

The Birth of *The Mile-Long Opera* out of the Events of a New York City Park at 7 O'clock: Performativity of Performativities or a Multiperformativity?

MONIKA MITÁŠOVÁ

Department of Theory and History of Art,
Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava, Slovakia

ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on *The Mile-Long Opera*, created by architect Elizabeth Diller and composer David Lang with contributions from other artists. This “subversive” open-air opera is interpreted especially from an architectural perspective* in relation to its performance venue – the High Line rail trail on Manhattan’s West Side – from the point of view of an inter-categorical work crossing multiple genres, introducing its various components into new relationships and contexts in terms of both staging and multiperformativity. The performance also addresses its hyperpresence – the hypertime and hyperspace of the work. The questions which arise are: Could one consider this multicategorical, continuously recreated

work to be a hyper-open work of both non-art and art? In what sense does it contain self-reflective processes and artistic metacommentary? And building on Lang’s words that “musicianship is citizenship:” Is the opera also an operatic-operable urbanship? In this regard, musicianship alludes not only to civic music-making, but also to the heteronomously infected process of autonomization, and citizenship is a heteronomization arising from the permanent process of the differing of artistic autonomy. The impacts of this include those on terminology – and, for example, that traditional theatrological and musicological terminology is changing its scope and content, triggering the need for a re-thinking.

KEYWORDS:

performativity, multiperformativity, performative opera, hyperspace, hyperopen work/composition

*“Architectural perspective” here means an understanding of architecture that forms the framework for other arts and considers the spatial consequences of inter-species and cross-genre event contexts shaping the cultural-urban ecosystem.

FRAMING AND CONTEXTS

When searching for answers to the question of whether and how contemporary architecture is performative, I was impressed by a multidisciplinary work, or to be more specific, a polyartistic¹ composition, which in some respects might correspond to an open-air opera or theater performance, in others to performance art or a site-specific public art installation in a city park... It presents the attributes of several different types and genres of performing and visual arts alongside the characteristics of non-artistic events, all taking place in a city park at seven o'clock in the evening – or to be more precise, arising from the relationship between them. One could say that what arose came from the relationship between the performing and visual arts newly opening up to one another and to non-art – performativity in its everyday meaning of events unfolding without a script, but also based on something that might resemble a script, something both predictable and unpredictable, intentional and random, as the events in a city and the actions of its inhabitants unfold over the course of the evening.

I first happened upon this multidisciplinary work in the context of contemporary architecture more or less by accident. One can encounter *The Mile-Long Opera: a biography of 7 o'clock*² in several different contexts. Premiering and running from October 3–8, 2018, at the High Line public park in Manhattan, the opera was reviewed by daily newspapers as well as professional theater, music, architecture, and art journals. Public rehearsals and six performances were held at the park, which had been opened to the public four years earlier, following the redevelopment of the elevated tracks over West Chelsea on the banks of the Hudson. Starting at 7 p.m., *The Mile-Long Opera* transformed the High Line, currently one of the most popular public spaces in New York City, into a venue for reimagining the presentation of contemporary forms of urban performance, a “stage in the park” accessible to city residents and visitors with a free ticket³. Describing the relationship between the park and the opera, Diller explained, “The way the High Line challenged the conventions of the park, *The Mile-Long Opera* would challenge the conventions of the stage.”⁴

Reflections of this multi-genre, hybrid work, opening up staged musical interpretations not only to improvisation by professional and amateur singers and choirs/

¹ *The Mile-long Opera* is understood to be a work having many muses (poly-muse rather than polymusical). However, due to the association of these terms with music, it is being replaced with the term “polyartistic.” See the entry for “polyartist” in: KOSTELANETZ, R. (ed.). *A Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes*. New York: Routledge, 2019, p. 337.

² For more on the opera see <https://milelongopera.com/meet-the-team/>.

³ *The Mile-Long Opera* was co-produced by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, the High Line, and THE OFFICE performing arts + film. It was sponsored by Target and the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation. Institutions which were originally contacted, including the Lincoln Center, Whitney Museum of American Art, and Creative Time, ultimately did not contribute to the production or performance of the opera.

⁴ Elizabeth Diller in conversation with Cynthia Davidson. See DAVIDSON, C. Choral Works: Elizabeth Diller on *The Mile-Long Opera*. In *Log*, 2019, Vol. 16, Issue 45, p. 75.



Diller Scofidio + Renfro (DS + R) and David Lang: *Mile-Long Opera*. Direction Lynsey Peisinger. Site 1a: *hello dusk*. The Astoria Choir, Empire City Men's Chorus, MLO Company Singers. Photo © Timothy Schenck. Blake Zidell & Associates.

choruses,⁵ but also to the performativity of the audience and the city, can be found in the context of contemporary classical music (a cappella choral composer David Lang, choir/chorus leader Donald Nally), in contemporary theater (costume artist Carlos J. Soto, who worked with director Robert Wilson in the 1990s), and in a literary context (the lyrics of the libretto was published in the program booklet and quoted in newspapers and journals). The poetry in the libretto was written by poet Anne Carson, based on a selection of discussions which the community organization PeoplmoVR held for this occasion with anonymous New Yorkers responding to the question, “What is your seven o’clock?”⁶ This part became the sung section of the opera. Delivered as recitatives, the prose pieces in the libretto were written by poet, essayist, and playwright Claudia Rankine, based on her own interviews with people living in the neighborhoods surrounding the High Line – more specifically, based on “dinner conversations” on a similar theme: what residents and their families do as day turns to evening... Moreover, *The Mile-Long Opera* is also reflected in the context of contemporary visual and multidisciplinary art, as a community performance

⁵ Multigenreism causes constant transformations and fusions to occur, including between ensembles and choruses in the classical sense – inducing changes in the *khôra* as a proto-architectural specialization. For more on the *khôra*, see footnote No. 40.

