

frieze

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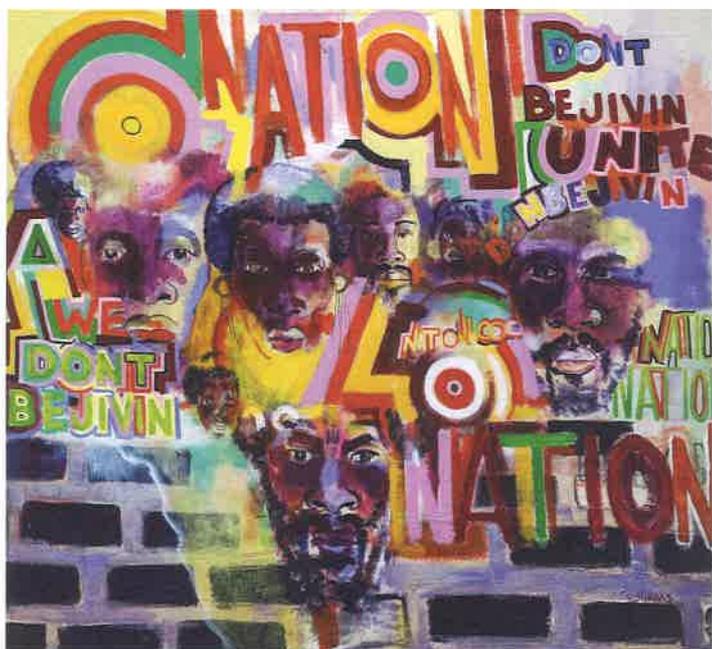
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76

SUN RISE



2



1

1
Gerald Williams
Nation Time, 1969, acrylic
on canvas, fabric, wood
and fringe, 1.2 x 1.4 m

2
Muhai Richard Abrams
Blu Blu Blu, 1991,
acrylic on cardboard,
45 x 48 cm

3
Jamal Cyrus
*The Dowling Street Martyr
Brigade - Towards a Walk
in the Sun, Pride Catalog
#2235*, 2005, collage on
paper, 30 x 30 cm

4
Roscoe Mitchell
The Third Decade, 1970,
acrylic on canvas, fabric,
wood and fringe, 61 x 101 cm

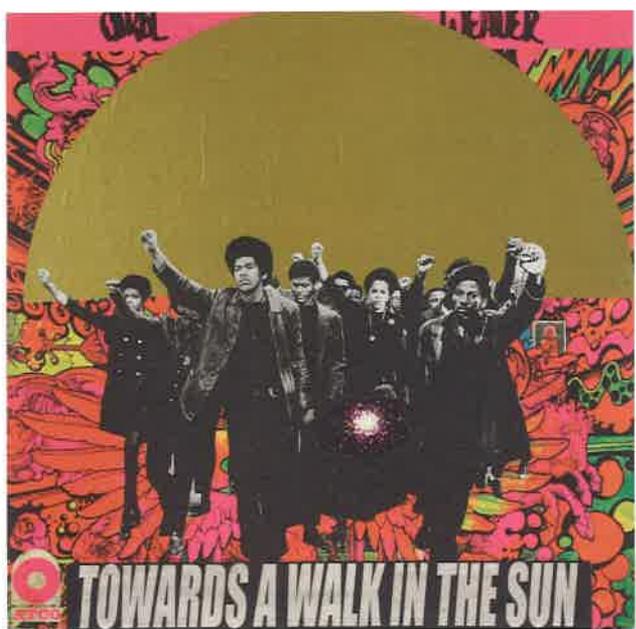
5
Intergral Performs
Centering Poster, c.1970

Courtesy 2, 4 & 5
the artists • 1 Johnson
Publishing Company •
3 the artist and Inman
Gallery, Houston;
photograph: Rick Wells

