Improvisation at Artpark: Composing Sam Gilliam's *Custom Road Slide*

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Abstract: In 1977, African American artist Sam Gilliam (1933-2022) orchestrated a constantly changing, month-long event along the Niagara River Gorge in Lewiston, New York. Named *Custom Road Slide*, the dynamic assemblage of fabric, rocks, and wood was radically open to the public for Q&A and to the ecosystem's high winds. Gilliam's improvisatory approach, stemming from his knowledge of postwar jazz, is this paper's primary focus. I also consider the unique patronage of Artpark, a state park that brought some of the country's most advanced art to Western New York in the 1970s and 80s. My argument recasts the artist as a musically inclined "composer" who worked with all media, contrary to his general reputation as a painter. Accordingly, contemporaneous improvisations by the saxophonist Ornette Coleman and violinist Laurie Anderson are brought in to help contextualize Gilliam's process-based art.
Key words: sound, jazz, improvisation, environment, Land art, and public art

> Improvisation, contrary to a lot of popular thinking, must be very exact. It is a reverberation, or an extension in another direction, from the basic thematic material.[1]
>
> – Romare Bearden

In a remarkable, early photograph of Sam Gilliam from 1966, the artist poses in his Washington, D.C. home, elegantly dressed in a cardigan and skinny tie (Fig. 1). He looks directly at us with a shrewd expression, his mouth slightly open. Our attention is then drawn to the bottom quarter of the image, where Gilliam is showing us a vinyl record that he partially slips out of its cover. He even holds the record flat like a painter's palette while seated in front of one of the hard-edge paintings that typified his mid-1960s output. The album is Ornette Coleman's *Change of the Century,* a radical recording of improvised music from 1960 that led to the development of free jazz (Fig. 2). In the dramatic photograph by Lee Friedlander on its cover, Coleman gazes outwards while wearing a black tie just like Gilliam, though the jazz composer's self-presentation is more solemn and communicates a resolute intensity that is amplified by the chiaroscuro lighting.

The portrait of Gilliam was taken by the photographer Geoffrey Clements for the nonprofit organization American Federation of Arts, which was promoting an exhibition of African American art at the *Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres* (First World Festival of Negro Arts) held in Dakar, Senegal. Taking place in April 1966, the festival was organized by the Senegalese president Léopold Senghor and showcased impactful Black arts from forty-five African, North/South American, and European countries.[2] While Gilliam himself never traveled to Dakar, two of his paintings did, and Clements' photographs of the

[1] Bearden, quoted in Edward Weeks, "Introduction," *Romare Bearden: Jazz* (Birmingham: Birmingham Museum of Art, 1982).

[2] The significance of this festival in world history has been assessed in David Murphy, ed., *The First World Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar 1966* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).

artist were valuable opportunities for him to present himself to the world as a sophisticated thinker whose intellectual investments in sound could enhance the effect of his visual artworks.[3]

The resonance between the Clements and Friedlander photographs figuratively opens up a new, multisensory space where Gilliam, the artist, comes face to face with Coleman, the composer.[4] Indeed, the Clements portrait echoes a photographic trope of jazz album covers from the late 1950s and early '60s (evidenced by *Change of the Century*), one in which the solitary composer (usually male) trains his eyes on something out of frame, awash in neutral tones and deep in contemplation.[5] Over the course of his career, Gilliam often likened himself to a musical composer in order to explain his own improvisational way of working.[6] For these reasons, it is necessary to consider what exactly he heard from Coleman that would motivate him to prominently feature the composer's album in the Clements portrait.

In the manifesto-like liner notes to *Change of the Century*, Coleman, who plays a plastic alto saxophone on the record, analogizes the avant-garde composer with the painter. "With my music, as is the case with some of my friends who are painters, I often have people come to me and say, 'I like it but I don't understand it,'" he observes. He goes on to describe the album tracks toward the end of the notes:

> Each is quite different from the other, but in a certain sense there really is no start or finish to any of my compositions. There is a continuity of expression, certain continually evolving strands of thought that link all my compositions together. Maybe it's something like the paintings of Jackson Pollock.[7]

His invocation of Pollock as an emblem of Abstract Expressionism serves to legitimize and contextualize the difficult nature of listening to his own abstract music. Unsurprisingly, Coleman was also known to make abstract paintings, some of which he used as album covers.[8] With Don Cherry on trumpet, Charlie Haden on bass, and Billy Higgins on drums, Coleman's quartet created an innovative style of free group improvisation that encourages collaboration between each instrument.[9] This constantly evolving notion of jazz improvisation is what Gilliam sought to activate in his visual art, and it explains why he was so interested in positioning himself as a composer.

