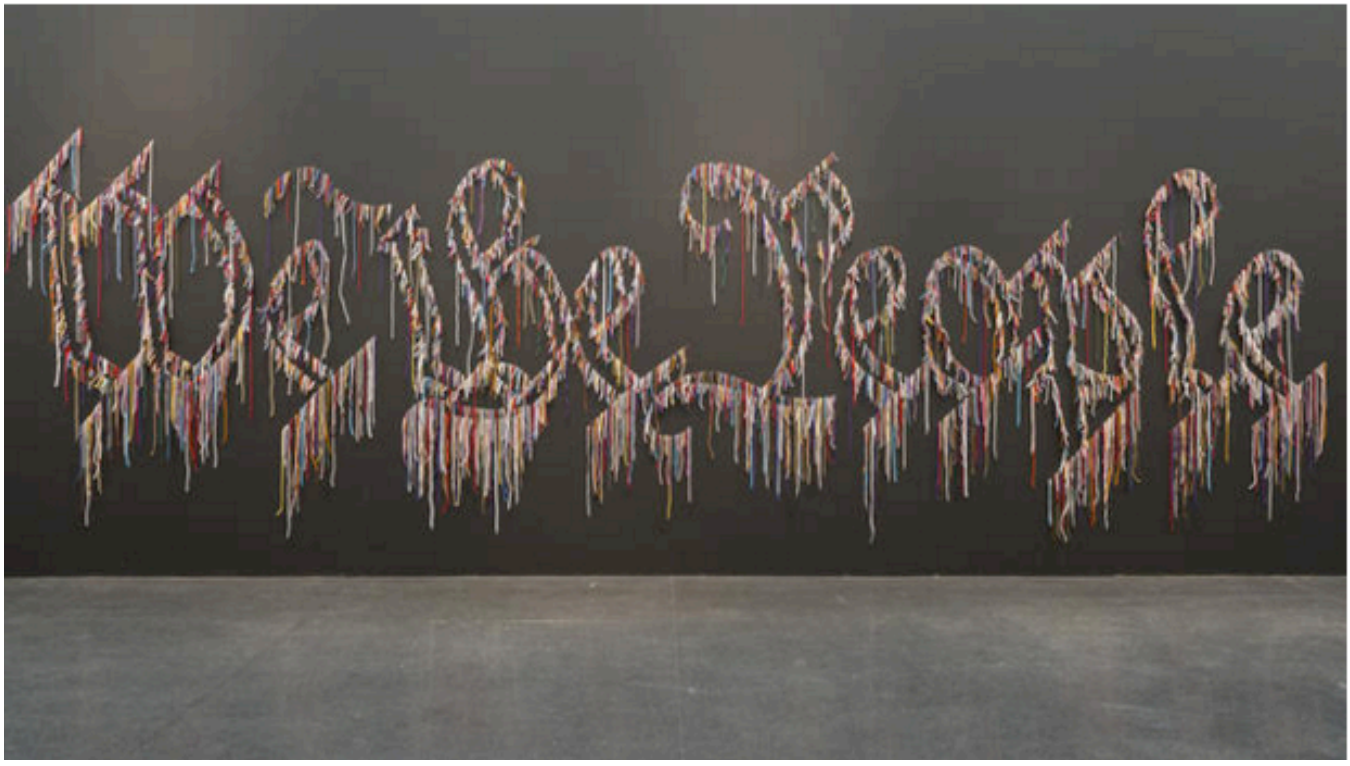
Chicago Tribune

'Freedom Principle' at MCA takes on black art, music



Work from Nari Ward, featured in The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now at MCA Chicago. (MCA Chicago)

By Lori Waxman

November 11, 2015

“The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now" is a dazzlingly ambitious and optimistic group show up for just a couple more weeks at the MCA. It ought to knock the socks off everyone who sees it, especially those who like their media mixed. It has — despite the radicality of the innumerable instruments, costumes, videos, opera, murals, sculptures, record

albums, backdrops, scores and paintings included, by some 40 artists, musicians and collectives — a little something for everyone.

It's also very noisy.

