

# AFTER OPERA

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Opera is the perfect incomplete artwork. Its past characterization as the artform most suited for the synthesis of disparate disciplines is now abandoned. As definitions and borders between fields of art have frayed and worn away, opera is now revealed as the artform most able to work within the current situation of anti-synthesis. This situation is fundamentally productive not only from an aesthetic, but also from a social and political standpoint.

"Incomplete" in this context is not represented here as an absence or lack, but as a vanishing point, an acknowledgement of the permanently unfinished state of art and experience. These terms are re-defined in a paradoxical, but essentially constructive sense to describe the contemporary artistic condition where wholeness and unity of form and intention are impossible; to describe this condition, to work within it, to find it, too, beautiful and indispensable.

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An initial question could be asked whether opera is even identifiable as a subset of music. Precisely what characteristics identify something as opera and permit it to be walled off from other musical forms? The generally accepted definition of opera as "music with dramatic text" has, by now, long been rendered irrelevant a full century after Dada and over 50 years after Sun Ra (to name just a pair of examples). All elements of the "music-theater-text" equation have been independently and completely reframed, as well as the multiple possible ways they can relate to one another. Carl Hegemann's statement that "although in art one can do anything, not everything goes in art" misses the mark slightly. One certainly can do anything, however not everything goes into each piece. Multiplicity is treated instead as a parameter. In this sense, all music has the potential to be considered opera.

The alleged weight of the term opera itself is assumed and assigned by dubious authorities (program directors, critics, funders). From the standpoint of the composer the supposed significance of writing an opera as opposed to undertaking a string quartet or a solo piece is a mirage. ("Composer" here is intended to include all forms of music-making including improvisational, electronic/computer, etc.) The presumed cultural significance of the sort that is

associated with opera (or composition, or art for that matter) is an utterly bereft holdover, it is based in the concept of the individual genius and the attendant economies that come with it. The heroism of the composer is back in fashion and there is no greater regression in the field.

From a practical standpoint, the permanently incomplete condition of opera is central to the collaborative process needed to generate it. The absence in the middle, around which everyone is working, *is* the piece itself. Everything else is merely a component, an element: there is no whole. Perhaps this heightened sense of incompleteness could serve as a definition of opera.

The contradictions created by this way of working are essential to the artwork, much like Jean-Pierre Gorin and Jean-Luc Godard's slogan from the Dziga Vertov film group: "the problem is not to make political movies, the goal is to make movies politically." Incompleteness can be recognized at any level and applied to any element of the piece or process. "Well-made" is thus the greatest insult one can pay to an artwork. Fallibility and amateurism are profoundly useful, even still. Anything to combat the stagnation of professionalism.

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It is not a question now of mixing elements from one discipline and another, rather a question of the extent of engagement with this mixing. By now, musical strategies have been expanded to include text scores, improvisational elements, theatrical gestures, myriad types of silence, physical or visual components and, in essence, anything that can be conceived of (in addition to "traditional" instrumental performance). Similar expanded definitions have occurred in theater and text. This is with the understanding that the very nature of the words "music", "theater", and "text" have been called into question and could simply be discarded if desired. However, the terms are retained here in order to heighten their internal and external contradictions and to examine the problems thus created. All elements of the opera must be radical, none can be taken for granted. If new music is paired with regressive text, staging, or performance it reveals an essential conservatism, or worse, ignorance.

The obsession with classifying (or rather denying inclusion to) something as *opera or not, improvisation or not, punk rock or not, jazz or not, theater or not, singing or not* is a tired excuse and a tactic to avoid engaging with the work in question. Terms are attached as a substitute for actual listening or viewing and

are designed explicitly to shut down thought and to provide a false sense of consensus. It is far more useful to adopt whatever terminology suits the musician without care for the blanket assumptions that accompany any genre or formal naming. Robert Ashley sums this up well: "who's running this show anyway!" Problematizing terms rather than defining them is more useful. This presents inclusiveness as a radical stance.

