



The Freedom Principle

Experiments in Art and Music

1965 to Now

THE FREEDOM PRINCIPLE

Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now

Edited by Naomi Beckwith
and Dieter Roelstraete

On the South Side of Chicago in the 1960s, African American artists and musicians grappled with new language and forms inspired by the black nationalist turn in the Civil Rights movement. *The Freedom Principle*, which accompanies an exhibition on the topic at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, traces their history and shows how it continues to inform contemporary artists around the world.

The book coincides with the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), a still-flourishing organization of Chicago musicians who challenge jazz's boundaries. Combining archival materials such as brochures, photographs, sheet music, and record covers with contemporary art work that respond to the 1960s Black Arts Movement, *The Freedom Principle* explores this tradition of cultural expression from, as one AACM group used to put it, the "ancient to the future." Essays by curators Naomi Beckwith and Dieter Roelstraete, AACM member and historian George Lewis, art historian Rebecca Zorach, and gallerist John Corbett accompany

beautiful reproductions of work by artists such as Muhal Richard Abrams, Barbara Jones-Hogu, Cauleen Smith, Rashid Johnson, Nick Cave, and many more. A roundtable conversation features Beckwith, Roelstraete, curator Hamza Walker, current AACM member and cellist Tomeka Reid, and artist Romi Crawford, with additional comments from poet and scholar Fred Moten. A chronology and curated playlist of AACM-related recordings are also included. The resulting book offers a rich sense of a global movement, with crucial roots in Chicago, driven by a commitment to experimentation, improvisation, collective action, and the pursuit of freedom.

Naomi Beckwith is the Marilyn and Larry Fields Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. She has curated or cocurated many exhibitions in the United States and has contributed to numerous periodicals and books. **Dieter Roelstraete** is the former Manilow Senior Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and a curator of Documenta 14.

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They play. You listen.
No one dreams.

—Jean-Paul Sartre,
*Jazz in America*¹

In the spring of 1965, four jazz musicians from Chicago's predominantly African American South Side began meeting in the kitchen of an apartment in one of the area's many public housing projects built in the aftermath of World War II. It was the home of percussionist Steve McCall's parents. McCall (b. 1933, Chicago; d. 1989, Chicago), along with pianist Richard Abrams (b. 1930, Chicago), pianist Jodie Christian (b. 1932, Chicago; d. 2012, Chicago), and harpist and trumpeter Phil Cohran (b. 1927, Oxford, MS) met to discuss the challenges facing black musicians coming of age in the United States during the mid-1960s as the period's social conflict and cultural dissent manifested in the jazz community. (A quick look at the titles of some of the era's classic jazz albums communicates the mounting militancy and growing political radicalization of jazz, which also inevitably included a heightened sense of *racialization*, a darkening of jazz's cultural complexion: Ornette Coleman's *Something Else!!!* from 1958 and *Tomorrow Is the Question!* from 1959; Max Roach's *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite* from 1960 and *Speak, Brother, Speak!* from 1962; Jackie McLean's *Destination Out!* from 1963; Albert Ayler's *Spiritual Unity* from 1964—it certainly was a golden age for exclamation points.)

Although their memories of these foundational moments diverge—in Phil Cohran's hoodoo-tinged origin story, the AACM was conceived in the shadow of Dinah Washington's final resting place in Oakwood Cemetery²—it was during the gatherings in McCall's familial kitchen, set among the familiar urban markers of postwar aspiration, that the seeds were sown for the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), one of the most influential and longest-lasting collectives in American musical history. The organization, which

1 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Jazz in America," in Robert Gottlieb, ed., *Reading Jazz: A Gathering of Autobiography, Reportage, and Criticism from 1919 to Now* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 710.

2 See George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago:



Max Roach, *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite*,
Candid Productions Ltd, 1960

continues to this day, half a century after its founding, was dedicated to the promotion of experimental ("free") jazz and improvised music, i.e. creative musicianship. (Here, the first of many linguistic caveats is in order, as it was one of the AACM's primary aims to challenge the implicit hierarchies attached to the very language of jazz; AACM sought to alter the customary association of jazz with standardized "light" entertainment—recall Theodor Adorno's infamous dismissal of jazz's signature use of syncopation as an echo of militarized