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[3] Even though Fig. 1 was not reproduced in the exhibition catalog (a different version of the portrait without the record was featured, perhaps due to Gilliam's awkward half smile), this rarely seen version is the key to understanding his mobilization of jazz improvisation in his art. For more on the exhibition, see American Federation of Arts, *Ten Negro Artists From the United States: First World Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar, Senegal, 1966* (New York: United States Committee for the First World Festival of Negro Arts, Inc. and National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution: 1966).

[4] For a wide-ranging engagement with the political power of sound and its affective frequencies in photography of the Black diaspora, see Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[5] This trope of the "brooding musician" is present in select photographic covers of most major jazz musicians of the 1950s and 60s, including, for instance, John Coltrane and Miles Davis. Carissa Kowalski Dougherty, "The Coloring of Jazz: Race and Record Cover Design in American Jazz, 1950 to 1970," *Design Issues* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 51–2.

[6] For example, he opened a local television segment about himself in 1985 with the statement: "I'm more like a composer. I mean I don't make music, but I literally make art in a sense." *Capital Edition*, "Sam Gilliam: Symphony of Color," produced by Raul Rivero, narrated by John O. Goldsmith, aired 1985, WUSA TV station.

[7] Ornette Coleman (as told to Gary Kramer), *Change of the Century* liner notes, 1960.

[8] See, for instance, his 1966 album *The Empty Foxhole*, whose cover art is a close-up view of gestural, colorful brushstrokes. This album notably features Coleman improvising on the violin and trumpet, instruments that he had only recently picked up, as well as the raw drumming of his ten-year-old son Denardo.

[9] Coleman also used Pollock's painting *White Light* (1954) for the cover of his genre-defining album *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation* (1961). Michael Stephans, *Experiencing Ornette Coleman: A Listener's Companion* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 34–6.

Despite his reputation of being solely a painter, Gilliam was generally a mixed-media artist who continually experimented with a wide variety of materials often found in assemblage: wooden planks, poles, wire, rope, and rocks. In fact, these materials were among those found in *Custom Road Slide*, in which they were re-arranged over the course of one month during the summer of 1977 on an elevated bank of the Niagara River Gorge in Western New York (Fig. 3). On the surface, this enigmatic work stands out as an anomaly in the artist's oeuvre. Due to its immersive and volatile nature—at most, *Custom Road Slide* was spread across an area of approximately thirty by twelve hundred feet—there is no definitive photograph of it, so commentators have long had difficulties describing what the artwork was. Radically open to park visitors for conversation while Gilliam and his assistants were working, it was subject to constant reorganization as well as natural deterioration.

Custom Road Slide both dramatizes the manual labor associated with the artist's studio and harnesses the unpredictable forces of the environment. This combination of work and spontaneity animates Gilliam's conception of improvisation, which is the throughline that connects the 1966 portrait to the 1977 work. Even though *Custom Road Slide* was once described by the art historian Jonathan Binstock as the ultimate "apotheosis" of Gilliam's improvisational method, this ambitious claim has not yet been substantively assessed in literature on the artist.[10] The purpose of this article is to describe the circumstances of *Custom Road Slide*'s patronage, construction, and reception. Specifically, a unique state park known as Artpark commissioned it and provided the artist with a challenging site, supplies, employee labor, lodging, and an organizational philosophy that would become deeply embedded into the fabric of the work. Through *Custom Road Slide*, Gilliam would theorize a collaborative model of improvisation that reverberated across multiple media and art forms.

In 1974, the small town of Lewiston, New York welcomed a plethora of talented artists and performers from around the country to celebrate the inaugural season of Artpark. Along with extensive theater programming and outdoor musical concerts headlined by the likes of jazz icons Miles Davis and Herbie Hancock, Artpark hosted an incredibly fruitful Visual Arts Program that brought cutting-edge contemporary art to its over 150-acre site. Most active from 1974 until 1984, the Visual Arts Program provided residencies to a diverse cohort of American and Canadian artists each summer, and that first season of projects was dedicated to the Land artist Robert Smithson, who had died the previous summer.[11] Artpark is geographically located just seven miles downriver from Niagara Falls, and its terrain includes an indigenous burial ground still in use by the Hopewell people of the Ohio River Valley (the general area also has cultural significance for the Haudenosaunee and Tuscarora peoples).[12] A wide stretch of bare earth in the park known as the Spoils Pile served as a reminder that the site was an industrial wasteland during the 1950s. The almost exclusively state-funded park was enjoyed by up to 504,000 visitors every summer, many of whom conversed with and occasionally assisted the artists-in-residence as they worked during regular Q&A sessions.[13]