The false scale of "more advanced" or "further out" is another dodge. It is ridiculous to posit a measurable range of discrete aesthetic advancement upon which any artist or artwork can be situated. This linear thinking and the narratives that it perpetuates was a sham from the start. There is no post-*anything* (-dramatic, -Fluxus, -modern), merely more work to be done in all directions. The forced construction of art-historical narratives is as trivial as the construction of dramatic narratives. The only relevant value judgment for art is whether it is productive or not.

After these forms of non-criticism are left behind, space opens up on all sides. Contradiction and disunity must be a matter-of-course now. This is not to say an image or discussion of such things, but the actual experience and production of these states, while generating the potential for their further spread. Only in these cracks and ruptures can the aesthetic space be carved out for possible areas of action. Ultimately, action is the goal: thought-action, political-action, aesthetic-action *et al.* There is no story to be told, no compositional form to be appreciated, no truth being sought, nothing to express, only action versus inaction.

Action here is initially meant in aesthetic terms, as a productive state. The artwork itself is being produced, but also is functioning as a generative agency for the listener/viewer. This productive action hovers between artist, artwork, and audience, privileging none of them.

Art must move towards a state of permanent immanence, generating possibility throughout all elements of the work. Carolee Schneeman writes, "I assume the senses crave sources of maximum information; that the eye benefits by exercise, stretch, and expansion towards materials of complexity and substance; that conditions which alert the total sensibility \_ cast it almost in stress \_ extend insight and response, the basic responsive range of empathetic-kinesthetic vitality."

This creation of possibility is perhaps the most explicitly political element of art and opera. New possibilities and room for action are by definition radical and revolutionary. Space created, whether aesthetic or political or discursive, has not yet been named and controlled. It is simply not supposed to exist within the existing system (political or aesthetic). In the political field the reaction of the dominant power is lamentably predictable whether locally here in New York (the NYPD during Occupy or during the 2004 GOP convention) or elsewhere (the current situation in Turkey, as of December 2013).

However it is difficult, if not impossible, to declare a new possibility as concretely having been created. This is not a cause for concern though, as the intention and attempt is what is necessary. The naming of something as definitively "new" is irrelevant, as is the novelty of form that is thus implied. This pursuit of novelty ("new sounds") is a distraction from the real task: not formal possibility (though that may occur as a byproduct), but aesthetic possibility. Aesthetic possibility derives its significance through the decentralization of its origination and impact. Both are located with the listener/viewer rather than the composer or the artwork, resulting in an uncontrolled and unpredictable situation. The corollary with political organization should be evident.

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The stock definition of opera is music combined with text in a theatrical setting. As discussed, the definitions, borders, and methods of operation of these three elements (music, text, theater) have been effaced and now spill into one another. This permeation remains anti-synthetic however, which is a paradox similar to that which Boris Groys describes in a political-revolutionary framework: "the totality of the political field is brought into view, and one is able to act not through exclusion but through inclusion." Here, it is a state of extreme affirmation that is most radical. The composer places contradictory approaches and vocabularies next to one another and permits them simply to exist. It is both a plurality and a unity (though both concepts operate under outmoded assumptions of function and discrete identity). A unit or individual element of notation or sound is as impossible to identify as a unit or individual moment of perception, or an individual cognitive idea. Taking this fundamental uncertainty and instability as a starting place is necessary for the aesthetic of new opera.

The means to describe this paradox in music is the same as its context and its content: language. While language is generally presented as anathema to music,

this is merely a relic of the conventional obsession with music as "pure" abstraction, non-rhetorical, sounded mathematics, scientific-perceptual research, etc. Language is not only meant here to describe a musical thing or to operate on a level outside of it, but to *be the thing itself* in its function, context, material, and perception. Language is meant both as the sound in question, and its perception, as well as its memory. This does not refer solely to words and sentences of course, but to every element functioning (or breaking down and failing to function) as a part of this mass of language. The definition of language itself is here expanded as well to include text, sound, theatrical and visual elements, and their perception. Once again, no unity is sought, no grand synthesis is imagined. Neither music nor word nor theatrical presence is being elevated, privileged, or lessened. But all these elements are to become utilitarian material and *put to use*. Everything gets dirty here, all waters are muddied.

