American Dramaturgies

For the 21st Century

Julie Vatain-Corfdir (ed.)

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If all the world is a stage (as the title of this series supposes), the stage of the 21st century must be a site of remarkable anxiety—at once global and splintered, intensely up-front and relentlessly mediatized, ever fragmenting the collective and seeking to build it anew. How can theater, an art of intimate presence, rethink its aesthetics and reassert its mission on such a stage? More specifically, how have American dramaturgies chosen to engage with our new millennium? Relying on a broad understanding of "dramaturgy" as a dynamic process, this book explores some of the inspiring trends and arresting innovations of contemporary theater in the US, investigating both playwriting and performance-making in order to delineate formal experiments, the imprint of socio-political themes, and new configurations in spectatorship.

The chapters of the present volume delve into various aspects of theater-making, from courses in playwriting to controversies in casting or discussions about the democratic function of theater. The wide range of examples studied include development practices at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center, the work of experimental companies (Ping Chong + Company, The Industry, New York City Players), and many plays by contemporary authors (Clare Barron, Jackie Sibblies Drury, David Levine, Charles Mee, Dominique Morisseau, Sarah Ruhl, Andrew Schneider, Paula Vogel, Mac Wellman). Conversations with Young Jean Lee and Richard Maxwell add the playwright's viewpoint to the prismatic perspective of the volume, which is dedicated to performances in the US but written from a decidedly international angle, thus implicitly querying what makes up the American identity of this rich body of work.

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PART II

Page, Stage and Gaze Reconfigured

THE INDUSTRY: OPERAS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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OPERA AS "AN IDEAL PLATFORM FOR 21ST-CENTURY EXPLORATION"?[1]

The Industry was created in Los Angeles in 2012, with the ambition to pioneer new forms for 21st-century opera according to its artistic director, Yuval Sharon:

> I view opera as an audacious and contemporary genre: as the first interdisciplinary art form, opera is an ideal platform for 21st-century exploration. My work is fueled by this belief and characterized by instability and the pleasure in complexity at the heart of opera.[2]

Taking this statement as a starting point for this paper, I would like to explore the ways in which this company redefines opera in direct opposition to the common perception of opera as an essentially static form, one whose heyday has passed. It is a provocation to define the genre as the most suitable art form of our times—Sharon is not only making a statement here: he is making a dare. To realize that dare, The Industry has not necessarily discounted the narrative and operatic features of traditional opera, but it has consistently sought to expand them beyond the limits of linearity in order to destabilize opera, in keeping with Sharon's definition of opera as "characterized instability". The Industry has defined itself by acting as a player in today's cultural landscape, rejecting the rigid forms into which opera has settled in order to transform the operatic experience into one that echoes with contemporary art practices. In its mission to make opera the platform for 21st-century aesthetic experiment, this young company has been especially keen to explore the possibilities of off-site opera. Its productions mark a shift from the stage to site-specific performances and the backdrop

1 Yuval Sharon, "Artist Statement", Foundation for Contemporary Arts' website, December 2016.

2 *Ibid.*

of this shift is the city of Los Angeles, which plays a role as an accomplice and an actor in The Industry's operatic productions.[3]

Since its creation in 2012, this young company has emerged to challenge conventions within the network of historical and traditional institutions, including the Bayreuth festival, perhaps opera's most watched and venerated venue, where The Industry's artistic director, Yuval Sharon, presented *Lohengrin* in 2018 and 2019; or the MacArthur Foundation, which presented Sharon with a Genius Grant in 2017. The Industry's repertoire belongs to the canon of the avant-garde with composers such as John Cage, Lou Harrison, Terry Riley, John Adams or Meredith Monk—names which have established it as a key institution in the promotion of American new music and avant-garde aesthetics. The company has also received praise from critics in the mainstream press, with glowing reviews in the *Los Angeles Times*,[4] but also, across the continent, in the *New York Times*[5] and *The New Yorker*.[6] The press has recognized the pioneering dimension of the company's work, turning it almost into a media phenomenon and certainly emphasizing a dimension of "cool" which the company seeks out and fosters. But beyond the self-created aura of hipness which is evident in its state-of-the-art website and extremely active social media presence,[7] I believe it offers a very interesting take on the state of opera in the United States today.[8]

3 The city of Los Angeles has been a literal accomplice of the company through its Department of Cultural Affairs. A quick glance at its website shows how the company exists out of a mixture of public agencies, private foundations and civil society. In an *LA Times* article entitled "The 2008 economic crash hit LA's cultural institutions hard. 10 years later many are bouncing back – and thriving" (Nov. 2, 2018), Scott Timberg gives an overview of Los Angeles County's specific openness to the arts which has helped make LA a thriving arts capital despite the 2008 recession.

4 Reed Johnson, "Yuval Sharon's the Industry Makes Own Track with 'Invisible Cities'", *LA Times*, October 12, 2013; Christopher Hawthorne, "Opera-on-wheels 'Hopscotch' drives home the complicated pull of downtown LA", *LA Times*, November 21, 2015; Mark Swed, "'War of the Worlds': Delirious opera rises from the death and destruction of LA", *LA Times*, November 13, 2017.

5 David Allen, "Opera's Disrupter in Residence, Heading to Bayreuth", *New York Times*, July 20, 2017; Seth Colter Walls, "Review: A 'Fake News' Opera on the Streets of Los Angeles", *The New York Times*, November 13, 2017; William Robin, "'Hopscotch' Takes Opera Into the Streets", *The New York Times*, October 30, 2015.

