

The Freedom Principle review – an astounding fusion of jazz and art

By Jason Farago | July 17, 2015

Contemporary art has grown omnivorous. These days, in your local white cube, you are as likely to see a dance or an experimental film as a painting. But music, somehow, remains a challenge for arts institutions: too abstract, too personal, too hard to present in three-dimensional space. The calamitous Björk retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art this spring, where visitors had to wear headphones while looking at pop-star relics, was not the only false step lately. This year's Venice Biennale features numerous musicians, notably the pianist Jason Moran, and yet music still felt like a temporary diversion rather than a coequal of fine art.

If all it were remembered for was its engagement with musical history, then The Freedom Principle – an astounding new exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago – would already stand as a landmark. In telling the story of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, a radical organisation of jazz artists founded in 1965, it does a better job than any show I have ever seen at analysing music and conveying its cultural importance. But The Freedom Principle, curated by Naomi Beckwith and Dieter Roelstraete, does even more than that. It shows how the themes of black cultural nationalism in the 1960s – an art engaged with political struggle, and unafraid to speak in a collective voice – continued a modernist artistic tradition of merging art into daily life. And it pushes into the present day, discovering the legacy of an important but under-appreciated musical tradition in contemporary art worldwide, from American sculptors to Albanian video artists. It fuses the history of music and the history of art into a single, more complete narrative, and makes it look easy.

The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians was formed on the South Side of Chicago, and dedicated to the promotion of free jazz and other experimental, improvised music at a moment when rock and roll was in the ascendancy. Its members – saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell, pianist and clarinetist Muhal Richard Abrams, harpist and trumpeter Phil Cohran, and many others – embraced wide swaths of musical tradition, stretching from the blues and African percussion to avant-garde composers such as Anton Webern or Edgard Varèse. That musical experimentation went hand in hand with collective political action: the AACM organized music education programs for children on the South Side, and still does.

Vitrines packed full of archival material plot the concerts, exhibitions, and protests that these musicians participated in, while listening stations offer hours of material to groove by. But there is far more to look at than just ephemera here. Many of the AACM's most important musicians were also visual artists – Abrams's paintings collages, exhibited here, appeared on the covers of albums such as *Levels and Degrees of Light* or *View From Within* – and performers often wore African-inspired costumes, even painting their faces on occasion. Long before the concept of multimedia had gained currency, the musicians of the AACM were smashing down boundaries between music and art, between recording and performance, through unprecedented exploits of sound. The composer Anthony Braxton experimented with visual scores, in the manner of John Cage, featuring coloured notes on inclined staves or else amoeboid shapes to be interpreted who knows how. One gallery of The Freedom Principle features the wild percussion setup of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, which grew out of the AACM: a mad scientist's rig of gongs, bells, chimes and squeaky toys.

If gospel was more naturally associated with the integrationist rhetoric of the civil rights moment, free jazz spoke more in the bolder language of black power. The old format of melody-solos-melody was swept away; some recordings had no real melody at all. (On the exhibition's excellent website you can stream many of the most important albums of the era, from Mitchell's *Smooth Sound* to Archie Shepp's Afrocentric *The Way Ahead*.) The music was joyous and pugnacious at once,

full of squawks and crescendos. It could make you angry, or make you want to dance. Even the names of the albums – Message to Our Folks, People in Sorrow, Nation Time – imagined a collective black population, unified and radicalised through music. Free jazz found an especially receptive audience in France in the years after 1968, where a Gauloise-puffing leftist intelligentsia considered it a model of possible new forms of social organisation. The Art Ensemble of Chicago based itself in Paris from 1969 to 1972: listen to Fontella Bass, on the ensemble’s glorious cut *Thème de Yoyo*, exhorting us to “dig, dig, dig, dig it on the Champs-Élysées”.

Many of the contemporary artists in this exhibition pay direct tribute to the AACM’s experimentation and political engagement, none more intelligently than Stan Douglas. For his seminal 1992 work *Hors-Champs*, the Canadian artist filmed four musicians playing Albert Ayler’s *Spirits Rejoice*, which mashes up black musical traditions such as gospel and call-and-response with a riff on *La Marseillaise*, the French national anthem. Douglas shot the video on a Paris soundstage in the style of a French TV show – typical shot-countershot editing, in soft black-and-white – and projects the final cut on one side of a hanging screen. On the other side, he projects all the material that ended up on the cutting room floor: the trombonist gasps for air, the saxophonist shuffles in place, the drummer smiles and scratches his head. Revealing what was off-camera (*hors-champ*, in French) in his fictional 60s TV show allows Douglas to underscore the complex realities of these exiled musicians, and their uneasy position in both American and European culture.

Beckwith and Roelstraete have constructed *The Freedom Principle* like a hinge: the show fastens jazz and visual art into a hybrid entity, and even the contemporary artists here with more oblique debts to jazz appear as natural successors to the AACM. Anri Sala films a dreadlocked saxophonist serenading Berlin from a drab highrise apartment. Sanford Biggers exhibits a bubble jacket covered in bird feathers, a performance costume in line with the Art Ensemble of Chicago’s theatrical getups. Lily Reynaud-Dewar, a gifted young French artist, contributes a mirrored listening station with four speakers blasting wild, cacophonous, grinding free jazz. Four repurposed stools nearby have been filled with black ink, bubbling and gurgling in time to the beat. They look on the verge of eruption. But before the explosion comes the music: hot-blooded, loud and utterly daring.