Martha Schwendener and Will Heinrich, "At Frieze New York, Islands of Daring", *New York Times*, May 2, 2019.

The New York Times

**ART REVIEW**

# At Frieze New York, Islands of Daring

Don't be daunted by the fair's nearly 200 booths. Our critics have done the walking and have found the standouts.

The Frieze Art Fair on Randalls Island includes exhibits from nearly 200 galleries from around the world. Rebecca Smeyne for The New York Times

**By Martha Schwendener and Will Heinrich**
May 2, 2019

Getting into this year's Frieze Art Fair on Randalls Island will cost you $57, plus the round trip on the ferry. But that's nothing compared to what it cost nearly 200 galleries to exhibit there. And so dealers have made the reasonable decision to bring a little of everything that sells — which may account for the conservative vibe. That said, there are many islands of daring, including special sections focused on solo presentations,

small galleries, the influential gallery JAM and virtual reality. We sampled them all — along with the mainland fairs that are part of Frieze Week. Our art critics Martha Schwendener and Will Heinrich pick a handful of the best booths under Frieze New York's big tent.

BOOTH C2

## Bridget Donahue and LC Queisser

"Traditional Object 34" (2019) is one of Lisa Alvarado's acrylic-on-canvas pieces. CreditRebecca Smeyne for The New York Times

One of the strongest single-artist booths is a joint presentation by Bridget Donahue Gallery and LC Queisser, who represent the artist Lisa Alvarado in New York and the Republic of Georgia, respectively. Ms. Alvarado made her acrylic-on-canvas pieces, each painted with a thrilling zigzag pattern, as backdrops for performances by the Natural Information Society, in which she plays the harmonium. If the fair's not too loud, you'll be able to hear the band's hypnotic music, too. *WILL HEINRICH*

Bill Meyer, Natural Information Society make the stage a home—and vice versa", *Chicago Reader,* April 17, 2019. https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/natural-information-society-abrams-alvarado/Content?oid=69669593

READER

# Natural Information Society make the stage a home—and vice versa

Joshua Abrams and Lisa Alvarado help give this Chicago collective's transcendent minimalism a family feeling.

By Bill Meyer

Lisa Alvarado and Joshua Abrams work in studios joined by an open doorway in their shared home.
CHARLIE GROSS

Chicago composer and musician Joshua Abrams likes to compare the guimbri (aka gimbri, guembri, or sintir), a traditional three-string bass lute associated with Morocco's Gnawa people, to the Roland TR-808, an early-80s drum machine that became foundational to hip-hop, Chicago house, and a long list of other genres. "Sometimes I'll joke that it's the original 808, because it has a percussive skin mixed with a bass tone," Abrams says. "It has a strong sub-bass too."

Abrams is widely known as a bassist, playing jazz, freely improvised music, indie rock, and hip-hop with the likes of Nicole Mitchell, Mike Reed, Dave Rempis, Will Oldham, Prefuse 73, and the Roots. During a long association with Kartemquin Films documentary director Steve James, he's created soundtracks for James's *Life Itself* (2014), *The Interrupters* (2011), and the series *America to Me* (2018). But Abrams plays some of his most personally significant music on the guimbri. "I think it's a very sophisticated instrument for centering and focus, and that's been an aim or concern with presenting music that can offer that possibility for the listener," he says. "For me it just became the locus to bring many different musical interests together. Sometimes inspired by very old or traditional music, sometimes inspired by contemporary music, electronic music, popular music—and that musical amalgam is central to the project's character."

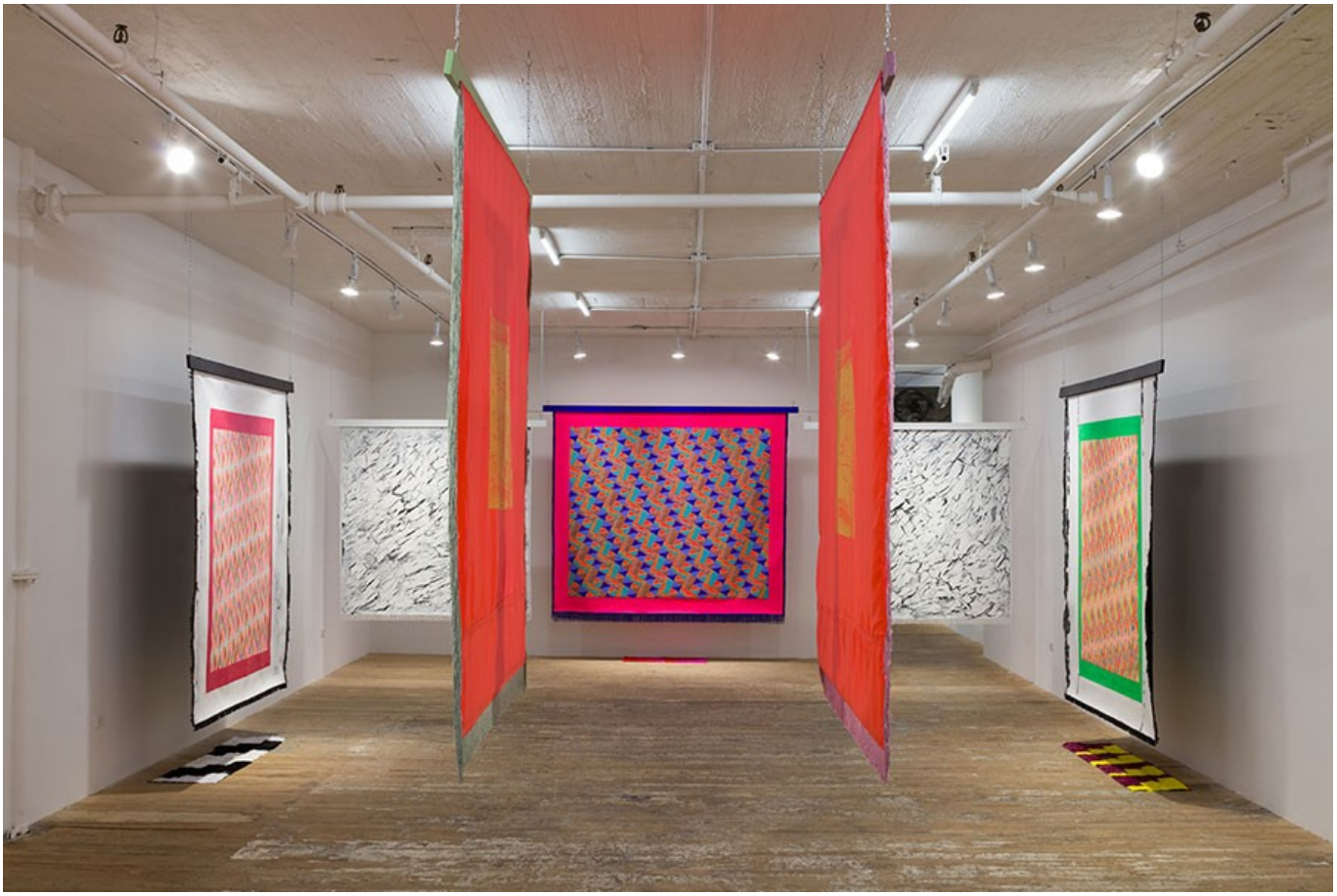
The project he's referring to is Natural Information Society, a constantly evolving collective that adopted that name in 2010. It also involves his wife, artist and musician Lisa Alvarado, and it's very much a family affair: Abrams composes the music, while Alvarado handles the Society's visuals. Currently represented by the Bridget Donahue gallery in New York, she has exhibited in Chicago, Glasgow, and Tbilisi, Georgia, but NIS has given her the chance to share her work with people who might never make it to an art show. Her large-scale paintings, whose intricate, repetitive geometric patterns rhyme with the hypnotic rhythms and interwoven tone colors of NIS's music, appear as stage backdrops and album covers.