6 Alex Ross, "Opera on Location", *The New Yorker*, November 16, 2015.

7 See The Industry's pages on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube.

8 This article seeks to show the great creativity of the current American stage through the study of The Industry's productions. It should nonetheless be noted that this wave of creativity is mostly funded and promoted in Europe, as *LA Times* classical music critic Mark Swed suggests when he opposes the great creativity of American opera to

Opera, with its canonical excess and its roots in the nineteenth century, seems, under The Industry's impulse, to be renewing itself in American terms, crossing a West Coast sensibility with the operatic energy of European high culture[9]. In doing so, it pulls against the feeling of decline in high cultural music charted by Alex Ross in *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*:

> From a distance, it might appear that classical music itself is veering toward oblivion. The situation looks especially bleak in America, where scenes from prior decades—Strauss conducting for thousands in Wanamaker's department store, Toscanini playing to millions on NBC radio, the Kennedys hosting Stravinsky at the White House—seem mythically distant. To the cynical onlooker, orchestras and opera houses are stuck in a museum culture, playing to a dwindling cohort of aging subscribers and would-be elitists who take satisfaction from technically expert if soulless renditions of Hitler's favorite works. Magazines that once put Bernstein and Britten on their covers now have time only for Bono and Beyoncé. Classical music is widely mocked as a stuck-up, sissified, intrinsically un-American pursuit.[10]

Ross, who is an enthusiast for high cultural music, is describing an unlikely scene for any revolution in our aesthetic sensibility. His indictment of a "museum culture" and the idea that opera today could be viewed as an "intrinsically un-American pursuit" is particularly relevant when trying to situate The Industry's take on opera. Indeed, Yuval Sharon puts forward a deep spirit of innovation into a genre that is too often considered ossified and European, by insisting on the company's West Coast and American identity.[11] The Industry's dare is compounded by the way it articulates "an American and West Coast aesthetic built off the innovations of great countercultural composers

what he considers an American disinterest for new forms ("Want the West Coast's best in opera? You have to go to Europe", *LA Times*, April 19, 2019).

9 In April, 2018, the Society of Fellows in the Humanities at Columbia University organized a conference and symposium on the topic of "Experiments in Opera Today" which engaged with this question. Among the topics mentioned in its online presentation statement, one finds a questioning of the validity of experimentation for such a codified form as opera: "is the emphasis on novelty particularly ill-suited to a form that, even in its most radical guise, continues to connote a host of conventions and traditions (ways of singing, a simultaneously extravagant and rarefied aesthetic, a canonical repertory, a bourgeois base, and so on)?"

10 Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*, New York, Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2007, p. 560.

11 It is important to remember that the history of American opera has been marked by the spirit of innovation—one central example is Virgil Thomson's and Gertrude Stein's *Four Saints: Opera in 3 Acts* which defied the codes of traditional opera as early as 1928.

who thrived in California"[12] and its choice of Los Angeles as a home city—a city that has long established itself as a frontrunner in scientific and cultural innovations. Also, the company's name pays perhaps ironic heed to the context of Los Angeles, where "industry" is used as a shorthand for the entertainment industry. One could argue that Los Angeles is a city where opera, unlike in other world metropolises, lagged far behind movies as a venue for the mix of high and popular culture. LA's growth and position among the world cities came too late for it to be affected by the craze for opera that swept across Europe and the world in the 19th century. As Jurgen Osterhammel has shown in *The Transformation of the World: the Global History of the 19th Century*, opera houses were built as an inextricable part of the economic and global expansion of the 19th century, first in Europe, then in North America, and then in the Middle East, with Istanbul in the 1860s and Asia with Tokyo in the early 20th century—thus, to claim that opera is being reinvented in LA is a bold assertion from the point of view of any lover of traditional opera. Video games and 3-D films might come through LA—but opera?

The first resident opera company in Los Angeles was established in the 1980s in the wake of the 1984 Olympics, which many in LA saw as a recognition of its status as world city. Its actual opera house, the iconic Walt Disney Concert Hall, designed by the city's star architect Frank Gehry, was completed in 2003. The history of Los Angeles opera is mostly a history of touring companies hosted in theatres, the very places which gave its prominence to film. This attention to opera houses is rooted in the historic fact that opera as an aesthetic form has always relied on the double experience of its site (the opera house) and its content (the various operas staged inside)—the Wagnerian dream of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* which rose in the late 19th century is the supreme example of this double experience: a whole place devoted to opera. Opera and the opera house were a unity, but as the 19th century ended and film technology advanced, opera lost its dominating position as the ultimate aesthetic expression of its time. Opera houses retained their popularity as destinations for cultured individuals, but it was movie houses that started to set the tone for cultural discourse, fashion and celebrity. In the 1930s, after talkies had grounded film as the 20th century's art form, premiere movie theatres even took on the architectural look of the opera house. This gives a sense of the semantic overdetermination of a name like "The Industry" for an opera company in Los Angeles.

Thus, if The Industry was to remake opera in a non-operatic city like Los Angeles, it first had to deal with that history. It would have to decide on how, exactly, it was

12 The Industry, "The Industry's 2018 Year in Review", p. 4.

going to represent opera. It did so by liberating opera from the opera house, following a principle articulated by Pierre Boulez, who called in 1967 to "blow the opera houses up".[13] Boulez's statement is particularly relevant in the context of this experimental Southern Californian opera institution, since he came to be a very important figure on the avant-garde scene of the area through his involvement with the Ojai Music Festival, for which he was music director seven times, from 1967 to 2003. The Ojai Music Festival's commitment to experimentation and to contemporary creation has transformed this small-town retreat—almost an LA suburb—into a breeding ground for experimentation, exemplifying Southern California's tradition of artistic innovation. In his 2015 review of that year's Ojai festival, Alex Ross aptly summarized Southern California's specific blend of American and European modernism for the *New Yorker*:

> ... no one should be surprised that such an institution took root in Southern California. The esoteric sects that proliferated in the state at the turn of the last century had myriad connections to modernism in the arts. The lineage of experimental composers who grew up on the West Coast or were based there for part of their careers—Henry Cowell, Harry Partch, John Cage, Lou Harrison, La Monte Young, James Tenney, and Pauline Oliveros, among others—is central to contemporary music history. And the mighty exodus of composers from Nazi-occupied Europe to Los Angeles, led by Schoenberg and Stravinsky, prepared the conditions in which the festival flowered.[14]

