



Free improvisation: history and perspectives

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Paul Steinbeck

«Like a cake made from five ingredients»:
the Art Ensemble of Chicago's social and musical practices

Many music aficionados first encountered the Art Ensemble of Chicago in the 1980s, when the band was touring the world to promote its ECM albums *Nice Guys*, *Full Force*, *Urban Bushmen*, and *The Third Decade*.¹ And a few Art Ensemble fans, mostly on the South Side of Chicago, still remember the group's early years in the mid-1960s, when its founding members came together in the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) and began to explore the practices that would make their performances so unique: multi-instrumentalism, group improvisation, and fusions of music with poetry, theater, and other forms of intermedia. But the best way to understand the Art Ensemble may be to examine the band's activities in between these two eras, after the mid-1960s and before the advent of the 1980s. During the ten-year period from 1969 to 1979, the Art Ensemble settled into its 'classic' lineup — adding Joseph Jarman and Famoudou Don Moye to the core of Roscoe Mitchell, Malachi Favors Maghostut, and Lester Bowie, a five-man configuration that would remain unchanged for a quarter-century.² At the same time, the band members established a set of social practices that governed how they related to one another, individually and collectively, in situations ranging from concerts and recording sessions to the group's business meetings.

In my book *Message to Our Folks*, published in Italian as *Grande Musica Nera*, I argue that the Art Ensemble's social practices were instrumental in

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1. ART ENSEMBLE OF CHICAGO, *Nice Guys*, ECM 1126, 1979, LP; ID., *Full Force*, ECM 1167, 1980, LP; ID., *Urban Bushmen*, ECM 1211/1212, 1982, LP; ID., *The Third Decade*, ECM 1273, 1985, CD.
 2. GEORGE E. LEWIS, *Singing Omar's Song: A (Re)Construction of Great Black Music*, «Lenox Avenue», n. 4 1998, pp. 69–92: 90.

enabling the group members to stay together so long.³ The present chapter takes this argument further, chronicling the development of the band's social practices and describing specific instances where these practices transformed the music the Art Ensemble made. Some of these findings are based on the research I have conducted at archives in Europe and the United States. However, many more discoveries came directly from the musicians themselves, or from their associates in the music industry. This chapter, therefore, is an interpretation of what the Art Ensemble members and their colleagues consider to be most meaningful about the group.

The Art Ensemble's story begins on Chicago's South Side. Three members of the Art Ensemble — Roscoe Mitchell, Malachi Favors, and Joseph Jarman — grew up in Chicago. They met in the early 1960s at a South Side junior college, where they were studying music and playing in the orchestra. In 1965, all three became charter members of the AACM, an organization made up of African American composers and performers who were interested in experimental music. Around 1965, many AACM members formed their own bands, including Mitchell and Favors, who started a group that would become the Art Ensemble. In 1966, they added another member to the ensemble: Lester Bowie, who had recently moved to Chicago from St. Louis. At the time, the three bandmates had other jobs — Bowie and Favors in commercial music and Mitchell in manufacturing. But they still found ways to hold marathon rehearsals, playing for several hours every day. From 1966 to 1968, they recorded three albums and performed as often as they could.⁴ Because of their day jobs, though, the Art Ensemble was only a part-time pursuit. The musicians wanted to make a living by performing together, but that was virtually impossible in Chicago. So in 1969, they set out for Paris, bringing with them their AACM colleague Jarman, who became the fourth member of the Art Ensemble.⁵

The venture to France was the most pivotal episode in the Art Ensemble's history. The group spent two years overseas, from 1969 to 1971. Although

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3. PAUL STEINBECK, *Message to Our Folks: The Art Ensemble of Chicago*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2017; ID., *Grande Musica Nera: Storia dell'Art Ensemble of Chicago*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2018 (Chorus, 1).
 4. ROSCOE MITCHELL, *Sound*, Delmark DS-408, 1966, LP; LESTER BOWIE, *Numbers 1 & 2*, Nessa N-1, 1967, LP; ID., *Congluptious*, Nessa N-2, 1968, LP.
 5. For more information about the Art Ensemble's early years, see STEINBECK, *Message to Our Folks*, pp. 9–60; or ID., *Grande Musica Nera*, pp. 33–91.