Instead of building another sculpture garden following the modernist precedent set by Storm King Art Center's opening in 1960, Artpark's founders embarked on a populist mission to make contemporary art accessible to as many people as possible.[14] The commissioned projects epitomized the most advanced

[10] Jonathan Binstock, *Sam Gilliam: A Retrospective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 113.
[11] While the Visual Arts Program ended in 1991 due to state budget cuts, Artpark continues to operate as an extremely popular state park and concert/theater venue, with periodic commissions of large-scale art installations. For the definitive account of its Visual Arts Program, see Sandra Firmin, *Artpark: 1974–1984* (Buffalo: University at Buffalo Art Galleries, 2010).
[12] "Indigenous History," About Us, Artpark, accessed May 16, 2024, https://www.artpark.net/about-artpark.
[13] This attendance peak happened in 1978. Firmin, "Have You Artparked?" *Artpark: 1974–1984*, 23.
[14] Rebecca Lee Reynolds, "The Anti-Sculpture Park? Or, How Site-Specific and Ephemeral Art Questioned the Sculpture Park," in *Artpark: 1974–1984*, 190–207.

categories of artmaking at the time, including (but not limited to) Earthworks, sound art, intermedia, installation, and performance. Most of the invited artists, while living in on-site cabins, worked on ephemeral land-based projects that were dismantled by the end of the summer. This foregrounding of transience differs dramatically from conventional public art's emphasis on (sculptural) permanence. As a result, the Visual Art Program's experimental ethos encouraged artists like Gilliam to think outside of gallery parameters and take risks.

From July 23 to August 20, 1977, *Custom Road Slide* was open to the public and under constant construction by Gilliam and other collaborators: his studio assistants, Artpark employees, and even his daughters. Before that summer, however, the artist had spent the spring brainstorming and conceptualizing what the work could be. It was originally titled *Custom Road Flow* during the preliminary phase. While the name of the dirt pathway (Customs Road) below the cliff that was allotted to Gilliam is the literal reason for the title, his decision to incorporate the word "custom" is also suggestive of his adaptive approach to tailoring the work to its site. According to work proposals from May of that year, he envisioned that *Custom Road Flow* would only be made with three colored fabrics, large wooden poles, and soil.

While the variety of materials in the artwork would expand once he started working *in situ*, his initial writings strongly establish the process-based thinking that is the hallmark of *Custom Road Slide*. In a statement to Artpark staff dated May 17, he writes:

> "Custom Road Flow" relates in part to the process through which I made suspended paintings ranging in scale from 75 feet to 200 yards. I often realized that the actual painting and making of a work was only one aspect of a many faceted experience. Sometimes, I went to untold lengths to get things to work, such as folding large lengths of canvas—crushing them with large pieces of wood after they had been completely saturated with water or dyes…. I always questioned whether or not the works as they existed on the floor should be left just that way.[15]

For Gilliam, imagining this work in the first place was not possible without his experiences as a painter in the studio. In fact, one can interpret the entire *Custom Road Slide* environment as an extension of his studio, once private and now made public for Artpark visitors to experience. The amorphous work then becomes an outdoor trial in which its materials are continually tested out in new positions and for different purposes. The emphasis on *work* is evident in the photo-documentation of *Custom Road Slide* that features symbols of manual labor like sawhorses, ropes, and ladders (Fig. 4). In a powerful photograph of Gilliam standing in front of one of his trademark Drape paintings that hangs from a shale outcropping, the artist proudly wields a hammer in his right hand (Fig. 5). The message is clear: instead of seeing a painter only interested in brushes, paint, and the depicted image, we are meant to see a versatile artist who builds his works with carpentry and construction tools. Instead of only using industrially manufactured paint and dye to color *Custom Road Slide*'s scattered materials, he also extracted earth tones from minerals embedded in the soil to apply to select pieces of fabric.