⁶ DAVIDSON, C. Choral Works: Elizabeth Diller on The Mile-Long Opera. In *Log*, p. 79.



DS + R and David Lang: *Mile-Long Opera*. Direction Lynsey Peisinger. Site 1b: *hello dusk*. The Astoria Choir, Empire City Men's Chorus, MLO Company Singers. Photo © Liz Ligon. Blake Zidell & Associates.

(*The Mile-Long Opera* is co-directed by performer and choreographer Lynsey Peisinger, a close collaborator of Marina Abramović), and as an urban 360-degree video of the opera performance uploaded to the internet.⁷ For that matter, one can also consider the opera in a multi-genre and hybrid context, combining some or all of the contexts mentioned here. Additionally, the work exists and is discussed in non-art contexts, which are related to, and in fact cannot be completely severed from, art contexts (though a distinction can be made between them) – i.e., in socio-cultural contexts: the co-creation of civic community in urban environments through community performances, actions, events, and installations, an area which has long been a focus of co-director Lynsey Peisinger.

THE HYPER-PRESENT – HYPERTIME AND HYPERSPACE?

The work was initiated, conceived, and co-directed by Elizabeth Diller, a renowned New York-based architect of Czech and Polish origin; her studio Diller, Scofidio + Renfro (DS+R) also co-produced the opera. DS+R worked with the landscape architecture studio Field Operations and landscape and garden designer Piet Oudolf to redevelop the elevated railway into the High Line⁸ in several stages, as a sequence of

⁷ See <https://milelongopera.com/walk-360/>.

⁸ Competition project 2004, built in stages in 2009, 2011, 2014, and 2019.

urban park microenvironments. These provided the space and time for the micro-situations presented in the script/libretto of *The Mile-Long Opera* and for the unscripted appearances by the public and the city during the performance. As to the question of who the “creator of the micro-environments” is, *The Mile-Long Opera* was preceded by the design and realization of the High Line, and one could argue that, given how this park above the city streets was conceived as a chain of urban landscape microenvironments on a viewing platform, the High Line itself is also a source and an initiator of the opera production. Describing the transformation of the park/“urban stage” into a temporary, six-day “urban performance stage,” Diller said, “The park will be a 30-block-long urban stage for an immersive performance in which the audience will be mobile, the performers will be distributed, and the city will be both protagonist and backdrop for a collective experience celebrating our diversity.”⁹

The opera subtitle, *a biography of 7 o'clock*, specifies the theme while referring to the start of *The Mile-Long Opera*, which always opens at 7 p.m. Consequently, the time and venue which set the theme of the opera are intertwined with the staging and the performative time, i.e., with the actual starting time of the opera and the time that individuals and groups in the audience need to walk one and a half miles (2.4 km) in 90 minutes to 3 hours. As Elizabeth Diller also explains, “It’s potentially a reflection of New York, about New York, by New Yorkers. We could do this in real time. It’s really about the hyper-present.”¹⁰ What might be the hyper-present?¹¹ Elsewhere

9 In DILLER, E. *The High Line*. Available on her architectural studio’s website at:

<https://dsrny.com/project/mile-long-opera>. [online]. [cit. 7 June 2024]. See also BARONE, J. In ‘The Mile-Long Opera,’ All the High Line’s a Stage. In *The New York Times*. 28 September 2018. [online]. [cit. 7 June 2024]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/28/arts/music/mile-long-opera-high-line-new-york.html>.

10 In LERNER, R. ‘The Mile-Long Opera’ Unites New York on the High Line. In *Forbes*. October 2018. [online]. [cit. 7 June 2024]. Available at:

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/rebeccalerner/2018/10/04/the-mile-long-opera-unites-new-york-on-the-high-line/>.

11 The “hyper-present,” as used by Elizabeth Diller, raises many questions. The logic of her explanation suggests that she is not a proponent of presentism or actualism (only that which is present does in fact exist; that which once existed no longer exists, and that which may exist one day does not exist right now). Her position is close to eternalism (the concept that the present moment always contains actual traces of the past and notions of the future and is thus multi-temporal – e.g., a musical composition whose notes have sounded but remain, giving the possibility to develop a musical idea, as conveyed in Edmund Husserl’s “retention” and “protention”). Perhaps the closest to hyper-present is Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence in his terms “différance” and “trace.” Traces in the sand are not only a record of something that occurred in the past and remains in the present, but rather they open up a whole range of differentiating possibilities for interpreting what kind of traces they are and who might have made them. Just as a script is not just a “dead” record of the present, i.e., of living speech, but a differentiating process of possibilities for the exchange of phonemes and changes of meaning, it is a constant search for the right words which may never be spoken, yet contribute to the generative process of meaning – so too can the hyper-present be a constantly renewing generative range of possibilities for its own development at every moment of the present. It would be more accurate to abandon the polarity of the possible and the real, where the possible has not yet occurred, and replace it with Deleuze’s understanding of reality as a permanent differentiation of the virtual in the actual. This is probably closest to hyper-presence. In this regard, the terms “hyperspace” and “hypertime” may be a quantum expression of these momentary connections and differentiations (see Michio Kaku’s book *Hyperspace*, Oxford University Press, 1994), but at the same time, they may be the space-time expression of the hyper-present as contemplated in this footnote. Hyperspace and hypertime can thus be understood as arrangements of events in their constant differentiation, always also changing the very nature of differentiation, or they could be the differentiation of différance itself, which follows from the nature of the event.