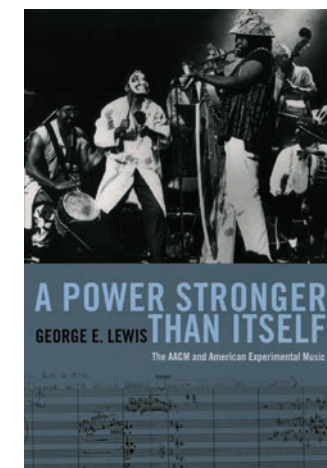
University of Chicago Press, 2008), 97. Lewis's magisterial study tells the story of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians in the greatest imaginable detail. Lewis, himself a prolific composer and contributor to some of the era's landmark recordings, has been a prominent member of the organization since the 1970s. His book is also an invaluable source for students of postwar American musical history and anyone interested in the African American experience in the Midwest more broadly. I will be referring to this book throughout this article. Special thanks are due to George for his invaluable help throughout the development of our curatorial project, as well as for his contributions to both the exhibition (as an exhibiting artist) and the catalogue (as a contributing author).

Oak Woods Cemetery is located in Chicago's South Side Woodlawn neighborhood (a couple of blocks south of this author's home, in fact). It is also the final resting place of such luminaries as Jesse Owens, the unlikely sprinting hero of the 1936 Berlin Olympics; Eddie Harris, author of the jazz standard "Freedom Jazz Dance"; and Harold Washington, the first African American mayor of Chicago and a key figure in the cultural history of black Chicago.

3 See Adorno's notorious diatribe "On Jazz" from 1936, reprinted in Theodor Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 470–95.

rationalization, of the machine age's very own mindlessness.³ The AACM also refused to accept the long-time marginalization of jazz in the historiography of "serious" Western music.)

The AACM was effectively founded during another meeting held on May 8, 1965 at Phil Cohran's home on East Seventy-Fifth Street, near Cottage Grove Avenue, one of the historical arteries of African American cultural life in Chicago (nearby Sixty-Third Street had long been home to one of the greatest concentration of music halls and nightclubs in the Midwest). Abrams, Christian, McCall, and Cohran—a veteran, as it so happened, of Sun Ra's genre-defying Arkestra during its formative tenure in Chicago throughout much of the 1950s—sent out invitation postcards to the city's African American music community. The postcards stipulated a fourteen-point agenda, with one of the main proposed topics being the promotion of "original" compositions, or "creative" music. It was a decisive departure from jazz's traditional attachment to a more or less defined corpus of standards. Other subjects of discussion at the initial gathering included a name, salaries, places to play, dues, and order and discipline. (The emphasis on the last item is entirely in tune with the growing militancy of black cultural life at the time; for instance, less than a year after the AACM was founded, a new political movement saw the light of day in the San Francisco



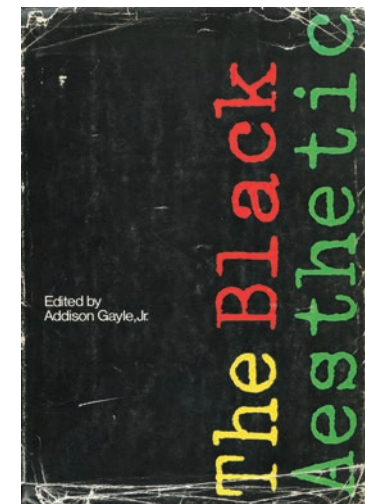
George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*,
University of Chicago Press, 2008



Bay Area, namely the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.) During these formative early meetings, all of which were recorded on tape, there were hardly any mentions of terms such as “avant-garde” or “free jazz”; nor were there any references to the concept of “black music,” even though almost all of the musicians present at these meetings were African American, and the founding of the AACM was inextricably linked to the defining impulses of mid-1960s black cultural ferment—such as the call for cultural emancipation and greater self-determination in the wake of a civil rights struggle caught between the rival drives of assimilationism and separatism, between Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, between the American dream of universal brotherhood and an emergent Afrocentrism spurred on by the citizens of so many African countries fighting to free themselves from their colonial overlords. It was also around this time that the tailored suits and clipped haircuts of the Miles Davis quintet and other institutions of “mainstream” jazz started to give way to Afros and dashikis in colorful African patterns, and that such figureheads of black America as Cassius Clay and LeRoi Jones changed their names to Muhammad Ali and Amiri Baraka, respectively. The search for a distinctly “Black Aesthetic” was on.⁴