Custom Road Slide's variation on the theme of the studio taps into late modernist debates about the symbolic role of artists' workspaces. As argued by the art historian Caroline Jones, the romanticized trope of the solitary genius in the semi-sacred studio was promoted by Abstract Expressionism, and it dominated ideas about workspaces until a series of industrial and technological challenges were

[15] Gilliam, "Statement About Work on *Custom Road Flow*," May 17, 1977, box 5, folder 10, Sam Gilliam Papers, Archives of American Art (AAA).

mounted by other artists in the 1960s.[16] Abstract Expressionism and its regional descendant known as the Washington Color School were central to Gilliam's early development as a painter, so there is undoubtedly a special significance to the studio that Gilliam upheld throughout his career. *Custom Road Slide*, however, departs from the Abstract Expressionist tradition in numerous ways, the crucial one being Gilliam's gradual dilution of his role as the autonomous creator. By moving his imagined studio outdoors to a state park that also hosted a bustling slate of fun-filled programming for families, he opened it up to external forces and public scrutiny. Gilliam's dislocation of the studio reads as "post-studio," a term often used to describe Robert Smithson's epochal departure from his own studio to work in the land.[17]

Smithson's posthumous relevance does not end there. In fact, Artpark's entire Visual Arts Program was indebted to the Land artist's work, seeing as the vast majority of commissioned projects explicitly engaged with Artpark as a site. Gilliam's preoccupation with improvisation riffs on Smithson's ideas about entropy as a measure of disorder in an environment.[18] While the two concepts are from vastly different disciplines (music and physics, respectively), they both speak to a highly contingent way of understanding the nature of art. For both artists, art is necessarily subject to processes outside of one's immediate control. Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown* (1969) similarly relied on a steep incline—on the edge of a defunct quarry outside of Rome, Italy—to allow a truckload of viscous, black material to freely creep down the slope until it hardened. The result was a frozen record of time passing, and the site was overtaken by vegetation soon after Smithson's intervention.[19]

For all the help that Gilliam relied on from his fellow workers, *Custom Road Slide* faced some serious logistical obstacles. The characteristic high winds of the gorge would frequently send its materials tumbling down the ravine, quickly undoing his fragile arrangements. That is to say, weather and gravity may have played larger roles than Gilliam himself in physically arranging the work. This, in addition to instances of nighttime vandalism (people sometimes cut the ropes that held materials in place), meant that he had to be comfortable releasing a considerable degree of authorial control.[20] It amounted to an improvisational process that he had already assimilated thanks to his understanding of jazz as a spontaneous and collaborative way of artmaking, even if this process was not fully appreciated by others.

Local art critics tended to exaggerate the antagonistic relationship between Gilliam and the environment, negatively interpreting the artist's experiment as a failed struggle that looked more like trash than art. As Nancy Willig recounted in the Buffalo-based newspaper *Courier-Express*:

> For Gilliam, the Artpark experience has been successful. Much of it has been experimenting and guessing. And he is happier with his result than this reviewer, naturally. "The greatest part of the piece is that…because certain materials are on the ground, does not make it litter," he declares. "To other people, the fact that the artwork is lying down represents a tragedy."[21]

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[16] Caroline Jones, "The Romance of the Studio and the Abstract Expressionist Sublime," in *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1–59.

[17] Cornelia Butler, "A Lurid Presence: Smithson's Legacy and Post-Studio Art," in *Robert Smithson* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004), 224–43.

[18] Robert Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments," *Artforum* 4.10 (June 1966): 26–31.

[19] Serena Solin, "Asphalt Rundown," *Holt/Smithson Foundation Scholarly Texts* (October 2022). https://holtsmithsonfoundation.org/asphalt-rundown-0.

[20] Gilliam, "Questionnaire Sent to Mr. Rae Tyson, 10/4/77," box 5, folder 10, Gilliam Papers, AAA.

[21] Gilliam, quoted by Nancy Tobin Willig in "Gilliam Works Fall Short," *Courier-Express*, 1977. In this review, he refers to the initial winds and rockslides as "events and situations…not even problems." For more reviews, see assorted articles in Artpark's *Current* magazine, the Rochester *Times-Union*, and the *Niagara Falls Gazette* from July and August of 1977. In box 66, folder 14, Artpark archives, Burchfield Penney Art Center (BPAC), SUNY Buffalo.

What Gilliam is communicating is that the value of his Artpark project does not hinge on a finished product, seeing as its composition changed every day. Instead, what really constitutes the work are the impromptu decisions that he made in response to his surroundings. Professional critics, however, were only one small part of the work's overall reception—the casual visitors who were on guided tours of the Visual Arts Program's projects often had feedback of their own. Many of the most commonly asked questions on these tours were of the straightforward variety that one would expect in contemporary art settings that disrupt traditional aesthetics: What are you making? And why are you doing this?[22] These frequent, matter-of-fact questions kept public opinion at the forefront of Gilliam's mind, pushing him to constantly re-evaluate his work.

