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Diamanda Galás: Defining the Space In-Between

It is by a continuous coming-and-going at an infinite speed that the multiplicities of entities differentiate into ontologically heterogeneous complexions and become chaotized in abolishing their figural diversity and by homogenizing themselves within the same being-non-being.

Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis*

I.

“Chants, shrieks, gurgles, hisses often at extreme volumes, frequently distorted electronically and accompanied by a torrent of words” (Harris) which defy description is what best characterizes the work of Diamanda Galás, the American vocalist, pianist, and composer, who became famous in the independent music scene as well as in the art world in the early 1980s. Galás can be considered the first artist who combined in her performances different kinds of musical styles ranging from classical opera, blues, and gospel traditionals to Greek rebetiko. The textual realm of her work oscillates, amongst others, between French poetry of the nineteenth century, the Old Testament, and her own writings.¹ Many contemporary musicians have been inspired by her work. The concept of Marilyn Manson, for instance, would not be possible without her. Another example of her influence on the music scene can be found in Madonna’s styling in the video *Frozen* (dir. Chris Cunningham), which relies heavily on the visual appearance of Diamanda Galás.² Working with jazz musicians as early as in the 1970s, she became ‘the real thing’ in the early 80s, when she created the *Intravenous Sound Operation*. The *Intravenous Sound Operation* encompasses the idea of extracting sounds that are meant to attack the audience like an injection that goes right into the nervous system. Besides piano concerts, where she mainly interprets Blues, she has gained great attention for performing fully composed pieces on stage—theatrical masses titled *Vena Cava*, *Insekta*, *Schrei X*, or *Plague Mass*—in which she deals with subject matters like clinical depression, torture, isolation, or the death penalty. In *Plague*

¹ See Galás, *The Shit of God*.

² The video is included on the DVD *The Work of Director Chris Cunningham*.

Mass, which is dedicated to people with AIDS, her naked body is covered in artificial blood during the ninety-minute performance.³

This article deals with the question of *intermediality* as the space ‘in-between’ different media. Fluxus artist Dick Higgins coined the term *intermediality* in an article originally published in 1966 and republished in *Horizons* (1984). Higgins used this term to describe a specific phenomenon that started to define the art world of the *Happening* and *Performance Art* in the 1960s. According to Higgins, this new phenomenon was “an uncharted land that lies between collage, music and the theater. It is not governed by rules; each work determines its own medium and form according to its needs” (50). Higgins questioned therefore whether a definite description of *intermediality* was at all possible. Basically, he understood the term as a description of an artwork that makes use of two or more artistic media. He suggested, however, that *intermediality* could not be affixed to any specific art movement. On the backdrop of *Fluxus*, Higgins argued that every movement changes itself. It ‘flows,’ it lives by its own means. To put it into a certain category would mean to theorize it in the first place, and by doing so, an artwork would be a mere appendix to the theory (cf. 53). *Intermediality*, understood as the “conceptual fusion of scenario, visuality and, often enough, audio elements,” does not secure the “uniqueness or value of the very best of art performance [for] some works will be *landmarks and will define their genre* [...] creating horizons in the new era” (53). For Higgins it serves as a kind of “ingress” to a work of art that seems to be “opaque and impenetrable, but once that ingress has been made it is no longer useful to harp upon the intermediality of a work” (53). To put it differently, *intermediality* is the “useful approach to some *new work*—to ask oneself: What that I know does this new work lie between?” (53, my emphasis) But, as Higgins concludes in his article that he rewrote in 1984, “it does not suffice to take only the formal origins of an artwork under account [...] one has to try to see the whole and not just my relation to it” (53). With reference to Higgins’s understanding, it becomes clear that a mere detecting of known and related elements does not suffice to grasp a new phenomenon in art. If an artwork opens up a new horizon the whole impact hits all at once generating an unknown field of sensation.

