

SEPTEMBER 14, 2016–
MARCH 19, 2017

The Freedom
Principle:
Experiments in
Art and Music,
1965 to Now

Gallery Guide

The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now features the work of over 35 artists of different generations who explore connections between the visual and the musical, the political and the aesthetic, the individual and the collective. This exhibition grows out of the pioneering work of two African American collectives founded on Chicago's South Side over half a century ago: the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) and the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists (AfriCOBRA). These collectives challenged formal aesthetics while also criticizing the institutional structures of cultural presenters, both groups represent important parts of the then-emerging avant-garde attuned to the social and cultural changes sparked by the struggle for African American equality.



Roscoe Mitchell, *The Third Decade*, 1970. Acrylic on canvas, fabric, wood and fringe.
Approx. 24 x 40 inches. Courtesy the artist.

AACM

The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians is an influential group whose members have revolutionized jazz and improvised music, often bringing a sense of play, inventive instrumentation, and openness to their work. The AACM was founded on the South Side of Chicago in May 1965 by four young musicians: Muhal Richard Abrams, Jodie Christian, Phil Cohran, and Steve McCall. To create their own support network and to break from the jazz tradition of performing popular standards, they started their own musicians' collective. Adventurous young composers such as Anthony Braxton, Douglas R. Ewart, George Lewis, Amina Claudine Myers,

Roscoe Mitchell, Wadada Leo Smith, Henry Threadgill, and many more soon joined the AACM, attracted to its spirit of experimentation.

AACM members not only made music but also collaborated with dancers, theater artists, poets, and visual artists. Even when focused on music alone, they broke new ground by pairing a rigorous approach to composition with new ideas about “free” improvisation, alongside innovative ensemble groupings of instruments. Education was important to the AACM. The organization’s headquarters served as a concert venue and base for a musician’s union as well as a free school. Through this emphasis on teaching, the AACM nurtured future generations of musicians. Still dedicated to the collective promotion of creative music, the AACM continues to thrive to this day with newer composers and performers, including Nicole Mitchell and Mike Reed.



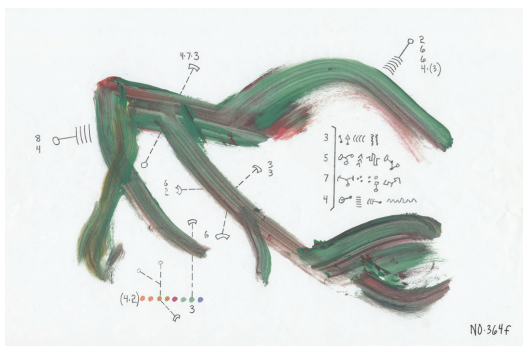
Gerald Williams, *Nation Time*, 1969. Acrylic on canvas. 48 x 56 inches.
Photo: Geoffrey Black/Johnson Publishing Company.

AfriCOBRA

The African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists was founded on the South Side of Chicago in 1968 by the visual artists Jeff Donaldson, Jae Jarrell, Wadsworth Jarrell, Barbara Jones-Hogu, and Gerald Williams. The group grew out of an earlier collective called OBAC (pronounced "oh-bah-see"), the Organization for Black American Culture, which brought activists, artists, and writers together to support the African American struggle for freedom, equality, and justice in the United States. OBAC organized the important Wall of Respect mural in Chicago, a

work that influenced many mural works around the country, including Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program. AfriCOBRA shared OBAC's belief that art could foster social change, and its artists brought a great political urgency to their work, which they positioned within a larger Pan-African context.

AfriCOBRA's strong social and political dimensions went hand in hand with a dedication to developing a new visual language. Many AfriCOBRA paintings and prints feature heroic figures and mosaic-like patterns in bright colors that seem to emanate light and movement. The collective was committed to making art widely accessible, and printmaking was a particularly important medium, since it allowed the mass production of affordable works on paper. Much like its musical counterpart, AfriCOBRA continues to influence and inspire.