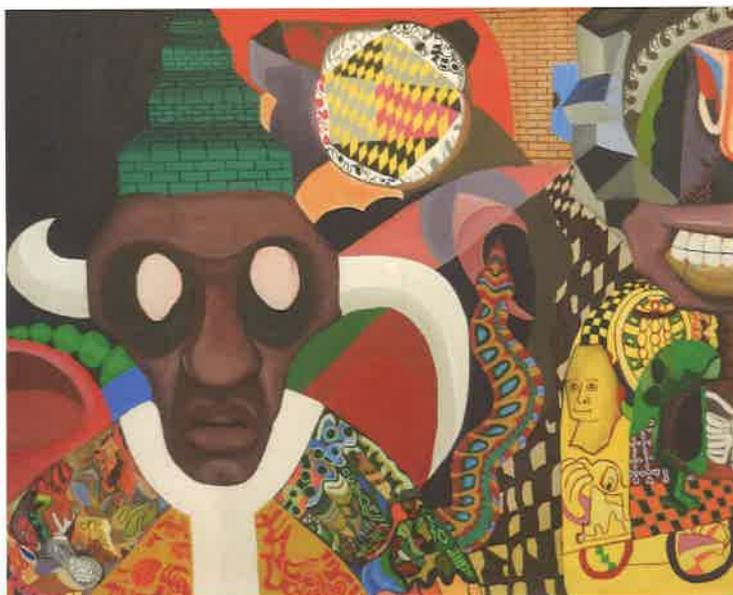
IN

On the 50th anniversary of Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, 'The Freedom Principle' at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, took a fresh look at the music and art of the black radical tradition
by Ian Bourland

DIFFERENT



DIMENSIONS



Chicago is known as a musical Mecca. Geographically and culturally midway between New York and Los Angeles, and home to a long line of avant-garde notables from the New Bauhaus to Kanye West, the city has, for decades, been a hub for sonic experimentation. For some, this means the golden age of post-punk record label Touch and Go or the raw production of Steve Albini; for others, it's the sultry 'four to the floor' of 1980s-era house producer Frankie Knuckles or the flow of recent MCs, such as Lupe Fiasco. But Chicago is, first and foremost, a city at the heart of American industry, a beacon during the Great Migration that brought millions of black Americans from south to north and, with them, the traditions of delta blues, hot jazz and gospel, which came together in the music of Muddy Waters and Buddy Guy.

Chicago is also the windswept, late-industrial landscape where Herman Poole Blount – later Le Sony'r Ra, or Sun Ra – founded El Saturn Records in 1957 and a society called Thmei Research, which explored numerological esoterica and occultist histories of Egypt. Ra is known widely for the sci-fi-pharaonic look that would be echoed by the likes of Parliament, Funkadelic and Afrika Bambaataa some 20 years later. But his experiments with synthesizers were equally significant: novel in the hard-bop era, they presaged a fusion of speculative technologies and African antiquity that would animate an entire generation's formulation of afro-futurism.

Not many years later, in 1965, a collective called the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) was formed as an umbrella group under which emerging strands of free jazz fused with a globalized array of instruments and metres. The AACM, in turn, was allied with a growing constellation of public arts spaces and black avant-garde circles, such as St Louis's Black Artists Group and the New York-centred Black Arts

Movement (BAM), which was influential in Harlem and beyond. The AACM sought to use music to complement positive images (and, later, afrocentrism) in black painting and sculpture by creating altogether new types of black subjectivity. Citing BAM leader Amiri Baraka in a new book that accompanies the recent exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 'The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now', art historian Rebecca Zorach writes that 'pure forms' of diaspora culture such as music, dance and religion resisted objectification and were best suited to 'reconstructing or excavating black identity'.

The location for 'The Freedom Principle', organized by Naomi Beckwith and Dieter Roelstraete, is unsurprising, given the Chicago museum's proximity to key figures and sites of this period, including Thmei Research and AACM, as well as The African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists (known as AfriCOBRA), the Afro-Arts Theater, the Wonder Inn on South Cottage Grove Avenue, the Hyde Park Art Center, and the celebrated Jazz Record Mart in the River North neighbourhood. Yet the exhibition arrives at a crucial time: it's an overdue reconstruction of an historical moment in the 1960s and '70s that was both vital and influential, one that fused radical sonics with post-medium visions of artistic production. This scene not only offers something of a decoder ring for a great many contemporary practices, but has also allowed recent artists to put non-visual forms of experience front and centre in their work. And, while sound is integral to the history of modern art – remember dada's swells of noise, surrealism's fascination with American jazz and the swing and syncopation that suffused postwar American painting – the antiseptic and visual logic of the white cube and the art-as-commodity system it underscores, remain stubbornly intact.

