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Naomi Rea, "The Return of the Gesamtkunstwerk? Why Contemporary Artists Are Flocking to the Opera House," *Artnet News*, August 23, 2017

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## Art World

# The Return of the Gesamtkunstwerk? Why Contemporary Artists Are Flocking to the Opera House

Why contemporary art could give opera a major fillip in the 21st century.

**Naomi Rea**, August 23, 2017



Shirin Neshat, *Aida*, (2017). Photo: ©Salzburger Festspiele / Monika Rittershaus

Next Wednesday, the curtain will fall on the 2017 edition of the Salzburg Festival, the renowned five-week showcase of new

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

productions in music and drama taking place in the Austrian birthplace of Mozart. So far, the radical injections of the festival's new artistic director, Markus Hinterhäuser, have been well received by its discerning audience, not least due to two star-studded leading productions that gave the visual arts a prominent place:

Hinterhäuser invited two contemporary artists, Shirin Neshat and William Kentridge, to direct operas.

“It was one of the most creative and invigorating artistic experiences I have ever had,” Neshat told artnet News of her operatic directorial debut, a staging of Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* with celebrated soprano Anna Netrebko in the lead role and Riccardo Muti conducting at the Großes Festspielhaus.

As a contemporary artist, photographer, and filmmaker, Neshat was able to engage with the complex history of the demanding opera through visual means; scholars of Middle Eastern Studies, particularly, have criticized its stereotypical Orientalist portrayals, alleging that Verdi created them solely for the entertainment of Europeans.

## GLADSTONE GALLERY



Shirin Neshat. Photo: ©Anne Zeuner, courtesy Salzburger Festspiele.

“Conceptually, my presentation wants to get away from purely targeting the ancient Egyptians and Ethiopians, who were very much depicted as barbaric, and rather turn the whole story of *Aida* towards Western culture,” said Neshat, who also explores gender, repression, and exile in her arresting artistic practice.

Neshat’s directorship also brought her minimalist aesthetic to an opera that traditionally revels in its own excess. “I tried to make a very sculptural piece; we had a very simple cube that was inspired by ancient Egyptian architecture, and we had no props...Much of what I did really came from my own continuing aesthetic interests:

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

minimalism and repetition, black and white, and the intervention of video in a live program.”



Shirin Neshat, *Aida*, (2017).

There is a history of artists designing sets and costumes for the stage: After Jean Cocteau introduced himself to Picasso in 1915 to collaborate on the design of *Parade* (1916), a one-act production by Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, a rich tradition of artists-as-set-designers has ensued, and is still prevalent today. But these collaborations never approached the idea of an all-encompassing work of art, possibly because full control of the show still lay in the hands of the establishment.

Hinterhäuser’s choice to give contemporary artists full reign over the opera house, then, is a radical move that recalls Richard Wagner’s

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

view of the opera as the one art form unifying all others. For Wagner, opera offered the potential for the creation of a *gesamtkunstwerk*, a German term loosely translated as a “total work of art” or an “all-embracing art form.” The opera, as Wagner argued in his theoretical essays from 1849, embodies the confluence of all art forms; music, words, and drama come together in epic productions that are also moving visual spectacles.



Shirin Neshat, *Aida*, (2017).



Shirin Neshat, *Aida*, (2017).

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

The challenge facing artists who are given dominion over the vast playing field of the opera house is not unlike that which confronted Wagner in the 19th century. Driven by his modernist aesthetic philosophy and his pursuit of the total artwork, Wagner wrote both the libretto and the music for his stage works, at the risk of one gaining supremacy over the other.

“As a visual artist there is a risk of the piece becoming too visual and undermining the story,” acknowledged Neshat, adding that her stripped-down *Aida* allowed the opera to shine in an entirely new light, “I wanted people to be immersed, not in my work, but in *Aida*.”

Meanwhile, South African visual artist William Kentridge has directed a production of Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck* (1914-22), conducted by Vladimir Jurowski. Kentridge’s approach to opera is a completely different animal, in which his signature ink-on-paper and charcoal, collage-style drawings are projected onto the stage throughout the performances.

## GLADSTONE GALLERY



William Kentridge, Photo: ©Marc Shoul, courtesy Salzburger Festspiele.

“The projections aren’t just the scenery or the background against which the opera happens, they’re part of the narrative material, the thinking material, the subtext, of the production,” the artist told artnet News.

Kentridge also acknowledged the need for artists taking on opera to find a balance between the singers as storytellers and the images, which must not simply illustrate but also expand the meanings of an opera. In *Wozzeck*, the frightening visions of the title character are configured in Kentridge’s visual language, and the artist finds a connection between the rough granular texture of charcoal and the music, as well as the grainy quality of photographs of the fields of Flanders and the destruction of entire villages in World War I, the historical time in which the narrative is set.



# GLADSTONE GALLERY



William Kentridge, *Wozzeck*, (2017).

This is not Kentridge's first intervention in the medium. In fact, this is his fifth opera, and he told artnet News that the opportunity to depart from a realistic representation of narrative was part of what drew him to the discipline, in addition to the generosity of scale offered by the machinery of the opera house. "In opera there's an expansion of time, very different from the naturalism of theater, which allows interpolations of images and thoughts," he said.