Taking into account the ‘theories of difference’ of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, my argument will be that the virtual ‘space in-between’ carries the potential of creating genuine thought as an *event* within the concentrated form of the *intermedial* artwork. Hence, the creative act in its capability of producing a “new language” (Barthes 155) becomes necessary for the emergence of meaning as a signifying potential. My analysis will evolve around Diamanda Galás’s work and unique persona to illustrate an example of contemporary

³ Galás belongs to the tradition of female American performance artists of the early 1960s to the late 1980s like Carolee Schneemann, Laurie Anderson, Meredith Monk, and Karen Finley. See also Juno and Vale.

intermedial production aiming at the creation of a “new language.”

II.

In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari describe the space in-between as follows:

Between things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one *and* the other way, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle (25).

When we see a performance of Galás, we surely do not realize all the different spaces that clash at once—we experience a homogeneous space, one flow of sounds, gestures, and movements. Everything fits together perfectly and draws us into the composition performed on stage. We are already ‘smack dab’ in the middle—inside this unique space. There is no time, no distance from which we could reflect, detect an order or make intelligible sense of what is presented to us. We are affected immediately by the combination of sounds, images, and words. Why is it that a definite description of these events taking place in front of us is not possible? It feels almost like a shock—there is not really a known grid or a code at hand to which we could refer. It must be something new—previously unknown—that is opened up for us.⁴

According to the British painter Francis Bacon, we experience art most powerfully through sensations that appeal to our nervous system rather than to our intellect.⁵ Based on this statement, Gilles Deleuze has formulated his “logic of sensation” (see *Francis Bacon*). Not to *represent* but to *present* is what has the capacity to genuinely create, and it is a realm that can only be understood via sensation—viscerally. This implies that every other intelligible understanding refers to something already known—to a referential system, grid or code. In Galás’s performance the familiar habitat is left behind—distinct spaces of music genres and media are shattered, mixed up, and violently brought together. This clashing of distinct spaces is what opens up the spaces in-between.

If we would now aim at tracing the various sources and at defining all the

⁴ Musician Janine Rostron, a.k.a. *Planningtorock*, who cites Galás as an influence, is another example that illustrates the idea of a certain shock intricately tied into this new realm which is built from connecting, overlapping, or resonating media. Similar to Galás’s compositions, Planningtorock’s work (*Have it All*) cannot be categorized according to one specific music genre. This ‘sound-operation’ is in flux, constantly developing into diverging directions and planes, and is therefore no longer fully graspable. It has generated “its own undeniable signature sound” (Suarez). See also Haist and Daniel.

⁵ “It’s a very, very close and difficult thing to know why some paint comes across directly onto the nervous system and other paint tells you the story in a long diatribe through the brain” (qtd. in Sylvester 18).

different influences on her work in order to get *one fixed* meaning by re-establishing the well known codes we would “fall in with the myth of filiation,” as Roland Barthes argues in his essay “From Work to Text” in *Image—Music—Text* (160). In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze attests to this idea, stating that genuine thought begins with an external act of violence inflicted upon thought in order to “awaken thought from its natural stupor [...]. Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental *encounter*.” That fundamental encounter is like a jolt, like a disequilibrium or deregulation of the senses “that can only be sensed” (139). I would like to take a closer look now at what might be the jolt that could have caused deregulation in the sequence of *Plague Mass* and to further approach the passages in which oscillations occur.

III.

Galás produces different voices as well as loops and layers of various voices that refrain from following a continuous flow of words and sounds but rather disrupt it. She sets different timbres, stretches and almost squashes tones, or inhales words. Galás operates here with elements that may allude to the *German Expressionistic Schreioper* of the 1920s or Antonin Artaud’s *Theater of Cruelty* that also resisted the articulation of phonetic units but gasped and cried in sheer unarticulated blocks of sounds in order to destroy representation of human states and to evade any possible interpretation of the piece.

It is important to stress, however, that Galás differs from these works. What may seem a chaotic accumulation of various sounds without any significant meaning is in fact the destruction of the clearly defined statement “Yes, I confess!” (Galás, “Tickets”). Galás shouts and repeats the same words over and over again until they start to build up resonance between each other. By means of her voice modulation, the word detaches itself from its former meaning and becomes nothing more than pure sound. She modulates these words with all kinds of different voices that overlap. Between high-pitched volumes and deep gurgles, she stutters the sentence and then connects it again with a clearly expressed dialogue, full speech acts: “Do you confess?—Yes, I confess.”