Here, it is worth considering two slogans that have long been identified with the AACM: “Great Black Music” and “Ancient to the Future,” both rallying cries that were coined in the context of early recordings by the Art Ensemble of Chicago, which is perhaps the best-known music group to have come out of the AACM (and early adopters, if somewhat paradoxically, of the aforementioned Afro-aesthetic). The unease felt among some (early) members of the AACM vis-à-vis the

⁴ The Chicago-based publication *Negro Digest*, which in 1970 changed its name to *Black World*, was one of the foremost public platforms for the discussion surrounding the notion of “black aesthetics,” culminating in the publication of Addison Gayle Jr.’s landmark collection of essays *The Black Aesthetic* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971). The publication was a cornerstone of the Johnson Publishing empire, which continues to print *Ebony* and *Jet*.



Addison Gayle Jr., *The Black Aesthetic*, Doubleday, 1971

“Great Black Music” moniker in particular reflects the organization’s complicated relationship with black nationalism, on the one hand, and its dedication to the universalist aspirations of color-blind music-making, on the other. Although overwhelmingly black, the AACM has had its fair share of white members over the years, and historically the AACM’s musical output has swayed between the symbolic extremes of African-inspired rhythmic patterning and austere, white-identified modes of musical high modernism.⁵ The broad temporal sweep implied in “Ancient to the Future,” meanwhile, points to the AACM’s deep awareness of, and indebtedness to, preceding musical traditions—African drumming and Louis Armstrong, Delta blues and Duke

⁵ The musical trajectory of Anthony Braxton, an influential early member of the AACM, neatly encapsulates the many ambiguities and complexities characteristic of the AACM’s handling of tradition, and of blackness in music specifically: an admired interpreter of Charlie Parker, Braxton is also known for his idiosyncratic graphic scores, the sonic effects of which are often much closer in spirit and timbre to the sound world of Karlheinz Stockhausen and Anton Webern than anything resembling “the blues” or “swing” as conventionally understood. As George E. Lewis notes about his oft-contested colleague, “Braxton’s work was respected across a broad spectrum of experimental fields, but he remained something of a polarizing figure as far as the jazz world was concerned. For some, adjectives such as ‘mathematical’ and ‘Varese-like’ served to problematize his jazz bona fides, as critics suspended the more typically macho language related to swinging, punching, and driving in favor of musicology-influenced depictions of the music’s structure and organization.” See Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself*, 342.

Ayé Aton



The Eye of Ra, 1972
Color photograph
10×8 in. (25.4×20.3 cm)
Collection of John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis



Untitled (Ayé Aton wall mural), 1972
Color photograph
10×8 in. (25.4×20.3 cm)
Collection of John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis

Ayé Aton (American, b. Robert Underwood, 1940, Versailles, KY; lives in Baton Rouge, LA) moved to Chicago in 1960. Although Chicago's most extravagant jazz denizen Sun Ra moved to the East Coast soon after Aton made the westward journey, their shared time in Chicago was fruitful enough to forever shape Aton's subsequent artistic development both as a painter and a musician (he played the drums in the Arkestra from 1972 to 1976, around the time of the release of Ra's best-known album, the manifesto-like *Space is the Place*; Ra himself was born Herman Poole Blount in Birmingham, Alabama and largely invented his cosmic persona after moving to Chicago in 1946, changing his name and gathering the soon-to-be famous Arkestra around him in the process). Long a cherished secret of South Side culture, Aton is best known today for the series of interior murals he painted in people's homes across Chicago's Black Belt in the 1960s and 1970s. Many of these seem to have been inspired by prolonged daily phone conversations between Aton and his mentor Ra, then based in Philadelphia. The latter's Afro-cosmo-futurist influence is only too apparent in these psychedelic murals' recurring motifs, which include Egyptian imagery and space travel. Here, a painting of Aton's is shown alongside photographs of the murals in 1972. Most are now presumed lost.