The key moment in *Custom Road Slide*'s real-time composition came when he decided to depart from the verticality of the three streamers that originally formed the work (Fig. 6). Initially, the cliffside was adorned with looping curves of red and white fabric that had a pictorial effect, much like a painting. The wooden poles were originally intended to frame that imagined pictorial image, but the aforementioned difficulties of the situation prompted him to change course and incorporate those difficulties into the ethos of the work itself. As he later explained to the *Niagara Falls Gazette*, he happened to spot "a length of red cloth that appeared as an undulating horizontal form on the slide pile—here and there buried beneath the dirt."[23] Seeing this fallen streamer caused him to reconceptualize the composition as a contingent work-in-progress and to embrace the conditions of its fall instead of stubbornly resisting them. It opened the work up to include the various other materials, which were then spray painted red, blue, green, or tan (to differentiate the ten separate material groupings) and were "bunched into wreckage-like abstractions…on, and partially buried in, the pile of granular dirt that [was] continually loosening and falling from the cliffside."

Due to the change in strategy, Gilliam consequently saw *Custom Road Slide* less as an environmental painting and more as a collaborative improvisation. In a statement that he provided to Artpark after his residency was complete, he commented that "through the use of sawhorses it was possible to establish both actual and transparent planes that functioned in a semi-cubist pictorial manner."[24] Because the sawhorses were some of the only objects that could stand vertically on the slope when their bases were secured, their height was essential in making the work appear more dynamically three-dimensional (Fig. 4).

Beyond just *Custom Road Slide*, the summer of 1977 proved to be an exciting season for Artpark on numerous fronts, as it hosted a busy schedule of Broadway musicals, Shakespearean plays, cooking demonstrations, dance performances, fireworks, and more. The cliffside that Gilliam was working on was located just below the main grounds that featured an elevated boardwalk called the ArtEl: a collection of buildings that formed a Town Square, and a multi-million-dollar theater with 2,400 indoor seats. For five days in early September, the first Artpark Jazz Festival was organized by the producer Bill Hassett and brought some of the country's best jazz bands to Lewiston (Fig. 7).

The Visual Arts Program hosted twenty-eight artists including Gilliam that season, most of whom engaged in environmental or process art and exemplified the Artpark ideal of learning by doing. Alice Aycock and Agnes Denes were two of the most notable Land artists there. The sculptor Martin Puryear created an abstract monument of wood that consisted of a modest box and an enormous, one-hundred-

[22] The Q&A sessions often centered around a healthy skepticism toward contemporary art on the part of the visitors, who sometimes debated with artists about what "art" is or should be. Several thoughtful conversations and talking heads are featured in *Artpark People*, directed by Michael Blackwood (Michael Blackwood Productions, 1976), color film.

[23] Jack Foran, "Gilliam Battles Gorge Wind in Creating Artpark Piece," *Niagara Falls Gazette*, August 21, 1977.

[24] Gilliam, "Statement Upon Completion," in *Artpark 1977: The Visual Arts Program*, ed. Sharon Edelman (Lewiston: Artpark, 1977), 37.

foot-tall pole that stood on the barren Spoils Pile. The sonic artist Laurie Anderson organized a performance called *Stereo Decoy (A Canadian/American Duet*), in which she improvised on the violin in concert with a pianist who was dramatically positioned on top of a bluff, while tape-recorded sound blared from a distant speaker on the other side of the Niagara River in Canada.[25]

The soundscape of Artpark was demonstrably filled with the cacophony of summertime entertainment and artistic activity. The chaotic simultaneity of so many events and artworks meant that the sensory boundaries between them could not be so well-defined, as visitors to *Custom Road Slide* were absolutely immersed in the wider festival-like experience. In this way, the element of chance enters the equation when trying to describe what it must have been like to run into (perhaps fortuitously, after attending a symphony orchestra concert) Gilliam's work-in-progress at the periphery of the grounds. Visitors may have seen *Custom Road Slide* from above or below the cliffside, and any number of noisy events or performances could have contributed to the overall sonic experience of the work.