Natural Information Society open for Body/Head at the Art Institute in March 2019. JULIA DRATEL

"Our aesthetic and our sensibilities worked so well together and kind of reflected each other, and now they're intertwined and inform each other," Abrams says. "Also on a life-decision level, sometimes people need to pursue very separate paths. You can be very supportive, and you do your thing and I'll do mine, and we come together to support each other. But for us it seems more fun to pursue a thing together. Then we would be in it together and be on the road together.

In the couple's home, which they share with a three-year-old daughter, their studios occupy adjacent rooms joined by an open doorway—so the acts of painting, playing, and composing can intermingle when they occur simultaneously. "I work in a home studio, where rehearsals and recordings happen," says Alvarado. "For me the context of where a work is made and how it is used is integral to its meaning and energy. The sounds of many great musicians, including Hamid Drake and Ari Brown, fill our home and vibrate the walls of my studio while I work. Experiencing rehearsals in front of my works showed me how well they could work onstage."

Abrams hopes the paintings can provide a focal point for the audience, and he enjoys having them onstage. "Sometimes they're hung way above us, but it always kind of changes the environment," he says. "For me that's a way to make whatever stage we're on feel more comfortable, more at home—and to give that signal that this might be a different sort of experience than is typical."



Lisa Alvarado's solo show "Sound Talisman" at Bridget Donahue gallery in New York. Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York.

In a recent article that Alvarado wrote for the *Wire*, she credited this concept—"the stage as a home, and the home as a stage"—to one of Natural Information Society's inspirations, the artistic partnership of Don Cherry and his wife, Monika "Moki" Cherry. Don first became known as the pocket-trumpet-playing foil to Ornette Coleman on Coleman's groundbreaking late-50s and early-60s free-jazz recordings for Contemporary and Atlantic, and he subsequently traveled the world, picking up ideas and instruments that he used to make increasingly genre-transcending music. In the early 70s he and Moki, an artist and

musician, formed the Organic Music Society, which performed with an international assortment of jazz and folk musicians (as well as Swedish summer-school students) and preferred communal, public settings to conventional jazz clubs. When they played at schools or museums, for instance, they discovered that people interacted with their output in different ways. Moki painted the gatefold cover of the project's double LP; look inside and you'll find photos of Don jamming with their kids.

In the *Wire*, Alvarado acknowledges the precedent of Moki's colorful paintings and talismanic banners. Her article also includes a 1978 photo of a young drummer who'd recently started playing with Don, reclining on a couch in the Cherrys' house in front of one such banner: Hamid Drake. Renowned for his work with Peter Brötzmann, Bill Laswell, William Parker, and Michael Zerang, among many others, Drake needs little introduction. Based in Chicago but active around the world, he's been a key figure in the development of Natural Information Society—and not just because he's one degree removed from the Cherrys. He's contributed as both a spiritual guide and an active participant, joining the band onstage occasionally and playing on two of its albums, including the brand-new double LP *Mandatory Reality*, released April 12 by Eremite Records.

Drake and Abrams have played together since the 1990s, when they shared the stage with venerable tenor saxophonist Fred Anderson. Once Drake knew that Abrams had a guimbri, he kept track of the bassist's progress on it. Abrams's first recording with the guimbri appears on a 2007 album by Anderson and Drake, *From the River to the Ocean* (Thrill Jockey). He subsequently played it in Drake's reggae-informed group Bindu. "Those experiences were very important," Abrams says. "They encouraged me to practice so that I got comfortable playing the instrument, and to let the music be the guide rather than arrive at a position that was solely intellectual."

It took more time and scrupulous experimentation for Abrams to sort out how he wanted to use the guimbri in his own music. Among the records he's made under his name or leadership, he first used it on the 2010 release *Natural Information* (Eremite), which combines solo home-studio creations, an electric trio session with guitarist Emmett Kelly and drummer Frank Rosaly, and recordings where Abrams plays bass with two jazz comrades, vibraphonist Jason Adasiewiecz and drummer Nori Tanaka. Linking these disparate elements is a meditative quality that's reinforced by the weighty resonance of the guimbri and by the accompanists' willingness to rein in spotlight-grabbing impulses in service to the centering insistence of Abrams's rhythms.

Alvarado first appears on Natural Information's successor, 2012's *Represencing* (Eremite), and though she's on only half the album, her droning harmonium (a bellows-driven reed organ) and clustered gong strikes enhance the music's ceremonial air. The personnel on *Represencing* vary even more from track to track than they do on *Natural Information*, reflecting the fluid membership of the nascent NIS. But subsequent lineups have been relatively stable (from song to song, if not from album to album), made up of musicians capable of maintaining their individuality while connecting the disparate influences that feed into the collective's sound.

"Everyone playing on any of the records is there because I love what they do and they were interested in the project," explains Abrams. "I like to work with musicians who have distinctive sounds and approaches, and I want the music to have room for their voices." Portions of 2015's *Magnetoception* (Eremite), which features Kelly and Jeff Parker on electric guitars as well as Drake on hand and kit drums, could almost pass for a late-night meet-up between the Velvet Underground and preternaturally eclectic multi-instrumentalist Sandy Bull. On 2015's *Autoimaginary* (Drag City), a collaboration with Chicago synth-and-reeds trio Bitchin Bajas, and 2017's *Simultonality*(Eremite), Ben Boye's radiant Autoharp and dense, winding keyboard figures sync up with terse guitar and drum-kit grooves, demonstrating a trance-inducing common ground between minimalist composition and Krautrock beats.

In June 2017, NIS returned home from a U.S. tour and played a record-release show for *Simultonality* at Constellation. Abrams used the show to debut a new approach: For its extended final piece, a three-piece horn section (alto saxophonist Nick Mazzarella, cornetist Ben LaMar Gay, and bass clarinetist Jason Stein) joined the touring ensemble (Abrams, Alvarado, Boye, and drummer Mikel Patrick Avery) and guest percussionist Hamid Drake. The piece was built, like many NIS compositions, around the guimbri's patiently ascending-and-descending lines. At first the horns and keyboards followed Abrams's steps, but

soon the instruments branched out to follow coordinated but independent paths. Their interwoven lines fit together like the repeating abstract shapes in one of Alvarado's paintings, and the occasional solo interjections accented the billow and flux of the larger patterns like the metallic paints she uses to throw matte colors into relief. Two days after the concert, that eight-piece version of Natural Information Society went into Chicago studio Electrical Audio to record a 40-minute version of that piece, "Finite," as well as the three other compositions that comprise *Mandatory Reality*.

