Center for the Arts, Rice University, Houston, TX (2018); MAK Österreichisches Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Vienna, Austria (2016); Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH (2013), Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA (2012), Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, England (2011), Museo de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain (2009), Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden (2007), The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY (2007), Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, Santiago de Compostela, Spain (2002), Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA (2001), The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, MA (1999) and the Seattle Art Museum, WA (1995). His work is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA; Museum of Fine Art, Boston, MA; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden; Tate Modern, London, UK; and Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, OH, among others. McElheny lives and works in New York, New York.

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