the musicians eventually came home to the United States, the connections they formed in Europe allowed them to tour the continent virtually every year from 1974 to 2004, providing the Art Ensemble with a steady source of income. However, these international tours would have amounted to very little if the Art Ensemble had not instituted the social practices that sustained the band for decades after the journey to France. In 1969, most of the group members did not have the means to travel from Chicago to Paris. Mitchell and Jarman were broke, and Favors's most valuable asset was his old Volkswagen van. Bowie, however, was a bit more prosperous, due to his work as a studio musician. If Bowie liquidated his entire household, he could raise enough funds to take the entire group to Europe. The other musicians agreed to this arrangement, and from that moment on, the Art Ensemble was more than a band: it was an investment and a business partnership. Mitchell, Jarman, and Favors repaid Bowie as soon as they were able, not long after they arrived in Paris. With this, the four members of the group became fully vested in the business of the Art Ensemble.⁶

Self-financing the move to Paris was the first step in the development of the band's social practices. The musicians' conception of the Art Ensemble as an investment meant that they were all equal partners. This approach, though, came with one potential drawback. In the group's regular business meetings, if each member had a single vote, there was a possibility that important decisions could end in a stalemate, or that a majority faction could repeatedly overrule a minority. (Tie votes would have been less likely after 1970, when the band added its fifth and final member, Don Moye, an American who had just relocated to Paris from Rome).⁷ In order to avoid the problems of a 'shareholder' model of governance, the musicians instituted a key social practice: *consensus decision-making*. All decisions affecting the Art Ensemble would have to be made with the unanimous consent of all five members. Now there were no majority or minority positions — just the position of the group as a whole.⁸ Of course, the musicians did have different perspectives

6. LINCOLN T. BEAUCHAMP JR., *Art Ensemble of Chicago: Great Black Music, Ancient to the Future*, Art Ensemble of Chicago Publishing, Chicago 1998, p. 73; PHILLIPPA RENDLE AND RAFI ZABOR, *Lester Bowie: Roots, Research, & the Carnival Chef*, «Musician», n. 44 June 1982, pp. 64–71: 68.

7. BEAUCHAMP JR., *Art Ensemble of Chicago*, pp. 59–60; FAMOUDOU DON MOYE, telephone interview by author, Marseille, 5 March 2015.

8. GEORGE E. LEWIS, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2017, p. 227.

on whatever matter was at hand, such as whether to accept a particular gig or how to negotiate a recording contract. When they considered a topic for the first time, Jarman and Mitchell usually found themselves in initial agreement, with Bowie and Moye on the other side. In the middle was Favors, the oldest member of the group and the Art Ensemble's spiritual leader. More often than not, Favors was able to provide a unique angle on the situation and guide the discussion into a place where a consensus could form.⁹

The Art Ensemble's practice of consensus decision-making grew in significance during the band's two-year sojourn in Europe. The group members had been operating as equal partners since they left Chicago. Once in Paris, the musicians were playing several concerts per week and recording new albums almost every month. Now they could afford to move out of the hotels where they had been staying. Instead of spending money on individual apartments, the bandmates arrived at a consensus to rent a house in the Paris suburbs where they could rehearse during the day and relax at night. The musicians were making all of their money together — so they decided to spend it together as well, on their new home. This lifestyle change led to a reorganization of the Art Ensemble as an economic *cooperative*. The group members were still equal partners. But rather than taking the proceeds from each gig and splitting the money five ways, the musicians kept much of their income in the cooperative, allocating a certain amount for their shared living expenses and using the surplus for savings and reinvestment.¹⁰

The practice of cooperation paid off right away. In Paris, most expatriate musicians were freelancers who earned only enough money to pay the rent. The members of the Art Ensemble, in contrast, were able to set cash aside for major expenditures, including a fleet of Ford trucks. Other bands had to take the train or a taxi to their gigs, but that wasn't practical for the Chicagoans, who played hundreds of instruments. After the musicians purchased their trucks, they could bring their entire instrument collection anywhere, whether they were performing in Paris, elsewhere in France, or across Europe. In between Art Ensemble concerts, they rented out their fleet for extra income. Thanks to their cooperative practices, the musicians prospered during their two years abroad. By 1971, they had amassed a savings that enabled them to

