

festival review

Vision Festival at Tufts: Free Jazz/Social Justice, October 27, 2018

Matthias Mushinski

All of us come together because there is a certain kind of life-giving ingredient that goes into the kind of music that we make. Even the source of it, it's what the American situation is concerned, it has been African and the suffering that we've had... But what has happened as a result of what we have learned how to do is that we have provided people around the world another methodology to express themselves, to forgive (Cyrille and Parker 2015, 393).



Fig. 1 2019 Vision Festival Lifetime Achievement Honoree Andrew Cyrille performing in New York.

The terms are often set with familiar edicts, proclamations such as “the history of cinema, and the concepts of film theory, become the most productive contexts for defining the audiovisual-ity of our past and current centuries” (Rodowick 2008, 393), or that “cinema and television, as the dominant media of the twentieth century, shaped and reflected the cultural sensibilities of the era” (Denson and Leyda 2016, 1). The effectiveness of such discipline-forging claims testifies to their dual purpose: they simultaneously acknowledge a debt to film history while cataloguing all audiovisual forms—of past, present, and future—as genealogically present within cinema’s twentieth century embryo. The twentieth century was “the century of cinema” (Badiou 2003, 92) and cinema is, therefore, the centre of reference for determining what is and what ought to be. Cinema envelops everything, cinema is everything—a sprawling pre- and post-cinematic enclosure that delineates possibility and designates cinema and moving image scholarship as the axiomatic command of the twenty-first century.

But what if that ain’t it? What does it mean to study *dominance*, and to be *productive* in doing so? To project it, compute it, and animate it? What if our ideas were to take a Glissantian *détour* elsewhere, as opposed to resting comfortably within the absolute facticity of the moving image’s eternal dominance and epistemological productivity? Or, more specifically, what would it mean to nourish cinema scholarship with what Andrew Cyrille refers to as free jazz’s *life-giving ingredient*, under the auspices of Jean-Louis Comolli and Phillippe Carles’ insistence, in *Free Jazz/Black Power*, that “Everything that the Western idea of Art censors in the arts *lives* in free jazz” (Comolli and Carles 1971, 174; my emphasis)? As noted by Brent Hayes Edwards in *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination*, “one medium can be inspired, provoked, or extended by an attention to the specificities of another” (Edwards 2017, 9), yet the prospect of such transmedial consonance insists upon the rejection of all pre-existing sensory hierarchies—those forewarned by flautist Nicole Mitchell via Octavia Butler: “You are hierarchical... I think your people did not realize what a dangerous thing they were doing” (Butler 1987, 39).

Let this review amplification of Fred Moten’s first on-stage, ensemblic, free jazz performance contribute to the celebration of free

jazz’s generative fugitivity—an impassioned commitment to “another way of thinking of things that is offered in the social aesthetics of black radicalism and its improvisatory protocols” (*Universal* 2018, 10). I am focussing here on an ensemble featuring Andrew Cyrille (drums), William Parker (bass), Rob Brown (saxophone), Steve Swell (trombone), and Moten (poetry). The lifting conclusion to an evening of music at Tufts University that included performances by Matthew Shipp (piano) and Michael Bisio (bass), “Revolution/Resurrection” featuring Patricia Nicholson (dance and text), Jason Kao Hwang (violin), Michael T.A. Thompson (drums) and Bill Mazza (live video painting), and a solo reading from Moten. Although the scope of these words is limited, my gratitude extends to all the event’s organizers and performers—for those and the many other sets I have attended in New York and Montréal—and for the records that accompany me now as I type.

During the 2015 edition of the Arts for Art Vision Festival in Brooklyn, Moten referred to Amiri Baraka as a “kind of spiritual and intellectual father,” and as he took the stage at Tufts’ Distler Performance Hall I couldn’t help but approach the event as yet another embodiment of this dedication. Not only did the performance include musicians who have performed with Baraka in various settings, but for Moten—whose writing continually posits free jazz as both an object and method of study—one has to imagine the event carried a symbolic resonance beyond the many lectures and readings he has shared over the years. George Lewis refers to “improvisation as a knowledge-producing, indeed, a knowledge-finding activity—a journey of discovery” (Lewis 1998, 79) and if you’ve ever attended a live, improvised performance, you know the feeling: the feeling that anything can happen, the rhythmic beckoning of the “tone world” (Parker 2007, 78).