"On this record, the music is more specific—there are clearly systems at play," says Abrams. "I wanted the album to focus on extended duration and slowness, to create a space and timing where the musicians can actively listen and make choices based on that listening. I wanted to write for multiple horns in the group but maintain NIS's interwoven dynamic. In NIS the orchestration lives within the sound of the guimbri—the low tones are the soil from which the other sounds grow. The challenge of adding horns is that they can easily take over the sound of a group, so I tried to write in a way that blends their timbres with the other instruments. Everyone has the opportunity to take their time to listen across the ensemble and focus on how they approach the notes they are asked to play."

"Finite" is the album's center of gravity, and for going on two years it's been the mainstay of the Society's live sets, where it can last from 30 minutes to more than an hour. On a recent European tour, a quartet version of NIS (Abrams, Alvarado, Stein, and Avery) played it every night. Avery puts a quick backbeat behind the piece, turning some concerts into prolonged dance parties.

Natural Information Society at May Chapel in Rosehill Cemetery, November 2017: Mikel Patrick Avery, Jason Adasiewicz, Nick Mazzarella, Jason Stein, Lisa Alvarado, and Joshua Abrams

"I think working in between the cracks of established genres has potential to find new forms," Abrams says. "My ongoing focus for the group is creating structures that might not be so obvious upon first listen. Sometimes that gets mistaken for no structure. We're trying to arrive at something different, and that's

where the energy comes from—both through the process of finding and through inhabiting a sound world that doesn't easily fit categorization."

The balance of patient ensemble development and strategically complementary individual contributions that characterizes "Finite" is also evident on the album's side-length opener, "In Memory's Prism." Abrams wrote it to soundtrack the film component of artist Simon Starling's *Project for a Rift Valley Crossing*. "The film is of a canoe trip across the Rift Valley in a boat made of the magnesium derived from the water which it is traversing," says Abrams. "That's a beautiful metaphor for this music to accompany."

Natural Information Society plays a concert to celebrate the release of *Mandatory Reality* at Constellation on June 28. Between now and then, Alvarado will help keep the group's sounds circulating. In May she'll have a booth at gargantuan international art fair Frieze New York, and NIS will be with her in sound and spirit. "I'm going to be showing some new pieces that I have, some smaller-scaled works that are longer in scale. Maybe you've seen one from photos on this last tour. But there's also going to be a sound piece that Josh and I have been working on—that's going to be something different for an art-fair environment."

Lisa Alvarado, "The Inner Sleeve", *The Wire*, March 2019, Issue 421, 73.

THE WIRE®

## The Inner Sleeve

This month's artwork chosen by **Lisa Alvarado**

Courtesy Hamid Drake

**Moki Cherry**
***Untitled Tapestry***
Silk and mixed media, 1978

Born Monika Marianne Karlsson in 1943 in Koler, Sweden, Moki Cherry was an artist, musician, mother and wife to the legendary musician Don Cherry. Her tapestries hung from performance stages and in her family home as meditation maps and reminders of elevated states. Travelling as a collaborative music and art group under the name Organic Music Society, Moki, Don and their two children built and lived a multisensorial and multi-inclusive path. Her silk metallic works are embedded with the residues, vibes and auras of their travels, their growing children, and the many powerful musical experiences that they hung alongside. They are relics of something magical, of a lived exploration into a reunderstanding of what it means to be a creative person, to have a family and to bring it all together into something that is full of spirit.

Bordered with spiritual incantations and shimmering collaged fabrics from her travels, Moki's works transformed the stage into an altar for ecstatic and teleporting musical experience. She created her work for eye and ear ingestion with psychic and musical utility-like talismans or guides for absorbing vibrations into the electrical system. Her works were kaleidoscopic in use as they set "the stage as a home and the home as a stage" (an Organic Music motto). They had the power of being space makers, context shifters and aids for recalling awareness to the experience of now. The fabrics were simultaneously peaceful and energetic, woven with the happenings of life around them and in "flow with time".

This golden photograph was taken after a long walk though the woods. In 1978 master drummer Hamid Drake and his family moved to Sweden to live with Don and Moki in their family home. The photo shows Drake sitting in front of one of Moki's silk mandala tapestries. Mandalas create a sacred space and help guide a meditator's focus towards the centring path of enlightenment. The tapestry is detailed with lotus flowers and a serpent-centred dharma wheel. The 12 golden spokes of the wheel symbolise a cyclical path that reminds the meditator that nothing has an independent or permanent existence. The mandala also references the colour symbolism of Tibetan Buddhism and its concept of the rainbow body – a meditating figure within the mandala that reaches a transitional state in which the matter of their body is transformed into pure light.

Hamid Drake calls humanity the greatest mandala. As a member of both groups, he is the living bridge between Organic Music Society and my group with Joshua Abrams, Natural Information Society. He made the connection at an NIS show in 2010 where I had brought one of my paintings for the same purpose: "Love, Wisdom, Music, Peace, Peace, Peace". ☐ Lisa Alvarado is an artist, musician and member of Joshua Abrams Natural Information Society, whose *Mandatory Reality* is released this month by Eremite

Moritz Scheper, "Lisa Alvarado's Paintings Activate the Canvas as Body", *Frieze,* November 6, 2018, https://frieze.com/article/lisa-alvarados-paintings-activate-canvas-body.

frieze

Reviews /

# Lisa Alvarado's Paintings Activate the Canvas as Body

BY MORITZ SCHEPER

06 NOV 2018

An exhibition at LC Queisser, Tbilisi, highlights how the artist invents new forms of touching a canvas

In recent years, there has been much talk of painting as a 'contact medium', mobilizing the idea of the canvas 'as body' via Willem de Kooning's famous assertion that 'flesh was the reason why oil paint was

invented'. While I have no problem with this theory from an intellectual standpoint, it has never made sense to me on a *physical* level. Yes, the surface of a painting is certainly less closed than that of, say, a Diasec, but does it impel you to touch, to feel, to be in contact with?

This debate surrounding the body's relation to the painted surface returned to me in Lisa Alvarado's exhibition, 'Polyphonic Shadow Cloth', at LC Queisser. Four works, two in large formats, hang from the ceiling as unstretched textiles. Their front-sides are fabric planes painted edge-to-edge; their reverse-sides are a lime green organza. In three cases, an extra layer of material sits between the two, lending the works a soft volume. With the pictures suspended, narrowing the gallery space as architectural interventions, the viewer is pushed to relate to them on both a visual and physical level, an effect only amplified by their soft, delicately knotted borders.

