

# FROM HAPPENING TO OPERA: *'The Construction of Boston'*

As William Blake, when looking at a Tyger,  
Did not consult texts in zoology, but cried instead  
"Where did you get those eyes, that heart, that head?"  
Or "Who could dare to make you, tyger, so?"  
This is how I see Boston.  
Though later one may look to history books  
To try to get some clue as to what happened,  
One's first impulse is, mine at any rate,  
To cry out, as at woman, man, or tyger,  
"Boston! who put the dark in you, and light?  
What slammed the buildings down, who made the sight  
Of Beacon Hill so bending and so bright  
When the sun rises? Place, where did you come from?  
Did He who made Aix en Provence make thee?"  
The answer is what you are going to see.  
See me, the Opera, and in seeing me,  
See Boston, see three artists build it up.  
Inspired to madness by my harmony.'<sup>2</sup>

In 1961, visual artists Jean Tinguely, Niki de Saint Phalle, and Robert Rauschenberg met each other in Paris.<sup>3</sup> The three artists traveled to Stockholm for the Swedish chapter of the *Bewogen Beweging* (*Art in Motion*) exhibition,<sup>4</sup> and, back in Paris, put on a performance piece at the American Embassy with Jasper Johns and David Tudor. While Tudor played John Cage's *Variations II*, the four visual artists contributed to the performance through actions and objects.<sup>5</sup> Having enjoyed the collaboration, Tinguely, De Saint Phalle, and Rauschenberg decided to do another performance together when Tinguely and De Saint Phalle visited the United States a year later. This time, however, they wanted to work with a script. De Saint Phalle approached her friend Kenneth Koch, one of the New York School poets.<sup>6</sup> On a postcard from Las Vegas marked 29 March 1962,

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During a stay in Boston in March 2012 Evelyn Austin interviewed Scott Wheeler on his opera *The Construction of Boston* (1988), based on a one-off performance by Robert Rauschenberg, Niki de Saint Phalle, Jean Tinguely, and Kenneth Koch in 1962.<sup>1</sup>

she wrote: 'I loved your play so did Jean – BERTHA makes happenings seem as if they hadn't happened at all. (Have an idea for a collaboration)?'<sup>7</sup>

With Koch on board, they decided on a subject for the performance, namely the construction of Boston. Tinguely decided he wanted to bring architecture to the city, Rauschenberg wanted to contribute weather and people, and De Saint Phalle set herself the slight task of enriching the city with art and beauty. Although Koch wrote the others into the script, all three refused to speak lines. Therefore doubles were enlisted to speak for them. Curator Henry Geldzahler (MoMA) 'played' Tinguely, Maxine Groffsky, an editor for Random House, did De Saint Phalle, and Rauschenberg got Frank Stella to read his lines.<sup>8</sup> The performance took place on 5 May 1962 at the Maidman Playhouse, New York City.

In *Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg* Calvin Tomkins describes the evening as a set of complete chaos.<sup>9</sup> The show sold out within hours, so the Maidman was packed. Rauschenberg's rain machine emptied out into the backstage before the performance started, and Merce Cunningham, who was listed as the director, quietly asked to have his name removed from the bill soon after. Finally on stage, Tinguely set himself to building a wall between the audience and the performers while Rauschenberg's wind machine blew around loose objects, and his rain machine, consisting of a punctured garden hose, released a downpour of water. De Saint Phalle strode in through the audience while helpers wheeled a plaster copy of the Venus de Milo onto the stage. Paint-filled balloons were embedded in the statue, and as De Saint Phalle started shooting at it with a rifle, the paint was released,

causing multiple colorful explosions. Frank Stella projected Rauschenberg's lines onto a wall with a portable slide projector, and Maxine Groffsky and Henry Geldzahler went to great lengths to remain heard and seen over Tinguely's rising, and dauntingly looming, wall. All in all, the event lasted no longer than twenty minutes.

Whereas Koch's contribution to the 1962 performance might have been a bit snowed under in the chaos of gunfire and water fall, it is, along with a few black-and-white photographs, the only remaining element of the original setting, having been published in the form of a play in various anthologies and collections. In 1988, Bostonian composer Scott Wheeler came across the text in one of these books, and decided to set the script to music. In a way, his opera can be read as a translation of the visual and physical aspect of the original piece through the textual into music. So what remained of the highly visual, Dadaist, 1960s scene? 'I can't say I can remember quite what the set looked like. I have pictures of it somewhere, though.'<sup>10</sup>

'Extravagant sets and decors are not the core of opera,' Wheeler continues, 'even though it has been a big thing in opera in many periods. The core of opera is story told through singing mostly, and amplified through orchestration. What's crucial is the size that is brought on by the operatic voice and the operatic orchestra. Which therefore requires a size of staging to make it work. Otherwise it looks bare, it comes off a little strange. But fairly simple productions of fine singing and playing are among my favorites. Whereas a big production where the story gets lost, or something else is amiss, is going to be a much bigger problem. When opera people have lower budgets, there is no such thing as doing

it with only piano, but with a big set. The opposite is done all the time.'

