



SUPPORT NETWORKS

Edited by
Abigail Satinsky

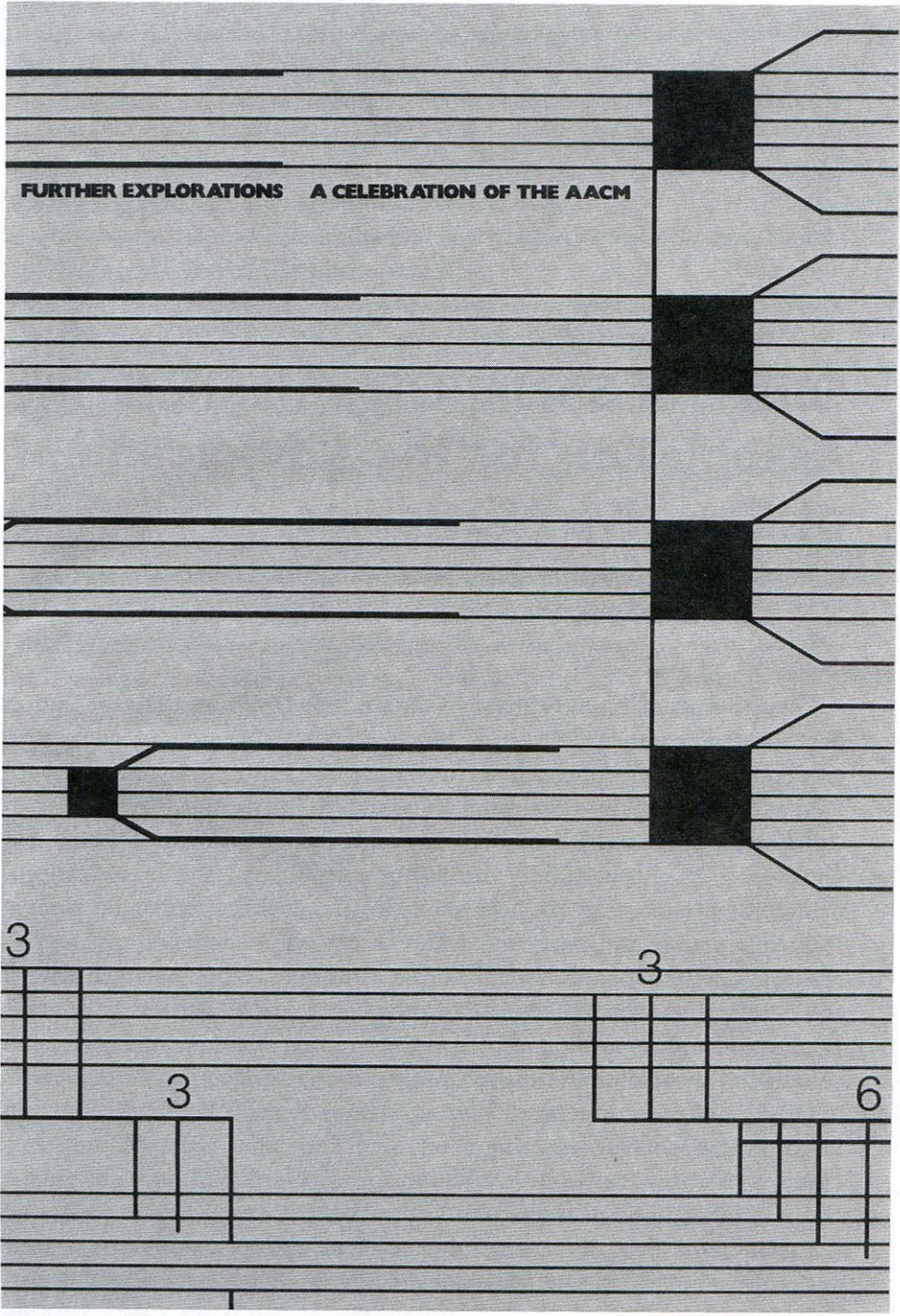
Chicago Social Practice History Series

Series editors Mary Jane Jacob and Kate Zeller

Forms of Social Organization: The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians

Dieter Roelstraete and Michelle Puetz

In the August 7, 1965 edition of the *Chicago Defender*, the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) announced its first two concerts in an “open letter to the public.” Both performances were held at the South Shore Ballroom on East 79th Street: the Joseph Jarman Quintet on August 16 and Phil Cohran’s Artistic Heritage Ensemble on August 23. Beyond this, the letter promulgated the organization’s principled aims and goals “to provide an atmosphere that is conducive to serious music and performing new unrecorded compositions” and to “create a spontaneous atmosphere that is unique to our heritage and to the performing artist.”¹ The AACM took control of all aspects of concert production and promotion as well as the training of young musicians, and sought to “show how the disadvantaged and disenfranchised can come together and determine their own strategies for political and economic freedom, thereby determining their own destinies. This will not only create a new day for Black Artists but for all Third World inhabitants; a new day of not only participation but control.”² Concerts were promoted with postcards, both designed and printed, as well as simple typewritten announcements. The AACM’s reach quickly expanded far beyond Chicago. By 1969 the Art Ensemble of Chicago—Anthony Braxton, Leroy Jenkins, and Leo Smith—had decamped to France, and AACM musicians were soon



Further Explorations: A Celebration of the AACM program, 1979.
Courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

performing at festivals throughout Europe. By the time most of the AACM musicians returned to the US in 1971, performances were still taking place in Chicago's alternative spaces and venues, but heightened interest in "new black music"³ meant that area arts institutions started booking AACM musicians, including Muhal Richard Abrams, the Obade Ensemble, Air, Anthony Braxton, and Roscoe Mitchell.

From the outset, the experimental aspirations of the various composers and collectives associated with the AACM sought to push the boundaries of traditional jazz instrumentation. This not only led to a considerable expansion of the existing arsenal of musical instruments (think of the myriad so-called "little instruments" which the Art Ensemble of Chicago in particular availed themselves of during their many memorable live performances), but also to the building of new instruments, such as the hubkaphone (a percussion instrument made up of hubcaps). Henry Threadgill, of Air fame, became an especially proficient player of this marimba-like contraption. As an artwork in its own right, the hubkaphone could also be viewed as a creative repurposing of the flotsam and jetsam of American car culture. Not surprisingly perhaps, given the crisis that the car industry was about to enter in the early 1970s, the hubkaphone's glory days reflected an earlier era. About his short-lived infatuation with the unconventional instrument, Threadgill noted: "in the '60s they were still making things in America that were of quality, but by the end of the '60s, America was on its way downhill in terms of making anything of quality. Radios. Hubcaps. I don't care what it is."



Art Ensemble of Chicago performing at the Bergamo Jazz Festival, Teatro Donizetti, 1974.

© Roberto Masotti.

In addition to a revolution in music and the politics of performance, the founding of the AACM also marked a decisive shift in the development of African American music's visual identity, especially in regard to the theatrical staging of this music's confident new self. Inspired perhaps by the shining example of Sun Ra and his Arkestra, who spent a formative decade-and-a-half on Chicago's South Side before the AACM's founding, as well as by the Afrocentric turn in the broader culture of black America in general, artists such as Phil Cohran and the Art Ensemble of Chicago became known for their extravagant stage costumes, combining elements from African folklore with space-age psychedelia and the like. The concerts of the Art Ensemble of Chicago in particular acquired an operatic quality, conjuring the Wagnerian dream of the total work of art—a musical as well as visual feast for ears and eyes alike.

This text reflects the preliminary research conducted by Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago curator Dieter Roelstraete and curatorial fellow Michelle Puetz for the exhibition *The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965-Now*, co-curated by Roelstraete and Naomi Beckwith.

- 1 "Creative Musicians Sponsor Artists Concert Showcase," *Chicago Defender*, August 7, 1965, 14.
- 2 *A.A.C.M. Newsletter* 1, no. 1, October 21, 1973, in the Jamil Figi Papers at the University of Chicago Special Collections Research Center, box 1, folder 1.
- 3 See Amiri Baraka [Leroi Jones], *Black Music* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1968).