Amy C. Beal


Reflecting John Cage's desire for "music in which not only are sounds just sounds but in which people are just people," radical improvised American music of the 1950s and 1960s offered the world models of artistic freedom for which social interaction - rather than compositional method or a repetitive mastery of stylistic conventions - was the key. In 1957, for example, Christian Wolff developed a musical language guided by a unique graphic notation, which led to a performance practice one might describe as democratic indeterminacy. Ornette Coleman's Free Jazz, recorded in December 1962, explored the untapped potential of a practice based on group response. By the late sixties, of course, many musicians all over the world attempted to free their own music from dominant ideologies and practices - the liberation not only of sounds but of musicians themselves. Many ensembles of this period challenged the status of composer-as-god with their ten-commandment-like scores, as well as the dominance of virtuosic star instrumentalists and their exalted, sermon-like solos. In some musical circles these norms were overthrown in favor of an egalitarian, cooperative spirit of free group interaction. In this context we might examine improvisatory practices that embrace varying degrees of non-hierarchical freedom, many of which, at the time, took place within live electronic ensembles. In this paper, however, I will discuss the activities of two particular American heirs to the utopian challenge of collective creativity: first, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, a tightly knit quintet that grew out of the Chicago-based African-American composers' collective called the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM); and, second, the flexible live electronic composer collective Musica Elettronica Viva (MEV), which explored deliberate musical-revolutionary action during a time of political and social turmoil. It is of significance to the agenda of the "Cross-
currents" symposium that both of these American groups lived and performed in Western Europe around the same time: MEV in Rome from 1966 until 1972, and the Art Ensemble in Paris from May 1969 until 1971. This particular story is different in many respects from the stories told in other Crosscurrents papers, however, especially those in which government agencies deliberately placed American musicians on foreign soil. All of the protagonists of both these groups were approximately thirty years old at the time of their self-exiles; therefore, they were at a prime age for participation in the international counterculture. Although the Art Ensemble was founded in Chicago – Charles Nessa first recorded Roscoe Mitchell, Lester Bowie, and Malachi Favors there in 1966 – it acquired its name and its fixed quintet status while in Paris. MEV was founded in Rome by American composers who were living there already.

My paper is not a reception history. Rather, through the general observations that follow, I hope to raise several areas of potential future inquiry: the interpretation of freedom within an improvisatory context, the stance these groups took toward the traditions they grew up in and what role instrumental technology played in that stance, the relationship of the individual to the collective, and the ideological implications of rejecting the conventional roles of skilled composers and virtuoso soloists. The historical backdrop for these questions includes the expatriate status of both groups, who were Americans in Paris and Rome during a time of great international hostility toward American policies. But it was also a time of growing acceptance of concepts like democratic indeterminacy and free improvisation in Western Europe. These expatriates’ relationship to their inherited musical traditions takes on a poignant significance in this context.

The Art Ensemble of Chicago: Signifying on Tradition

Lester Bowie has stated that the four founding members of the Art Ensemble of Chicago (himself, Malachi Favors, Joseph Jarman, and Roscoe Mitchell) decided to move to France in May 1969 because their prospects for performing in the United States were so few and far between (he told Options magazine that “in the States we worked maybe four times a year”). Almost immediately after arriving in Paris (after only three days, according to Bowie), the band was working six nights a week. The reason for this, he said, was that “Europe is known as a haven for Black artists. And for the New. We had faith that we would succeed there, so we took the gamble.” Similarly, Anthony Braxton, who moved to France one month later, along with fellow musicians Leroy Jenkins, Steve McCall, and Leo Smith, and who occasionally played with the Art Ensemble while abroad, asserted: “We went to Paris because it made no sense to stay in Chicago after 1969; we were dying.” According to Mitchell, Bowie sold all of his furniture in order to pay for the travel to Europe. He added: “Paris was a magnet for musicians from all over. […] The America Center there was very involved in the whole scene, because they had space for rehearsals and concerts. […] We started working four nights a

4 Anthony Braxton, quoted in Graham Lock, Forces in Motion: The Music and Thoughts of Anthony Braxton (New York: Du Capo, 1990), 35.
5 Roscoe Mitchell, “Outraza Days 2003 Report,” 598 available online at http://www.oicohb.ch/day/2003/lectures_mitchell.htm (accessed 25 May 2009). He also said “In Paris we knew this drummer who introduced us to a doctor who played trumpet on the side. The doctor worked at a mental hospital, and when we arrived, he let us stay there until we started to get some work, and managed to get our own place.”
week at a theater there, and people started to know us." Once there, the American percussionist Don Moye, who had been in Rome in 1969 working with the saxophonist Steve Lacy shortly before moving to Paris (notably, Lacy was also a key player in the MEV network at the time), became the Art Ensemble's fifth permanent member.

