

# ARTFORUM

## “The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music 1965 to Now”

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART CHICAGO

Solveig Nelson



View of “The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now,” 2015. Clockwise, from left: Nari Ward, *We the People*, 2011; Renée Green, *Space Poem #3 (Media Bicho)*, 2012; Sanford Biggers, *Ghetto Bird Tunic*, 2006; Terry Adkins, *Native Son (Circus)*, 2006/2015. Photo: Nathan Keay.

**AT THE THRESHOLD** of this exhibition is Glenn Ligon's *Give Us a Poem*, 2007, positioned immediately adjacent to the show title that spans the entirety of the gallery's outer wall. Ligon's neon wall work quotes Muhammad Ali's response to a 1975 Harvard audience's request for a poem. Ali's succinct answer—"Me / We!"—is illuminated in an alternating pattern, the two words stacked one atop the other. Ligon's use of reflexive symmetry plays on the collectivity called for by Ali to amplify a central question of "The Freedom Principle": How does contemporary art revisit black cultural nationalisms of the 1960s in ways both critical and affirmative?

That is to say: What was—or *is*—the Black Arts Movement? This expansive exhibition places two seminal and interrelated Chicago groups founded during the '60s—the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) and the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists (AfriCOBRA)—in conversation with later works that engage unresolved tensions within a movement that called for collaborative organization (and the anonymity such collectivity sometimes entails) while advocating for self-determination and individual agency. In emphasizing collectives, curators Naomi Beckwith and Dieter Roelstraete challenge art history's monographic focus and present the Black Arts Movement as a complex system, productively unwieldy in its embrace of visual art and sound and in its integration of myriad media—all in the service, paradoxically, of separatist politics.

"The Freedom Principle," which takes its title from critic John Litweiler's book about jazz's increasingly abstract manifestations after World War II, examines the dialogue between American free jazz and postwar visual art. The show was occasioned by the fiftieth anniversary of the AACM, an organization of primarily African American musicians founded in 1965 on Chicago's South Side. Since its inception, the universalist-minded nonprofit has continually supported the production and performance of original works by its members, while fostering procedures of improvisation that allow for collective orchestration. As pianist-composer and cofounder Muhal Richard Abrams stated in 1965, "I think what we mean by 'original' is direct output from your system, your personal system." With this ethos in mind, the curators introduce the AACM via an arrangement of wind player Roscoe Mitchell's "little instruments," which range from sturdy African drums to ephemeral camera flashes. Chicago free jazz is here positioned as a progenitor of punk and performance art alike.

The AACM and AfriCOBRA, in dialogue and friction, exemplify the African American avant-garde strains that "The Freedom Principle" employs as its conceptual motor. The latter, an African American art collective founded in 1968 on the South Side, emerged out of the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC), led by artist and art historian Jeff Donaldson, and an overlapping group called Cobra, which formed to protest the exclusions of Columbia College's conference "Arts and the Inner City." Following these ad hoc formations, Donaldson, Wadsworth Jarrell, Barbara Jones-Hogu, Carolyn Lawrence, and Elliot Hunter would establish AfriCOBRA. The collective is here emphasized for its creation

of a group aesthetic and its innovative use of direct address to the viewer. Two key examples are photographs of 1967's *Wall of Respect*, a mural depicting inspirational African American role models, produced by OBAC with AfriCOBRA members, and Jarrell's *Revolutionary*, 1972, a silk screen based on a photograph of Angela Davis. *Revolutionary* presents the activist's abstracted figure emerging through an all-over, pixelated field of multicolored letters. Repetitions of B in particular (sometimes beginning the words BLACK or BEAUTIFUL) emanate from Davis's eye to cover her face and microphone-clutching hand, increasing in size as they extend beyond her Afro. In its centrifugal design—as if tracing Davis's sound—and high-key color, *Revolutionary* positions the viewer as a listener.

AfriCOBRA was, like AACM, pedagogically oriented. “Expressive awesomeness” and “*Symmetry that is free*” were among the aesthetic principles the collective championed after a retroactive process of group critique of individual members' works. AfriCOBRA's use of color was as didactic as its use of text. In a 1970 text for *Black World*, Donaldson described “color that defines, identifies and directs. Superreal color for Superreal images. The superreality that is our every day all day thang.” The collective celebrated the “Coolade color” of street fashion (and, implicitly, of the Kool-Aid powdered sugar drinks that themselves resembled paint pigments)—a circularity between art and the everyday that parallels Pop art's creation of intimacy through reference to known things. Donaldson would later confirm AfriCOBRA's awareness of the European Cobra, a collective including Asger Jorn and others who developed parallel discourses on freedom and color. Importantly, “The Freedom Principle” mounts an explicit challenge to the perceived whiteness of the avant-garde and, moreover, to the assumption that the postwar avant-gardes had lost their political charge by the '60s. Establishing a set of moves that would be crucial to subsequent identity politics, AfriCOBRA and the AACM demonstrated that “freedom” in the '60s necessitated at once a withdrawal from the mainstream *and* an active transformation of it.