Lisa Alvarado, *Traditional Object 28*,
2018, acrylic, fabric, wood,
1.5 × 2.2 m. Courtesy: the artist
and LC Queisser, Tbilisi;
photograph: Angus Leanly Brown

In contrast, the edge of *Traditional Object 28* (2018) is stitched with coarse hemp. The bristles frame an abstract composition of interlocking coloured layers, itself framed in pink, that might recall Gerhard Richter's tedious squeegee abstracts. But Alvarado's bright colour palette, which evokes impressionist depictions of nature, sets the groundwork for a project beyond self-regarding abstraction alone. The

vertical brushstrokes – swift flicks of the artist's wrist – create a freehand pattern behind which a glowing vermillion occasionally peeks through. That same colour features in a small rug of part-dyed pheasant feathers that lies on the floor below. The patterning of the iridescent plumage seems to have provided the blueprint for Alvarado's paintings, and it returns again in *Feather Shadow 12* (2018), a narrow rug of feathers that seem to come from a pheasant's throat. The beauty of the work derives wholly from these materials, which lend the exhibition a very physical form of seduction. After all, Darwin identified the soft touch of a bird's plumage as a form of enticement crucial to sexual selection.

Lisa Alvarado, *Traditional Object 29*, 2018,
acrylic, fabric and wood, 2.4 × 2.4 m.
Courtesy: the artist and LC Queisser,
Tbilisi; photograph: Angus Leanly Brown

The show's strength lies in the subtle manner in which it delivers this sense of touch within distinctive, organizing patterns. *Traditional Object* 29 (2018) presents a grid of diagonal bars in gold, pink, shimmering

violet and green. Some of the bars are broken up by zigzag lines resembling cardiogram readouts or soundwaves. This grid, neatly painted without the slightest trace of brushstrokes, is inserted, slightly off-centre, into a monochrome frame of bright vermillion. Here, prominent brushstrokes reveal traces of an underlying complementary green, causing the red to shine bolder still. The synesthetic aspect is reinforced by a soundtrack: *Polyphonic Shadow Cloth* (2018), composed by Natural Information Society, the band founded by Alvarado and her husband, Joshua Abrams. The vibrations of drawn-out harmonium chords seem tuned to the zigzag lines, but in more general terms, too, the music shifts the physical works into a performative context. They were originally made as stage designs for Natural Information Society concerts, and thus exist at both sounding boards and objects in their own right.

Perhaps polyphony would be a suitable word to describe Alvarado's irregular patterns. But much would be lost in such a description: the traces of her hand; the alluring glow of the imagery; and, of course, the tactility. Alvarado highlights the latter quality on the reverse of her pictures: using screen printing, abstract patterns are applied to the organza, which, a gallerist explains, are the imprints of glove stretchers. Another degree of touching, then. But if there have ever been pictures that cried out to be touched, it is these. Painting as, well, a contact medium.

*Translated by Nicholas Grindell*

Thea Ballard, "Lisa Alvarado", *Art in America*, June 1, 2017, http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/lisa-alvarado/.

Art in America

REVIEWS JUN. 01, 2017

# Lisa Alvarado

**NEW YORK,**
at Bridget Donahue

by Thea Ballard

View of Lisa Alvarado's exhibition "Sound Talisman," 2017, at Bridget Donahue.

The works in Lisa Alvarado's "Sound Talisman" weren't paintings in a precious, gallery-bound sense. Rendered in craft-store acrylics on layers of inexpensive polyester satin, the large mandala-like hangings are supposed to be rolled, transported, and rearranged. Alvarado plays harmonium in the experimental ensemble Natural Information Society, which is led by her husband, Joshua Abrams, and these pieces, usually displayed two or three at a time, were made to invigorate venues during NIS performances. Yet when attached to strips of wood and suspended from the Bridget Donahue ceiling on sturdy hooks and chains, the painted fabric rectangles became more than utilitarian backdrops. They emerged as stand-alone visual inquiries that may occasionally accompany music and performance.

Bright and lively, the hangings were designed to be seen from a distance. Some were positioned parallel with and close to the wall, hinting at painting's traditional place within a white cube. Others were arranged freely in the space, suggesting floating hallways and corners. There's an intensity to entering a room full of these works; even before noticing the details, one feels a sort of pulsating energy. While the backs display the same medium-size printed motif, the fronts are painted in different patterns.

Alvarado's designs are derived from Mexican textiles, and follow formats that are similar to one another. A handful of the works are geometric, with a zigzagging effect created from small triangles and jagged lines. Lurid color combinations give the hangings force. In one piece with a fringed purple border, blocks of neon orange, teal, and magenta are accented by hot pink and kelly green. Though similarly vivid, other works are less geometric; the brushwork is looser and more improvisational, and a rhythmic scratching overrides the borders between colors. These examples have the layered feel of topography, their wavy organic movement dotted with violent blotches of red and cobalt.

Some patterns encompass the fabric's whole surface, while others fill an off-center rectangle set in a field of a complementary hue. In both cases, the imagery is often slightly askew in its frame, giving the sense that we're seeing only a clip of a pattern that stretches infinitely. Small mats made of dyed feathers—a detail new to Alvarado's practice—sit below several hangings, adding a sense of ritual. And, throughout, works seem to overlap and connect, as if they were a part of some larger geometry.

A soundtrack by Abrams, which played on a loop unless there was a live performance, compounded the somewhat hippie-style aesthetic. Where NIS's free jazz–inflected music tends to lock into a groove, this eighty-minute soundtrack wanders through a set of moods. With a droning bass and weaving melodies, it generates drama and even a semblance of narrative. During one of my visits—a rainy day—I entered to a warbling, cool harmony, which was slightly sad and passed in small waves. The sound component altered the focus of the show, inviting a meditative state, but the music's predetermined arc limited the capacity for mutual activation between art and sound.

Live performance generated the strongest interdependence. At the opening, in front of a particularly arresting fuchsia banner, Alvarado played her harmonium alongside drummer Chad Taylor and Abrams on a three-stringed North African bass lute. The three musicians' instruments, merging into a warm and open sound, underscored the connections among Alvarado's paintings and invited a slight collapse between seeing and listening, as viewer focus turned into pure enveloping experience.

Alec Coiro, "Sound Activated Art by Lisa Alvarado", *Ravelin Magazine,* May 17, 2017.

RAVELIN

**ART**

# Sound Activated Art By Lisa Alvarado

The artist and musician takes us through her exhibit at Bridget Donahue Gallery.

From afar or at a quick glance, Lisa Alvarado's pieces seem like an accomplished innovation that remains within the genre of maybe color field paintings. Or there are others that could seem like a fresh take on a spatter-type technique.

On closer inspection, however, it's quickly apparent there is way more going on. Below most of the works exist a grounding patterns made of carpeting. The paintings are also fringed, and by fringed, I mean with actual fringe, an intentional nod to the importance of textiles. "I'm interested in the history of textiles as a framework to think about painting and abstraction. It's a culturally inclusive history that provides a different trajectory to think about forms and art objects, their histories and uses. I think about the in-between place of objects, like textiles, that are categorized as artifacts rather than art works. Could an artifact become an art work and an art work become an artifact? That in-between space is interesting to me." Thus the fringe is more than a decorative element. It is also more than the frame for the painting in the sense that Alvarado considers her works to have multiple frames. "I think of it as layers of frames. Almost like a collage." On the back of the pieces is a silk-screen of an image that Alvarado describes as a tear machine, which is a fascinating combination of birds and tears and Klee-esque machine for producing them.

