

This year, the MCA Chicago will premiere the opera *Afterword*, a collaboration between New York based composer, musicologist and MacArthur Fellow, George Lewis, Los Angeles based composer Sean Griffin, and Chicago film and theater artist Catherine Sullivan.

The project, is based on Lewis' award-winning book *A Power Stronger Than Itself: the AACM and American Experimental Music* which chronicles of the artistic and political communitarianism of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), founded on the predominantly black South Side of Chicago nearly 50 years ago. AACM composers and performers are internationally recognized for their contributions to music and for the wide range of experimental methodologies they have developed around both improvisation and notation. AACM musicians and composers include The Art Ensemble of Chicago, Anthony Braxton, and Muhal Richard Abrams.

The film component is a collaboration between Sullivan, Lewis and Los Angeles based artist Charles Gaines, and features compositions by Griffin. For this exhibition, the film *Afterword Via Fantasia* is presented as an installation running roughly 100 minutes and is accompanied by wall drawings by Gaines. Filmed on four sets for unrelated productions with themes and chronologies paralleling the history of the AACM, the work is a series of propositions, derived from Lewis' book and the libretto for his opera. The sets were for plays produced in Chicago over the last year directed by African American directors, and featuring African American casts:

*Porgy and Bess*, Lyric Opera

*Waiting for Godot*, Court Theater

*Two Trains Running*, Goodman Theater

*stop. reset.*, Goodman Theater

In terms of both personal histories and historical resonance, the roots of the AACM discourses of mobility and atmosphere can be traced to the Great Migration. The oldest members of the AACM's first wave were all born between 1927 and 1932, the children of migrants who settled in Chicago and St. Louis. *Porgy and Bess* (set in the 1930s) is a relevant context in this sense, and in terms of the production's complex form and history. The artists were also struck by the many productions of *Waiting for Godot*, (written in 1953) and the political thresholds within the play that are animated by African American casts. August Wilson's *Two Train's Running* (set in 1969) corresponds to contestations around self-determination in the Civil Rights era and the economic deterioration familiar to the AACM's Chicago milieu. *Stop. Reset.* is set in present day Chicago amongst questions of legacy and technology. Regina Taylor cites the influence of Afrofuturism, a reminder of

the AACM's relation to these aesthetics, and its contribution to forms that are simultaneously critical and expressive. *Afterword Via Fantasia* imagines a set of possibilities for the staging of an opera about the AACM through settings for theater plays with parallel and divergent themes. The sets are readymade environments that have already been mediated through a variety of cultural perspectives. They become spatial and temporal atmospheres for a discursive film about creative mobility that is inspired by the AACM's emphasis on free attitudes toward time, form, and genre. The piece imagines a series of possibilities for the setting of Lewis' opera, without conclusion. Additional exterior scenes were filmed outside the building of the AACM's first rehearsals, the former Abraham Lincoln Center in Chicago,

Fantasias are departures from structure, and in this sense the film's departure aspires toward the "polyphony of quoted voices" Lewis consciously creates in the final chapter of his book, making the ethnographic dimension of his history of the AACM multi-perspectival and contingent. The libretto and book are followed closely in the film, and are at the same time animated through the alternating scenographies, choreographies and stagings. The form is both historical and propositional. The cast includes AACM members Douglas Ewart, Ann Ward, Coco Elysses and Khari B., as well as artist William Pope L. and actors, dancers and vocalists from Chicago. Los Angeles-based artist Charles Gaines created supergraphics for the installation. These drawings are a scaled up version of his designs for the opera's scenography, drawn with white chalk on black walls. The images create another alternate setting, one which houses a church organ and a surveillance room.

In some scenes the actors recite Lewis writings about the contribution of AACM's African-American members to the history of the avant-garde, alternating with much more abstract, Beckett-sounding texts. Elsewhere, black and white scenes present exterior shots of locations where the AACM used to meet. As with most work by Sullivan, the narrative uses repetition of characters, movement, and in some cases texts. In this specific project the scenes' rotation is conceived to create interest for viewers watching the piece for various lengths of time. The AACM is also known as a training program for young musicians, and the film follows Ann Ward as she teaches a group of students how to compose and improvise. The final scenes in the video concentrate on the social, political and cultural realities that inspired the evolution of the AACM as well as dilemmas around artistic creativity and mobility.

The film hopes to create a disparate field of forms and practices where the "polyphony of quoted voices" in the book can maneuver in the same spirit of decentralized authorship and artistic promiscuity.

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