'The Freedom Principle' is an overdue reconstruction of an historical moment that was vital and influential, fusing radical sonics with post-medium visions of artistic production.



1
Art Ensemble of Chicago
performance at MCA Chicago, 1979,
photographer unknown

2
Robert Abbott Sengstacke
Wall of Respect, 1967, public mural

Courtesy
1 MCA Chicago • 2 the artist;
photograph: Robert Abbott Sengstacke/
Getty Images



2

One of great joys of ‘The Freedom Principle’ is that it takes us back to the apex of postwar modernism, when avant-garde music was venturing into uncharted territory and the black-radical tradition in the US was figuring itself through sonic experimentation and its visual analogues. Such experiments, of course, were largely obscured by the more familiar formalist narratives of the 1950s and ’60s. Even as arguments against modernism’s supposed transcendence of daily life were issued by a host of global players – Hélio Oiticica and the tropicália movement in Brazil, Guy Debord and the Situationist International in France, the Art Workers’ Coalition and early land art in the US – many influential curators and critics doubled down, most notably Michael Fried in his 1967 essay ‘Art and Objecthood’, a defence of medium specificity and the priority of immediacy and opticality.

‘The Freedom Principle’ featured a wide spectrum of materials – musical instruments, posters, paintings, multi-media installation, textiles – that collectively provide a vital counterpoint to the modernist and post-modernist debate that defined much of the late 20th century. Beckwith and Roelstraete’s show made clear that the postwar failures of the democratic project in much of the west meant that there could be no ‘outside of politics’, no universal subject or viewership. The exhibition’s main strength was the way in which it connected a history of Chicago to the liberating aspirations of music and social collectivity in that period.

Although the show was staged in a traditional white cube gallery, it managed

to replicate several, multi-sensory projects. I had to be dragged away from Douglas R. Ewart, George Lewis and Douglas Repetto’s *Rio Negro II* (2007/15). These three members of the AACM had prepared a room-sized assemblage of robotically controlled and interactive sculptural forms, including rain sticks and chimes. The ethereal soundscape was hypnotic and called to mind Phil Cohran’s electrified mbira (his ‘space harp’) and Aphex Twin’s cyber-analogue hybrids in equal measure. Cohran, for his part, played in several groups, including the Artistic Heritage Ensemble and Sun Ra’s Arkestra; the fluid cross-pollination between many of the key players in the scene exemplified the collectivist undercurrents that typified earlier avant-gardes. In a nearby gallery, Terry Adkins’s *Rendering of Native Son (Circus)* (2006/15) clattered and resonated across the space. This accumulation of cymbals turned the instruments into a pleasing sculptural assemblage and recalled the massive walls of polyphonic percussion developed by the Art Ensemble of Chicago’s Roscoe Mitchell – itself a subtle rejoinder to the stereotypical excesses of the 1970s-era prog rock drum kit.

Fans of another AACM alumnus, multi-instrumentalist Anthony Braxton, were given a chance to pore over his beguiling systems of alternate notation and his densely theorized *Tri-Axium Writings* (1985), which were displayed flat, inviting prolonged reading. In practice, Braxton is challenging music: from his solo saxophone compositions to his ‘Ninetet’ excursions, the intricate and sprawling sounds are better suited to deep immersion than background

entertainment. As his contemporary Rahsaan Roland Kirk famously quipped of his own work with multi-melodic jams, this is music that’s ‘splittin’ the mind in two parts’. The synergy of visual and sonic forms in the early 1970s is made clearer still in photographs of wall murals by Ayé Aton (born Robert Underwood in Versailles, Kentucky). He drummed for Ra’s Arkestra, whose synthesis of occultism and sci-fi aesthetics found their way into Aton’s large-scale, pop-psychedelic wall paintings in homes throughout Chicago’s southside – an update of the visionary panoramas of black deco artists such as Aaron Douglas. Overall, ‘The Freedom Principle’ gave credence to both the serious formal interests and socio-political purpose applied to the avant-jazz tradition in Chicago.