According to Kentridge, the art form has been tamed by the demands of a bourgeois audience who want to have their proverbial cake and eat it too when it comes to programming. "If an opera



## GLADSTONE GALLERY

house does a completely new opera it's very hard to get an audience, but if an opera audience comes to see another *Norma* and it's like the one they saw before, they are also dissatisfied," he explained.

While his immersive production is striking next to Neshat's minimalist homage, Kentridge nonetheless acknowledged the artist's necessary debt to the *métier*. "There's always a danger that the interests of the artist overwhelm the material they're working with," he admitted, "But it's the same with many stage directors who, in their hunt for some novelty to inject into the opera, push it into the most deformed jackets."



William Kentridge, *Wozzeck*, (2017).

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

Other artists, such as Jonathan Meese and Tino Sehgal, have also experimented with opera in their efforts to move contemporary art away from the material object culture engendered by its electric market.

Last year, Tino Sehgal, whose artistic performances are becoming increasingly difficult to define, collaborated with the Paris Opera Ballet on a production at the lavish Palais Garnier in Paris. Sehgal's contemporary choreography saw dancers break the fourth wall and interact with the audience in the public spaces of the opera house before the show and during the performance. The immersive experience deconstructed the traditional codes of the establishment in a manner that recalled the infamous first performance of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* at the Champs-Élysée Theater in 1913. (Though it didn't provoke the same outrage.)

But the contemporary artist perhaps most immediately associated with the opera is German installation and performance artist, Jonathan Meese. His work has consistently mined the troubled territories between Germany's inglorious history and its high culture. His interrogations of characters like Parsifal finally won him an invitation, in 2012, to direct at the venerable Bayreuth Festival, a yearly celebration of Wagner dreamed up by the composer himself, and carried out in the theater he built for the purpose in 1876.

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

Tackling the opera house was a logical next step for Meese, whose installations and performances have repeatedly challenged the establishment. “My work has always been multidimensional, which means all techniques and materials are allowed and needed,” Meese, who has always been drawn to Wagner’s vision of the *gesamtkunstwerk*, told artnet News.



Rehearsal for artist Jonathan Meese’s opera project “MOONPARSIFAL ALPHA 1-8” on June 1, 2017, in Vienna, Austria.

Bayreuth is one of the most sought-after tickets in the world of opera, and high-ranking politicians flock there every summer to rub elbows and sit through hours-long productions. Meese was slated to interpret Wagner’s *Parsifal* at the festival in 2016,

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

but Katharina Wagner, the composer's great-granddaughter and Bayreuth's artistic director, rescinded his invitation in 2014, citing the excessive running costs of his proposed staging.

But Meese, who at the time publicly attacked Bayreuth for its decision, told artnet News this was “nonsense,” arguing that “the officials who rule Bayreuth had to get rid of me because of political and religious reasons.”



German artist Jonathan Meese performs his play “Generaltanz den Erzschiller” on stage at the National Theatre in Mannheim, western Germany, 2013.

The controversial artist has become notorious in Germany since his 2013 prosecution and later acquittal for making the Nazi salute

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

onstage, and has incorporated Nazi symbolism into his performances in illustration of his devotion to the supremacy of art. It has been suggested that his invitation to Bayreuth was withdrawn in an effort by the organizers to distance the festival from references to Wagner's anti-Semitism, as well as its association with the Nazis (Hitler was a big fan).

For his part, Meese stated that remaining in Bayreuth would have meant compromising his artistic principles and conforming to the codes of the illustrious festival, which he said was concerned more with the lifestyle of opera than the art. Indeed, Meese's exile from Bayreuth could suggest the upper echelons of the opera world are not yet ready to embrace the value contemporary art can confer upon the opera.

After three years, Meese has begun his so-called revenge on Bayreuth, having staged "MOONPARSIFAL ALPHA 1-8" in Vienna this past June and by bringing "MOONPARSIFAL BETA 9-23" to Berlin in October.

His interpretation of Parsifal transposes the Wagnerian myth onto a distant revolutionary year in the future. Meese was vague in his comments about the work: "Moon-Parsifal is Total Art, therefore it is Future. My respect towards Richard Wagner is purest metabolism, Meese sees in Richard Wagner the Total Artist Daddy Cool."

# GLADSTONE GALLERY



Rehearsal for artist Jonathan Meese's opera project  
"MOONPARSIFAL ALPHA 1-8" on June 1, 2017, in Vienna, Austria.

"Art will destroy all political, religious and ego-cynical devil circles!" he told artnet News, prophesying that reality itself will become a *gesamtkunstwerk*.

Although perhaps not everyone is as dedicated to the supremacy of art or its "Daddy Cool," it is clear that the possibility of directing opera is captivating the interest of many contemporary artists. Bayreuth notwithstanding, opera directors seem to want contemporary artists to inject new life into the aging art form. The San Francisco opera house, for example, has collaborated with artists from RETNA to David Hockney on its productions, and Hinterhäuser's daring programming at Salzburg is already starting to pay off.



# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Artists, on the other hand, can benefit from the backing of a deep-pocketed establishment to make vast artistic productions that revolutionize not only how an audience responds to an opera, but how they respond to the art. The music, libretto, and elaborate trappings of the opera house provide the armature on which a total artwork can be created. Now it's just a question of getting the right audience in the seats to witness it.