9. FAMOUDOU DON MOYE, interview by author, Chicago, 20 October 2009.

10. ARTHUR CARRALL CROMWELL, *Jazz Mecca: An Ethnographic Study of Chicago's South Side Jazz Community*, PhD diss., Ohio University, 1998, pp. 195–6; FAMOUDOU DON MOYE, email to author, 22 October 2005.

travel back home in style — on an ocean liner, with their trucks in the cargo hold.¹¹

The band's emerging social practices can be heard on a number of early Art Ensemble recordings, including *People in Sorrow*.¹² Recorded for the Pathé label in July 1969, a few weeks after the Chicagoans arrived in Paris, *People in Sorrow* is based on an eleven-measure theme composed by Mitchell. The musicians use this brief theme as the foundation for a forty-minute group improvisation, not by soloing over the theme's chord progression but rather by drawing on their practices of consensus and cooperation. During the performance, the band alternates between statements of the theme and open-ended interludes. Each theme statement and interlude is constructed by consensus. The group members spontaneously decide whether to play the theme or move away from it. At the same time, they choose who will take the lead, who will accompany, and which instruments they should play. The performance is also cooperative in nature. Although Mitchell wrote the theme himself, the album cover and disc label give compositional credit to his bandmates as well, in recognition of their integral contributions to the music. No one monopolizes the theme or plays extended solos. Instead, they take on a shared responsibility for playing countermelodies, creating accompaniment textures, and proposing musical ideas that advance the group improvisation. The result is a performance of great complexity and sensitivity, perhaps the finest recording from the band's time in France.

In 1971, the Art Ensemble returned to the United States. The musicians had become a success in Europe, and they hoped to achieve the same at home. However, they soon discovered that some things about the American scene had not changed. The critical acclaim that the band won in France did translate into a few gigs in the States — about a dozen concerts in 1971 and 1972, including a performance at the University of Michigan that led to the Art Ensemble's first contract with a major record label. Unfortunately, the musicians were not making as much money as they had in Europe. For brief periods, they tried sharing a residence, but even cooperative living was not enough to guarantee the prosperity they enjoyed back in France. Once again, it was

11. J[AMIL] B. FIGI, *Art Ensemble of Chicago*, «SunDance» November-December 1972, pp. 43–50: 47; KUNLE MWANGA, telephone interview by author, Middletown, Connecticut, 14 October 2006.

12. ART ENSEMBLE OF CHICAGO, *People in Sorrow*, Pathé 2C 062–10523, 1969, LP.

time for the Art Ensemble to develop new social practices.¹³ The solution that the group devised was: *autonomy*.

The musicians realized that they could not survive on their Art Ensemble income — not yet. They still believed in their music, though, and refused to give up on the band. Spending two years overseas had been a major sacrifice, and the musicians wanted to capitalize on their investment. Instead of disbanding the Art Ensemble, they decided to start a network of other groups, which they called ‘side projects.’ Each member of the Art Ensemble formed his own band (or bands), sometimes with another Art Ensemble member, but more often with their AACM colleagues or various musicians from Chicago, St. Louis, and New York. They performed and recorded with their side projects, earning money to supplement their income from the Art Ensemble. In addition to providing financial stability, the side projects gave the musicians opportunities to try out new compositions and concepts that they could bring back to the Art Ensemble. The side projects also remade the Art Ensemble’s image into that of a ‘supergroup’, comprised of musicians who had independent solo careers and who were bandleaders in their own right. The members of the Art Ensemble could focus on their side projects for months on end. Then, when it was time for an Art Ensemble concert tour, they would reunite and prepare for the performances with a few weeks of intensive rehearsals.¹⁴