The show was less clear in explaining how the relative success of these earlier practitioners might help us to theorize the present more clearly. While many members of the AACM and Sun Ra’s Arkestra are still active, Beckwith and Roelstraete gave over much of the installation to artists who they suggest were predecessors. On this level, there were some miscues – the usually outstanding Renée Green and Nari Ward both contributed text-based works that, in this context, seemed one-dimensional, diminishing the social ambitions that might elsewhere be unlocked through wall text.

In other sections, ‘The Freedom Principle’ found useful ways to recontextualize the work of other contemporary artists. For example, Nick Cave’s *Soundsuits* (1999–ongoing) – always texturally inviting but often uncomfortably staid in the gallery,

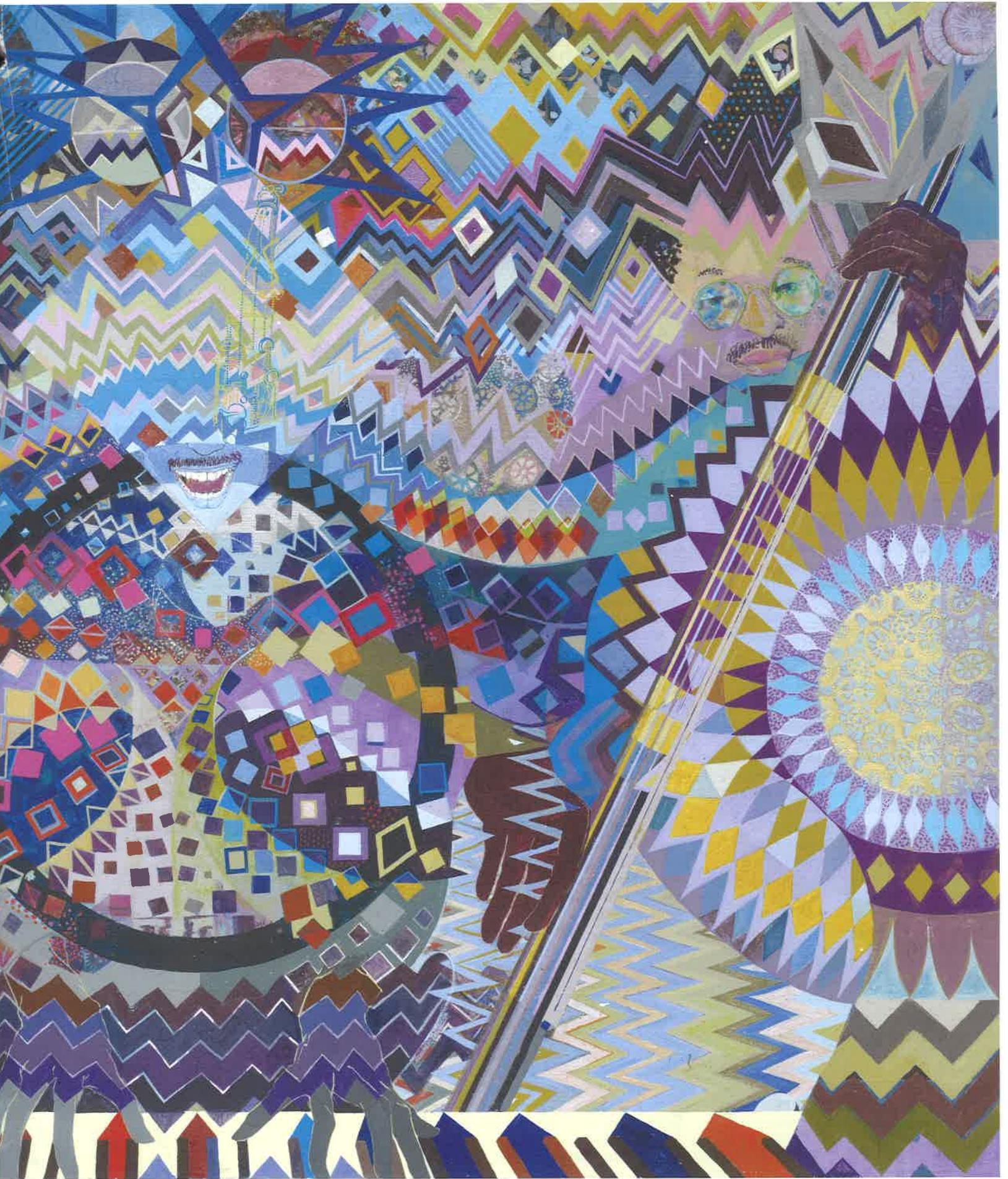
Jeff Donaldson made paintings as both positive affirmations of blackness and as microcosmic depictions of utopian futures and dynamic black bodies.