The connections between chance and sound have long animated the conversation about experimental music's impact on postwar art history. Euroamerican classical music and its incorporation of indeterminacy and aleatoricism as two distinct chance operations represent a major subfield. Indeed, the teachings of the New York composer John Cage and the anarchic performances of Fluxus focused on the event score as a crucial tool for negotiating chance in the work of art.[26] Improvisation, though born out of a vastly different social history rooted in the blues and the Black American experience, has the unique ability to expand this conversation. What is more, improvisation does not depend on a notated score as much as other chance-based music, reflecting an artist's profound impulse to work spontaneously without keeping a commodifiable record of the process.

1977 was also the year that Ornette Coleman released a jazz album called *Dancing In Your Head*, backed by an electrified band that he later named Prime Time. The contemporaneous resonance between Gilliam's and Coleman's activities demonstrates how improvisation can adapt to different art forms and still retain its generative power. *Dancing In Your Head*'s ecstatic funk music encapsulates Coleman's philosophy of harmolodics, an improvisational technique that evolved in meaning over the course of the composer's later career. The portmanteau describes a democratic unison among harmony, movement, melody, time, speed, phrasing, instrumentation, and other musical elements.[27] As a radical exacerbation of *Change of the Century*'s mode of improvisation, *Dancing In Your Head* showcases the full force of Coleman's avant-garde vision.

The three-track album can be divided into two groups: the first group ("Theme from a Symphony (Variation One)" and "Theme from a Symphony (Variation Two)") consists of Prime Time's variations on a musical phrase that Coleman had lifted from an older composition; the second group ("Midnight Sunrise") is a shorter collaboration with the Master Musicians of Jajouka, a collective of Jbala Sufi men who play the traditional folk music of their village in the Rif mountains of northern Morocco. Widely admired by musicians across the globe, their improvisational, trance-like music appealed to Coleman at a time when the popularity of jazz as a genre had faltered due to the cultural surge of rock.[28] In "Midnight Sunrise," the Master Musicians open the third track with the strong, unified sound of their *ghaitas* (oboe-

[25] Edelman, *Artpark 1977*, 5–8 (Anderson), 70–3 (Puryear).

[26] For instance, see Natilee Harren, *Fluxus Forms: Scores, Multiples, and the Eternal Network* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

[27] Harmolodics has always had multiple meanings for Coleman and his musical collaborators, making a concise definition of the term difficult to pin down. For the composer's own early interpretation, see Ornette Coleman, "Prime Time for Harmolodics," *DownBeat*, July 1983, 54–5. For a thorough scholarly analysis, see Stephen Rush, *Free Jazz, Harmolodics, and Ornette Coleman* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

[28] The village of Jajouka is alternatively spelled Joujouka or Zahjouka. For a biographical account of Coleman's travel to Morocco, see Maria Golia, *Ornette Coleman: The Territory and the Adventure* (London: Reaktion Books, 2020), 191–98. For a breakdown of each track on the album, see Stephans, *Experiencing Ornette Coleman*, 73–82.

like double-reed instruments), punctuated by staggered drum accents, before Coleman joins in with his own theme on the alto saxophone. These three elements deftly weave in and out of each other for the rest of the performance, spontaneously feeding off each other's energy.

At its conceptual core, the 1977 album hinges on this duality of sources. Its patchwork construction reflects a jarring array of locations and dates that can only be mentioned in passing for the purposes of this essay—"Midnight Sunrise" was recorded in 1973 in Joujouka, while both versions of "Theme from a Symphony" were recorded in Paris in 1975, with the titular theme being originally composed by Coleman for the London Symphony Orchestra in 1972.[29] When listening to the full album, the timbral juxtaposition of the Master Musicians' acoustic woodwinds and Prime Time's electric guitars could not seem more incongruous. What could *maqam*, or Arabic improvised music, possibly have to do with American jazz-funk? According to Coleman's liner notes, a universal impulse to improvise links both groups, "with the Western and Eastern musical forms resolving into each other's lead."[30]

The flexibility to operate within two different musical systems that Coleman exercises on the album demonstrates how harmolodics can extend beyond jazz to have an egalitarian social significance for the world. "Pop, classical, rock, folk, and jazz are names that are used to cover up a lot of human racialism," Coleman proclaims in an explanation of harmolodics that he wrote in 1983. By emphasizing equality among every musician who plays with him (regardless of their instrument, stylistic inclination, or even race), Coleman empowered his collaborators to "compose their own music and play other instruments" in real-time during their countless rehearsals, recording sessions, and live performances.[31] *Dancing In Your Head*'s tracks rely heavily on the repetition of rhythmic figures in order to establish a consistent groove that its musicians could freely riff on. Repetition, then, emerges as a helpful feature of improvisation. As the French Algerian-born philosopher Jacques Derrida would put it during a later interview with Coleman, "Repetition is already in improvisation: thus when people want to trap you between improvisation and the pre-written, they are wrong."[32]