Lisa Alvarado, Installation View Of *Sound Talisman*, March 26 - May 21, 2017, Bridget Donahue, New York, Copyright Lisa Alvarado, Courtesy Of The Artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC

Then, there is what I think is the most important aspect, the notion of activation and the fact that the pieces are inextricable from the musical context for which they are intended. Alvarado describes this: "I think the pieces are activated through the experience — the experience of sound, the experience of the shared gatherings around them."

But it would be wrong to simply imbue Alvarado's work with a gesture to the reductive term "multi-media." The activation does not simply describe the fact that there is music that goes with the piece. Rather it is the collective experience shared by musician and audience in the presence of the work of art. "It's something that I consider: Does collective experience do something to an object, a history, or a person? Is there any psychic residue or transformation that goes on?" Anyone who has ever been conscious of the distinction between experiencing music in your bedroom and at a show will understand what Alvarado means. And any kid who's ever saved the stub from her first concert is a testimony to Alvarado's insight that collective experience does indeed leave its trace on an object.

To the end of collective experience, Alvarado along with Bridget Donahue curated a series of shows to take place among the works hanging from the ceiling. Performers included White Magic, William Parker, Battle Trance, and Natural Information Society.

Speaking of Natural Information Society: they are responsible for the sound installation as well as the music that twins the Alvarado's pieces on tour. The group was founded by Alvarado's collaborator and husband Joshua Abrams."Natural Information Society is Joshua's music. There is a core lineup of musicians who play with the band and others who augment the group depending on the concert and the context." Alvarado is the harmonium player in Natural Information Society; she describes her initial attraction to the instrument as related to her childhood affinity for the accordion. "I've always liked the accordion. I'm from San Antonio, Texas and the accordion is a staple of the music from there. I love the sound. Hearing the harmonium for the first time, I was amazed how it is similar to the accordion but constructed to create more meditative layers as well."

In a sense, the harmonium is an apt metonym for Alvarado's work as a whole, which combines layers of frames, layers of meaning, layers of media, and always in a meditative way.

Dana Kopel, "Conversations: Vibrational Aesthetics: Lisa Alvarado" *Mousse Magazine*, May 2, 2017.

MOUSSE

CONVERSATIONS

# Vibrational Aesthetics: Lisa Alvarado

*Sound Talisman*, Installation view
Courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC

Lisa Alvarado and Dana Kopel in conversation.

The artist's practice is an exercise in balance, bridging visual art and sound to create works that feel at once spiritual and grounded in the physical, natural world. Her paintings often operate as stage sets, artworks, and ritual objects simultaneously, and engage with abstraction beyond

the parameters of Western art history. Alvarado also plays harmonium in the band Natural Information Society, whose music has been described as "ecstatic minimalism"—a designation that also suits her paintings, with their bright colors and geometric patterning. Originally created as stage backdrops for Natural Information Society performances, these paintings are currently on view in Alvarado's solo exhibition at Bridget Donahue in New York. The show also features a sound installation by the band and a program of live performances.

Dana Kopel: You're involved in projects that are sometimes more firmly grounded in music, as with Natural Information Society, and sometimes—as with your exhibition at Bridget Donahue, or the recent group show *The Freedom Principle* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and the ICA Philadelphia—more situated in a contemporary art context. Other performances and projects seem to exist somewhere between art and music, bridging the two. How does your approach differ among these different modes of production?

Lisa Alvarado: It's an intertwined process. My husband and I are both involved in music, and our home is a space for rehearsals and recordings. When I'm in my studio, which is right next to the sound studio, I hear music a lot and it influences the work. I always have been interested in the residue of how these things rub off on each other, and in bringing the works into real-time gatherings with people, the platform or backdrop that they create. What is the psychic residue, if anything, that is embedded within them, or within our memory? Does any sort of transformation happen? That's something I'm curious about.

DK: In your exhibition at Bridget Donahue, your paintings are installed to form a sort of stage, where performances intermittently take place, yet most of the time the paintings very clearly constitute an exhibition. Sound, too, inhabits a gallery space quite differently than it does a performance, in terms of both time and the kinds of attention it elicits from its audience. How do you see your works operating in a gallery setting, as opposed to the performance environment in which they're more commonly shown?

LA: The differences allow for new things to happen. For example, I'm able to have more than a few paintings up at a time and play with the relationships among them. The performances, along with the sound installation, help activate the work and bring the paintings into a similar place as when they're on stage. It's exciting to see them up for a longer time and beyond a transient situation.

DK: There's also something durational with an individual experience of the works: a viewer can walk around them, especially the double-sided ones, spend time with them, and see that they take up space in a different way.

LA: That's something that can get missed when we're on a stage. Often the audience doesn't know there's a back to the paintings, or may not even know that they're painted. It becomes an inside thing. The band knows the ins and outs of it; the band is helping roll up the paintings and put them in the van with all the other instruments, so they come to hold this collective memory of our experience. That's what's nice about the exhibition: I get to share more of what's going on.

DK: The paintings are designed to be rolled up so you can take them to shows, open them up, and put them away afterward. That's a much less precious relationship to them as art objects than is usual for artists.

LA: I thought that it was important that they became part of my life. I make them in my home, which is also a site for rehearsals and recordings, so bringing them on tour felt natural—they were already a part of this environment.

DK: Tell me a bit about your process.

LA: The process is slow, and I see it as meditative, repetitive, mantra-like. I think about how the paintings can create balance in my life. When everything's going fast and I need to be on the computer all the time, my work in the studio forces me to slow down. When communications are virtual, I want to make work that creates situations of shared experience. In a lot of the works I am thinking about movement. I've been calling it "vibrational aesthetics." I use a variety of approaches: sometimes it's more of an organic, cracking, poured paint; other times I'm standing at the wall and painting these patterns with small brushes. Very different processes that arrive at similar ends of movement, vibration, and pulse. It relates a lot to music and sound but also, for me, to the heartbeat and the breath and how the painting can tune in with someone's body.

DK: There's a resonance between the use of rhythm and this mantra-like quality that you describe in the paintings and in your music with Natural Information Society.

LA: A lot of my decisions also come from thinking about the stage and the audience. With color, I think about how I can make the works be seen at a distance and how they function with a foreground of moving instruments and people, to highlight the situation and create a back and forth. I've been painting for a long time, so paint has become an instrument I communicate with. The way musicians get started playing a certain instrument is the way that I went into painting: you develop a language with it over so many years of playing; it becomes your voice. I think that is my relationship to paint. I see it as a very ancient process. You have this liquid stuff that you're guiding to a solid state.

DK: You titled your exhibition at Bridget Donahue *Sound Talisman*, and there is indeed a talismanic quality to the paintings: their use of patterns inspired by Mexican textile designs, the way they hang from the ceiling like banners or charms, the small geometric feather pieces that are placed beneath some of

them, almost like a prayer mat. Where does this element of ritual, or the talismanic, come from? And how does it relate to your musical work with Natural Information Society?

LA: The title of the show came from an NIS song where I'm rapidly striking a gong for a long duration. I think there's something talismanic about that striking or activating—talismans are objects that get activated or enacted through some form of concentration or touch. When I was setting up the space at Bridget Donahue, I started thinking about the works as though they were chimes, and the sound was wind bouncing off all of them, and activating them like a talisman.