DS + R and David Lang: *Mile-Long Opera*. Direction Lynsey Peisinger. Off-Site Performance above Site 1c: *hello dusk*. The Astoria Choir, Empire City Men's Chorus, MLO Company Singers. Photo © Liz Ligon. Blake Zidell & Associates.

she also mentions “live and mediated presences”¹² and the *un-mediate* and *immediate*.¹³ While walking through *The Mile-Long Opera*, the audience in the park hovering above the city witnesses the perception-experience of the mediated presence of the opera’s fictional world (“What is your seven o’clock?” in New York City) intertwined with the perception-experience of the immediate presence of the events happening in the dwindling light of the city park at dusk, with flickering street lamps and the background bustle, roars, and noise amidst the sung a cappella pieces and recitatives of the opera. In addition, the audience can watch a “live stream” of this urban opera from afar. Some operagoers also took digital video recordings and photos in the park, stopping along the edges, so that the walking audience could easily pass through the opera performance. In addition to these fusions and new distinctions between the actual, fictional, and virtual time and space, could one also consider this opera as taking place in an eventful hyper-time and hyper-space? Would the

¹² DAVIDSON, C. Choral Works: Elizabeth Diller on *The Mile-Long Opera*. In *Log*, p. 45.

¹³ “For technophobes who blame technology for the collapse of the public sphere, liveness may be a last vestige of authenticity – seeing and/or hearing the event at the precise moment of its occurrence. The un-mediated is the immediate. For technophiles, liveness defines technology’s aspiration to simulate the real—in *real-time*. Lag time, search time, and download time all impair real-time computational performance. But whether motivated by the desire to preserve the real or to fabricate it, liveness is synonymous with the real – an object of uncritical desire for techno-extremes.” In TUCKER, S. Introduction to Diller + Scofidio’s *Refresh*. [online]. [cit. 7 June 2024]. Available at: <https://www.diaart.org/exhibition/exhibitions-projects/diller-scofidio-refresh-web-project>.



DS + R and David Lang: *Mile-Long Opera*. Direction Lynsey Peisinger. Site 6: *make shift*. Huaxia Choir, MLO Company Singers. Photo © Timothy Schenck. Blake Zidell & Associates.

eventful present manifest in these as a ceaseless differentiation of diverse virtualities in the actual process of the unfolding of the eventful present by its various actors in various places? For example, while the performing choirs/choruses stood or sat at their posts in the park, never straying from their spaces illuminated by the glowing caps on the heads and fluorescent props in the hands of the singers and speakers (lighting direction by John Torres in collaboration with DS+R), the audience walked amidst and around them, stopping and continuing bit by bit, choosing momentary trajectories of movement in the actual rhythm of steps here and now, co-creating the dynamics of the staged-performed present engulfing all places and times.

An urban opera with an audience in movement would therefore actually take place in a dynamic field of space-time, in trans-fusions of actual-fictional-virtual time and space, in their permeation and a new differentiation or differing¹⁴ of the present. This space-time in-fusion, transpiring in the direct contact between the performers and the audience, with events in the city playing a supporting role, also induces new means of immersive perception, e.g., one that can oscillate between rhythms of composed, uncomposed, and decomposed sounds and images, mixing them and drawing new distinctions between them in a kind of theatrical-operatic-choral cortege, i.e., a parade, a procession, or a crowd, but also a new conductus, a multi-voiced

¹⁴ See DERRIDA, J. *Texty k dekonstrukci* [Texts to Deconstruction]. Bratislava : Archa, 1993, Chapter 3 *Difference*, pp. 146–177. [“Difference.” In *Bulletin de la Société Française de philosophie*, 1968, Vol. 12, Issue 3, pp. 73–101].



DS + R and David Lang: *Mile-Long Opera*. Direction Lynsey Peisinger. Site 7: *no we don't talk*. Mount Sinai Choir, Wadleigh High School Choir, MLO Company Singers. Photo © Liz Ligon. Blake Zidell & Associates.

composition – its flowing urban stream. When performers and spectators came into close proximity, they also discovered opportunities for non-verbal inter-action – eye contact, smiles, gesticulation – co-creating an operatic performance as well as a work open to performativity. The immediate contact between the performers and the audience, but also video recordings and photos, may or may not have been perceived as having “alienating effects” or perhaps as a visualization of Lang’s possible space of many virtualities in the actual (a multiplicity of virtual worlds within actual worlds), rather than a utopia, which is merely an opportunity that cannot find its place: “I think most musical statements are expressions of utopia. If you can imagine a piece of music that should exist that doesn’t exist, maybe there is also a performer who doesn’t exist yet who needs to learn to do it. Maybe there needs to be a social environment or a location or a way of thinking about music that doesn’t exist yet.”¹⁵

In other words, this initial pause to consider the perception and conceptualization of time and space offers a vast range of clues; this opera forms an inter-categorical work of art crossing multiple genres, introducing its various components and dimensions into new relationships and contexts in terms of both staging and performativity. And in addition to information about the space, the duration of David Lang’s choral music (60 min), the opera title also indicates the space, the “area” of

15 LANG, D. – MURRAY, P. Wisdom of the Crowd: David Lang on Finding Community. In *Choral Journal*, 2022, Vol. 63, Issue 1, p. 40.