The intriguing cover design by Dorothy Baer of Horizon Records embodies the idea of duality and represents a further application of jazz improvisation within the visual field (Fig. 8). A clown-like, smiling face reminiscent of an imaginary African mask stares straight ahead, while repeated mentions of the title and composer frame the outer edges of the blazing red background. Upon deeper inspection, one realizes that the face can be flipped upside down to reveal yet another face, this one more serious in expression. The second face sports a pitch-black beard and has misty, blue-gray eyes, and it is featured on the reverse side of the record, set against a deep blue background. The doubling of the image is of course thematized by the first two tracks, which start with the same phrase but then spin out in two complementary directions. The two faces are best experienced by physically flipping the cover upside down and over to its back, and one can easily imagine jazz aficionados doing so when first coming across *Dancing In Your Head* in a record store.

Baer's pictorial demonstration of multiple viewpoints of the same face even echoes the phenomenological experience of *Custom Road Slide*, in that Artpark visitors could witness the constantly changing work from various angles and positions on the top or bottom of the cliffside. They could even be inside the work, physically flipping over or otherwise manipulating its materials. *Dancing In Your Head*'s album art, like Gilliam's work, asserts that interpretive flexibility on the part of the listener-viewer is a crucial component of improvisational art, just as crucial as the cooperative spontaneity on the part of its

[29] Peter Niklas Wilson, *Ornette Coleman: His Life and Music*, trans. (Berkeley: Berkeley Hill Books, 1999), 194–96.
[30] Coleman, *Dancing In Your Head* liner notes, March 15, 1977.
[31] Coleman, "Prime Time for Harmolodics," 55.
[32] Jacques Derrida, "The Other's Language," interview by Derrida, June 23, 1997, *UbuWeb*, https://www.ubu.com/papers/Derrida-Interviews-Coleman_1997.pdf, 323.

authors. Coleman and Gilliam let their creative processes play out to their very ends, and our temporal experience of their works are meant to generate ever new meanings.

The discursive expansion of improvisation, from its initial in jazz studies to its wider relevance in any number of humanistic fields and social sciences today, has been the impetus behind the field of critical improvisation studies. In this way, musicology has led the interdisciplinary charge even if other fields such as dance, theater, anthropology, literature, and education have also made significant contributions.[33] The architecture critics Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver elaborated on their term "adhocism" in 1972 to describe how improvisation can work as "a method of creation relying particularly on resources which are already at hand," believing that engaged citizens and artists were adept at "dealing with an existing situation in a new way to solve a problem."[34] Their focus on what is already "at hand" led them to isolate an improvisational spirit in the assemblages and collages of (Neo-)Dada art rather than in abstract painting, a move that might surprise fine art traditionalists. Art history has usually focused on the typical association between jazz improvisation and Abstract Expressionism, a convention that has limited our understanding of Gilliam's multi-faceted art beyond his late modernist paintings.

In order to remedy this, his experimentation with mixed media public art has been highlighted in this essay, and this mode of working would continue to guide him through the rest of his career. Artpark's philosophy undoubtedly invigorated his practice, as it did for the over two hundred artists in total who would end up making the trek to Lewiston to participate in the Visual Arts Program. In the ensuing decades, Gilliam pursued even more public commissions in transportation, governmental, and educational settings across the country, continually learning lessons from each project to apply to the next one. The significance of Artpark for the trajectory of his oeuvre is suggested by the critic Lucy Lippard's review of the Visual Arts Program's inaugural season:

> If more artists had the opportunity to work in such close contact with their audience, this could be the birthplace of a genuinely public art—neither equestrian statues nor their abstract counterparts but an art that belongs where it is and to the people there, illuminating the history and development of the area and becoming a heightened part of the experience of the place.[35]

A "genuinely public art" is an ideal that, for instance, his important *Sculpture with a "D"* (1979–84) approached when it was designed for a Massachusetts subway station as a part of the progressive, community-powered Arts On the Line initiative. Although Lippard takes issue with the impersonal abstraction associated with "plop art," Gilliam's later public art program would effectively use abstraction to perceptually draw viewers into the work.