While the opera might not contain the original performance's visual temperament, in terms of music and composition it definitely lives up to the performance's hybrid, sometimes ostensibly frivolous nature. 'I definitely felt the weight of the artists' heritage, and the best way to honor them is to have fun as they did. Not to treat them as if they were Michelangelo and Rembrandt and Shakespeare or something. They were all about having fun in a particularly irreverent manner. It gave me license to be polystylistic and hope to create something that had a drive to it. That had a dramatic drive to it.'

The introduction of weather by Rauschenberg marks the start of the building of Boston.<sup>11</sup> '[There] are four places where weather comes in, and I decided those were four solos working upward from bass to tenor to mezzo to soprano,' Wheeler explains. 'The storm, I decided, was like Polyphemus, the giant in Händel's *Acis and Galatea*, a beautiful galumphing, bass aria.<sup>12</sup> The melody is based on one of Robert Schumann's little children's pieces, which I literally quoted.<sup>13</sup> Then the next is the summer moon, and that became a little tenor song. The soprano was moonlight.' Second up is Tinguely, whose appearance is accompanied by Gregorian chant, a direct quote from *Veni, Creator Spiritus*.<sup>14</sup> In Wheeler's piece, Tinguely's character embodies architecture. 'I wanted hammering. Tinguely's music is mostly brass and percussion. Lots of low chords. I had a music image for it. I kept shooting him up to these G's and F#s there. I have always been enamored of the vocal riding at the top of *The Rake's Progress*.<sup>15</sup> It's a highly dramatic way of using a tenor that isn't particularly indebted to Italian or German opera. It sounds something like it could be part of American speech. I like that about it.'

After Rauschenberg has delivered the weather and the people, and Tinguely has constructed the buildings and the subway, we arrive at the crisis in the composition. Despite Boston's rapid progress and expansion, the chorus feels something is missing. The music is returned to the primeval pastoral. 'O Tinguely, Rauschenberg, it's fine. / And yet I can't help feeling / Something divine is gone: pure nature; roses; sparrows singing; redbird; bluejay; twit-twit-twitter-twee! / It seems such a short time ago we had that here! / O tell me, how can we get back what's gone? / I miss the fresh air and the lovely feeling!<sup>16</sup> To which Rauschenberg

replies: 'Don't you like cities? It's / A fine time to ask me, / A fine time to bring that up! / Why Tinguely is already underground / Building the subway, and you ask me how / To get back bubbling brooks?'<sup>17</sup> Then Niki appears, on a high A ♭, bringing beauty and art. '[Niki] is just something else. She's the redeeming feminine, as in Wagner or something. That is how Kenneth [Koch] clearly portrayed her. The fact that she was shooting a pistol is somewhat anti-feminine, and only makes her femininity and her beauty the more interesting and intriguing.' However, Wheeler's Niki could not have been more different than the Venus de Milo-shooting, officer's uniform-clad vamp that strode out onto stage from behind the audience back in 1962. 'I decided she was some upper middle class lady singing a parlor song with a piano. When the chorus keeps talking about how beautiful she is, a Gilbert and Sullivan moment sets in. The final is a lullaby. To Boston.'

Urged to classify *The Construction of Boston*, Koch, who had refused to do so back in 1962, half jokingly labeled it a postmodern baroque opera. 'The question is, what does postmodern mean? It means so many different things to different people in so many different contexts. But what it means to me in music,' Wheeler explains, 'is that you are not responsible for making the connection between the parlor song and the rock piece, and the gamelan number, and the blues, and all the different things you're throwing in. That you throw in a rap piece, anything you want, and it's up to the audience to make the connection. That you, the composer, don't have to help make the connection and come up with a unified work. Postmodern means being freed of the classic responsibility which Stravinsky, as a high modernist, would take. I think you make a stronger statement when you do unify it. So I guess I am more a modernist than a postmodernist – despite Kenneth's description.'

Indeed, in the translation of the performance into music, something new seems to happen that doesn't become apparent from descriptions of the 1962 work: Tinguely, Rauschenberg, and Niki are joined in harmony. As we arrive at the end of the composition, Niki shrouds the city, finally whole, in the soft gold glow of the sunset, not only uniting the city, it seems, but uniting the composition as well. The variety of musical styles and influences that have been presented to us, seem to merge in the final, grand lullaby. Echoing Virgil Thomson, who maintained that 'we can now cast a floodlight

onto the past and illuminate our knowledge of performance in all details except once – what it meant to the people of the time', Wheeler's *The Construction of Boston* might not bring us any closer to an understanding of the original piece, but, like Koch's text, offers an intriguing way in, as well as being a valuable work in its own right.<sup>18</sup>

Kind acknowledgment is made to Karen Koch for letting me use an excerpt from archival material from her husband, Kenneth Koch's archive at the Berg Collection, New York Public Library. I would also like to thank Scott Wheeler for sitting down for an interview.