Though the Art Ensemble of Chicago included only African-American musicians and featured instruments that were associated with jazz, such as saxophone, trumpet, string bass, and percussion, they self-consciously rejected the word "jazz," insisting it was too narrow for what they did (the AACM simply referred to its composer-performers as "creative musicians"). This explicit challenge to the commodification of popular music was just one of their many subversive acts. Avoiding jazz as a marketing label with racially constricted implications, they adopted an assertive motto that defined their philosophy: "Great Black Music – Ancient to Future," indicating an ethnocentric yet wide-open field of vision. Moye said they were "playing African music from an American perspective," and it was generally understood by the members of the group that the rejection of the word "jazz" reflected a philosophical orientation. The notion of Great Black Music was both an ideological and a psychological response to European dominance in American musical institutions, and it aligned these musicians with the Civil Rights, Black Power, and African liberation movements. One scholar has even described their work as "an unfinished multivolume history of freedom." As major players in the Black Arts Movement they combined revolutionary politics with revolutionary experiments in art and explored "the simultaneous embrace and rejection of tradition." Such explorations contributed to their popularity in France, given the more open climate, artistically speaking, toward revolutionary avant-gardism, and allied the Art Ensemble with Joachim Ernst Berendt's assertion that jazz, too, is contemporary music.

One of the Art Ensemble's great achievements was the dissolution – or at least the subversion – of the typical jazz combo. They did this in a variety of ways. First, through the kind of music they played – blues, gospel, bop, funk, Waltzes, marches, sound mass, free jazz, African drum choirs, and more. Everything was fair game. Second, their performance practice might be described as extramusical, interdisciplinary, and experimental – through the theatricality of their performances they simply refused to acknowledge certain unspoken rules about what was typically appropriate in a jazz context. In the words of Chuck Nessa, "it was a time when 'the tradition' was not a crutch, but a platform to build upon." Similarly, Terry Martin, who worked with Nessa recording the group's 1967 rehearsals, said that these musicians joined "to generate the first mature expression of the new creative freedom which could accept and absorb, as well as reject, anything." Several of them wore African and Egyptian costumes and face paint; Bowie, perhaps ironically, wore a white lab coat symbolizing what he called the "research" of their music. The fact that their costumes were inconsistent and individualistic is a further manifestation of their egalitarianism. The theatrical element of

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6 See Art Ensemble of Chicago (see note 3), 60.
10 Ibid., 20.
11 "Auch der Jazz ist zeitgenössische Musik," Joachim Ernst Berendt in advertising copy for the evening program at Dornach in 1969 (Guendulain Historical Archive, Baden-Baden).
13 Terry Martin, in ibid.
14 Lester Bowie, quoted in Levi, "Lester Speaks Out" (see note 3), 15.
their performance included dance, pantomime, comedy, parody, absurd dialogue, poetry, and non-sonic, purely visual displays [like tossing sparkling confetti into the air]. According to the MEV co-founder Alvin Curran’s account of the Belgian BYG Festival in October 1969, where both groups performed back-to-back in a large tent in the middle of the night, the Art Ensemble came onto the stage totally naked, “like wild horses,” and proceeded to set a grand piano on fire. This was light years away from John Coltrane’s white-hot intensity or Miles Davis’s unflappable cool. It represented a slap in the face to the establishment, whether European or African, classical or jazz.¹⁵

A third way in which the Art Ensemble subverted expectations for a typical jazz combo was in the balance they achieved between composing and improvising, soloing and accompanying—in essence, a reinterpretation of the roles of the individual musicians and their rejection of the cult of virtuosity associated with jazz improvisation, i.e., a relinquishing of individual fame for the good of the group (which was a fundamental principle of the AACM, and which was an idea that would have resonated deeply in post-1968 Paris).¹⁶ The Art Ensemble was composer-oriented but with a committed investment to group improvisation, believing that “individuality and collectivity could co-exist.”¹⁷ In fact the lines between composed pieces and improvisations were often deliberately obscured (though they never completely abandoned single authorship).¹⁸ Lester Bowie has remarked that sometimes the most wild, free-sounding sections were actually written out (often by Roscoe Mitchell), whereas the straight-ahead, tonal, and tuneful sections were actually completely spontaneous.¹⁹ They also cultivated murky

¹⁵ At this point in my presentation I played an example by the Art Ensemble called “The Waltz,” from the album A Jackie in Your House recorded in Paris on 25 June 1969, BYG label 0991. It was the second of two albums the Art Ensemble made in Paris during this period. All compositions on that record were by Roscoe Mitchell.