DK: Can you speak to the histories of minimalism and abstraction—in both sound and visual art—that inform your work?

LA: I'm into the musician-artist couple Don and Moki Cherry, specifically their Organic Music Theater: they used Moki's textiles and created a space for musical performances. Asco, the art collective from Los Angeles, their walking murals. Gutai, the Art Ensemble of Chicago's sound stations—those are their onstage visual-sonic assemblages. I think textiles are an interesting framework for thinking about painting and abstraction, the history of textiles being a more culturally inclusive history than, say, the Western painting canon. They're objects that have been categorized as "in between," situated as artifacts rather than works of art. Some objects made by some people are considered art, and some objects made by other people are considered artifacts. My work considers that in-between place: is there a place for artifacts to turn into art or art to turn into artifacts? I'm interested in the motif of the steps that can be seen throughout the Americas, part of an art history that encompasses a geography that's not separated by artificial borders. Something that's beautiful about these steps is that they're simultaneously going in opposite directions: on one end they're going up to the heavens, and on the other end they're going down to the underworld. I see it as a symbol of opposites that coexist and complement each other. It's very musical, but also goes into how these opposites or parallels can be in harmony together.

Lisa Alvarado (1982, San Antonio) is an artist and performer based in Chicago. Alvarado plays harmonium in the experimental band Natural Information Society comprised of multiple performers and led by multi-instrumentalist Joshua Abrams. She has exhibited most recently in the group exhibition "The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 To Now" at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and The Institute of Contemporary Art Philadelphia, and in group exhibitions at the Kentucky Museum of Arts and Crafts, The Logan Center of the Arts at The University of Chicago, and in a solo presentation at the Soccer Club Club.

Joe Bucciero, "Lisa Alvarado: Sound Talisman", *The Brooklyn Rail,* May 1, 2017

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

**ARTSEEN** **MAY 1ST, 2017**

# LISA ALVARADO
# *Sound Talisman*

***by Joe Bucciero***

BRIDGET DONAHUE | MARCH 26 – MAY 21, 2017

Eleven tapestry-like painted objects hang from the gallery ceiling in symmetrical arrangements, delineating pathways, establishing something of a community. Together they share similar patterns, materials (acrylic, satin, fringe), rectangular shapes, and sizes of 6 to 9 feet, yet no one object is the same as its neighbors. All stamped with the same icon on their glossy backsides (with the exception of one hung at the front of the gallery), the banners appear visually bonded to their counterparts.

These eleven objects—plus five feathered floor mats, a photographic print, and an audio piece—comprise *Sound Talisman*, the first New York exhibition by Chicago-based artist and musician Lisa Alvarado. Referencing Mexican craft traditions, the hanging works, called *Traditional Objects* (2010 – ongoing), are used as backdrops in performances by Natural Information Society, an avant-garde music ensemble in which Alvarado plays harmonium and percussion. Removed from that context, though, they remain striking objects on both formal and material levels. Each is patterned with layers of acrylic paint, alluding not just to textiles, but also to movements in painting such as Impressionism, Abstract Expressionism, and Capitalist Realism.

Often Alvarado delivers what looks like an immaculate modernist composition, only to undo its perfection through material deviations. For *Traditional Objects 10, 11,* and *12*, she encloses an impressionistic sea of thin brush strokes within a rectangle, which itself is set in a larger plane of color. In *Traditional Object 11*, other substances such as paper towel are buried beneath layers of neon yellow acrylic; the piece's primary subject (the Impressionist rectangle) is revealed to be a facade covering up techniques and materials native to textile arts or collage.

Installation view: Lisa Alvarado, *Sound Talisman*, Bridget Donahue, New York, March 26 - May 21, 2017. © Lisa Alvarado. Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York

*Traditional Objects 17* and *18* reveal material tricks as well: from a distance, they recall postwar canvases with marble-like patterns, yet at closer look, the thin strokes of paint become frayed fabric, as if Alvarado X-rayed the work's satin innards.

*Traditional Objects 5, 6, 15, 19, 20,* and *21* showcase the jagged, weaving patterns that speak most clearly to Alvarado's interdisciplinary practice; fans of Natural Information Society will recognize them from the band's record covers, like the recently released *Simultonality*. These pieces summon the painting of Sigmar Polke and Thomas Bayrle, both of whom borrowed textile strategies to, in part, evoke the networked substructures of people and information in late capitalist society. Like Bayrle, Alvarado composes her patterns with accumulations of discrete shapes—a regimented process more in line with printing than painting. *Traditional Object 21*, the exhibition's newest piece, shows a cascading maze of small stenciled rectangles atop a vibrant pink backdrop. Within every shape are more, delineated forms, each colored to contrast its surroundings.

Yet, however separate, the individual forms lock into one another, forming what could be a never-ending sequence. Painted in formal and spiritual unity, the diamonds, rectangles, and zigzags that comprise these sequences suggest foundational real-world materials: bricks, religious icons, single-celled organisms—things of which history and culture are formed. Because Alvarado paints the patterns by hand, there are minor inconsistencies from shape to shape which give the impression that each variant represents an evolution, a new shape woven in with the old.

In the 1970s, Bayrle's painting coexisted with music by groups like Kraftwerk and Can, who through focused sonic repetition referred to the structures of the postmodern world (highways, computers) while resisting western music traditions. Natural Information Society adds Krautrock's pulsing beat to disparate influences from free jazz to West African folk. On *Simultonality*, their rhythmic patterns activate and fuse together these genres, each containing its own complex history and attendant patterns. *Sound Talisman* is likewise set into motion by sound, meandering the pathways between *Traditional Objects*, causing Alvarado's patterns to shake and quiver. Each thump of sonorous metallic percussion sends a ripple through the fabric; each harmonium drone slithers up one diagonal or another. Due to their use for performances, some of their surfaces have cracked from the band's travels, illuminating the material's lived history. As sounds reverberate through Alvarado's community of objects, the stories and traditions contained within them call out and enter into the mix.

CONTRIBUTOR

JOE BUCCIERO was born in Chicago and is based in New York City. He is a co-author of Colossal Youth (forthcoming 2017, Bloomsbury Academic).

"Lisa Alvarado", *The New Yorker*, May 1, 2017, 6.

THE NEW YORKER

ART GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

# Lisa Alvarado

The Chicago-based artist-musician's first solo show in New York is an abundance of lovely hanging pieces from an ongoing series she calls "Traditional Objects". The geometric compositions recall Mexican textiles and float between categories - they are at once screens, paintings, and tapestries. Alvarado began making the works in 2010, as portable sets for her band Natural Information Society, an experimental ensemble of traditional and electronic instruments. (The group provides the atmospheric recorded soundtrack that plays in the gallery.) She makes elegant use of the gallery space, installing her vibrant, two-sided works to create airy partitions, evoking both theatrical and ceremonial uses. Visitors may feel as if a live happening is about to occur, and, indeed, musical performances are scheduled for 7:30 on May 8 (Angelica Sanchez, Gerald Cleaver, Joshua Abrams) and May 10 (Battle Trance). *Through May 21. (Donahue, 99 Bowery. 646-896-1368.)*

Holland Cotter, "10 Galleries to Visit Now on the Lower East Side", *The New York Times*, April 28, 2017, C30.