So, what happened? If to describe a performance is, as Moten suggests, to “violate[] that performance’s ontological integrity” (*Points* 2017, 107)—to move away from its “absolutely fugitive punctum” (*The Universal*, 34)—the task of “reviewing” live, improvised music presents a unique set of challenges; or, as William Parker puts it in *Who Owns Music?*, “the task of the critic is to become a poet” (Parker 2007, 83). At the risk of running against these notions I will say that Moten was seated behind a glass podium, stage-right. In

front of him laid an assortment of notebooks, along with a copy of his *The Feel Trio*, a finalist for the 2014 National Book Award for Poetry. Moten plays, Cyrille plays, Parker plays, Brown plays, and Swell plays. Moten flips through his notes with the same, aberrative rhythm imparted by his writing as he intermittently transfers his gaze from the podium to his collaborators. He speaks it out, he feels it out: “They killed every single one of us... the music is why they couldn’t kill us all.” A riff, perhaps, on Baraka’s conclusion to “New Black Music”: “New Black Music is this: Find the self, then kill it” (Baraka 1967, 176).

If practicing improvisation is the practice of improvisation, Vision Festival at Tufts inaugurates a new futurity. Forgive me for disavowing a grade-like evaluation, though I will say that Moten’s performance felt like a rehearsal, and I mean this in the best possible way—in prophetic passage. Improvisation operates within “a seemingly unbridgeable chasm between feeling and reflection, disarmament and preparation, speech and writing” (*In the Break* 2003, 65). For sure there is an element of extemporaneity, but not in pursuit of some naïve denomination of non-thinking ineffability. It asks: what if there’s thought outside, the thought



Fig 2 Fred Moten performing at Tufts University with William Parker (bass), Rob Brown (saxophone), Steve Swell (trombone) and Andrew Cyrille (drums).



Fig 3 Women with an Axe to Grind” performing at the 2018 Arts for Art Vision Festival: Nicole Mitchell (flute), Joëlle Léandre (bass), Patricia Nicholson (dance) and Melanie Dyer (viola).

of going outside, an outer side of thought? It exceeds the discursive limits of our conceptual universe in order to step to it again, to do it again. During the performance, we find Moten listening, bobbing his head, gauging the volume of his voice within the acoustics of the concert hall. Brown and Swell grip their horns with what I perceive as compassionate hesitancy, perhaps uncertain whether to jump in or to let Moten do his thing.

Robert G. O’Meally, the director of Columbia University’s Center for Jazz Studies, has introduced Moten under the premise of an *aesthetics and politics of generosity*, and there is perhaps no better heading under which to describe the mission of Arts for Art, a New York-based organization “dedicated to the promotion and advancement of Free Jazz” with year-round concerts, conferences, symposiums and community events, as well as the Vision Festival which is held at Roulette Intermedium in Brooklyn every summer. Their social, educational, political, and aesthetic initiatives emblemize Moten’s outlining of *study* as something that we “do with other people. It’s talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice” (Moten and Harney 2012). And although Vision Festival at Tufts was free to the public, it was difficult not to approach the “official” concert hall setting housed within the university as warm up for a later date. After all, as Moten remarked during a symposium held prior to the music, “the ideal situation for the playing of this music—which is to say, black music—is communism.”

I have been wondering lately, how is it possible, or what is potentiated, by the fact that Moten’s books are piled on the tables at Book Culture at the same moment he is seated behind a table at the Vision festival, as a volunteer/board member, collecting raffle tickets and providing general information? How is it possible, or what is potentiated, by the fact that Moten continues to rack up accolades from academia and “the art world,” yet even the greatest free jazz musicians endure their struggle to make ends meet? Don’t they hear the music in his writing? There is a *life-giving* secret to impart and Vision Festival is it! The movement of black radical praxis as the tapping in/to an ontological tonality.