Anthony Braxton, *Falling River Music (364f)*, 2004-present. Graphic score. 11 x 17 inches. Courtesy Anthony Braxton and the Tri-Centric Foundation.

There were many parallels and direct collaborations between AfriCOBRA and the AACM. Both collectives responded to the Afrocentric cultural aspirations of the time and to experimental approaches that melded art and life in new ways. AACM rehearsals and concerts occasionally took place in the studios of AfriCOBRA artists, and AACM musicians also appear in paintings by these artists. At one point, the two organizations shared an address.

Featuring both historical and contemporary artworks rooted in the adventurous mixtures of form and structure of the AACM and AfriCOBRA, *The Freedom Principle* suggests that the art and music formed in Chicago in the 1960s and 1970s points to a way ahead for a geographically dispersed number of artists working today. Echoing the ideas and experiments

that arose during a time of politically charged cultural activity, and presenting these artworks in another such politically charged time, these approaches continue to reshape boundaries between art forms and rethink social conditions.

Looking beyond the geographic boundaries of the exhibition, the artists and composers in the exhibition, in their approaches and their desires to work across forms and with others, can be seen as a model for redirecting traditions and structures taken as givens. We can look to these works as examples of how the path to tomorrow can be changed by revisiting the materials and forms of yesterday. *The Freedom Principle* ultimately tells a story in the present tense. As an AACM motto puts it, “Ancient to the Future.”

—Chief Curator Anthony Elms,
adapted from materials supplied by the
Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

Muhal Richard Abrams, *Integral performs Centering* poster, c. 1970.
Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago.

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22

APRIL

8

P.M.

UNITARIAN CHURCH

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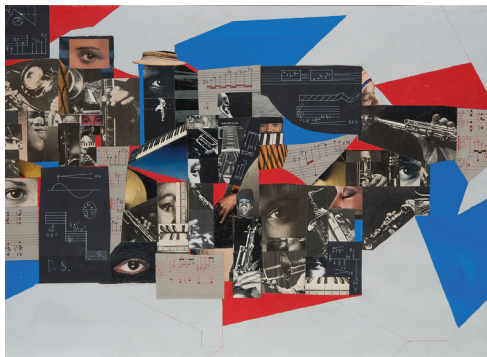
DONATION † 2.00

Organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, this exhibition is the result of a collective curatorial effort by Naomi Beckwith, Marilyn and Larry Fields Curator; Dieter Roelstraete, former Manilow Senior Curator; Grace Deveney, former Marjorie Susman Curatorial Fellow; and Karsten Lund, former Curatorial Assistant. The exhibition is coordinated at ICA by Chief Curator Anthony Elms with Assistant Curator Meg Onli.

The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now is organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

Lead support for *The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now* is provided by Cari and Michael Sacks. Additional generous support is provided by the Pamela Alper Curatorial Fund, Dr. Anita Blanchard and Martin H. Nesbitt, Lester N. Coney and Mesirow Financial, Anne and Don Edwards, Denise and Gary Gardner, Vicki and Bill Hood, Jeanne and Kevin Poorman, Linda Johnson Rice, and Desirée Rogers.

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Muhai Richard Abrams, *View From Within*, 1985.
Collage and acrylic on canvas. 17 ¾ × 25 ½ inches.
Photo: Gavin Ashworth, © MCA Chicago.

RELATED PROGRAMING

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 14
6:30-9 PM

Public opening celebration with complimentary
snacks and cash bar

*The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music,
1965 to Now*
Endless Shout

5 PM (MEMBERS ONLY)

Preview and conversation with artists and curators

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 26
6:30 PM

The Freedom Principle: Curators' Conversation with
Naomi Beckwith, Anthony Elms, and Dieter Roelstraete

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 4
4 PM

Endless Shout and The Freedom Principle: Conversation
between Charles Gaines and Fred Moten

ICA is always Free. For All. Free admission is courtesy of Amanda and Glenn Fuhrman.

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