DS + R and David Lang: *Mile-Long Opera*. Direction Lynsey Peisinger. Site 8a: *parts of us erase*. Haiyun Chorus, Open Hydrant Theatre Company @ The Point, Edison Chinese Choir, MLO Company Singers. Photo © Liz Ligon. Blake Zidell & Associates.

movement through the musical opus in miles. The pamphlets and website for the opera¹⁶ also include crucial cartographic images: a map of the park marking the entrance/starting point, side entrances/exits, and the end/exit of the opera, i.e., the planned route with the twenty-six main stops and posts where performing individuals and choirs/choruses are stationed. During public rehearsals, opening night, and the five repeat performances, audience members could use the map to repeatedly search for and select sections/lengths and durations of the route of movement through the opera. Ultimately, it is an opera for an audience that is walking and interacting with the park and the city, offering views of the surrounding skyscrapers, Manhattan, and the Hudson River; it is an event for Manhattan's long-distance walkers, a pilgrimage route and meandering path that the audience takes ninety minutes to three hours to complete, depending on their own movement on foot, amongst the plants, trees, and songbirds, as well as the arcades, greenhouses, and amphitheater in the park. In the surrounding high-rise buildings, whose lit apartments and hotel rooms are visible from the park, other staged performances took place in the blue-lit interiors – the washing of the glass façades, storefronts, and windows, the glass soaped up and wiped down to clean it and, in fact, to reveal crystal-clear views into the interiors of the surrounding skyscrapers (these performances were conceived

¹⁶ See <https://milelongopera.com>.



DS + R and David Lang: *Mile-Long Opera*. Direction Lynsey Peisinger. Site 8b: *parts of us erase*. Haiyun Chorus, Open Hydrant Theatre Company @ The Point, Edison Chinese Choir, MLO Company Singers. Photo © Timothy Schenck. Blake Zidell & Associates.

by Elizabeth Diller and Lynsey Peisinger). All these staged and performative layers of the opera contribute to its multiperformativity, to our being able to learn about it and think about it also in terms of a question that has been opened regarding the performativity of coalescing – or, figuratively speaking, “fusing” – performativities.

CONTEXTS OF CREATION AND METHODS OF DE/COMPOSING

the redevelopment of an abandoned elevated railway into the popular and highly frequented High Line park quickly transformed the neglected, free-spirited, infamous neighborhood of West Chelsea into a gentrified zone with all the controversies that high real estate prices and the arrival of the haves and evictions of the have-nots can bring to an area and the people who live there. The speed and the nature of this transformation was an impetus behind the community performative opera in public space. As composer David Lang, the co-founder and co-artistic director of New York’s legendary musical ensemble Bang on a Can, described this catalyst, “There’s a very dramatic change going on [in] the city and in that neighborhood. I wanted to notice the change but I didn’t want to say that change has winners or losers, that change is good or bad. I just wanted to notice people in their lives and I wanted to have as much variety as possible.”¹⁷ In this context, architect Elizabeth

17 BARONE, J. In ‘The Mile-Long Opera,’ All the High Line’s a Stage.



DS + R and David Lang: *Mile-Long Opera*. Direction Lynsey Peisinger. Site 9: *funny ho money*. Peace of Heart Choir, Bobby Lewis New Light Baptist Choir, Os Ensemble, MLO Company Singers. Photo © Timothy Schenck. Blake Zidell & Associates.

Diller understands *The Mile-Long Opera* also as the re-discovery of opera in the city's changing public space. She believes there is a deeply rooted idea connecting opera with elitist opera institutions, a notion which *The Mile-Long Opera* intentionally "subverts." Regarding the opera's subversiveness, Diller explains, "We wanted to use the word 'opera' and use the voice as the framework – not to use instruments, but to make music with the human voice. It is a form that challenges conventions in every way possible ... It puts the audience in a very different relationship to performers. The way the piece was composed and the way the text was used was very much about atomizing the story into a thousand stories."¹⁸

When Canadian composer and conductor Patrick Murray asked David Lang why *The Mile-Long Opera* – which Lang writes in lower-case letters as *the mile-long opera*, a convention he follows for all his works – should be called an opera and how it differed from his earlier works of choral whispering, yelling, screaming, and singing for a thousand or more professional and amateur performers in a public space,¹⁹ Lang responded by describing the preparation and creation process for the opera at

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ From works for one thousand professional and amateur singers performing in chorus with sections which are whispered, spoken, sung individually and together, shouted and clapped together, and then sung in chorus with choreography (*crowd out*, 2014; *the public domain*, 2016) to an interactive work for professional and amateur choirs (*memorial ground*, 2016).