The Industry positions itself very clearly within a scene that has long blended together native creation and European modernism. It is therefore no surprise that it would claim John Cage as its most important influence, since the Los Angeles-born composer has not only redefined our conception of music, silence, spectatorship and community, but also commented on opera as a genre in desperate need of renewal. As a celebration of Cage's essential influence on its work, The Industry staged Cage's *Europeras 1 & 2* in the fall of 2018. Sharon explains: "I believe that no influence has been more strongly felt on this company than Cage".[15] It is indeed striking that Cage turned opera, at the end of his career, into an American proposition flung against Europe, making it a chance collage and kaleidoscope of extracts from previous canonical operas. Cage, in a characteristically *koan*-like comment, explained: "For 200 years the

13 Boulez, quoted in David J. Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky*, Chicago and London, Chicago UP, 2007, p. 18.

14 Alex Ross, "Outsiders: the Ojai Music Festival", *The New Yorker*, July 6 & 13, 2015.

15 The Industry, "Yuval Sharon Reflects on The Industry's Production of John Cage's Europeras 1 & 2", December 19, 2018.

Europeans have sent us their operas. Now I am returning them all to them".[16] The kinship with John Cage is obvious, but it is also intriguing that the company would mention the role played by a larger array of influences presented thus: "Wagner's idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Jacques Rancière and Guy Debord's philosophy of spectatorship, and Los Angeles itself".[17] One might wonder at such a diverse list of interests, yet this list of influences illustrates the central tension at the heart of The Industry's project. Indeed, the company seeks to create operas following the grand Wagnerian tradition of the total work of art, yet comes to this tradition from a 21st-century perspective and reads opera through the lens of thinkers who all seek to decenter the work of art. One could argue that The Industry opposes two visions of opera: that of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* and that of Cage's ironic responses to the total work of art, in the shape of happenings and the advent of performance.

I will first look at the way the company explores what its director calls "the possibilities of the streets" which is exemplified in the 2015-piece *Hopscotch*, a piece which introduces Guy Debord's notion of psychogeography to opera. This leads to unexpected encounters and an aesthetics of fragmentation which I will explore by focusing on the 2014 production *Invisible Cities*. And I will conclude by looking at how opera, when separated from its signifier, the opera house, becomes something different and out of place, generating a reflection linking urban, social and aesthetic discourses, making opera a vehicle in which a consciousness of our contemporary condition might be forged, echoing Jacques Rancière's reflections on art and the "distribution of the sensible".

HOPSCOTCH: OPERA AS PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY

Since its creation, The Industry has emphasized its desire to free opera from traditional staging modes, as with its first piece in 2012, *Crescent City*, which was staged in a warehouse where the audience was encouraged to walk around the performers. More recently, in November 2017, it has staged an adaptation of *War of the Worlds* taking place both within the LA Phil, a traditional opera house, and on the streets of Downtown Los Angeles, where the city's decommissioned World War II sirens broadcast the performance occurring inside the theater onto the streets. The Industry's adaptation of Brecht's Galileo was created to be performed on Cabrillo Beach in

16 *Ibid.*
17 *Ibid.*

San Pedro, right next to the place where Brecht landed in his exile to California [18]. Los Angeles and its history thus play a major role in the very definition of these pieces which, because they spread out onto the city's contours, operate at a crossroads between the intentionality of urban planning and the unexpected possibilities of live performance.

By the simple but decisive gesture of taking opera out of the opera house, The Industry turns it into a sort of ghost of opera, a dreamlike route through the landscape of the city. The Industry's most emblematic piece is *Hopscotch, a Mobile Opera in 24 Cars*, which took the "audience" through downtown Los Angeles, essentially making its freeways, buildings, parking lots, parks and urban wastelands the opera's set—though we could argue the piece displaces the very notion of a set, or set-up, inverting the relationship between reality and the stage. Thus, the very scenography created a spectacle that dispensed utterly with the opera house, or any conventional stage. Instead of being performed in an urban monument, in conformity with traditional opera, it made the entire city streetscape—that which opera traditionally and ritually kept outside—into a space to be enacted *by* the performance.

This is of course not a new gesture, and situates the opera company within the context of *in-situ* art which grew out of the artistic explorations of the 1950s and 60s in the United States. It evokes for example Trisha Brown's 1971 *Roof Piece*, where the performance is defined by the relationship it institutes with its environment, while also challenging the notion of a choreography as a unified work seen in the same way by all audience members. Merce Cunningham's 1994 production of *Ocean* performed in a quarry near Minneapolis [19] also comes to mind as a forerunner of the way The Industry challenges traditional performance spaces—especially the way *Ocean* sought to fully immerse the audience, which surrounded the dancers while being itself surrounded by the musicians. In other words, The Industry follows up on a tradition which integrates within the artwork a reflection on its relationship with its environment and suggests that any chosen site will bear meaning important to the reception of the work.

These site-specific performances are usually associated with the New-York avant-garde scene rather than Los Angeles, but The Industry choosing to take its

18 At the time of this article's publication, the full production has not yet taken place, but the company's website states: "The Industry presented two concert workshop performances of GALILEO at Angels Gate Cultural Center in San Pedro. This live concert version brought together the orchestra, cast, and set elements to give a preview of the full production."