1. The work premiered in January 1989 as a dramatic cantata for SATB chorus, soloists, and an orchestra of sixteen players, performed by John Oliver Chorale. A year later the Charlestown Working Theater did a reduced staged version, and in 2002 Boston Conservatory produced the piece as an opera, with full staging and orchestra. For this performance, Wheeler restored the original overture and orchestrated the sung prologue. This arrangement was performed by Boston Cecilia Orchestra in 2007, and is considered by Wheeler to be the final version. The 2007 performance was recorded for Naxos' 'American Opera Classics' series, released 25 March 2008.
2. K. Koch. *The Construction of Boston*, Boston (2008), track 2. For the 1990 Charlestown Working Theater production of Scott Wheeler's *The Construction of Boston* Kenneth Koch wrote a prologue from which this is an excerpt.
3. Rauschenberg had his first one-man show, 'Robert Rauschenberg' at Galerie Daniel Cordier, April – May 1961. The same year Rauschenberg started working as the lighting designer and stage manager for Merce Cunningham and Dance Company, with which he traveled extensively.
4. From March 10 to April 17 1961 the exhibition *Bewogen Beweging* took place at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

This show on Kinetic Art was a collaboration between Willem Sandberg (Stedelijk Museum), Gunnar Pontus Hultén (Moderna Museet Stockholm), Swiss artist Daniel Spoerri, and French artist Jean Tinguely. After Amsterdam the show traveled to Sweden (Moderna Museet Stockholm) and Denmark (Louisiana Museum). In the following year Tinguely initiated another exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum, namely *Dylaby*, to which Tinguely, De Saint Phalle, Spoerri, Per Olov Ultvedt, Martial Raysse, and Robert Rauschenberg contributed. The exhibition catalogue states: 'zes kunstenaars hebben in zeven ruimten / een wereld geschapen vol afwisseling / vrolijk, griezelig, luidruchtig en stil / waarin de bezoeker gelegenheid heeft / om zich op te winden, te lachen / na te denken / de bezoeker beschouwt de voorwerpen niet van buiten / maar bevindt zich voortdurend er middenin / maakt deel uit van het geheel / misschien vraagt hij zich af / of hij nog wel in een museum is' [six artists have created, in seven spaces, / a world full of variety / happy, creepy, loud and quiet / in which the visitor can / be aroused, laugh / think / the visitor regards the objects not from outside / but finds himself constantly in the center of things / is part of the whole / he might question / whether he is still in a museum]. *Dylaby: Dynamisch Labyrint*, Amsterdam 1962,

catalogue Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

5. C. Tomkins, *Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg* (2005), New York 1980, pp. 192-193. Tomkins discusses this performance in more detail, describing it as 'roughly resembling but considerably more theatrical than a New York happening.' Rauschenberg made an on-stage painting, Tinguely contributed a self-stripping machine, De Saint Phalle had someone shoot at one of her white plaster sculptures, and Johns, refusing to appear in person, placed a sign reading 'Entr'Acte' on stage during the intermission.
6. John Ashbery (1927), Barbara Guest (1920 – 2006), Kenneth Koch (1925 – 2002), Frank O'Hara (1926 – 1966), and James Schuyler (1923 – 1991) are generally considered the first generation New York School poets.
7. Kenneth Koch Papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library. 'Bertha' was first performed in 1959 at Living Theatre (New York City), and was produced as an opera with music by Ned Rorem in 1971.
8. While Tomkins states Groffsky read De Saint Phalle's lines, the original bill lists Elmarie Dooley as playing Niki.
9. C. Tomkins, *Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg* (2005), New York 1980, pp. 187-198.
10. In an interview with me on 29 February 2012 in Boston, MA. All subsequent Wheeler quotes were taken from this interview.
11. From now on the artists' names refer not to the actual people, but to the characters in Koch's text.
12. *Ace and Galatea* premiered in 1718 as a one-act masque. The music was written by Georg Friedrich Händel to a text by John Gay.
13. In 1848 R. Schumann released an album of forty-three pieces for children to play, titled *Album for the Young* (*Album für die Jugend*).
14. The title in the libretto reads 'Veni Tinguely Spiritus!'
15. *The Rake's Progress* is a three-act opera by I. Stravinsky, based on a libretto written by W.H. Auden and C. Kallman. It premiered in 1951.
16. S. Wheeler. *The Construction of Boston*, Boston (2008), track 19.
17. Ibid.
18. N. Rorem, 'The Classical Style' (1971), *Pure Contraption*, New York 1974, pp. 27-33.