The spaces in which the three realms connect with one another—to be precise: the spaces between high-pitched volumes which are reminders of the high sound of classical opera singing, and stuttered, cut-up sentences, as well as the space between stuttered sentences and deep gurgles—create vibratory passages that produce the very own rhythm of the piece. It is as if these distinct realms start to communicate with each other, but it is a genuinely new communication that is taking place, one that has not been heard before, causing a jolt or disequilibrium to

our senses in that it can only be sensed.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari state that every milieu is open to chaos. They see the space in-between two milieus as the common zone of chaos and rhythm “chaos rhythm or chaosmos” (312). Regular or irregular meter or cadence is only possible within coded forms whereby meter can change but only within a milieu that is non-communicating. Thus they understand meter as a dogmatic entity whereas rhythm would be critical (the *Unequal*; the *Incommensurable*), which means that only rhythm has the capability of connecting critical moments, connecting itself with the passage from one milieu to another. Rhythm does not operate within a homogeneous space-time but with heterogeneous blocks, and it always changes directions.

If we understand a well-known genre as a form of a certain ‘habitualized’ code, an already established terrain or milieu in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis of coded forms in *A Thousand Plateaus*, it can be said of Galás’s composition that the connection of pure expression, cut-up sentences, and fully articulated sentences opens up codes and creates a passage between them. In *Plague Mass* it is already more than just one single encoding because it is both a connection of heterogeneous sound material as well as the combination of two media—text and music—that mutually affect each other, become each other and thus create something new.

The connection of different voices, different volumes and modes of expression of “Yes, I confess” is precisely the device by which the sentence is brought into resonance with other forces that start to vary its single meaning, forces that start to violate the common signification of an affirmative confession sentence and shoot it into multiple directions. The affirmation mixes with madness and even black humor; thus forces lever out the sentence’s affirmative sense and drives it forth to non-affirmation.

Thus Galás produces a new precondition which is necessary in order to push something through, to make something visible, audible, and discernible that has been covered or could only have been guessed in the sense of Paul Klee’s famous formula: “not to render the visible, but to render visible,” and likewise not to render the sonorous, but to render sonorous (qtd. in Deleuze, *Francis Bacon* 48).⁶ The sentence assumes all possible meanings, becomes an ‘over-potential,’ which sets free its mad and chaotic energy.

It is thus not a simple quotation of disparate elements that are fused into an amorphous ‘one,’ nor a simple collection where parts are set against parts simply collecting them as aggregates, but the process of relating parts within a single field of composition, the connection or joining of elements. The space where disparate

⁶ “New Conditions were necessary for what was buried or covered, inferred or concluded, presently to rise to the surface. [...] It is only after matter has been sufficiently deterritorialized that it itself emerges as molecular and brings pure forces attributable only to the Cosmos” (Deleuze and Guattari 347).

elements touch delivers the possibility of a critical communication between heterogeneous blocks. The line between the different spaces does not move in a specific direction but is a continuous oscillating movement, an endless back and forth between two or more spaces. It creates tension, vibration, and intensity. The composition contains a clear structure, but it is a unique and new, a self-forming structure, which is achieved by undoing the structure of fixed codes and static grids of conventional configurations.

IV.

If we were to visualize Diamanda Galás's 'sound sculpture' we would get something similar to the image of the human body created by video-director Chris Cunningham in his digitally manipulated montage called *Rubber Johnny*.⁷ To strengthen this point it might prove useful to look at the work of musician Peaches. Within the construct of her image, the clashing of different visual realms appears in a very catchy and aggressive way. Although the beard in her face and the dildo in her crotch are attached to her, these prosthetics seem to become rather 'natural' extensions of her body than alien elements or even a costume.⁸ By mixing up the different explicitly sexual male and female attributes as well as various visualized music genres and eras that all implicate coded forms of erotic images, a new body of sexual energy has been generated.