19 The piece was first performed at the Cirque Royal Brussels before being performed at the Lincoln Center in New York and finally, at the invitation of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, in a quarry outside the city.

performances outside of the opera house can also be considered as a nod to Hollywood films, which chose to go outside the studio to create films in real locations, leading to the "locative" realism that R. Barton Palmer explores in *Shot on Location: Postwar American Cinema and the Exploration of Real Place*. The Industry thus brings together two very different traditions: the high modernist avant-garde explorations of *in-situ* aesthetics, and Hollywood's take on the "real". The site-specificity juxtaposed against the highly ritualistic performance of song within a narrative evokes the Situationists' psychogeographic explorations of the city, and it is probably the notion of movement within the cityscape that marks out The Industry as an opera company. It this respect, one must note *Hopscotch's* close kinship to works such as Robert Wilson's 2012 *Walking* in Norfolk, in which audiences were asked to undertake a three-and-a-half-hour aestheticized walk across a nature reserve—though the difference lies in the opposition between urban and natural contexts, as well as between driving and walking.

The *LA Times* critic Mark Swed has also explained that a mobile piece is not new since, as early as 1969, Robert Moran transformed the city of San Francisco into a performance site with 100,000 performers in a piece called *39 Minutes for 39 Autos*, but the difference with The Industry is that the latter creates closeness between the audience and the work, shaking the foundations of the fourth wall. The audience is indeed taken from place to place as the piece progresses, in a context which comments on the notion of urban mobility, thus making the aesthetic experience of attending a performance very close to the daily experience of the city. The binary between the opera as place and the opera as performance is displaced, uncovering the opposition between the spaces that are subconsciously "skipped" by the drivers or commuters and those that attract their attention. In that displacement, the opera takes on the form of a Situationist *dérive*, a drift—an adventure with the possibilities of the city—and this formal transformation creates an operatic psychogeography. That this program is initiated in cars in Los Angeles brings together the city's by now obsolete image as a utopian synergy of urban life and the automobile—as it was celebrated for instance by Joan Didion: "The freeways become a special way of being alive [...] the extreme concentration required in Los Angeles seems to bring on a state of heightened awareness that some locals find mystical"[20]—and a more ambivalent but realistic account of the city's car culture today as it is ironically presented by Chris Burden's kinetic sculpture *Metropolis II*.[21]

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20 Joan Didion, "Bureaucrats", *The White Album Essays*, New York, Open Road Media, 2017.

21 The Industry's take on place seen from the perspective of mobility takes Doreen Massey's definition of place as "an ever-shifting constellation of trajectories" (Doreen Massey, *For Space*, LA and London, Sage, 2005, p. 151). It also constitutes a relevant

The Industry calls its audience to participate in a psychogeography of both aesthetic and economic activity, an exploration of relics, leading its audience to a *dérive* as it was defined by Guy Debord:

> In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.[22]

The "psychogeographical relics" Debord mentions further in the same text constitute the unifying thread of the work and define its form and narrative.

Hopscotch is a nod to Cortazar's 1963 novel of the same name, a novel that is organized like a children's book game, in which various adventures can be realized by moving from one page to the next or to various other possibilities, each one leading to different adventures. The opera enacts this hypertextual dimension of the novel by performing it on the freeways and surface roads of the city, using the roads as a connecting thread between the different parts of the opera while also, probably, pointing to the way freeways have operated economic and racial segregation in the city, suggesting fragmentation. The piece pays homage to the novel's mutability but, because the company could not secure the rights to an adaptation, the work is an original creation by a team of 12 LA-based composers and writers,[23] who outlined an overall structure before working individually on specific scenes. The plot, though, is probably the least important element of the opera, which seeks to present itself as a series of micro-narratives. The central character—the heart of the narrative, in other words—Lucha, is performed by 18 different actors, musicians and dancers, performing different stages of her life, enhancing the sense of a work with no center. This centerless form evokes the way the Situationists sought to create new connections between separated parts of the city, as Henri Lefebvre recounted:

example of what Fiona Wilkie calls "the mobility turn" of performance as it would fit particularly well in the "set of conversations about transport and mobility" that she defines as currently "happening in and around performance" (Fiona Wilkie, *Performance, Transport and Mobility*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p.7).

22 Guy Debord, "Definitions", *Situationist International Anthology*, trans. Ken Knabb, Berkeley, Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006, p. 52.

23 Six LA-based composers—Andrew McIntosh, Veronika Krausas, Andrew Norman, David Rosenboom, Ellen Reid, and Marc Lowenstein—and six LA-based writers—Tom Jacobson, Mandy Kahn, Sarah LaBrie, Jane Stephens Rosenthal, Janine Salinas Schoenberg, and Erin Young.

> Their idea [...] was that in the city one could create new situations by, for example, linking up parts of the city, neighborhoods that were separated spatially. And that was the first meaning of the *dérive.* It was done first in Amsterdam, using walkie-talkies. There was one group that went to one part of the city and could communicate with people in another area.[24]

This description also brings to the fore the technological and logistical feat of *Hopscotch*, following a tradition of opera as technological prowess. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* is here perhaps pushed to its ultimate logistical limits, each route carrying four audience members around eight of the chapters. The cars also transported actors or musicians and the simultaneous actions were broadcast live at a hub in the arts district where people could watch the show for free and where all routes converged for the final chapter.

The use of the city's landscapes adds layers of external meaning to the work which rests thus between its determined score and performance, and its changing urban backdrop as well as, perhaps most importantly, the individual audience members' subjective perceptions of these places. The cityscape of Los Angeles is indeed to be considered not only as the backdrop of the audience's everyday life but also, following Baudrillard, as a "screenscape"[25] of shared cinematographic memory. Los Angeles, its streets, iconic freeway landscapes, historic buildings such as the Bradbury Building where scenes from *Hopscotch* are performed, imprint infinite layers of meaning on the work, evoking the many films shot there, most famously perhaps *Blade Runner*. The landscapes on which the operas unfold bring an added, personal and subjective layer of meaning marked by memory, as it would in any city, but this is particularly significant in the city of Los Angeles which exists predominantly as the shared memory of Hollywood films. Yet the simple opposition between the subjective and the objective can be misleading inasmuch as this work, in line with modernist texts such as *Ulysses*, *Mrs. Dalloway* or *Paterson*, endows the city with a collective subjectivity: the audience members are presented with a city as a network of *dejà vus*, a fictionalized reality and the real context of their everyday lives. It therefore follows the definition of the *dérive* as "a mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society:

24 Kristin Ross and Henri Lefebvre, "Lefebvre on the Situationists: An Interview", *October*, vol. 79, 1997, pp. 69-83. Lefebvre continues: "The experiment consisted of rendering different aspects or fragments of the city simultaneous, fragments that can only be seen successively, in the same way that there exist people who have never seen certain parts of the city" (p. 80).