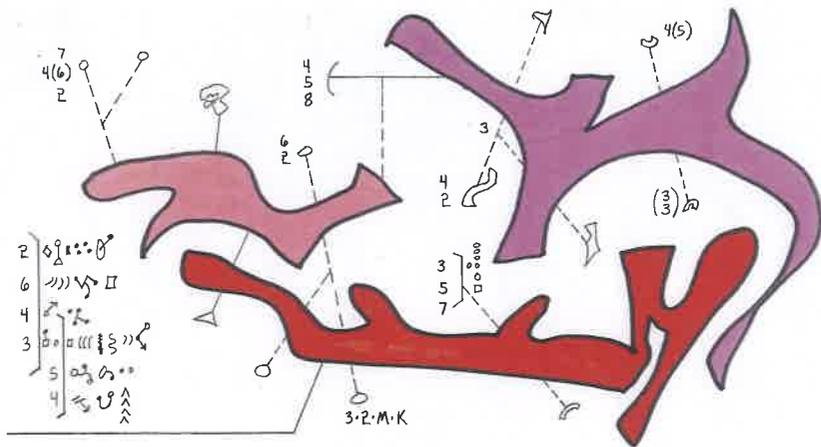
and almost like taxidermy – are reconnected here with the exuberant movement and sweaty Chicago-house dance floors that inspired them. Similarly, Rashid Johnson's semiotic play of black-cultural tropes seems less like cynical hipster pastiche than it otherwise might. His work *Roscoe's Target* (2014) evokes the afrocentric streetscapes of Chicago's Bronzeville and Hyde Park – not far from where Johnson went to art school – all the way down to Akan soap and a Roscoe Mitchell record that, resting at the centre of the composition, has the charge of a devotional reliquary.

The 1960s remain, for most, a romantic dream, a time when the radical left and grassroots collectives might force larger systems to make good on promises of inclusion and liberation – the completion of the project of modernity itself. Some 50 years on, however, many of the most intractable problems of the day seem to persist, and we hear their echoes in the Black Lives Matter and Occupy movements. But, unlike in the 1960s and '70s, the sort of art on offer in today's jazz clubs and galleries seems largely removed from radical activism, at best providing ancillary support in the form of documentary, archival research or sloganeering.

This shift in cultural context, from one of true grassroots activism to one of more explicit commodification, cannot be discounted. Accordingly, the most powerful recent work on display in 'The Freedom Principle' seems to draw on the utopianism and post-medium approaches of those earlier years, but updates them in ways that make the gallery itself a site of disorientation. For a theorist such as Robin Kelley, using objects creates a form of imaginative disorientation, an elaboration of surrealism within the black-radical tradition. Visionary spaces can be conjured through art, and it is no surprise that the surrealists' discovery of the 'marvellous' in black music extends well beyond jazz. But we also learn that, within the Chicago scene itself, Jeff Donaldson developed a subtle riff on the surreal: the 'superreal' or 'art that fills up, adds to and exceeds reality'.