There is a familiar refrain in cinema scholarship brought forward by Solanas and Getino’s

landmark essay “Towards a Third Cinema,” “that every image that documents, bears witness to, refutes or deepens the truth of a situation is something more than a film image or purely artistic fact, it becomes something which the System finds indigestible” (Solanas and Getino 1965, 241). With this in mind, we may then proceed by asking what, if any, filmmaking practices and complementary discursive frameworks have maintained their revolutionary indigestibility? Does the supposed dominance and productivity of cinema obstruct it? Is all of cinema eventually assimilated within the intensification of “second cinema” and its elusive corporate outposts? If it is necessary, as Solanas and Getino suggest, “to transform time, energy, and work into freedom-giving energy” (Solanas and Getino 1965, 248; emphasis in original) perhaps the social, aesthetic, and spiritual resources of free jazz and the black radical tradition—by virtue of their perpetual indigestibility and coinciding marginalization—point to galvanizing modes of improvised sociality, methods of assembly, and intellectual practice.

Moten writes that “really listening, when it goes bone-deep into the sunken art of bones, is something other than itself. It doesn’t alternate with but *is* seeing; it’s the sense that it excludes” (*In the Break* 2003, 67; emphasis in original). In resonance, Julie Reid writes in *Cinema Journal* that “It is in the interest of dominant and colonial power to leave ‘listening’ out of the communication theoretical model that we have been teaching for so long” (Reid 2018, 138). Free jazz embodies a tension between the abstraction of art music and the desired functionality of folk music. It encompasses collective improvisations, networks of unpredictability, and scatterings of sound that merge together familiar rhythms, found objects and disassembled instruments. If listening, as Reid suggests, can “reasonably be envisaged as the first step” towards denaturalizing cinema scholarship’s privileging of “voices from the ruling quarters of the vox populi” (Reid 2018, 138), forging solidarity with free jazz and the ideas surrounding it enacts a much-needed transgression of disciplinary borders. An uplifting path towards a true ensemble of the senses—an Arthur Jafa-esque “cinema like the music” (Jafa 2017)—and a new thought environment for mobilizing the conversion between aesthetic and political insurgency.



Fig 4 Fred Moten performing at the 2017 Arts for Art Vision Festival

References

- Badiou, Alain. 2003. *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy*. London & New York: Continuum.
- Baraka, Amiri. 1967. "New Black Music: A Concert in Benefit of The Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School Live." In *Black Music*, 172-176. New York: William Morrow.
- Butler, Octavia E. 2000. *Lilith's Brood*. New York: Aspect/Warner Books.
- Comolli, Jean-Louis and Philippe Carles. 2015. *Free Jazz/Black Power*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.
- Cyrille, Andrew and William Parker. 2015. "The Discipline of Freedom, The Beauty and Creation It's Real." In *Conversations II: Dialogues and Monologues*, edited by Ed Hazell, 373-416. Paris: Rogueart.
- Edwards, Brent H. 2017. *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Jafa, Arthur. 2017. "Arthur Jafa and the Future of Black Cinema." *Interview Magazine*, January 26, 2017.
- Lewis, George. 1998. "Singing Omar's Song: A (Re) Construction of Great Black Music." *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 4: 69-92.
- Moten, Fred. 2003. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- _____. 2017. "Some Propositions on Blackness, Phenomenology, and (Non)Performance." In *Points of Convergence: Alternative Views on Performance*, edited by Marta Dziewańska and André Lepecki, 101-107. Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art.
- _____. 2018. *The Universal Machine*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Moten, Fred and Stefano Harney. 2012. "Studying Through the Undercommons: Stefano Harney & Fred Moten – Interviewed by Stevphen Shukaitis." *Class War University*, November 12, 2012.
- Parker, William. 2007. *Who Owns Music?: Notes From a Spiritual Journey*. Köln: Buddy's Knife Jazzedition
- Reid, Julia. 2018. "Decolonizing Education and Research by Countering the Myths We Live By." *Cinema Journal* 57: 132-138.
- Rodowick, David N. 2008. "Dr. Strange Media, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Film Theory." In *Inventing Film Studies*, edited by Haidee Wasson and Lee Grievson, 375-397. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Solanas, Fernando, and Octavio Getino. 2014. "Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development and Liberation in the Third World." In *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology*, edited by MacKenzie Scott, 230-50. Berkeley: University of California Press.