25 Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner, London, Verso, 1988.

a technique of transient passage through varied ambiences"[26] and, as such, it questions the very possibility of a definite meaning.

All accounts of the opera insist on the sense of loss and the dizzying effects of a piece that takes its audience through different locations and experiences: cars, buildings, parks. It is made of a series of vignettes that take place along three distinct routes, all simultaneous, creating an operatic mode based on fragmentation. Fragmentation is essential to the Industry's redefinition of opera and disruption of the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, particularly in its 2014 production *Invisible Cities*.

INVISIBLE CITIES: FRAGMENTING THE *GESAMTKUNSTWERK*

One could argue that The Industry takes Boulez's call to blow up the opera house almost literally by creating an opera experience that exists as an infinite number of fragments, turning our experience of opera into an ever-changing, mutable one, working very much like a hypertext, where any experience branches out into different paths for each audience-member. The total work of art is blown up and pulverized into a number of fragments so that the idea of a master narrative no longer holds. The works presented by The Industry seem to all have in common a similar break from the notion of a master-narrative, or a masterwork, that would be a unique object of perception for audiences. *Invisible Cities*, "a headphone opera",[27] was made to be experienced by wandering through Los Angeles' historic Union Station, the performance taking place in the middle of the train station's habitual activities, people leaving and arriving, homeless people finding shelter—the station is therefore part of the work, bringing forward the socio-economic conditions of everyday life in Los Angeles. Through their headphones, audience members heard the same thing at the same time but did not see the same scene at all.[28] Based on Italo

26 Guy Debord, "Definitions", in *Situationist International Anthology. op. cit.*

27 Christopher Cerrone, the opera's composer, explains on his personal website: "I imagined the sound of an unearthly resonant and gong-like prepared piano, the ringing of bells, and wind players gently blowing air through their instruments. All of this would support a lyrical and deep-voiced Kublai Khan who is slow-moving and sings with gravitas. I imagined there would be two women, two high sopranos, singing together in harmony: they would be the musical personification of the cities in the novel. And of course, our Italian explorer would be a tenor, light and quick-moving, melismatic, and deft."

28 Yuval Sharon explains: "Beyond the ways headphones have changed our everyday engagement with music, I've had some unforgettable experiences with headphones as an artistic tool—Janet Cardiff's haunting walk around Central Park, where pre-recorded memories co-existed with the present-day life of the park; Merce Cunningham's

Calvino's imaginary dialogue between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, it draws a map of imaginary cities which are made real by the teller's words here enhanced by the singers and Christopher Cerrone's music.

The opera is made to be experienced as a myriad of broken moments: it follows Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, narrated in several chapters where Marco Polo describes to Kublai Kahn all the imaginary cities of his kingdom. The viewers get partial visions of the whole, thus underlining non-linearity and instability as a defining aesthetic model. This aesthetic model comes directly from Calvino's words: "Memory's images, once they are fixed in words, are erased," Polo said. "Perhaps I am afraid of losing Venice all at once, if I speak of it. Or perhaps, speaking of other cities, I have already lost it, little by little".[29] The narrator expresses his fear of fixity: Venice might lose its identity and be absorbed into its legend. The viewers navigate the station, headphones on, in a way that is very similar to the way most people go through a train station. They become aware of the station while at the same time losing the sense of reality behind their thoughts, here a dreamlike atmosphere set by the music—by interrupting the station as a utilitarian place, a place of departure and arrival, the piece creates a puzzle. It becomes, literally, an invisible city. The tension between visibility and invisibility, or between the materiality and disappearance of the city illustrates the tension at the heart of all of The Industry's productions, which is the tension between a total work of art and its destruction into fragments, or between the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and its modern fragmented form.

This open work of art unfolds as a palimpsest, adding visual, aural and symbolic layers one over the other. Christopher Cerrone explains:

> To borrow a term from one of Calvino's favorite writers, Jorge Luis Borges, *Invisible Cities* is a garden of forking paths. As the work progresses, you might find yourself wandering back to the same place in Union Station again and again, to find new things happening there each time. In the same way, the same few musical ideas of Invisible Cities are revisited again and again, but from vastly different perspectives.[30]

EyeSpace, where each audience member was given an iPod shuffle to hear a random selection of Mikel Rouse pieces while watching the same choreography; and Back to Back Theatre's play "Small Metal Objects," where a drug deal takes place among unwitting commuters. When you factor in the "silent disco" phenomenon, headphones have been disrupting trends in a wide spectrum of artistic genres for some time" (Yuval Sharon, "The Dematerialization of the Opera", KCET website, October 10, 2013.)