Somewhat paradoxically, the Art Ensemble’s social practice of autonomy enhanced the band’s approach to cooperative economics. Because the musicians were no longer solely reliant upon their Art Ensemble income, they could be more selective with the gigs that the band accepted. Rather than taking several hundred dollars for a performance in Chicago, or one or two thousand for a show out of town, the group significantly increased its booking fee, making the Art Ensemble one of the most expensive acts in jazz and experimental music. This strategy gave the band more cachet in the music industry and prevented the group from working too much for too little money. In between Art Ensemble tours, the musicians could earn income from their side projects. And when they were ready to reconvene the Art Ensemble, they could feel confident that the work would be lucrative. This meant that they were able to direct even more of their Art Ensemble revenue into

13. JOHN B. LITWEILER, *There Won’t Be Any More Music*, in *Down Beat Music ’71: 16th Annual Yearbook*, Maher Publications, Chicago 1971, pp. 23–6, 37: 37.

14. LEWIS, *Singing Omar’s Song*, p. 75; BOB RUSCH, *Lester Bowie*, «Cadence» v/10 December 1979, pp. 3–6, 14: 6, 14.

the cooperative. Some of their concert proceeds would fund band retreats where they rented a house and worked on their music or a month or more, rehearsing for seven or eight hours each day. Other income was used to produce merchandise that the group could sell, from t-shirts, stickers, and posters to albums from AECO Records, the independent label that the musicians founded in the mid-1970s. One substantial payday, from another label that released a live recording of a concert in Chicago, allowed the musicians to purchase a renovated Greyhound bus that became their transportation for tours across North America.¹⁵

The concert recording that helped the musicians buy their bus was *Live at Mandel Hall*.¹⁶ They recorded the album in January 1972, nine months after they returned from Europe. At the time, the band members were beginning to implement their newest social practices, and throughout the Mandel Hall concert, they find ways to improvise autonomously while remaining in tune with the overall trajectory of the performance. Near the end of the concert, Favors is playing a bass solo and preparing to cue the final composition on the set list, a piece entitled «Mata Kimasu». But before he can introduce the «Mata Kimasu» bass line, Bowie, Jarman, and Mitchell interrupt him and create an improvised wind texture that sounds not unlike certain passages from *People in Sorrow*. Instead of trying to regain control of the improvisation, Favors gives his bandmates the autonomy they need to develop the wind texture. For a moment, he accompanies them, and then he takes a brief rest. Finally, Bowie, Jarman, and Mitchell reach an inflection point in their improvisation. Seconds later, Favors returns with the «Mata Kimasu» bass line. Moye aligns himself with Favors, and starts playing the drum beat for «Mata Kimasu». The other musicians agree as well, bringing the group to a consensus. Bowie, Jarman, and Mitchell play the «Mata Kimasu» theme, and with that, the concert comes to a close.

The social practices that the Art Ensemble developed from 1969 to 1979 would serve the band for decades. Beginning in 1974, the group toured

15. BEAUCHAMP JR., *Art Ensemble of Chicago*, p. 62; LARRY BIRNBAUM, *Art Ensemble of Chicago: 15 Years of Great Black Music*, «Down Beat» XLVI/9 3 May 1979, pp. 15–7, 39–40, 42: 17; TITUS LEVI, *Lester Speaks Out*, «Option» n. 1 March–April 1985, pp. 24–5: 25; MOYE, email to author.

16. ART ENSEMBLE OF CHICAGO, *Live at Mandel Hall*, Delmark DS-432/433, 1974, LP.

Europe every year, and also started performing in Japan.¹⁷ By the mid-1970s, the cooperative was taking in enough money for the Art Ensemble to rent an office space in Chicago and hire a full-time administrator. And in 1979, the musicians officially incorporated the cooperative as Art Ensemble of Chicago Operations, formalizing the practices of consensus decision-making, cooperation, and autonomy that they had developed over the past ten years. From their core business with the Art Ensemble and from their individual side projects, the musicians earned a more-than-respectable living. All five members of the Art Ensemble were able to purchase houses and pay for their children's university educations — no small achievement for performers specializing in jazz and experimental music. Of course, the bandmates were not primarily motivated by money. Each was talented enough to work in many different fields beyond music performance. Bowie was a natural salesman, Favors was a respected community leader, Jarman was a martial-arts instructor, Mitchell was a college professor, and Moye was fluent in at least four languages. If they had truly desired to become wealthy, of course, they would not have chosen careers in music. But to the members of the Art Ensemble, it was incredibly meaningful that they succeeded in the music industry on their own terms — and that they did it together.¹⁸