DS + R and David Lang: *Mile-Long Opera*. Direction Lynsey Peisinger. Off-Site Performance near Site 10: *after rain*. Willow Interfaith Women's Chorus, MLO Company Singers. Photo © Iwan Baan. Blake Zidell & Associates.

the High Line: "We lined up a thousand people, from the bottom to the top of the park, and the whole idea was that it would be the opposite of a normal opera where you sit in one place and there's a story and characters who run in and out. Instead, we put the whole opera along this promenade, and you walk from scene to scene. ... so the idea was to make something that was about seeing New York with New Yorkers and seeing New Yorkers in New York."²⁰ He emphasized two transformations that interested him: even New Yorkers, whose words and voices people barely notice on the crowded streets, in stores, at humdrum jobs, or in crammed subways in everyday life, can become actors in any variety of forms (the transformation of the anonymous dweller in a crowd into a dweller-character in the opera, a dweller-performer in the audience of a staged opera, or a dweller-singer and reciter in a staged opera-theater choir/chorus, becoming a performer of their own improvisations and random interactions with the audience). The second transformation that David Lang is interested in is the relationship between actors²¹ (the relationship between the cast-performer in the opera choir/chorus and the performer in the opera audience). What the actors

²⁰ LANG, D. – MURRAY, P. *Wisdom of the Crowd*, p. 45.

²¹ The term actor is used in its original meaning of someone who is undertaking some action, and in the context of Bruno Latour's *La théorie de l'acteur-réseau* (ANT – Actor Network Theory), not in the sense of a "player" – an actor on the stage or screen.



DS + R and David Lang: *Mile-Long Opera*. Direction Lynsey Peisinger. Site 18: *pawns. roofs. sharks*. Frank A. Haye & The Brooklyn Interdenominational Choir, Downtown Voices, MLO Company Singers. Photo © Timothy Schenck. Blake Zidell & Associates.

share is this performative dimension of the opera performance, the opera park, the city's opera community... Opera as an excursion/walk-and-stop-in-the-park allows for the emergence of both immediate and mediated contact of the coalescing audience–performers in a single performing, pulsating organism (body), which for Lang is above all “emotionally charged.” Lang literally states that the opera makes it possible “to build an emotional bridge from a character [to the audience].”²² While Elizabeth Diller the architect reshapes obsolete urban infrastructure (a decommissioned elevated railway) into a park, an urban lookout, and the potential stage for a subversive opera performance, David Lang the composer thinks of the opera-performance or performative opera as a bridge or bridging between the opera's documentary-fictional characters and its audience, reversing and reconnecting their passivity and activity, namelessness and significance, everydayness and extraordinariness, non-artistry and artistry... into a newly discovered rhythm, sound, and singing.²³ According to Lang, the result is a new operatic work created (opened and repeatedly performed) not by professionals for professionals and audiences in the classical and

²² LANG, D. – MURRAY, P. *Wisdom of the Crowd*, p. 45.

²³ In terms of terminology and etymology, opera thus returns to the original meanings of the Latin word: to perform, to have an effect, to cause, but also to form a work or composition. See KRÁLIK, L. *Stručný etymologický slovník slovenčiny* [Concise Etymological Dictionary of Slovak]. Bratislava : Veda, 2015, p. 404.

usual sense of opera house operations, but by a community living, reflecting, and interpreting the everyday and extraordinary accelerations and changes affecting the lives of their own and other urban communities (an embodied and concurrently self-reflective opera?).

David Lang does not consider himself a community composer, but rather a creator of contemporary instrumental and choral music for professional music ensembles and choirs/choruses, including opera ensembles. However, the process and minimalist music from which he emerged does not play a key role for him, he resists being labelled as a post-minimalist and conceptualist, and he views his work as creation that crosses contemporary music and theater genres. "I consider myself to be an opera composer. I've written lots of things that combine music and theater in all sorts of weird combinations. And I consider them all opera," says Lang. "The music helps us get deeper to who the character is. To me, that's the core of the operatic experience,"²⁴ Lang explains. He has noted that by cooperating with amateur singing choirs/choruses and the public, he always surprises even himself.²⁵ In this respect, *The Mile-Long Opera* is a work searching for new musical-theatrical and architectural codes of communication that emerge and are presented and verified in urban communities, in group initiatives, or in collectivities of residents, migrants, drifters, or transit tourists – wherever we are accustomed to distinguishing only single individuals or whole crowds of people; while preparing his large crowd choirs/choruses, Lang says that he went back to reading Elias Canetti's book *Crowds and Power*.²⁶ What he finds remarkable in his staged, presented, and performed choral works is the mental connection between people who have sung or whispered and shouted in a polyphonic chorus in public, making it an intrinsic part of themselves, and not forgetting it even after years of cultivating this mental connectedness.²⁷

As an early inspiration for his work with large choirs/choruses in public spaces, Lang cites a fourteen-day installation by Christo in the 1970s – a 24.5-mile-long white curtain stretched along the coast of Sonoma and Marin counties before dropping down into the Pacific Ocean in northern California (Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Running Fence*, conceived in 1972 and completed in 1976). A music student at the time, David Lang worked with other college students to build the "white curtain;" he believes the building process was more important for him than the resulting installation, including the aesthetic experience offered to him by the completed work. He views his own musical rehearsals similarly, seeing them as being more important to him than the resulting live performance in a musical institution.²⁸ Could this also be understood as opening up the processual approaches and

24 BARONE, J. In 'The Mile-Long Opera,' All the High Line's a Stage.

25 See David Lang on Music for Crowds. Chicago Humanities Festival. *YouTube*, 29 November 2017. [online]. [cit. 7 June 2024]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9aq-TGixTew>.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 BROWN, G. H. Process as Means and Ends in Minimalist and Postminimalist Music. In *Perspectives of New Music*, 2010, Vol. 48, Issue. 2, pp. 180–192.