Custom Road Slide's sheer size far exceeded any other work in his oeuvre, making group collaboration absolutely essential for its execution. Instead of employing the cranes, bulldozers, and excavators characteristic of other famous artists who worked in the land, Gilliam relied on the humble hands of park workers and his own family for support. Group improvisation is often predicated on trust and sharing certain instincts, so it is not surprising that his daughter Melissa was involved in physically composing the work (Fig. 9). When considering improvisation as a life strategy, family bonds emerge as a strong foundation on which to improvise. Coleman evidently had the same idea. He frequently

[33] The field-defining publication is George Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, vol. 1 and 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[34] Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1972), 9.
[35] Lucy Lippard, "A Is for Artpark," *Art in America* 62, no. 6 (November–December 1974): 39.

performed with his son on the drums, even recording an entire album with Denardo when he was only ten years old. This goes to show that improvisation is accessible to people of all ages, and, hopefully, fun too.

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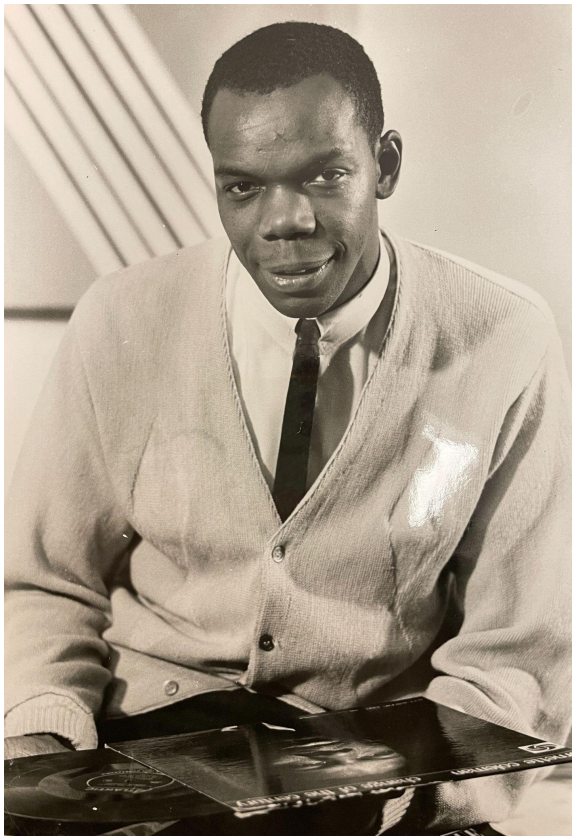

Figure 1. Portrait of Sam Gilliam in his Washington, D.C. home, 1966. Photo: Geoffrey Clements. Sam Gilliam Papers, Archives of American Art.

Figure 2. *Change of the Century* album cover, 1960. Lee Friedlander, photographer, Atlantic Records (SD-1327).

Figure 3. Partial view of Gilliam's *Custom Road Slide*, summer 1977. Commissioned by Artpark in Lewiston, NY. Temporary 30 x 1,200-ft assemblage along the Niagara River Gorge arranged by Gilliam, assistants, and the artist's daughters. Ten continually rearranged groupings composed of sawhorses, timbers, poles, wire cloth, rope, shale (rocks), polypropylene, polyester fabrics, paint, and food dye. Box 136, folder 4, page 15a. Artpark Archives, Burchfield Penney Art Center (BPAC), SUNY Buffalo.

Figure 4. Partial view of Gilliam's *Custom Road Slide*, likely August 1977. © 2024 Estate of Sam Gilliam / Artists Rights Society, New York.

Figure 5. Gilliam, holding a hammer, stands in front of a Draped painting in *Custom Road Slide* during the summer of 1977. Box 136, folder 4, page 14c. Artpark Archives, BPAC, SUNY Buffalo. ©2024 Estate of Sam Gilliam / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Figure 6. Initial appearance of *Custom Road Slide*, likely late July 1977. White polypropylene, scarlet polypropylene, white polyester, rope, and wood. Box 136, folder 4, page 13r. Artpark Archives, BPAC, SUNY Buffalo.

Figure 7. Brochure cover for the 1st Annual Artpark Jazz Festival (held September 7-11, 1977). Box 47, folder 14. Artpark Archives, BPAC, SUNY Buffalo. Courtesy of Artpark and Company. Photo by the author.

Figures 8a and 8b. *Dancing in Your Head* (front and back covers), 1977. Cover art by Dorothy Baer, Horizon/A&M (now Verve) Records (SP-722).

Figure 9. Melissa Gilliam (the artist's daughter, at bottom-right) and two assistants working on *Custom Road Slide*, 1977. Box 136, folder 4, page 16q. Artpark Archives, BPAC, SUNY Buffalo.