

Afterword via Fantasia

THE FREEDOM PRINCIPLE: EXPERIMENTS IN ART AND MUSIC,
1965 TO NOW // MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART CHICAGO

By Stephanie Cristello



**“ADMIRABLE AND AMAZING ARE ALL THINGS OF
WHICH WE DO NOT KNOW THE CAUSES.”
— FRANCESCO DE’VIERI, 1586**

On July 9, 1975, artist Bas Jan Ader sailed out of the harbor in Cape Cod, Massachusetts to perform *In search of the miraculous*. He never did return. Ader’s voyage to sea—“a romantic and adventurous trip in a very small boat across the Atlantic”²—was the second performance in a trilogy. The work was never finished, but it was complete. His miracle was one that was never realized, existing instead in the liminal space between intention and action, as an idea—the image of the artist forever lost at sea. The mythology surrounding Ader’s disappearance has, in itself, been a subject of his work that in many ways equals his output, an influence that permeates the context of his earlier pieces. *In search of the miraculous* was his final poem. Its message was simple: —

— The miraculous was not here. The miraculous was elsewhere. —

— The piece was arguably the first instance in contemporary art toward a fully secular shift in the idea of a miracle. Miracles require loss; or perhaps better phrased, the experience of a miracle requires the suspension of belief, a loss of reason. While this was always true of the traditional definition, Ader’s piece approached a new framing of loss. It positioned the miracle as an event that not only occupied a space of the unknown—a parallel world where enchantment replaces logic—but relegated the experience to the status of the image. The artist was not dead; he was supplanted by the concept of absence. Within this manufactured space, Ader is immortal. He wrote his own history—his absence was his own authorship. But what of the forced absence in the histories of those whose voices were not valued enough to write their own? How can their performances, their own searches for the miraculous, use fiction as a way to reclaim authorship? —

— *Afterword via Fantasia*, the title of the collaborative film installation by media / theater artist Catherine Sullivan, composer and musician George Lewis, artist Charles Gaines,

and director Sean Griffin—currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in *The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now*—uses this ‘elsewhere’ as a device to expose a miswritten history. At once otherworldly and visceral, the film is an adaptation of George Lewis’ libretto for the forthcoming opera *Afterword*. Within the intimate screening room at the MCA, which can be viewed as a satellite to the exhibition as a whole, the single-channel projection presses against the



whole of the space, the bodies of the performers on screen to scale with the viewer’s own body. Lewis and Griffin’s dissonant sounds contribute to the recording, unfolding in waves of symphonic minor chords that clash with the movements of the actors in the film. The figures in the piece exist not as fixed characters, but as musical identities—disembodied and transitive. Gaines’ contributions—whose work is also installed in the larger galleries of the fourth floor exhibition, co-curated by Naomi Beckwith and Dieter Roelstraete—creates an environment to hold the projection. A chalk drawing of a church organ occupies one of the painted black walls, its delicate white lines illuminated amid a shallow field of fake flowers, glowing under a black light cast from above. Microphones are placed among the petals, as if either the drawing or the blossoms will emit a sound. They stand waiting. —

— The experience transports the viewer into an estranged

place—a place that floats in history, pairing 16mm film with spliced scenes of HD footage that creates an anachronistic atmosphere. History and speculation collide. The term ‘fantasia’ here operates on two registers—the first, as an explanation of the improvisation and free form means that led to the adaptation, and the second as a reference to an extemporaneous site, a fictive location where the retelling of Lewis’ narrative of the AACM can take place. A man groans “*Mississippi*,” his head bobs slightly forward and back again—he breathes, his eyes meeting the camera in supreme clarity briefly before the camera cuts. “Do you know how this music came from the heritage of our people?,” another voice says, on the backdrop of a grainy black and white parking lot, “Their psyche was awakened by the very vibrations of the air.” —

— The spoken and sung voices of the ensemble of actors, dancers, and artists, including current members of the AACM—the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, an experimental Chicago group whose fifty year anniversary precipitated the exhibition—represent an identity, but not necessarily a single body. These are the *afterwords*. By definition, an afterword is a conclusion written by another that is not the author. Here, this concept is acted out in plural—*other authors*. The choreography in Sullivan’s film destabilizes the boundaries that define a singular role. Throughout *Afterword via Fantasia*, the movement inherent to one character is easily replicated by another. This transference of self, a quality that operates as a type of possession, conjures a series of hybrid identities, each carrying with it a voice capable of telling a story. This concept of authorship stands in stark contrast to one of the sets where the film was shot; Porgy and Bess is often cited as one of “the most incongruous, contradictory cultural symbols ever created in the Western World.”³ The opera was a fiction; its plot was rife with racial stereotypes, with the pervasive myth of poverty and violence as intrinsic to the everyday experience of black



life, even in Gershwin’s demands of the performance, which imposed a hyperbolized dialect on the actors. As composer and critic Virgil Thompson said in a review of the opera, “Folklore subjects recounted by an outsider are only valid as long as the folk in question is unable to speak for itself, which is certainly not true of the [African-American] in 1935.”⁴

While source material of *Porgy and Bess* is outside of Sullivan’s experience, as a white artist living in the twenty-first century, it is also necessarily outside of *any* authentic experience—the adaptation is based on an original form that was conceived as a fabrication. The difference in *Afterword via Fantasia* is that its fiction approaches a means of authorship through the purposeful abstraction of its narrative. Sullivan touches upon a pressing question through the means of film, which is more relevant today than ever: how can art progressively impact—and even alter—the canonized history of others?