The linguistification of sound does not necessitate a value judgment. Rather it opens into an environment that combines Ornette Coleman's music where "we're manufacturing our own words" and Smithson's idea that one can "look at any word long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void." Language can create possibility through its usage, its disruption, and its failure. Through the linguistification of music, everything is subject now.

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Notation, to look at just one sort of musical activity, is at its most effective when it fails. This failure extends to the instrumental or vocal performance of a given score. Failure does not occur as a result of the unattainability of an idealized, perfect object (i.e. complexity), but because of incompleteness. Engagement with this parameter of incompleteness is mobile and can shift rapidly in its application. Performance of this music straddles the line between execution and breakdown, often oscillating wildly between the two. Fortunately there are many musicians now who can perform this paradoxical music. They can treat an instrument or their voice as a thing to produce traditional musical content but also, and potentially simultaneously, as a physical object made of material (or software/electronics) to be manipulated. Great musicians now do not privilege a violin above a rock or a paintbrush or a wad of paper or a basic physical gesture. It is essential that performers are equally adept at the production of incomplete work.

Similarly, the inherent theatricality of musical presentation must be acknowledged and heightened as an essential component of the artwork. This, however, is in contradistinction to the recent fashion of museum/gallery/festival performance in its current, inherently regressive, form. There are many problems with these performances, including cult-of-personality/"star" presentation and simplistic metaphor (the overwhelming reliance upon one-dimensional metaphor itself is wildly reactionary). This situation stems from a culture dominated by what Diederich Diederichsen calls "discursive scarcity". Diederichsen suggests that this "withdrawal of material" serves primarily for "the construction of unambiguousness - a false unambiguousness". There is certainly a desire for ease of consumption that drives this scarcity, one with obvious parallels and motives in a social and political (and aesthetic) need for control and normative power.

"More" certainly is the better, more productive possibility here. The actual application of "more" can take the form of multiple levels of activity, superimposition, overload, volume, high density of materials, etc. But extreme reductionism (silent or static musics) can also exemplify "more" in this context of language and linguistification: more than just the sounds, more than duration, more than silence, more than the room, more than the listener, more than the performer's presence. Every element of performance is now a readymade. This is transgressively political as well, of course.

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The space created in the very concept of opera as an incomplete, anti-synthetic artwork complicates the identification of the border of the piece: what can be considered inside and what can be considered outside of the artwork. The complication stems from the linguistification of the form and material within the opera being mirrored in the language of the world outside of the work. It must be restated that language in this case refers to all text, sound, theatrical, and visual elements as well as the environment in which these elements are produced.

This complication, once again, is a productive paradox, and is an essentially dialectical state. Boris Groys writes, "the central law of dialectical materialism is that of the unity and the conflict of opposites. To follow this law means, de facto, to think in paradoxes, and thus to seek out the greatest possible and most radical

paradox as the goal of thought." The relevance of this idea to opera is a direct one, as the contradictions Groys describes are inherent to the form. What is useful here is the affirmation of this relevance and the heightening of its application.

Smithson argues that "language should find itself in the physical world, and not end up locked in an idea in somebody's head...Art's development should be dialectical and not metaphysical." Dialectical artwork does not need to seek out engagement with the outside world (though it certainly may). Because of the embrace of a paradoxical and dialectical environment, it implicitly and automatically does so. Art cannot be unembedded from the world in which it occurs. Or, as Lou Reed said on hearing the Ramones for the first time in 1975, "It's too perfect, they are their own dream!"

The metaphysical development that Smithson refers to here is often found in music. It is artwork that presents false unities and halts the dialectical, paradoxical situation at the core of creative art. This is an aural quality, particularly in light of perception (hearing, seeing) as a joint element in linguistified music. It must be noted that musics that are similar in form can be either metaphysical or dialectical. For example, some drones and silences are productive and some drones and silences are unproductive. What separates them is their linguistic/dialectical state. Or, as Richard Foreman said, "to me the issue in art these days finally becomes a moral issue...Courage and integrity are all that count." Morality here is untethered from religiosity and is transferred from belief to action.