The New York Times

**Art & Design**

SPRING GALLERY GUIDE

# 10 Galleries to Visit Now on the Lower East Side

Lisa Alvarado's bannerlike paintings at Bridget Donahue.
MICHAEL NAGLE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

By HOLLAND COTTER

APRIL 27, 2017

## BRIDGET DONAHUE

The scroll-like, free-hanging paintings of the Chicago-based artist Lisa Alvarado have been most often seen as backdrops for the music group Natural Information Society, for which she plays harmonium. Her recent inclusion in the traveling exhibition "The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now," has changed that, and in her New York solo debut at Bridget Donahue, "Sound Talisman," Ms. Alvarado is a painting star.

Her two-sided banners divide the open gallery into chapel-like spaces that sing with color and pattern, channeling Mexican and Tibetan textiles; Anni Albers; and AfriCobra artists like Jeff Donaldson, Wadsworth Jarrell and Barbara Jones-Hogu. With their funky luxe, her banners hold their own just fine, though they will again set the scene for music when Natural Information Society's founder, Joshua Abrams, performs at the gallery on May 8.

Giovanni Russonello, "Pop, Rock and Jazz in NYC This Week", *The New York Times*, April 20, 2017.

NEW YORK

# To Do: April 19–May 3, 2017

**Twenty-five things to see, hear, watch, and read.**

Published Apr 16, 2017

(Photo: Joan Marcus (Happy Days); courtesy of Gorillaz (Gorillaz); courtesy of Netflix (Girlboss, Casting Jonbenet); courtesy of Amazon Studios (The Lost City of Z))

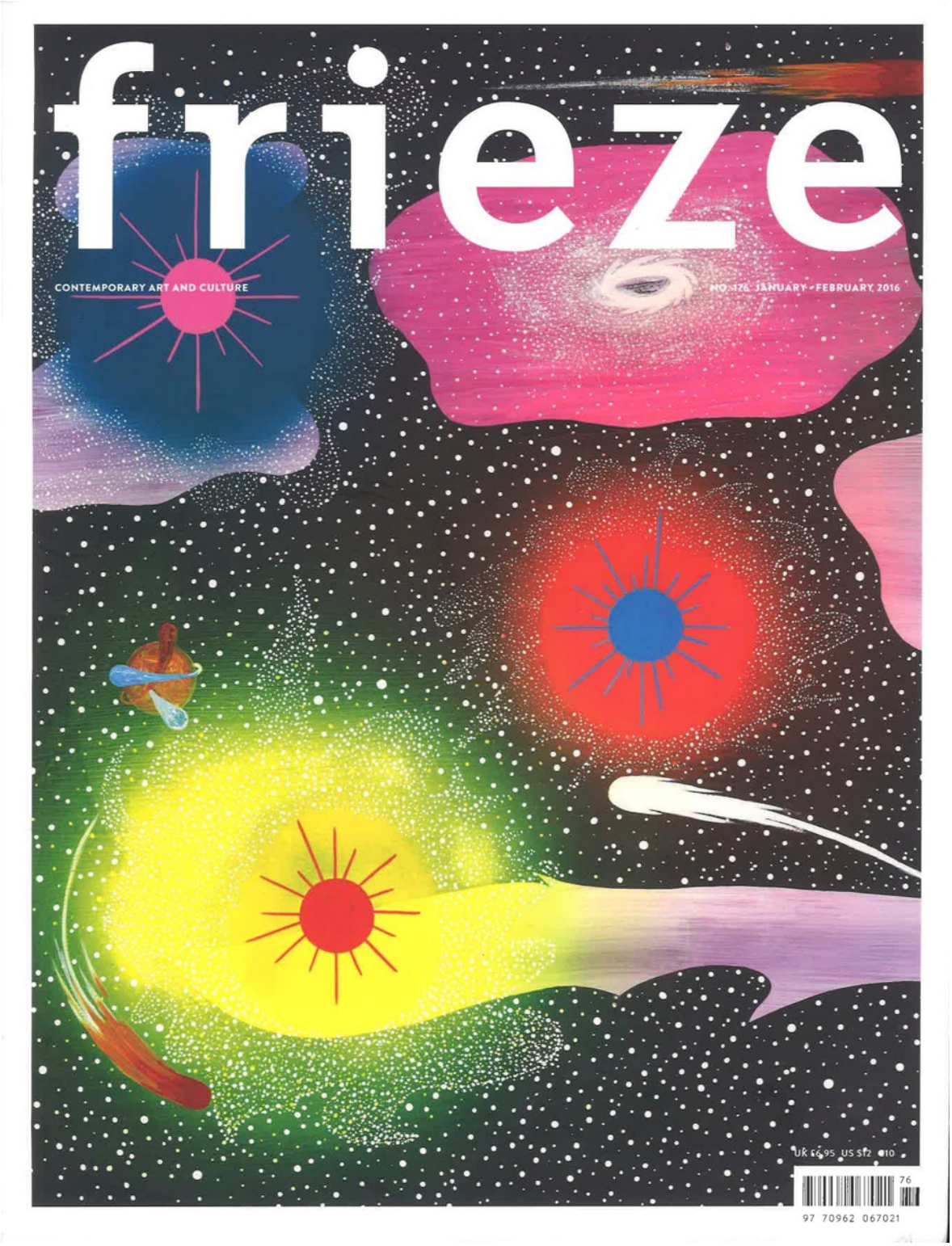
## Art

### 5. See Lisa Alvarado: Sound Talisman

*Tapestry of a sacred state of mind.*

Chicago's Lisa Alvarado makes magical hangings of many colors. Mesmerizing music accompanies, making her show a walk-in wormhole to better states of being. —Jerry Saltz

Ian Bourland, "Sunrise in Different Dimensions", *Frieze Magazine*, January – February 2016.



FEATURE - 16 DEC 2015

# Sunrise in Different Dimensions

## A fresh look at the music and art of the black radical tradition

BY IAN BOURLAND

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 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.

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.

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.

ROSCOE MITCHELL, *THE THIRD DECADE*, 1970, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, FABRIC, WOOD AND FRINGE, 60 X 101 CM. COURTESY THE ARTIST

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.

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

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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, 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'.

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.

ART ENSEMBLE OF CHICAGO PERFORMANCE AT MCA CHICAGO, 1979, PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN. COURTESY MCA CHICAGO

*While radical collectivity reiterates itself as activism in the streets of Baltimore, Manhattan and Missouri, some of the work in 'The Freedom Principle' will be sold and re-objectified.*

2

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

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
*Represencing*, 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

4

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 Tunic* (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 *JamPact/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 microcosmic 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 superreal in which we, too, might radically reorient our senses.

IAN BOURLAND

Ian Bourland is an historian and critic of the global contemporary. He writes on issues of race, location, and power and is assistant professor of art history and theory at Maryland Institute College of Art, in Baltimore, Maryland, USA.

Allison Glenn, "Transmissions and Interruptions," in *Derrick Adams: ON*, exhibition catalogue, New York: Pioneer Works Press, 2016.