29 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, San Diego, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1974, p. 87

30 Christopher Cerrone's website, *op. cit.*

Linearity of plot is here replaced by a vortex of possibilities, in a fragmented form enhanced by the disjointed aspect of a piece that takes place in different places at the same time, and that must be pieced together by the audience. The *in-situ* presentation of fragmentation gives a plastic reality to Calvino's poetry of fragments:

> At times all I need is a brief glimpse, an opening in the midst of an incongruous landscape, a glint of lights in the fog, the dialogue of two passersby meeting in the crowd, and I think that, setting out from there, I will put together, piece by piece, the perfect city, made of fragments mixed with the rest, of instants separated by intervals, of signals one sends out, not knowing who receives them. If I tell you that the city toward which my journey tends is discontinuous in space and time, now scattered, now more condensed, you must not believe the search for it can stop. Perhaps while we speak, it is rising, scattered, within the confines of your empire.[31]

The Isidora chapter opens with the voice of the train station's operator calling the names of the cities the next train will serve. Upon these names the chapter begins, with a dance solo that accompanies the music's metronomic urgency, opposed by the intrusion of a dream-like atmosphere with the slow tempo of the woman—whom Cerrone explained is a musical personification of the cities—chanting a wordless aria. The opening thus rests on two tempos, the tension between which structures the Isidora sequence. As we learn from Marco Polo's description of the most invisible of cities, the ideal city, this is a sequence about the ideal city brought back to reality by the contrast between youth and age, and, visually, between the business of Union Station, Marco Polo's casual clothing, and the dreamlike detachment of the dancers and muse-like singers. The performer's voice gives existence to the city, bringing to mind a city that is very much like Los Angeles in many ways: its buildings, its prominent science industries, and more generally a city that is fascinated with its own image.

The epilogue continues to mirror the very situation of the viewers: the reference to our reception ("I feel your voice is reaching me from far away") enhances the way the work calls on the audience's self-awareness in a piece that both immerses its audience in its dreamlike sequences and at the same times leads them to look at themselves as viewers in a highly unusual reception situation. The epilogue also evokes the role of the audience in completing the piece: "it is not the voice but the ear that commands the story"[32]. We see here the fate of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* after modernism and, for instance, Duchamp's reflection on audience participation. In its awareness, the

31 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

audience is not a passive component, nor should it be lulled into thinking it is, and the viewers complete, not the painting as Duchamp said[33], but the opera.

The Industry insists on the audience's freedom to attend to some things and to connect them to other things, without the sense that we will ever solve the puzzle or find a master-narrative, since the piece can only be completed by being read and listened to over and over again. In this sense, it opposes the traditional notion of opera masterpieces which it replaces with a work that suggests possibilities—opera existing here only as a score presenting possible narrative threads, rather than a unified whole. In opposition to traditional opera houses where the audience's gaze is directed and defined according to a unique and controlled perspective on the world, here the fragmentation of the piece is also to be understood as a way of giving agency to audiences. This fragmented aesthetics runs against the fetishizing dimension of opera and participates to making it an open and ever-changing experience.[34]

The Industry's creations question the validity of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* for the 21st century. The notion is at the heart of the company's references and yet all its creations seem to push the total work of art on the side of fragmentation. The reference to Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, associated with that of John Cage, shows how much The Industry is indeed a proposition force for 21st-century opera, as it continues a tradition that it both acknowledges and opens for future experimentations. Fragmentation is indeed inherited via John Cage and his notion that "anything that engages the eye and the ear [is theatrical]",[35] or that "theatre takes place all the time wherever one is and art simply facilitates persuading one this is the case".[36] Cage's experiments with performance at Black Mountain College and his 1952 "event", which has come to be considered as the first happening, paved the way for a movement away from the stage, while at the same time convoking the necessity for all the arts involved in performance to co-exist as a total, anarchic work of art. Cage's re-writing of the Wagnerian concept

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33 Marcel Duchamp: "Ce sont les REGARDEURS qui font les tableaux", *Duchamp Du Signe*, p. 247. "It is the viewers who make the painting", *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp,* vol. 1, p. 258.

34 In this respect, The Industry's de-centered and fragmented aesthetics evokes the figure of Adorno whose presence in Los Angeles has marked the city's intellectual heritage. Adorno defined opera as "a bourgeois vacation spot", a commodified and socially predetermined artform, something which The Industry is actively trying to erase and replace by a socially diverse open artform (Theodor Adorno, "Bourgeois Opera", in David Levin (ed.), *Opera Through Other Eyes*, Stanford, Stanford UP, 1994, p. 25).

35 John Cage in Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner, *« An Interview with John Cage »*, *The Tulane Drama Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 50-72, p. 50.

36 John Cage, *Silence*, Wesleyan, Wesleyan UP, 1961, p. 174.

of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* led to his circus-like, anarchic *Europeras 1 & 2*. They pay heed to the scale of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and deconstruct traditional operas while retaining the notion of its great scale—as the website of The Industry lists for its production of Cage's opera:

> SINGERS: 19
> DANCERS: 6
> LA PHIL INSTRUMENTALISTS: 27
> ARIAS: 95
> MUSIC: 6 Hours (49 minutes of arias, performed in 115 minutes)
> OPERAS: 52
> COMPOSERS REPRESENTED: 33
> COSTUMES: 95
> PROPS: 254
> DROPS: 64 (including an Austrian curtain!)[37]

The Industry staged Cage's operas in the fall of 2018, at the very heart of the film industry: Sony Studios. Cage's original 1987 opera is a collage of canonical European arias which the American composer mixed in order to re-discover a genre that had been historicized and had lost its disruptive potentialities as Cage's aforementioned formula for American operas suggests. Setting this 21st-century version of these operas in one of Hollywood's most prominent studios, Sharon collages the notion of avant-garde experimentation and classical Hollywood film. As is explained on the company's website: "This new production was anchored in our local environs and LA history with hand-painted backdrops, props, and costumes from the classic Hollywood era."[38] This in turn makes the opera a tongue-in-cheek reference to another Los Angeles thinker, namely Adorno whose exile on the shores of the Pacific led him to reflect and lament on the effects of the "culture industry". The Industry indeed takes Cage's humorous play with high and low culture to the very heart of the culture industry. In doing so, it questions our relationship to culture and entertainment, making opera no longer the codified genre of the cultural elite but rather the very place where to explore our cultural expectations. In doing this, it opens the way for a 21st-century reassessment of culture and entertainment.