It is not infrequent that an artwork will enact a double failure of cynically co-opting the vocabulary of productive art while clandestinely presenting tired reproductions of the old faux-monuments (sonic and intellectual) or simply just boring, insipid art that has no object beyond its own consumption and marketing. One need look no further than the press releases, festivals, and series that drip with terms like "experimental" or "radical" that belie the conservative reality of the art. The likeness of the thing is presented in lieu of the actuality. Fashion and pose (anti-production) take the place of creative production. The difference is obvious, you can smell it a mile away. Some things just mark time, others define it. Revolution and progressive art face the same fate as Christoph Schlingensiefel's victims in *The German Chainsaw Massacre*: "They came as friends and were turned into sausage."

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Another border that is called into question is the temporal boundary of the piece. In this environment, atrophy and decay are essential characteristics. They present here further possibility, as no point on the temporal line is considered more beautiful or more pure. Groys notes that, "contradictions cannot be localized solely in the past...they cannot be eliminated, but continue to remain active in reality.... Contradictions cannot be sublated or confined to the memory. They can only be administered." The event of the artwork remains active, calling into question where and when, even, one can locate and name the encounter with the artwork as an event.

No music is, in its actuality, solely a physical, sonic event. Sound waves, vibrations, psycho-acoustics, etc. are only one component of what could finally be called a musical event. A sound is produced (or a silence occurs, or a gesture happens), is perceived, and is embedded in memory. Via atrophy, decay, or faulty memory the event is recalled, combined with previously or presently occurring events, creates or confounds expectations, and so on. As the re-presentation of the event fails within the listener/viewer the event acquires greater complexity and multiplicity even as it recedes and decays (or reappears and intensifies). Failure and incompleteness, once again, is central to music. Language describes and inhabits this musical-temporal landscape.

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In this performative context of language, decay, and paradox, the artwork (and, more specifically, opera) demands a different way of listening, of looking. The glance is a particularly useful means for encountering this work. As a response to the density and wide variability of the work, the glance is by definition brief, discontinuous, and casual. As Edward Casey writes, "discontinuity in place is paired with discontinuity in time." Discontinuity is, as discussed, central to the material, production, and environment of opera. It is also central to the perception of this art.

The notion of total comprehension is no longer needed nor expected nor desired. This, too, illustrates the incomplete nature of current opera. As the total immanence of the artwork offers multiple and diverse perceptions, the

momentary glance carries as much weight as sustained meditation. This is relatable to James Tenney's concept of ergodic form, where any sliver of the piece gives an equal sense of the whole, or in this case an equal sense of the incomplete work. Smithson again: "a set of glances could be as solid as any thing or place." In place of unity of form, collections of related or unrelated fragments become foundational to the experience of the work.

The glance here is ideal for the full range of durations available to the contemporary musician: from absolute pointillism and extreme miniature to works of long duration and silent music, the glance puts us "into an intense momentary time and out of a continuous distended time." (Casey) It responds to duration equally and from the same productive place of discontinuity and paradox. From a political standpoint, this agility is particularly useful as it constantly shifts perception, counteracting "false unambiguousness."

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As with most progressive artistic developments, what is sought is not the abolishment of more traditional forms. Radical artists make work that "functions as the exclusion of exclusion. It accepts every opposition. But what it does not accept is the refusal by this opposition to accept the opposition contrary to it," (once again, Boris Groys). One of the most notoriously hostile examples of this is Branford Marsalis' strawman-dismissal of Cecil Taylor's work (also culpable here is the Ken Burns editing and narration that constructed the moment in his PBS documentary *Jazz*): "that's total self-indulgent bullshit as far as I'm concerned." Only one side of the conversation seeks to extinguish the other.