DS + R and David Lang: *Mile-Long Opera*. Direction Lynsey Peisinger. Site 26: *whatever can happen*. MLO Company Singers. Photo © Iwan Baan. Blake Zidell & Associates.

generative “mathematical” compositional processes from which Lang emerged to a different understanding of musical processuality – to the (human voice and musical instrument) sounds, noises, and silences that occur, including those which were incidental?

Recalling Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s installation, Lang explains, “There’s this whole ecosystem of all the things that that must be created to make this event. And that became the point. You think of art as being the object, but it’s actually the sphere around the object. It’s what you do to make the object, and what’s left when the object is gone.”²⁹

Audiences participate in several of Lang’s musical works, including by singing (at the performance of *harmony and understanding*, 2018, the audience spent the first part of the concert rehearsing the piece with the conductor; in the second part, the audience performed the piece with the orchestra; the title is taken from the lyrics of “The Age of Aquarius” in *Hair* (musical 1976, film 1979). Lang says that when an audience becomes a choir/chorus, they are no longer separate individuals or an audience – they become a community of performers participating in the result.³⁰ From this perspective, Lang’s quandary writing for an orchestra and choir/chorus that

²⁹ LANG, D. – MURRAY, P. *Wisdom of the Crowd*, pp. 45–46.

³⁰ David Lang Describes *Harmony and Understanding*. In *SoundCloud*, 2019. [online]. [cit. 7 June 2024]. Available at: <https://soundcloud.com/new-world-symphony/david-lang-describes-harmony-and-understanding>.

performs “before an audience” and emphasis on the audience becoming a performing body and ensemble are also understandable. In *The Mile-Long Opera*, the audience neither sings nor shouts in the park; at most they speak or gesticulate among each other or with the singers. (Television crews and reporters were filming in the park while the opera was being staged). The audience does, however, participate in forming their own itineraries of speed and slowness; arrivals and departures; entries, exits, and returns. The audience walks through the opera, listening to individual scenes and choirs/choruses once or perhaps repeatedly, given that the sung and recited parts are repeated differently (the performers repeat or improvise the sequences at their posts) and that some sections are variously reiterated at numerous locations in the park. But even with such “musical direction,” the audience creates its own relationships to individual sections and chooses how these relate to the whole story; it responds to Lang’s and Diller’s problematized barrier between city and stage, as well as between audience, stage, and proscenium, whereas classical theater and opera house audiences are generally expected to just sit back in admiration. Lang understands this as a conflict, leading him to ask, “What are we making our musical experiences for?” He believes that some composers compose music so that at least one in a thousand renditions and performances would be good – meaning that nine hundred ninety-nine of them are not. “How happy am I to live with that? Maybe I would rather make a piece of music that deals with those other experiences.”³¹ Yet he repeatedly states that he is not a philosopher, sociologist, or activist – he is a musician who composes music that is neither simple nor easy to play... Although these words echo the enduring yet constantly recurring polemics of aesthetics, ethics, and politics currently underway also in contemporary architecture and the visual arts, Lang’s approach to the composition of orchestral and choral works is more of a dialogue (including the tensions between trained and untrained singing and declamation and performance) and a network; Rob Hansen, an amateur singer who sang a cappella in *The Mile-Long Opera* and is otherwise active in several other New York choirs/choruses, described the composition as “tone clusters” and the effect as “flowing.”

“I was in the bass baritone part, and there was a tenor, alto, and soprano part that interlocked with that. And the effect, when it worked, was really quite stunning just to hear. David Lang composed these works as a series of tone clusters. There was a set of notes from which each performer could choose what they wanted to sing. They could sing it as repetitiously or as slowly or as lightly or as heavily as they wanted, and that would give this kind of flowing effect that you could hear, this cloudy sense of the sound.”³²

It was a challenge to manage some forty different improvising choirs/choruses over the course of a year of one-on-one and several public rehearsals. Rob Hansen

31 LANG, D. – MURRAY, P. *Wisdom of the Crowd*, p. 46.

32 A Performer Reflects On The Mile Long Opera. In *Medium*, 16 November 2022. [online]. [cit. 12 September 2024]. Available at: <https://medium.com/@evefelsen/a-performer-reflects-on-singing-in-the-mile-long-opera-eb3517c2070a>.

describes the transformation from community singers into performers as a process in which a person who loves to sing “is now being asked to be Marina Abramović for eight nights in a row. The endurance element while also maintaining musical ability is really, really hard, and that was a hugely difficult structural thing for [the organizers] to deal with: how do you teach a thousand singers this music to the extent that they can own it themselves after two or three rehearsals? It’s kind of amazing that it had such an effect, given all the structural constraints.” As a singing performer, Hansen reflects, “I think the best thing about this project was the really human way in which people reacted, by which I mean, completely randomly. All of the rules are abandoned. So the expectation for the audience is similarly disregarded or exploded. What are they meant to do?”

COULD A SELF-REFLECTIVE PERFORMATIVE OPERA ALSO BE AN AUTO-REFLECTIVE WORK?

All one thousand professional and amateur singers (professional opera singers as well as members of school, church, community, and corporate choirs), singing and delivering declamations in English, Spanish, and Chinese, were selected through competitions held throughout New York City’s five boroughs – making it a “site specific” work executed in the languages primarily spoken in the city, including various accents. Perhaps this overlapping of interpretive scales with the hum, noise, and rattle of the venue could also be characterized as an *urban dialogue* held between people and their cultural surroundings near and far, an interweaving of composed and uncomposed local and global sounds made on site, in more distant parts of the city, and in other cities on the North American continent and beyond...