From one gallery to another, robotized rain sticks raucously harmonize with free jazz-noise rock, a chamber orchestra, the occasional smash of cymbals and the barely audible hum of feedback. There's a lot of jamming going on, and it's to the credit of co-curators Naomi Beckwith and Dieter Roelstraete that they've encouraged it by mostly eschewing the typical museum strategy of exhibiting sound-based works in isolation from one another. Collectivity and improvisation are the norm here. They're also the history, one that the curators recount with a medley of passion and respect. "The Freedom Principle" marks the 50th anniversary of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), a group founded in response to the difficult conditions facing black experimental musicians in Chicago. It remains active today, though many of its civil-rights era compatriots are long gone, including the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) and the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists (AfriCOBRA). The first half of the exhibition is devoted to telling the cultural and political stories of these and other grass-roots ensembles, through scintillating paintings by Nelson Stevens, Wadsworth Jarrell and Jeff Donaldson; mysterious Afro-cosmo-futurist murals by Sun Ra drummer Aye Aton; a black suede dress by Jae Jarrell wittily imprinted with the images of revolutionary "brothers"; and a stage set for the Art Ensemble of Chicago crammed full of bells, horns, cymbals, rattles, drums and a hundred other "little instruments" just begging to be played.

If some of this history and these objects sound familiar, they are. In the past two years, Chicago viewers have witnessed a long overdue series of related exhibitions, including a stellar trio at the South Side Community Arts Center, the Logan Center and the DuSable Museum. Most recently, Wadada Leo Smith, whose Calderesque musical notations appear in "The Freedom Principle," enjoyed a solo show at the Renaissance Society.

Follow that beat, drummer. It's a vital one, and it sounds different in each venue. At the MCA, an institutional obligation to the present tense equals an exhibition pulsing with intergenerational reverberations. Sounds aren't all that cross from one gallery to another; people and ideas move too. Roscoe Mitchell, founder of the Art Ensemble of Chicago and first-generation member of the AACM, features in the center of Rashid Johnson's 2014 wall sculpture, a quartet of splattered shelves artfully arranged with a houseplant, dishes of shea butter, a pair of books and a 1966 album by the Roscoe Mitchell Sextet.

Artifacts and instruments from Roscoe Mitchell, founder of the Art Ensemble of Chicago and an early member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, are part of "The Freedom Principle" exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art. (Zbigniew Bzdak / Chicago Tribune)

Sanford Biggers' "Ghetto Bird Tunic," a fabulously flamboyant garment made by covering a floor-length bubble jacket with bird feathers, was once performed in by the late Terry Adkins, whose giant cluster of magnetized cymbals — itself a tribute to the great improvisational saxophonist Charlie Parker — clangs nearby. Lisa Alvarado's pulsating pattern paintings, often hung as backdrops for the Natural Information Society, the music group for which she plays the harmonium and gong, echo the psychedelic rhythms and colors of AfriCOBRA. Stan Douglas' 1992 video installation "Hors-champs" simultaneously shows on each side of a large hanging screen different footage of the same musicians playing a classic free-jazz tune. I've never been a fan of Douglas' exploration of the space outside the frame (hors champ is French for "off camera"), but it's a terrific listening experience, not least because of the virtuosity of the protagonists: saxophonist Douglas R. Ewart and trombonist George Lewis, both AACM members, electrify.

They also planted an instrumental installation in the next gallery (with Douglas Repetto), a zany pseudo-Zen garden of jangly bamboo chimes and spinning rain sticks. And then there's Catherine Sullivan's "Afterword," an immersive environment and film based on Lewis' opera of the same name. Charles Gaines designed the set, and three rooms over his opus, "Manifestos 2," delivers four historical social justice speeches translated into chamber music. Malcolm Xand the 18th-century French feminist Olympe De Gouges never sounded quite like this before. Oh, and Gaines sometimes plays in a quartet that once starred the late Adkins and still features Smith.

With so many artists involved in and around and across and back and forth between so many productions, a "where is the art, who is the artist" question arises. That's the wrong question, of course, betraying a limited understanding of raw creativity, technical ability, artistic influence, aesthetic and political solidarity, and economic and institutional realities.

Sometimes, too, it's about time. In the Albanian video artist Anri Sala's "Long Sorrow," the staggering brilliance of the two involved virtuosos can take as long as the length of the film for full revelation. Free jazz horn player Jemeel Moondoc thrills immediately and continuously with his piercing, guttural sounds. Sala bides his time. What at first looks to be a weirdly situated documentary about a talented musician eventually gives way to a surreal memorialization of socialist ideals. Moondoc hovers in midair outside the top floor of a concrete housing tower on the outskirts of East Berlin, a snake charmer for pipe dreams, afloat on a magic carpet languidly easing its way back down to earth.

Put that in your horn and blow it. Yeah.

Lori Waxman is a special contributor to the Tribune, and a lecturer at the School of the Art Institute.

"The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now" runs through Nov. 22 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 220 East Chicago Ave., 312-280-2660, **www.mcachicago.org**.