# TRANSMISSIONS AND INTERRUPTIONS

Allison Glenn

Natural Information Society performing at Pritzker Pavilion, Chicago 2014 Photo: Colin Lyons, Image courtesy of Lisa Alvarado.

Derrick Adams' *LIVE* and *IN COLOR* series are laden with signifiers and double entendre that operate as a critique of representation. Through the use of pop-cultural referents, such as sit-coms, infomercials, and television psychics, a conversation emerges between the everyday experience of watching television and its loaded history of imagery, provoking a discourse around consumerism, race and class.

Within the two dimensional wall works, such as *Fabric Station Number 7* (2016), the frame operates as both a formal device for viewing and also as a backdrop for performance; they call to mind the work of Lisa Alvarado, whose paintings similarly perform the dual function of painting and performance backdrop for the experimental jazz group Natural Information Society. With tightly collaged, thick strips of fabric forming a

surface of shapes, Adams' textiles deconstruct the television screen itself. Adams' material choices—ranging from camouflage to Dutch-wax prints—carry loaded histories.

This abstraction of the image calls to mind Nam June Paik's *Magnet TV* (1965), a sculpture that consists of a CRT TV with an industrial sized magnet adhered to the top.[1] When placed on the top surface of the television, the magnet's field distorts the image, obfuscating the ability for information to be transferred in its entirety. Not unlike Paik's transformed televisions, the abstraction of the imagery in Adams' work is located within its performative transmission. When Paik first debuted his work, the viewer was encouraged to participate – moving the magnet to alter the distortion. During the opening reception for *ON*, nine performers activated Adams' televisions with their bodies, diligently working to highlight the absurdities of sales rhetoric. On the opening night, Adams disrupted the performance through the live mixing of audio from their microphones. Where Paik's insertion of a magnet interrupts the physical structure of the television and the mechanism of transmission, Adams' live mixing interrupted the social mechanism of broadcast. *Color Bar Constellation 4* from *Network Constellations*—a series of newer collage paintings—feels looser, as if Adams'



redistribution of the image has already occurred. A large swath of fabric cascades outside of the frame, its sparse placement interspersed with acrylic painted SMTPE color bars and vintage *TV Guide* covers.

The subject positioning within Adams' work is, as David Theo Goldberg mentions, about the "social formation of the subject...[which] involves, thinking [of] oneself in terms of—literally as—the image projected in prevailing concepts of the discursive order."[2] The aforementioned paradox of representation is perpetuated by semiotics and institutions of power, or what Kobena Mercer describes as the "formal work of codes [which] essentializes each model into the homogenized embodiment of an ideal type."[3] This ideal type can take many forms, and in the case of Adams' interrogation of media and representation, it is the archaic archetypes that serve to further perpetuate one-dimensional views on race, class, and difference in America.

1 David Joselit. "Open Circuits," in *Feedback: Television Against Democracy*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 7-12.

2 David Theo Goldberg, "Modernity, Race and Morality," *Cultural Critique*, no. 24 (Spring 1993): accessed September 13, 2011, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354133.

3 Mercer, Kobena, "Skin Head Sex Thing" in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003), 242.

Lori Waxman, " 'Freedom Principle' at MCA takes on black art, music", *Chicago Tribune*, November 11, 2015.

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

"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 X and 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.

Elliot Reichert, "Imaginary Landscapes/Mana Contemporary", *New City Chicago*, March 20, 2015.

NEWCITY Art

Reviews, profiles and news about art in Chicago

# Review: Imaginary Landscapes/Mana Contemporary

RECOMMENDED

In this compact exhibition curated by Allison Glenn, landscape serves as a metaphorical ground for four artists' expansive manipulations of imaginary sites. Each of the works evince traces of fragmentation, collapse and compression, processes that appear here as gestures enacted on sites that are more the spaces of memory and history than they are physical terrains.

*Lisa Alvarado. "Traditional Object 6"*

On opposite walls, Caroline Kent's sculptural acrylic on wood paintings hang in low relief, the tactile painterly brushstrokes on their surfaces in direct tension with the sculptural gestalt of these beguiling objects. Although they appear to be carved subtractively, they are in fact built constructions and thus call up architecture as a sculptural endeavor, or vice versa. Robert Burnier's "Cirkaû," a blue and tan composition painted over an arrangement of thick panels, draws painting more fully into this conflation of space as it is inhabited by dimensional objects and space as it is rendered as an image on flat surface. Displayed on a white plinth, the sculptural presentation of Burnier's painting is at odds with the smooth, painterly gradients spread over the surface of the work, which is fragmented into eight square panels with thickness enough to return the work to the realm of sculpture. Conversely, Burnier's "Griza Intervalo" hangs from the wall with the low profile of a painting, its shadowed pockets and crinkles appearing as if they were painted on its surface, and yet the folded aluminum that creates these effects presents the undeniable volume of sculpture.

Hung off the wall and bedecked with black tasseled fringe, Lisa Alvarado's "Traditional Object 6" is a tapestry and also a painting that combines these media to interrogate expectations of the assumed dissociation of the abstraction of contemporary art from its corollaries in non-Western artistic traditions. Similarly, the stair-like constructions depicted in Assaf Evron's "Untitled (Athens and Oraibi)" are based on a Pueblo structure with resonance in modernist sculptural constructions. Landscape is a field that situates the indeterminate media and conflated cultures that unite this spare but potent gathering of objects and drive the exhibition's concise and compelling inquiry into abstraction's entanglements with space, place and history. (Elliot Reichert)

Peter Margasak, Dieter Roelstraete, Lisa Alvarado, "In Rotation", *Chicago Reader*, June 6, 2013.

CHICAGO READER

# In Rotation: MCA Curator Dieter Roelstraete on Constellation

Plus: Painter Lisa Alvarado on Esteban 'Steve' Jordan's Echoplex accordian, the *Reader's* Peter Margasak on Afro-rockers Colomach, and more

***Dieter is curious what's in the rotation of...***

Noh theater

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## Lisa Alvarado, painter, member of the Natural Information Society

**Noh theater** For the past couple of years the Natural Information Society has included painting in many of our live performances. Searching for historical precedents, I came across Noh, a 650-year-old form of Japanese musical theater. The sound of Noh is slow and haunting, with three drummers and a flutist. Giant pots buried beneath the stage floor increase resonance and ghostly vibration. All Noh performances take place in front of a painting of an old pine tree, called the *oi-matsu,* which symbolizes the demarcation of a sacred place. I'm also a fan of the similarly slow-motion Japanese court music called gagaku.

**Tumba Francesa** Tumba Francesa is an intricate simultaneous combination of song, drumming, dance, and weaving, which originated with Haitian slaves in 18th-century Cuba and fuses influences from West African music and French traditional dance. Dancers hold ribbons connected to the top of a tall pole, and as they circle and cross back and forth with their partners, their movements create a multicolored weaving that runs down the pole's length.

**Esteban "Steve" Jordan** Esteban Jordan (1939-2010) was a south Texas conjunto musician and connector of musical genres. He incorporated a myriad of styles into conjunto and shredded his accordion through an Echoplex. I was fortunate to hear him play live several times at Salut*é* back in my hometown of San Antonio, where he packed the dance floor every Friday night until his passing in August 2010.