¹⁶ Bowie said that they were “developing our concepts together […] exclusively as our whole living.” Art Ensemble of Chicago (see note 9), 49.


¹⁸ Lewis writes that the “boundaries between solo and accompaniment become either difﬁcult to parse or quite deliberately obscured […].” Lewis, “Singing Omar’s Song” (see note 17), 76.

boundaries between solos and accompaniments, emphasizing a shared space in which players were not subservient to pre-existing notions of foreground and background, or to appropriate behavior within a rigid frame (for example, the aforementioned intensity and cool might indeed be present, but alongside whimsical silliness).

Similar to experimental European improvising groups like Misha Mengelberg and Han Bennink’s Instant Composers’ Pool, Alexander von Schlippenbach’s Globe Unity Orchestra, and the Willem Breuker Kollektief, the Art Ensemble’s performances had a particularly wide frame of reference: not only the entire jazz tradition, but an “expanding notion of a shrinking world.” Though much free jazz has been (rather inaccurately) accused of turning its back on both a blues aesthetic (melodic expressivity, scales, blues form, harmonic progression) and a swing aesthetic (flexible and driving use of regular time, for one thing), we should note that the Art Ensemble maintained the integrity of these factors alongside everything else—they excluded very little from their collages. Many of their early composition titles alluded explicitly to types of music: “The Waltz,” “Jazz Death,” “Rock Out,” “Old Time Religion,” and “O Susanna,” for example. Furthermore, the stylistically hermetic nature of most jazz was blown apart by their radical approach to instrumental forces. In addition to their main instruments they all cultivated their voices, played extended percussion, and improvised using a tremendous variety of what they called “little instruments” – bells, rattles, whistles, toys, accordion and piano, homemade instruments, and noise makers of every possible kind. What other jazz quintet featured harpsichord, harmonica, thunder sheets, police whistles, koto, kazoo, and hysterical laughter? The multi-instrumentalism of the musicians (what Mitchell has called the “supermusician”?) and their serious yet playful devotion to their “little instruments” (which could be played by anyone, and with little or no training) can be read as a key challenge to the jazz status quo, and to the tolerance of conservative jazz audiences. Performances were ruled by interaction within a shared sonic space rather than by the “heroic individual instrumentalist” typical of jazz practice.

**Musica Elettronica Viva: Tabula Rasa**

While the Art Ensemble challenged the jazz status quo by simultaneously embracing and rejecting tradition, Musica Elettronica Viva wanted “to make music with whatever means are available.” This move away from the cult of virtuosity – or from the academically trained omnipotent composer – is an attitude that connects them with the Art Ensemble of Chicago, and with local groups like Franco Evangelisti’s improvisational group Nuova Consonanza in Rome, with whom MEV had much interaction. MEV’s stance was more self-consciously aggressive in its tabula rasa rejection of inherited traditions – especially the Ivy-League modernist and Darmstadt avant-gardist traditions of contemporary composition. Along these lines, MEV founding member Jon Phetteplace wrote in his journal in 1967:

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20 Ibid., 88.
"Is music-making so much like time-telling and calendars that it too, must be based on a tradition? When will the day come, to be able to throw out all the watches and calendars, yet live well without?" Attempting to move beyond traditional signifiers and performance practices, MEV explored music's potential as "a universal human right" and "a form of property that belongs to everyone." 

Like the Art Ensemble, MEV's instruments defied links to a particular tradition or style: they included a synthesizer, percussion, saxophone, trumpet, cello, tape recorders, olive-oil cans, springs, glass, wood and metal objects, rubber bands (which might bring to mind Braxton's use of balloons), and voices. Nearly everything was amplified with a homemade PA system — "little instruments" made big! Embracing homemade analogue technology as a way to move even further from home, they saw their heavy amplification of small and unusual sounds as a "liberating experience" — liberation from the instruments they had studied, from the traditions they had inherited, and from the rituals they had embraced. Improvisation with technological tools was a means toward a socially conscious performance practice, a means toward collective liberation, and in this sense, they believed that "improvisation is the art of the possible." For MEV, free music — and freeing musicians — was an ideological as well as an aesthetic obligation. We might note that their interest in freedom existed in their performance practice itself, in the way in which they actually made the music, and with whom, rather than in explicitly political subject matter, like, for example, Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln's Freedom Now Suite (1960) and other works from the early seventies. Jon Phetelplace recognized the difficulty of convincing mainstream cultural administrators and diplomats of the quality of their stripping-down and exploratory work:

Why is it, when you limit yourself to the bare truth about some (music) topics, it sounds INSANE? [...] I can see myself now, with this project at hand, going to the American Ambassador here and saying, "We're a group of American composers, and are looking for an opportunity to be paid to play Benjamin Franklin's String Quartet with three violins in an amplified version. Can you at the Embassy be of any help? He might panic, importantly, slightly.

The most important of MEV's socio-musical experiments became pieces they called Soup and Soundpool. The titles implied that anyone could bring any sound and add it to the soup or throw it into the pool, and indeed audience participation was their intent, a completely non-hierarchical musical situation, with no performers, no audience, no boundaries, no rules. This anarchic and revolutionary reinterpretation of the concert ritual placed MEV close to many radical American theater movements during the 1960s, including the Living Theatre, which itself was in exile in Europe during the period in question (and not coincidentally, MEV co-founder Richard Teitelbaum had recently been involved in the première of Luigi Nono's A flotta d'oro e eheua de vida, in collaboration with the Living Theatre in Venice). Having left behind the western art-music model of works-based concerts performed in

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23 Diary of Jon Phetelplace, Istanbul (Turkey), 7 August 1967; Jon Phetelplace Papers, Mardelle Special Collections, University of California, San Diego.
26 Diary of Jon Phetelplace, Rome, 21 August 1967; Jon Phetelplace Papers (see note 3).
front of immobile listeners, MEV challenged the boundaries of what a performance should be, creating something like a musical group therapy against the backdrop of street violence after May 1968. MEV invited their audience to participate in the creation of a new musical society. An empowering audience-participation piece like Soundpool figured well in this formula, since it was described as "a free improvisation session whose limits are undefined." 29 On one occasion, according to Alvin Curran, the Art Ensemble of Chicago even "dropped in" at the MEV Trastevere studio to participate in one of these sessions. 30

Finally, while MEV sought to eradicate boundaries by allowing all people to become musicians in whatever way they desired, the events of 1968 motivated them toward a greater level of activism and direct political engagement: they played at anti-Vietnam protests, factory strikes, and in prisons, and played illegally in public squares like the Piazza Navona. MEV was not alone in its effort to align radical politics with improvisational art, and its attempts to "make music with whatever means are available" were, without question, made in the creative and rebellious spirit of their time and place.

**Conclusion**

Though very different in their backgrounds and their relationships to their inherited traditions, the Art Ensemble of Chicago and MEV have some factors in common. Both ensembles became very well known in Europe almost instantly, and even though what they were doing was radical, they could actually make a living through their music. Both were involved with film. Both recorded on the BYG label, and performed in the BYG festival in October 1969 (as did Anthony Braxton), though it’s interesting to note that the publicity for the festival made a clear distinction between groups that were considered "Free Jazz" (the Art Ensemble of Chicago) and groups that were considered "New Music" (MEV). 31 In the case of both groups, members lived together to some extent, like nomadic communes, because they believed in the intimacy of the group itself and felt that their friendships were relevant to their collective music-making. Both groups thought deeply about improving human conditions and strengthening human relationships through musical interaction and by embracing a wide variety of sound-making machines. Both groups believed strongly in diversification – in the eclecticism of drawing from outside their inherited traditions or beyond the standard idioms of their instruments. In both groups diversification was enhanced by flexibility – all musicians in both groups created sounds in any number of conventional and unconventional ways. They all readily "turned away from every kind of musical muscle-flexing," to borrow a metaphor from Ekkhard Jost. 32 Their ideology of community-oriented efforts was expressed primarily through the language of improvisation, both electronic and acoustic. Finally, their efforts to improve social conditions through liberated creativity helped contribute to the growing international network of free improvisers, a network that still today celebrates composer-performer egalitarianism, stylistic diversity, and artistic freedom all over the world.

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28 Alvin Curran, interview with the author, 8 March 1999.
30 Ibid.
31 These categories of "pop music," "free jazz," and "new music" are listed on the advertising poster for "The First Paris Music Festival" organized by BYG records and produced by Frank Zappa and Pierre Lottes, 22–28 October 1969.