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One exemplar of this is Jennie C. Jones, who, for decades, has answered the question: what if modernist abstraction and minimalist seriality had continued to interweave with the sonic efflorescence of the 1960s? For the Chicago show, Jones contributed *Quiet Gray with Red Reverberation #2* (2014), a relief painting and assemblage comprising an acoustic absorber and acrylic on canvas. It calls to mind the hard edges of Kenneth Noland and Al Loving, or Donald Judd's cadmium red. Even more, it re-forges connections between postwar painting and jazz. In 2013, Jones's solo installation, *Higher Resonance*, at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington D.C., took the austere architecture of the museum and converted it into a resonance chamber. Looped microsamples of music by Kirk, Alvin Singleton and others reflected off and were absorbed by the works and rebounded around the corners of the gallery. Jones's 'hybrid modernism' deflected the viewer away from mere visual absorption, cultivating breaks and grooves that reverberated through the otherwise hushed corridors.

'The Freedom Principle' also featured more conventional black-box screening rooms for works by both the Canadian artist Stan Douglas and Britain's Otolith Group. Both mine film archives to recuperate lost moments. In Douglas's *Hors-champs* (1992), members of the AACM perform Albert Ayler's free jazz album *Spirits Rejoice* (1965) on a Parisian TV soundstage. For *People To Be Resembling* (2012), The Otolith Group created a portrait of the 'post-free-jazz' trio Codono,

pulling in a range of references to the political context of the 1970s. Douglas's 2014 installation at David Zwirner Gallery in New York, *Luanda-Kinshasa*, nodded to the postcolonial vectors of disco, funk and psychedelic music. The looped video shows the improvised performance of a fictional band from the 1970s, playing a loose, vibrant jam session at the famed Columbia 30th Street Studio in New York. This is anachronistic fantasia, to be sure, but to witness the film is to be transported: for a moment, the tumult and *jouissance* of an otherwise-distant era finds expression in the here and now.

In contrast, multi-media artist Sanford Biggers has long mined more ecclesiastical undercurrents in his work, exploring gospel and the connections between Buddhism and hip-hop, such as the shared transience of Tibetan sand painting and improvised break dancing explored in the *Mandala of the B-Bodhisattva II* (2000), a breakout piece with David Ellie from 2001. (The following year, Biggers was featured in the 'Freestyle' exhibition curated by Thelma Golden at The Studio Museum in Harlem and 'One Planet Under a Groove' at The Bronx Museum: shows that both prefigured 'The Freedom Principle' in their curatorial approach.) Biggers's *Ghetto Bird Tonic* (2006) was shown at the MCA – a mash-up of the hip-hop bubble jacket, Caribbean carnival and West-African masquerade. More stirringly, in 2012 he drew together family history, Atlantic migration and afro-futuristic motifs for his massive installation *The Cartographer's Conundrum* (2012) at Mass MoCA's giant Building 5, where he infused the funkadelic with the history of gospel; the play of chromatic light and squalls of sound transformed the space into a site of communion on the scale of an earthwork.

The show at Building 5 also featured a panoramic reproduction of a 1970s-era painting in bold afrocentric figuration and colours by John Biggers, Sanford's cousin. The elder Biggers's painting was of a piece

with works by Nelson Stevens and Jeff Donaldson in Chicago: Stevens's *Uhuru* (1971) and *Towards Identity* (1970), for instance, or Donaldson's *JamFact/JelliTite* (1988). Unlike Sanford Biggers, however, John Biggers, Stevens and Donaldson played to a primarily black audience, making paintings as both positive affirmations of blackness and micro-cosmic depictions of utopian futures and dynamic black bodies.