If history is to be presented as fact, its stories must remain conspicuous.

The canonical history of the Western world is not known for being a poly-

vocal one. *Afterword via Fantasia* exists as one of the few pieces of cultural phenomena that is successful in telling a story of an identity from a perspective that is not its own. The stereotypical portrait of Black America has been subject to countless cultural contributions directed by white voices. As with *In search of the miraculous*, it too exists as authorship through absence. One of the greatest oppositions to this absence is music. In fact, one of the most ubiquitous songs in American repertoire, *Summertime*, was lifted from the score of *Porgy and Bess*, yet has gained an entirely independent identity from the narrative of the play through its various adaptations. This same tenet of independence is proposed by *The Freedom Principle* as a whole, but is made explicitly clear in Sullivan’s film: “The insistence by blacks that music has to be saying something becomes part of a long history of resistance to the silencing of the black voice,” reads one character, from a scene in *Afterword via Fantasia* set on the stage for a production of *Waiting for Godot* at Court Theatre. “Indeed, as might be expected from a people whose genetic, historical, and cultural legacies were interrupted through sustained, systematized violence. Every effort was made by the musicians to recover, rather than

disrupt, historical consciousness. Rather than an ordering of sounds, for which the composer ultimately claims parenthood, and disclaims moment-to-moment responsibility, the new black musicians felt that music could effectuate the recovery of history itself.”⁵ The dangers of a white voice directing a film with this message are clear. *Afterword via Fantasia* is built on precarious territory, where the residue of the systematized colonization of Black voices in contemporary America remains at the forefront of our consciousness. Current events are rarely untouched by the same racist narrative of *Porgy and Bess*. Fiction disguised as documentary is still fiction. *Afterword via Fantasia* is successful because it takes this fiction to its limit. “There is something healthy in not being certain where you are, when your sense of place is not confirmed,” said Sullivan. “No element of this piece is presuming any kind of authenticity.”⁶ On the concept of *Meraviglia*, the Latin term given to the study of miracles, Francesco de’Vieri stated in 1586, “Admirable and amazing are all things of which we do not know the causes.”⁷ Now over four centuries later, in *Afterword via Fantasia*,



we know the causes that led to its creation. Yet the piece still retains the qualities described of *Meraviglia*—not through unknowing, but through a hyper-awareness of fiction. While the approach in Sullivan’s film locates a space where a fragment of black history has the potential to be reconstructed, its status as an invention should not be discounted as utopic. By Ader’s definition of a miracle, *Afterword via Fantasia* finds elsewhere.

The opera, *Afterword*, will be presented on the MCA Stage on October 16 and 17, 2015. *The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now* runs through November 22, 2015.

TITLE PAGE:
Installation view, *The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now*, MCA Chicago. July 11–November 22, 2015. Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago.

PREVIOUS SPREAD (RIGHT):
Bas Jan Ader, *In search of the miraculous*, 1975. Image: Claire S. Copley Gallery, Los Angeles, black and white postcard, 8.9 x 14 cm.

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
Installation view, *The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now*, MCA Chicago. July 11–November 22, 2015. Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago.

ABOVE (LEFT, RIGHT):
Installation view, *The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now*, MCA Chicago. July 11–November 22, 2015. Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago.

Installation view, *The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now*, MCA Chicago. July 11–November 22, 2015. Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago.

- 1 Francesco de’Vieri, *Discorsi delle Meravigliose Opere di Pratolino e d’Amore*, Florence, Giorgio Marescotti, 1586, p.57. translated through Brunon, Hervé.
- 2 Céleste Boursier Mougenot: *Rotations*, “As If by Enchantment” Venice: Institut Français, 2015. Print.
- 3 Beenker, Erik, Tacita Dean, and Rein Wolfs. *Bas Jan Ader: Please Don’t Leave Me*. Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2006. Print. p.102–103
- 4 James Standifer, *The Tumultuous Life of Porgy and Bess*, HUMANITIES, November/December 1997 | Volume 18, Number 6. Web. 2 August 2015.
- 5 Review, 1935, Virgil Thompson.
- 6 sullivan&co on Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/135164014>, 2015.
- 7 Catherine Sullivan in conversation with the author, 2015.
- 8 Francesco de’Vieri, *Discorsi delle Meravigliose Opere di Pratolino e d’Amore*, Florence, Giorgio Marescotti, 1586, p.57. translated through Brunon, Hervé.
- 9 Céleste Boursier Mougenot: *Rotations*, “As If by Enchantment” Venice: Institut Français, 2015. Print.