FOLLOWING SPREAD
Untitled, 1964
Acrylic on paper
22×27½ in. (56×70 cm)
Collection of John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis

Glenn Ligon

Glenn Ligon (American, b. 1960, New York; lives in New York) came to prominence with a series of highly textured monochromatic paintings and photo-based installations that borrowed images and words from a variety of sources such as writers Gertrude Stein and Zora Neale Hurston, actor and comedian Richard Pryor, photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, and even nineteenth-century “Wanted” posters for runaway slaves. This conceptual practice of appropriation allows Ligon and his audiences to “re-read” the texts and images and foreground the often-overlooked racial, sexual, and gender assumptions operating in the original sources. *Give us a Poem* is an example of several sculptural works that he has produced in neon lettering. Its simple, two-word content is a quotation from world-champion boxer, devout Muslim, and antiwar activist Muhammad Ali. Ali spoke the words in 1975 at Harvard University when asked by a student to “Give us a poem.” Besides being arguably the world’s shortest poem, Ali’s lines suggests that his personal destiny was implicated in the collective of a broader community. Ligon’s quotation of the work, where the words “me” and “we” flicker alternately, and occasionally simultaneously, suggests that the relationship between the individual and the collective may be interdependent yet also, at times, indeterminate.

Give us a Poem, 2007
Black PVC and white neon
75⁵/₈ × 74¹/₄ in. (192.1 × 188.6 cm)
The Studio Museum in Harlem, gift of the artist.





Former location of the *Wall of Respect*, South Langley Avenue and Forty-Third Street, Chicago



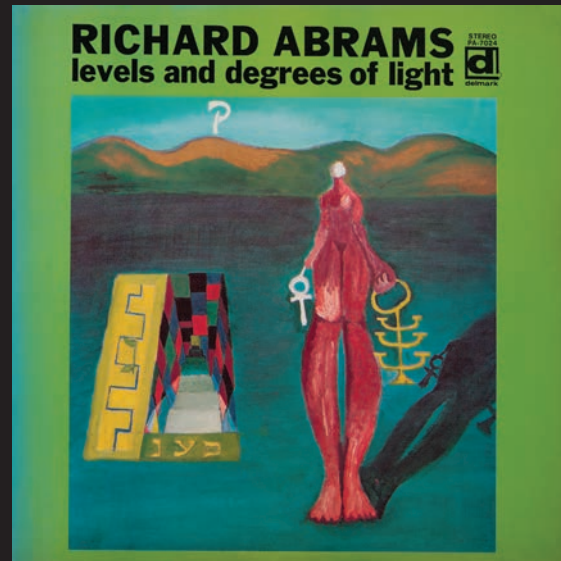
Former location of Child City Daycare Center (AACM concert space in the 1970s),
8701 South Bennett Avenue, Chicago



Joshua Abrams,
Natural Information,
Eremite Records, 2010



Muhai Richard Abrams,
Levels and Degrees of Light,
Delmark, 1968



Muhai Richard Abrams,
Blues Forever, Black Saint, 1982

Muhai Richard Abrams,
View From Within, Black Saint,
1985

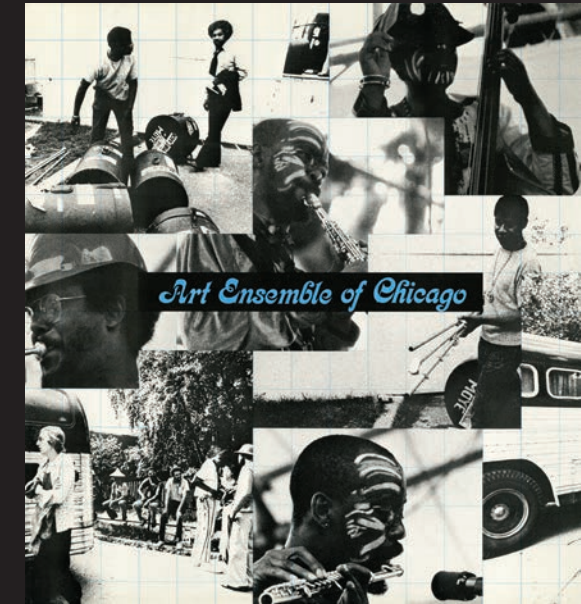
Muhai Richard Abrams,
Roots of Blue, RPR, 1986

Muhai Richard Abrams,
Blu Blu Blu, Black Saint,
1991

Muhai Richard Abrams,
Sound Dance, Pi Recordings,
2011

Air, Air Song, Why Note, 1975

Fred Anderson and Hamid
Drake, *From the River to the
Ocean*, Thrill Jockey, 2007



Fred Anderson Quartet,
Dark Day, Message Records,
1979

The Art Ensemble of Chicago,
People In Sorrow, Pathé, 1969

The Art Ensemble of Chicago,
Message to Our Folks, BYG
Records, 1969

The Art Ensemble of Chicago,
Live at Mandel Hall, Delmark,
1974