Without the practices of consensus decision-making, cooperation, and autonomy, the Art Ensemble would not have enjoyed the prosperity that set it apart from its peers in jazz and experimental music. These social practices also helped the bandmates endure the challenges they faced on and off stage, from business-related issues to interpersonal friction within the group. Even in the most difficult situations, the musicians learned that they could rely on their social practices — and the deep relationships they built over the years — to remain united even when one of the members was struggling. This is how the Art Ensemble came to be so resilient, as Mitchell and Jarman explained in a 1978 interview:

Roscoe Mitchell: In the Art Ensemble, each individual is different, and this leads to completely unique results, because of the combination of personalities.

17. The Art Ensemble visited Italy for the first time in 1974, giving performances across the country, including a celebrated concert at the 1974 Festival del Jazz di Bergamo. CLAUDIO SESSA, *Prefazione*, in STEINBECK, *Grande Musica Nera*, pp. 9–13: 10.

18. MOYE, email to author; RUSCH, *Lester Bowie*, p. 5; GREG TATE, *Gone Fishing: Remembrances of Lester Bowie*, «Village Voice», 14 December 1999, pp. 165–6: 166.

So it's crucial to understand the reality of what keeps us together. I'll give you an example: the problem of improvisation. There aren't many musicians with whom I can attempt this kind of experiment, for any significant period of time, other than the musicians of the Art Ensemble. Such an experiment really requires individuals with strong personalities. If any of the members of the Art Ensemble had shown weakness, we would never have progressed [...]. Joseph, for example: I'm sure that if I showed weakness, he would quit, simple as that [...]. What do you think, Joseph?

Joseph Jarman: The Art Ensemble is like a cake made from five ingredients: remove one of the ingredients and the cake no longer exists. When you look at the Art Ensemble from a certain distance, that's how it is, much more than any one individual whose personality you manage to isolate. Each member of the Art Ensemble has a certain strength in all the domains: composition, improvisation, etc. Additionally [...] we have developed an internal loyalty, an awareness of our interdependence. All of the experiences we went through together, our emotional experiences, positive or dramatic, all of the situations we found ourselves in collectively and individually — all of this has brought us closer together to the point that now we are of one mind. Roscoe has just said that if he were weak, I would leave. In fact, I don't think that it would work that way. I think that I would accept that his spirituality gives me strength. Of course, if one of us completely lost his footing, we would do everything in our power to restore his balance. It is our fifteen or eighteen years of communal life that allows such solidarity.¹⁹

The members of the Art Ensemble found themselves in a particularly challenging situation on the way to a performance in Istanbul. The hotel where the musicians were staying was a long distance from the concert venue. Moreover, the limousine hired to take the band to the gig was running behind schedule, and one of the group members had a few drinks at the hotel bar while waiting for the car. When the limousine finally arrived, he was intoxicated. For the Art Ensemble, this was not a common occurrence, but it was not unheard of either — these were grown men with an appreciation for beer, wine, and cognac. In the past, when someone was late to a sound check or had too much to drink, the other group members would fine him, and that would be the end of it. The incident in Istanbul, however, was unusually complicated. The

19. Roscoe Mitchell and Joseph Jarman, cit. in LAURENT GODDET AND ALEX DUTILH, *L'Art, ensemble*, «Jazz Hot», n. 356–357 December 1978-January 1979, pp. 23–9: 26.