Elizabeth Diller initiated the transformation of the High Line into what she called “a fantastic urban stage”³³ (with set design – the posts, the black-and-white costumes with glowing baseball caps illuminating the performers’ faces, and the props of fluorescent cups and lit hand-held screens were all designed by Carlos J. Soto), but the stage never stopped being an urban public park. Diller explains, “I was wrestling with the ethical problem of stepping into the lifecycle of a city, either in its decline or rebirth, and unwittingly helping to accelerate its change in one direction or the other. I struggled with the question of one’s [architect’s] post-occupancy responsibility on the site where it happened. (...) We always thought of the High Line as an alternative park, so how it became mainstream? After all, it’s a place where you can’t do much.”³⁴ People can walk up above the city and relax and enjoy the view of the skyline and the river; that is how people, especially young and older New Yorkers and tourists, occupy the park most of the day and at night. This is what has proved to be the “proto-scenic” potential of the site: “The High Line is naturally theatrical so I thought it would make a great stage. I’ve always been interested in rethinking the space of the theater. I imagined a 1.5-mile performance work about the rapid speed

³³ LERNER, R. ‘The Mile-Long Opera’ Unites New York On the High Line.

³⁴ DAVIDSON, C. Choral Works: Elizabeth Diller on The Mile-Long Opera. In *Log*, p. 45.

of growth of the contemporary city and the misaligned rhythms of its inhabitants.”³⁵ This misalignment, this crisis, carried some inherently critical potential. And thus, *The Mile-Long Opera* was conceived of, created, and staged in relation to The High Line not only as its stage venue, but also as the epicenter of the problems from which and in which it came into existence. In other words, the subversive performative opera exists in the transforming urban environment as a slightly subversive, cultural-artistic initiative which allows locals and visitors alike not to “take back the privatized and co-modified public space around the High Line” (whose artsy, free-spirited, and rough-and-tumble vibe is long gone), but rather to co-create a new urban public space through community-based urban performance. Shared and immersive performativity in this sense also acts as a renewing or even a new democratizing force. As such, *The Mile-Long Opera* might be performed and experienced not only in its past and present, but also in its future time and space as establishing new urbanities that are yet to come – as alternative urbanities in a time of inception, with significant cultural and critical dimensions. Or, as Diller notes, “but we didn’t want to hit the audience over the head with a critique. It’s not a treatise in an academic setting. It’s a performance that situates the public in the place where change happened, and it’s meant to trigger critical thinking about it without imposing a value judgment about whether it’s good or bad. It’s meant to arouse uncertainty and other emotions. You know, a year ago I wouldn’t be talking this way. Now I want to make people feel something about this place and this time. It had to be a shared critical reaction in real time, in the hyperpresent.”³⁶

The hybridization mentioned earlier fuses the critical dimensions of the work with the extra-artistic and artistic dimensions. During preparations for the opera, Elizabeth Diller firmly believed that the prose and recitative sections would be very critical. Claudia Rankine wrote the recitatives based on twenty-six tables at 7 p.m., drawing in part on interviews with New Yorkers from the choirs’ neighborhoods. “I thought she [Claudia] would bring an agitated critique of gentrification. Instead she wrote these poetic reflections about tables, old and new, filled with unopened mail or piled up with food, some with company and others with empty chairs full of memories.”³⁷ This was not because the author of the libretto and Diller had different opinions about the city’s rapid transformation. “Both writers ultimately touched the very thing I wanted to get at, but not head-on. That was eye-opening artistically – the critique could be made sideways, poetically. What was also unexpected was the artistic submission of the writers to the composer. David [Lang] openly said, ‘You know the way I work, I won’t take all of your writing. I may chop it up and only use parts.’ And they both agreed to let David use as much as he wanted in any way he wanted. David and I were able to use both Anne’s and Claudia’s texts like a kit of parts, assembled to make the most sense musically and spatially. Much of the text structure

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 76.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 80.

was defined by a single logistical factor – we had to construct a work that could move the audience through the park in a steady stream.”³⁸ This is another fusion – this time performative – which introduces the audience into a state of relatively continuous flow; like the music and the micro-spaces of the park, they are in a temporal and spatial stream of movement.

CONCLUSION

“26. whatever can happen

Whatever can happen to anyone can
happen to us, whatever can happen
to a city can happen to this city...”
Libretto, *The Mile-Long Opera*

In summary, the High Line has been designed and implemented as a multiplicity of architectural, urban, and landscape micro-environments. In these environments, *The Mile-Long Opera* is an open-air performance (a performing arts genre) of an audiovisual opus with a libretto and a score, whose participants co-create an open performative work, an open performance; they choose their trajectories and assemble an itinerary of movement, selecting from the sequences of the work as they walk through the opera and through the park of unpredictable interactions, emerging relationships, and the interplay between them. The participants in this performative opera are live-streamed and filmed, and if they wish, they may take their own photos and videos, which become a part of the multi-media performance. Art and architecture “perform” in this performative opera in the sense that they co-create new communities of audiences, urban communities, park communities – a new public? Building on Lang’s words, Musicianship is citizenship – is it also an operatic-operable urbanism? For that matter, one could consider a multi-categorical, continuously recreated work such as this to be a hyper-open work of art. Unlike Umberto Eco’s “open work,” which presumes a prepared range of possibilities and therefore remains a classical opus, although also a work in movement,³⁹ it might be regarded as a work that changes the nature of workliness and is open to a continuously generated range of unforeseeable possibilities, which are not at all programmed. From a methodological perspective, this would mean that it constantly contains self-reflective processes for each participant as a performer and a creator simultaneously, but it also contains procedural self-reflection for both prepared and unforeseen ways of self-creation and artistic metacommentary. In this regard, musicianship alludes not only to civic home-grown music-making, but also to the heteronomously infected process of autonomization in the sense of participation and self-reflection

³⁸ Ibid., p. 80.