37 "The Industry's 2018 Year in Review", *op. cit.*, p. 7.
38 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

"AN UNPREDICTABLE DIALOGUE OF MANY VOICES":[39] OPERAS AS PROMISE

It is striking that this company, which is so concerned with innovation, insists a lot on the genre of *opera* as a central aspect of its creations. Yuval Sharon explains: "Opera has historically been accused of cultivating a 'passive' audience. I see this as a critical fault of operatic productions but not the genre itself."[40] Naming *Crescent City* a "hyperopera", *Invisible Cities* a "headphone opera", *Hopscotch* a "mobile opera", the company redefines and confronts the genre by modulating its scale from the intimacy of headphones to the panoramas of a "hyper" or "mobile" opera. This is perhaps due to the revitalized culture of opera, as discussed by opera critic David Levin, but it is probably above all part of The Industry's commitment to situate opera at the very heart of a discussion on the possibilities offered by performance today. One might think that a phrase like "music theatre" or the term "performance"[41] would perhaps better fit an aesthetic endeavor that is so clearly derived from the changes in performance art that have marked the second half of the 20th century, and that continue to happen today. I believe that the company's uncompromising use of the term "opera" serves to show its commitment to turn the very heart of high culture into the locus of a reflection on the potentialities of an experimental yet democratic and inclusive artform. The operas are committed to the vocal style of opera, its arias and recitatives are not replaced by more modern cadences as one could have expected given the company's freedom in playing with codes. The company blends together the high art of operatic music and the quotidian or non-operatic contexts of its performances, blending high and low in order to give new life to the genre. By disseminating opera on multiple platforms and by opening it to larger audiences—especially as it tries to capture unwitting audiences, immersed in their everyday life, as in *Invisible Cities*—the company calls for this genre to become the place for an aesthetic and socio-political discussion questioning our relationship to our urban and lived environment. It raises the question of how experimentation can accommodate itself in the context of the entertainment industry while also commenting on, and counteracting, the entertainment industry's tendency to transform audiences into passive receivers.

39 Yuval Sharon, "I Pledge Allegiance to Art", KCET website, January 24, 2017.

40 Yuval Sharon, "Artist Statement", *op. cit.*

41 Or what RoseLee Goldberg calls "the development of live visual art" in *Now: Live Art for the 21st Century* (London, Thames & Hudson, 2018, p. 7.).

The "cities" that are at the heart of The Industry's productions: *Crescent City*, *Invisible Cities*, Los Angeles in *Hopscotch*, are deeply grounded in the specific reality of Los Angeles, which is to be understood as a socio-political space. This is where one understands the company's website mention of Jacques Rancière as a key reference—the notion of the "distribution of the sensible" calls on us to reflect on the space of a community, our shared space as opposed to individual spaces. The Industry's explorations of urban space and communities, as well as its reappraisals of our ways of being in the city, which we could also call our ways of sharing communal space, pay heed to Rancière's philosophy of aesthetics as politics. *Hopscotch* is an interesting case in point as the piece enacts on the one hand an extreme version of the opera box prestige, with 4 people only being able to be in the cars and with tickets starting at $125, but it is also the very opposite of an elite closed-circle form of entertainment as its central hub allowed anyone to see for free the entirety of the opera on videos, as well as the piece's finale. The piece thus questions our experience of the city as shared communal space.

Aesthetically interesting, these pieces are in contact with some of the great tendencies of American avant-garde work, while also participating into the larger culture of entertainment. Elise K. Kirk has shown how film has been the most powerful influence on modern American opera and The Industry's many nods to Hollywood seem to prove her right.[42] But beyond these aesthetic questions, the pieces, in their interest in globalization, bear on a social and political discourse. The company pays great attention to its social inclusiveness, as is suggested by the recurring reflections on immigration in *Hopscotch*, or by Marco Polo's figuring the beginnings of a global world in *Invisible Cities*. The early 2020 opera *Sweet Land* was advertised as a production which "takes on a broad range of issues surrounding the founding of America and explores unresolved trauma. The artistic team's work and backgrounds are deeply connected to questioning narrative hierarchy and cultural identity through a social justice lens,"[43] featuring the work of composers Du Yun, a Chinese immigrant, Raven Chacon from the Navajo Nation, and African-American and Native American librettists Douglas Kearney and Aja Couchois Duncan. This project which seeks to present "a multi-perspectival tour through American history"[44] confirms the company's concerns with separating opera from old-world canons, and offering its audiences a renewed form of opera that not only pushes the boundaries of traditional opera aesthetics, but that is also politically

42 Elise K. Kirk, *American Opera*, Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2005, p. 4.

43 "The Industry's 2018 Year in Review", *op. cit.*, p. 2.

44 *Ibid.*

engaged and socially conscious of the challenges facing the United States in the new century.

These operas all call for a reflection linking urban, social and aesthetic discourses, something which Yuval Sharon defined, in the wake of the 2016 elections, in the following words: "I pledge allegiance to the art form of opera not because of what it was but because of what it can be: the promise of its platform as an unpredictable dialogue of many voices".[45] Opera is thus conceived of as a possibility ("what it can be") and a "platform for a dialogue of many voices" which formulates a discourse on our living conditions and on the future. This idea is what gives *Invisible Cities* its majestic ending with Marco Polo's call for "vigilance and apprehension" to avoid the inferno:

> Marco polo – The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.[46]

The last sentence "seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space" lingers in a 6-minute long monologue which becomes a chorus engaging all the performers, making the audience hear the call from all directions. The opera underlines Calvino's call for action, for "[giving] space to" a society that is "not an inferno", calling on the individual viewers who were separated by their headphones into a communal listening experience. The space for "who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno" is perhaps to be understood as the space of opera—not the space of the opera house, but rather of the whole city, which the Industry seeks to make us see as a space of promises for a future and more inclusive community. It reclaims spaces of absent-mindedness (cars, train stations, beaches...) for an opera that is intended as a 21st-century take on the theater as utopian communal experience. Enacting what Lefebvre called, at the time of the first experiments with opening performance to the streets, "the right to the city" or what, closer to us, Doreen Massey called our "throwntogetherness,"[47] it calls on its

45 Yuval Sharon, "I Pledge Allegiance to Art", *op. cit.*
46 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, *op. cit.*, p.165.
47 Doreen Massey, *For Space. op. cit.*, pp. 149-62.

audience's engagement with the city as locus of civic life. The Industry indeed engages its audiences with dreams of the ideal city, calling attention to the city as social space to be imagined for all. The fragments of these pieces, the communities enacted in the very act of putting together such technically-demanding works as well as the communities formed with the audiences or with the neighborhoods where the pieces unfold—all these elements point in the direction of a definition of opera as an aesthetic moment directly connected with life and its socio-political context. The company indeed pays close attention to the way its productions affect communities and neighborhoods, involving local communities and thus associating opera creation with communal living.