person who over-indulged was not accustomed to drinking that much, and during the limousine ride, he started berating another member of the band. The individual who was under attack took it all in stride, but the other three group members became upset and decided that they needed to defend their bandmate. Instead of addressing the problem right away, they waited until the concert began. That night, whenever the person who had acted rudely in the limousine started to take a solo, the others played much louder and drowned him out. By then, he was completely sober and all too aware that he was being reprimanded. The other members always intervened in thoughtful, musical ways, but the offender understood the reason for their actions, and this unconventional disciplinary strategy had the desired effect. After the performance, he apologized profusely to the entire group, and during future tours he was more careful about how he conducted himself.²⁰

The Istanbul concert was not the only time that the Art Ensemble found a musical solution for an interpersonal problem. In 1981, the *Full Force* tour brought the band home to Chicago for a residency at the Jazz Showcase nightclub.²¹ The set list for one of the Jazz Showcase performances included «Promenade», a composition by Moye for percussion ensemble. This piece has a simple structure: each musician is assigned a repeating drum rhythm, and they enter one by one, gradually assembling a percussion texture and then maintaining the groove while Moye takes a solo. «Promenade» begins with Moye playing a composite rhythm based on elements of all the musicians' parts. After Moye introduces the composite rhythm, Bowie and Jarman join in, followed by Favors. Mitchell is up next, but as soon as he enters, Favors drops out unexpectedly. When Favors returns a moment later, he is one beat behind the rest of ensemble. These kinds of mistakes had been happening in the rehearsals prior to the concert, and Moye was a bit frustrated with how his bandmates were performing his composition — but he also knew how to solve the problem. Moye raises his arms, telling Favors to pay attention to what will come next. Then Moye plays a new rhythm that combines Favors and Mitchell's parts, showing Favors how to get back in alignment with his bandmates. This cue works immediately: Favors re-enters at the right point in the groove, and Moye is able to proceed into his solo.²²

20. KEVIN BEAUCHAMP, interview by author, St. Louis, 5 December 2014.

21. ART ENSEMBLE OF CHICAGO, *Live from the Jazz Showcase*, University of Illinois, 1982, VHS.

22. FAMOUDOU DON MOYE, interview by author, Chicago, 6 September 2007.

The Jazz Showcase concert — and the other examples analyzed in this chapter, from *People in Sorrow* and *Live at Mandel Hall* to the Istanbul performance — reveal the connections between the Art Ensemble's music and the social practices that the band developed from 1969 to 1979. The group members' commitment, to their ideas and to one another, also inspired many of their colleagues to emulate their musical and social practices. In the mid-1960s, the Art Ensemble was the first band in the AACM to experiment with multi-instrumentalism, the practice of playing dozens of instruments from different families in order to obtain orchestral timbres in a small-group context. Soon, a number of the Art Ensemble's AACM colleagues began their own explorations of multi-instrumentalism, a practice that eventually became a trademark of the AACM as a whole.²³ By the 1970s, the band's practices were gaining currency among the musicians who played in the Art Ensemble's side projects. The members of the Art Ensemble knew how to be effective bandleaders, and they were able to share this expertise with their side-project colleagues, several of whom went on to lead their own groups.²⁴ The musicians from the side projects also consulted the Art Ensemble for tips about personal finance. In the jazz community, Bowie became something of a financial adviser, teaching his friends how to save their money and qualify for a mortgage, even in expensive markets like Chicago and New York City.²⁵

Stories like these show that the members of the Art Ensemble were not merely musicians. Of course, music was what brought them together initially, but as they made their way through the world, they taught other performers how to relate to one another and succeed in the music industry. The Art Ensemble's concerts and recordings changed the sound of jazz and experimental music. And the example set by the group members changed other musicians' lives. From the South Side of Chicago to southern Europe, musicians are still building on the foundation laid by the Art Ensemble, still adding to a legacy that continues to grow, five decades after the band was formed.

23. For more about how the Art Ensemble introduced multi-instrumentalism to the AACM, see STEINBECK, *Message to Our Folks*, pp. 45–7, 49–50; or ID., *Grande Musica Nera*, pp. 74–6, 79–80.

24. LESTER BOWIE AND MALACHI FAVORS, radio interview by Ted Panken, WKCR-FM, New York, 22 November 1994.

25. TATE, *Gone Fishing*, p. 166.