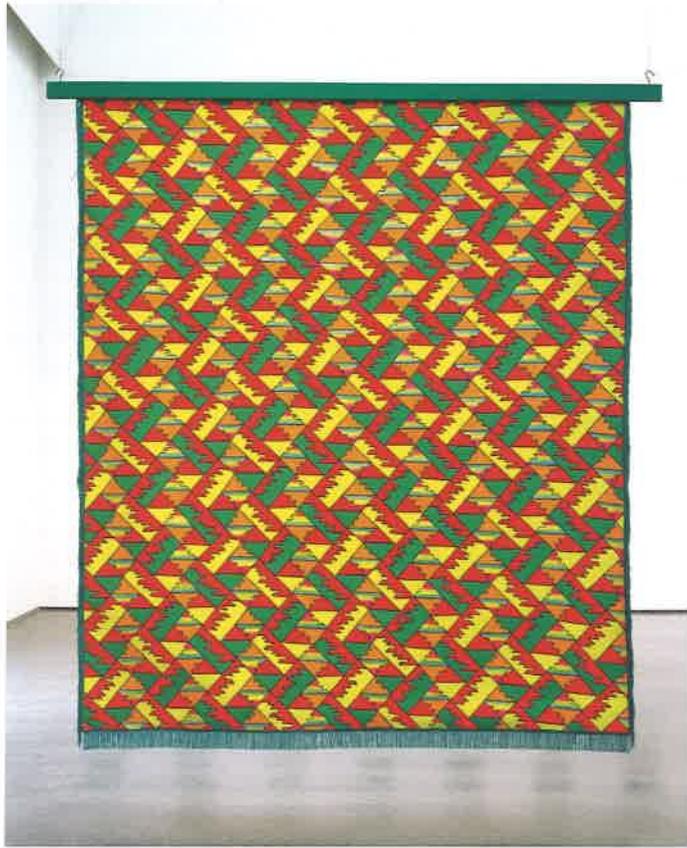
'The Freedom Principle' did not describe the performance or visualization of blackness per se but, instead, the reclamation of the supposedly autonomous space of the white cube in ways that bend and distort it away from the more static or passive encounters often fostered by exclusively visual practices. It reconnected viewers with the lineage of the black-radical tradition and its varied methods such as afro-futurism, improvisation and superrealism. Yet it's worth remembering that, while radical collectivity reiterates itself as activism in the streets of Baltimore, Manhattan and Missouri, some of the work in the show will be sold or, rather, in Baraka's terms, will be re-objectified.

Beckwith and Roelstraete's show has made it difficult to read mainstream 1960s modernism – with its assertions of the moral weight of formal problems – in quite the same way, knowing that artists such as these, working in Chicago, Los Angeles and New York, were taking on big questions with a breathtaking blend of tradition and originality. Much of that work from the 1960s and '70s survives largely in record-store bins or art catalogues but, at its best, 'The Freedom Principle' highlighted the fact that there is now a cohort of younger artists who channel those same energies, creating new breaks and elisions, new zones of the surreal and super-real in which we, too, might radically reorient our senses. ❖

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Organized by Naomi Beckwith and Dieter Roelstraete, 'The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now' was at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, USA, from 11 July until 22 November 2015 and travelled to the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, from 14 September until 31 December 2015.

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2

Previous page
Jeff Donaldson
*JamPact/JelliTite (For
Jamila-Kinshasa)*,
1988, mixed media
on canvas, 88 × 127 cm

1
Anthony Braxton
Falling River Music (363h),
2004–present,
graphic score, 27 × 43 cm

2
Lisa Alvarado
Representing, 2011,
acrylic, flash and ink on
banner (canvas,
fabric, wood and fringe),
2.5 × 2.3 m

Courtesy
Previous page collection
of Jameela K. Donaldson •
1 Anthony Braxton
and Tri-Centric Foundation,
New York • 2 the artist



3

3
Stan Douglas
Luanda-Kinshasa, 2014,
video still

4
Rashid Johnson
Roscoe's Target, 2014,
burned red oak flooring, black
soap, wax, spray enamel,
vinyl, plant, shea butter, books,
270 × 335 × 25 cm

Courtesy
3 the artist and David Zwirner,
New York • 4 the artist
and David Kordansky Gallery,
Los Angeles



4