CONCLUSION

The Industry heeds Boulez's call to destroy the opera house in each of its creations. But this destruction of traditional opera and its aura of elitism, its complicity with old hierarchies, participates to the reconstruction of opera as a fully contemporary and socially relevant artistic form. The company is fully conscious of the history of opera which it celebrates in continuing with, very importantly, the musical language of opera and the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*; but it also seeks to establish a counter-narrative to the traditional history of opera, by claiming a certain number of contemporary philosophical and theoretical references through which it decenters and desacralizes opera. From Guy Debord and the notion of psychogeography, it takes opera into the city, decentering the very notion of opera houses and destroying the fourth wall. From John Cage, it takes a desire for fragmentation and a continuous aesthetic experience. And from Jacques Rancière, it takes the notion that art, embedded as it is in its urban environment, can be a proposition force in our civic everyday life. The Industry calls for a practice of opera as a civic activity outside of the space commonly controlled by established power, and it is probably not by chance that Los Angeles plays such an important role as the place where opera can be reborn: it is perhaps from this culturally marginalized and multi-ethnic city that opera could be more radically reconfigured.

In a recent article about the two Los Angeles opera directors Peter Sellars and Yuval Sharon, Mark Swed has posited the notion of an "LA School of opera" which he defines as combining aesthetic innovations and socio-political power:

> Sellars and Sharon practice a new progressive approach to opera as an agent for societal transformation and environmental activism that goes far beyond the usual directorial updating of opera beloved in Europe, too often for little more than show-business

> pizzazz. Can we go so far as to call this a Los Angeles school of opera? From this side of the Atlantic, that's where the big ideas seem to be coming from.[48]

The Industry's double perspective on aesthetics and politics offers a potentially radical perspective on how aesthetic innovations can impact our styles of perceiving and inhabiting these communities. The notion of a Los Angeles school of opera suggests that the form of opera might be renewed for the 21st century from Los Angeles, perhaps the least operatic city—and yet, as a world capital in innovation, entertainment and diversity, the best stomping ground for the aesthetic and political renewal of opera.

48 Mark Swed, "How two top directors are teaching Europe the LA School of Opera", *LA Times*, August 23, 2019.

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Abstract

The Industry is a young Los Angeles opera company which seeks to redefine opera by opening it up to 21st-century aesthetics. This strong interest in making opera into a contemporary genre can be seen in the way this company rejects traditional opera's reliance on a certain kind of theatrical *mise-en-scène*, notably through its experimentation with *in-situ* performances. This article looks at some of the company's most notable performances, which are analyzed in the context of American avant-garde performance as well as in the specific context of Los Angeles. In so doing, it reconsiders the significance of the company's references to varied concepts and thinkers such as the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Guy Debord, John Cage or Jacques Rancière, and suggests that behind this eclectic array of references lies a very careful reflection on the possibilities of opera today. The Industry works to create a new aesthetic experience of opera that shifts the boundaries between art and the politics of everyday life, thus making opera the place for a reflection on art's political potential.

Key words

opera; performance; avant-garde; *Gesamtkunstwerk*; The Industry; Los Angeles; Guy Debord; John Cage; Jacques Rancière.

Résumé

The Industry est une jeune compagnie d'opéra de Los Angeles qui cherche à redéfinir l'opéra pour l'adapter au XXIe siècle. Cet intérêt très marqué pour un opéra du contemporain passe d'abord par un rejet des codes traditionnels de l'opéra à travers notamment des mises en scène *in-situ*. Cet article s'intéresse aux performances les plus emblématiques de cette compagnie, qui sont analysées dans un premier temps dans le double contexte de la performance d'avant-garde américaine et dans le cadre spécifique de Los Angeles. La compagnie définit son projet esthétique en rapport à un large éventail de références, du *Gesamtkunstwerk*, à Guy Debord, John Cage ou Jacques Rancière – références diverses qui témoignent en réalité d'une pensée très articulée sur les possibilités qu'offre le genre de l'opéra aujourd'hui. Cet article revient sur l'importance de ce corpus intellectuel et théorique dans la démarche de cette compagnie qui vise à définir une nouvelle esthétique pour l'opéra au XXIe siècle, faisant bouger les lignes de séparation entre art et politique.

Mots clés

opéra ; performance ; avant-garde ; *Gesamtkunstwerk* ; The Industry ; Los Angeles ; Guy Debord ; John Cage ; Jacques Rancière.

CRÉDITS PHOTO

Visuels de couverture : *YOUARENOWHERE*, créé et interprété par Andrew Schneider, 2015 (photographie de Maria Baranova) ; Adina Verson dans *Indecent*, créé et mis en scène par Paula Vogel et Rebecca Taichman, 2015 (photographie de Carol Rosegg) ; Elizabeth Jensen dans *Eurydice* de Sarah Ruhl, mise en scène de Helen Kvale, 2017 (photographie de Jasmine Jones) ; Quayla Bramble dans *Hopscotch* créé par Yuval Sharon pour The Industry, 2015 (photographie de Anne Cusak / *LA Times*, droits réservés). Avec nos remerciements aux artistes et photographes.

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