The musician/composer's main concerns are of productivity, of practicality, and of extreme openness. The artist "wishes to be absolutely open - and thus excludes everything that does not wish to be just as open as [she] is." (Groys) The day-to-day working artist simply cannot engage with the outright deligitimization of their artwork. There is no time for such trivialities. As John Coltrane wrote, "The 'jazz' musician (You can have this term along with several others that have been foisted upon us.) does not have this problem at all. We have absolutely no reason to worry about lack of positive and affirmative philosophy. It's built in us." Coltrane explicitly resists the term jazz here (prior, even, to his move outside of metric time - that supposed pillar of jazz-identity). Though of course he and other

black musicians were subject to race-based exclusion from a wider musical dialogue.<sup>1</sup>

Working in the ways outlined in this article by no means need preclude work in other methods. Art is not a zero-sum game. By all means, the classical voice and narrative can and should be an option in music and opera. But at this late date in the development of experimental music, the definitions of terms such as "music", "text", "theater", or "singing" have acquired a constellation of possibilities far exceeding the single characterization that is generally accepted. In the end, the composer/musician should keep George Lewis' words close at hand that "underlying it all is the conviction that if you get written out of a history in which you were very evidently present, you can just write yourself back in."

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In addition to the challenges of creating new works, progressive artists face the very real problem of de-radicalization over time, often after the artist's passing, though occasionally with their complicity. The smoothing of edges and rounding of sharp corners occurs via lazy curation or misinformed contextualization, sometimes with the alleged "best of intentions" of inclusion in the art-world mainstream. This violence was evident in many of the dull John Cage centennial concerts or the recent "re-performances" of decades-old performance artworks. It is worth remembering Lester Young here, "I try not to be a repeater pencil. I'm always loosening spaces, and laying out to somewhere." Of course remounting older works is possible and even productive; for example, Robert Ashley's 1968 piece "That Morning Thing" performed again in 2011, Christoph Schlingensiefel's pseudo-homage "Kaprow City" from 2006, or Carolee Schneeman's ongoing treatment of documentation from her 1960's performance pieces as raw material for new film works. What must be avoided is the reduction of artwork to commodity (economic or intellectual).

Similarly, what was once dynamic and radical does not necessarily remain so. Situations change and strategies must as well. This does not mean either discarding past advances nor slavishly repeating them, but reframing and recasting them. John Cage visited the famous Ryōan-ji stone garden in Kyoto in

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<sup>1</sup> George Lewis' book on the AACM is essential on this subject. In it, Wadada Leo Smith recalls the AACM artists in France: "people who were in the media system there, their questions were always limited to just the black issues... Even though we would go into these areas of exploration, other ideas, they would always try to refocus it. Their idea was designed to present not just an artist, but a black artist in their society"

1962 and had his productive experience of "tranquility and contemplation." When writer/director Kara Feely and I visited Ryōan-ji in 2008, it was a construction site but still open to the public. The shrine's walls surrounding the raked gravel were half-covered by blue tarps. Workmen in jumpsuits were walking around chatting casually, and loud, constant sawing, drilling, and hammering echoed around the 15 stones. It was fantastic. Times change.

With this in mind, it is important to recognize, and then immediately discard, the art-historical baggage that comes with the term "opera". The simple fact is that we are 50 years removed from the publishing of Yoko Ono's *Grapefruit*, 45 years from the Art Ensemble of Chicago's debut, 44 years from the composition of John Cage's *Song Books*, 37 years from Black Flag's first show, and 30 years from the premiere of Robert Ashley's *Perfect Lives*. These events cannot un-happen, their innovations cannot be erased. That so much opera is still mired in traditional definitions of singing, centuries-old orchestral instrumentation, and narrative theatrical construction is frankly absurd. The corollary in politics, for example, is unthinkable; why is such conservatism permitted in music?

Better is the expansion or abolition of these old terms and conditions. The actual artwork being made has ceased to concern itself with them anyway. The re-definition of opera is, in actuality, an illusory act. The shift has already occurred, like a population that has already been revolutionized while the government totters conservatively on. What is different? Everything is available to the artist now, as it has been for decades; "the center is everywhere and the limits are nowhere," (Robert Smithson via Pascal). To what end? The radicalization and continuing viability of the artform. Does there need to be another?

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