³⁹ As an example of an open work, Umberto Eco cites Alexander Calder’s stables and mobiles. They move and they occur, but only within the range of degrees of freedom allowed by their structure; consequently, Calder’s open work is only open to a certain quantity of occurrences and movements within a framework that cannot be crossed. See ECO, U. *Otevřené dílo*, Praha : Argo, 2015, p. 76. [*The Open Work*. Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1989].

on procedures, and citizenship is a heteronomization arising from the permanent process of the differing of artistic autonomy, continuously generating hyper-open compositions and changing forms of the *khôra*.⁴⁰

Translated by Elizabeth Walsh-Spacilova

The study is an output of the project VEGA 1/0402/22 Arts-Related Research: Critical Terms, Methods, Criteria.

LITERATURE

- A Performer Reflects On The Mile Long Opera. In *Medium*, 16 November 2022. [online]. Available at:
<https://medium.com/@evefelsen/a-performer-reflects-on-singing-in-the-mile-long-opera-eb3517c2070a>.
- BARONE, Joshua. 'The Mile-Long Opera,' All the High Line's a Stage. In *The New York Times*, 28 September 2018. [online]. Available at:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/28/arts/music/mile-long-opera-high-line-new-york.html>.
- BROWN, Galen H. Process as Means and Ends in Minimalist and Postminimalist Music. In *Perspectives of New Music*, 2010, Vol. 48, Issue 2, pp. 180–192. ISSN 2325-7180, 0031-6016.
- David Lang Describes Harmony and Understanding. In *SoundCloud*, 2019. [online]. Available at:
<https://soundcloud.com/new-world-symphony/david-lang-describes-harmony-and-understanding>.
- David Lang on Music for Crowds. Chicago Humanities Festival. In *YouTube*, 29 November 2017. [online]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9aq-TGixTew>.
- DAVIDSON, Cynthia. Choral Works: Elizabeth Diller on The Mile-Long Opera. In *Log*, 2019, Vol. 16, Issue 45, pp. 72–91. ISSN 1547-4690.
- DERRIDA, Jacques. *Khôra*. Paris : Galiée, 1993. 112 p. ISBN, 2718604239, 9782718604237. [Khora. In *On the Name*, Stanford, CA : Stanford University Press, 1995, pp. 89–130. ISBN 0804725551, 9780804725552].
- DERRIDA, Jacques. *Texty k dekonstrukci*. Bratislava : Archa 1993, pp. 146–177. ISBN 80-7115-046-0. ["Difference". In *Bulletin de la Société Française de philosophie*, 1968, Vol. 12, Issue 3, pp. 73–101].
- DILLER, Elizabeth. *The High Line*. [online]. Available at:
<https://dsrny.com/project/mile-long-opera>.
- ECO, Umberto. *Otevřené dílo*. Praha : Argo, 2015, p. 76. ISBN 978-80-257-1158-3. [*The Open Work*. Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1989. ISBN 0674639766, 9780674639768].
- KAKU, Michio. *Hyperspace*. New York : Oxford University Press, 1994. 384 p. ISBN 9780195085143.
- KIPNIS, Jeffrey – LEESER, Thomas (eds.). *Chora L Works: Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman*. New York : Monacelli Press, 1997. 208 p. ISBN 978-1885254405.
- KOSTELANETZ, Richard (ed.). *A Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes*. New York : Routledge, 2019, p. 337. ISBN 9781351267120.

⁴⁰ See DERRIDA, J. *Khôra*, Paris : Galiée, 1993, or the English translation published by Stanford University Press 1995. See also KIPNIS, J. – LEESER, T. (eds.). *Chora L Works: Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman*, New York : Monacelli Press, 1997.

KRÁLIK, Ľubor. *Stručný etymologický slovník slovenčiny*. Bratislava : Veda 2015. 404 p. ISBN 978-80-224-1493-7.

LANG, David. *Keynote Speech at Yale School of Music Symposium on Music in Schools 2015*. [online]. Available at: <https://music.yale.edu/people/david-lang>.

LANG, David – MURRAY, Patrick. Wisdom of The Crowd: David Lang on Finding Community. In *The Choral Journal*, 2022, Vol. 63, Issue 1, pp. 38–48. ISSN 0009-5028.

LERNER, Rebecca. 'The Mile-Long Opera' Unites New York on the High Line. In *Forbes*, 4 October 2018. [online]. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rebeccalerner/2018/10/04/the-mile-long-opera-unites-new-york-on-the-high-line/>.

TUCKER, Sara. Introduction to Diller + Scofidio's *Refresh*. [online]. Available at: <https://awp.diaart.org/dillerscofidio/intro.html>.

Walk the Mile in 360°. [online]. Available at: <https://milelongopera.com/walk-360/>.

Monika Mitášová

Vysoká škola výtvarných umení v Bratislave

Katedra teórie a dejín umenia

Hviezdoslavovo námestie 18

814 37 Bratislava

Slovakia

E-mail: mitasova@vsvu.sk

ORCID: 0000-0001-9566-3197