In the exhibition catalogue, Beckwith stresses that black cultural nationalism, “however outmoded,” is alive and well in contemporary art. Witness the proliferation of flags, nationalist symbols employed by the Black Arts Movement to assert black agency and community. David Hammons's *U.N.I.A. Flag*, 1990, which repaints the American flag in Pan-African colors, and Renée Green's *Space Poem #3 (Media Bicho)*, 2012, which cites the AACM slogan “A power stronger than itself,” are two key examples. Elsewhere, Nari Ward's *We the People*, 2011, spells its title in multicolored shoelaces that jut out from the wall and appear abstract unless viewed from a distance. Also on display are part-parodic, part-loving visual references to Black Power in Jamal Cyrus's fictional Pride records, such as *DMFD—6 Minutes Till Nation Time!!! Pride Catalogue #2217*, 2005, and Rashid Johnson's sculpture *Roscoe's Target*, 2014, which presents a record by jazz musician Roscoe Mitchell on a shelf.

The show risks displacing its ambivalence about the paradoxes of the Black Power era—including aspects of the movement that appeal to notions of cohesive unity in order to ground a black aesthetics—onto the self-conscious reflexivity of contemporary works. Yet “The Freedom Principle” also offers an alternative reading from within the Black Arts Movement, since free jazz was itself a model for self-reflexive composition, with musicians analyzing and generating patterns in order to break free of them—most famously through improvisation but also via indirect modes of audience address. The AACM’s alternative scoring practices by Wadada Leo Smith and Anthony Braxton exemplify these tactics. Braxton’s collected *Tri-Axium Writings*, 1985, a discursive system that offers an alternative criticism of black experimental music, is displayed alongside Matthew Metzger’s “I Can’t Concentrate with You in the Room,” 2014—, a series of photorealist paintings of bookends intertwined in chance-based arrangements; the background colors of the wooden panels correspond to those of the covers of Braxton’s bound writings.

If Metzger’s work functions as a tribute to the influential jazz composer, William Pope.L’s *Another Kind of Love: John Cage’s Silence, by Hand*, 2013–14, reads as a criticism of that other celebrated pioneer of indeterminacy, chance operations, and generative structures. Pope.L hand-copied selections from Cage’s 1961 book *Silence* onto sheets of yellow legal paper and mounted the sheets on a wooden lattice dyed green, yellow, and red. This “direct” transcription, which retains Cage’s typographic design but skips pages, repurposes the collected writings as performance and brings forward its elisions. While Cage explicitly disavowed jazz improvisation, instead championing an “indeterminacy” facilitated by external systems that disrupted subjective expression, nearly every statement that Pope.L copied could be applied to free jazz, including Cage’s ethos of experimentation: “an act the outcome of which is unknown.” *Silence* can be productively considered in tandem with Charles Gaines’s *Manifestos 2*, 2013, which activates systems-based musical scoring in the service of social critique. Gaines’s celebrated work, which comprises four TV monitors and a set of four large-scale drawings, presents a system of association between four political manifestos from different eras that demand civil liberties, including Malcolm X’s last speech. The individual letters within each of the manifestos were translated to a corresponding musical notation. The composition was arranged by Sean Griffin to elegiac chordal effect. Shoring up the show’s premises, *Manifestos 2* undermines the idea of protest as a local concern, and that of Conceptual art as divorced from the Black Arts Movement.

The catalogue’s chronology cites the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement, whose mission statement explicitly critiques “narrow” formations of nationalism when it comes to the role of “our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk.” Black Lives Matter “centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements.” Does such a platform cohere with “The Freedom Principle”? The show regrettably mostly skips the ’80s

and '90s, which produced projects such as Chicago-based writer Robert Ford's *Think, Inc.*, a zine that approached the Black Arts Movement from a black queer perspective. Chicago in the '80s also witnessed the proqueer performance series at Hothouse, which hinged on the AACM. Yet "The Freedom Principle" is shot through with brilliant works, which successfully keep much in play—black cultural nationalisms and contemporary art's ambivalent revisitations of them, the '60s debate around the definition of "black art," examinations of collectivity and individual civil liberty, subject and system, improvisation and composition. "The Freedom Principle," like the Black Arts Movement itself, poses more questions than any exhibition could answer. The show brings forward what's most experimental about the Black Arts Movement—and so, too, postwar art.

*Travels to the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, Sept. 14–Dec. 31, 2016.*

Solveig Nelson is an art historian and critic based in Chicago.