My summer at The Kitchen was a constant history lesson on the New York avant-garde arts movement: who worked with whom, where they performed what, what are they doing now, and how it relates to the avant-garde’s origin. On only my second day as a curatorial intern I experienced a full immersion into the world of contemporary art history: I volunteered at The Kitchen’s annual gala, and was able to hear Cindy Sherman, Laurie Anderson, and Robert Longo speak about their early days experimenting, collaborating, and discussing at The Kitchen, and saw dance great Bill T. Jones perform an improvisation to live music. Before my real work in The Kitchen archive had even begun, I heard the teary testaments of internationally-renowned artists about the significance of this thirty-three year old collective-turned-non profit to their lives, their work, and the future of young artists.

The Kitchen gave me the opportunity to understand the arts world from many angles. Watching performances in its black-box theater and examining the works in the gallery’s summer show, The Rehearsal, I was able to appreciate and think about art as an audience member. Working with spreadsheets, organizing archives, looking at submissions, and scanning documents for rehearsing artists, I learned the day-to-day technicalities of an arts organization, and what it takes to create the productions that happened downstairs. Reading up on artists and having curators describe work to me so that I might answer questions for visitors in the gallery, I learned what catches the eye of a curator in an art piece. And looking through season brochures from as early as the 1970s and writing artist profiles, I got a sense of how important The Kitchen has been and continues to be to young artists, providing space and funding for experimentation with video, electronic music, performance, dance, and visual art, free of judgment or
requirements for theme or artistic canon. I enjoyed the daily thrill of finding out that an artist I admire had shown work at The Kitchen, such as writer and performance artist Miranda July, choreographers like Lucinda Childs, Trisha Brown, and Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, and bands like the Talking Heads and the B-52s. I was excited to see provocative performance artist Karen Finley’s history of involvement with The Kitchen, having read about the “NEA Four” lawsuit involving revoked federal funding and governmental art censorship in a class called Performing The Political. Each day I worked there I was met with a sense of awe by The Kitchen’s pivotal role in the arts world, and the realization that historical arts moments that I had read about had taken place at The Kitchen, such as Bill T. Jones’ performance of “Four Dances”, during which Keith Haring continuously painted a backdrop.

As an intern at The Kitchen, I quickly discovered that the tasks I enjoyed most involved writing about art and artists, and that this might be a career I would like to pursue. We were assigned the task of writing short bios of artists and performers whose work had been shown at The Kitchen for the website: this involved sifting through archive folders and lists of events from the past, hunting down reviews online, and watching clips to get a sense of their work in order to succinctly and accurately describe it. I enjoyed the challenge of describing a lifetime of achievements, an artistic voice, and an artists’ relationship with The Kitchen in a brief paragraph. The interns were also assigned to write a blog post about something interesting we found while working in the archives: the event it related to, the significance of the event, and its reception by critics and audiences. I chose to write about a 1980 event called Dance Day after finding an old photo of two dancers who are now prominent choreographers, Elizabeth Streb and Molissa Fenley. Using several folders of archival material from Dance Day, I discovered that it was an all-day event involving more than thirty choreographers, many of whom are distinguished
dancers and choreographers today. The format of the event meant that dancers’ work was shown with equal attention and favor, and audiences were able to get a sense of the range of work that was being created in the “downtown dance” scene of the 1970s and 1980s. Through newspaper reviews and handwritten notes on props and lighting technicalities, I was able to get a sense of the work shown. The blog post recently appeared on the The Kitchen website. The culmination of my art writing experience at The Kitchen was the opportunity to discuss this blog post with the executive director of The Kitchen, Tim Griffin, the former editor-in-chief of Artforum. Tim provided me with a list of writers, theorists, and publications to explore in order to educate myself on art and dance criticism.

Working at The Kitchen this summer allowed me an insider’s look into the arts world, and introduced me to some of the many career paths within that field. The interaction of artists, curators, archivists, technicians, publicists, and critics brings an exhibit or performance to fruition and preserves it for future discovery. The Kitchen also created a space for me to find connections within my studies at Columbia: Between reading up on artists, judging submissions, and personally handling the documents that led to famous performance pieces I have studied in class, I was able to bridge my knowledge from a postmodern poetry class, dance technique classes, art history classes, and performance studies class in an entirely new way. I am very grateful to Columbia and The Kitchen for this opportunity to work, learn, and grow in such a creative and thought-provoking environment, and I look forward to applying my knowledge and appreciation for the arts as well as professional direction to my studies at Columbia and a fulfilling career.