In contrast to Peaches, who presents this rough collage of various codes, Cunningham's 'remix' of one single code of the human body forms a new corporeality, which intricately generates homogeneity that can be linked to the seemingly amalgamated 'sound sculpture' of Diamanda Galás.

It is important to note, however, that it is still the confrontation of distinct parts that evokes the space in-between and that causes tension. In Galás's composition, elements from such different styles of music such as gospel, opera, and even rock vibrate and form a resonance space between one another within a single scream. During this process a new form comes into being; right here, *intermediality* has been produced. We sense all different elements only as one unique entity because the oscillation that occurs between different realms is moving too fast to be apprehended. The tension or friction that has been generated within the spaces in-between becomes so condensed that it can only be sensed viscerally.

⁷ See Cunningham, *Rubber Johnny*.

⁸ See <<http://www.peachesrocks.com>>.

V.

With reference to Friedrich Nietzsche, Deleuze's *Desert Islands* postulates the political element immanent in the active undoing of fixed codes, political in the sense that nothing new or a new people can emerge on the foundation of an established code system (cf. 254-60). This would only be possible if an absolute encoding, a mix-up of all codes, took place in order to push something through which is not encodable (cf. 254). Deleuze connects the emergence of thought with a direct and inevitable relation to the outside. He states that every 'quotation' that comes from the outside comes only as a "proper name," which is neither a representation of things or of persons, nor a representation of words but a lived experience or intensity (257).

Accordingly, Galás becomes her own proper name in that she becomes all the different proper names, whether they are collective or individual names: the witch, the saint, the whore, the murderer, the victim, Maria Callas, Aretha Franklin, Jesus Christ, the Anti-Christ. Every proper name designates intensities inscribed either onto her body, onto the plane of composition, onto the body of her work, or onto all of the above. As Deleuze states further: "The intensity can be lived only in relation to its mobile inscription on a body, and to the moving exteriority of a proper name, and this is what it means for a proper name to be always a mask, the mask of an operator" (*Desert Islands* 257). So Galás does not represent concepts or essences of these external references that have been mediated and dissolved by an internal soul or consciousness. Instead, she sets free the lines of infinite, immediate, and mobile relations with the outside. Already the slightest gesture of pulling up the eyebrows is what forces the brutal expression of her saying "NO" into the *Divaesque* and consequently forces the change of direction. Thus an infinite oscillation is taking place between different spaces, and she becomes all the proper names at once and at the same time.

Thus, what we conceive is not only this or that style. What we conceive is basically the vibration—the clash in-between things, the process of becoming-other. All thought, then, begins in sense experience, in the becoming-other of the senses, and is therefore reshaping our own senses. This is where genuine thought has the potential to come into being. The tighter the different codes are pressed against each other the faster the perpetual movement between them becomes. The higher the speed of the movement the higher the intensity with which all the information hits the nervous system, and the less time there is to prevent it from hitting. The detour through the brain, in which intelligible thinking would take its time and place, is cut off, and information can only be sensed.

In this sense, *intermediality* shows itself here through the inscriptions on a particular 'body.' It works directly on the 'figure' where text, image, and music not only show themselves in their own specific media but where image becomes text,

text becomes music, and music becomes body. Music, image and text not only clash but start to interact and become other via the spaces in-between. They become a whole new, open package, all at once—the ‘non-total’ *Gesamtkunstwerk*,⁹ Gesamt-noumenon/phenomenon, or whatever you want to call it.

⁹ There is a difference between the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—the ‘total work of art’—and the concept of *intermediality*. In the former, the different realms of media cooperate in a way that is complementary. Every different realm is still discernable and only serves to support the other, aiming at totality. In contrast to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* idea, in *intermediality*, the ‘deconstruction’ of the ‘total work of art’ takes place. David Roberts states that “Wagner defines the artwork of the future as ‘living represented religion,’ [...]. [A] union of art, religion and politics” (109). Thus, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, especially in the Wagnerian sense, defines the “[i]dealized union/synthesis of music, visuals and text on stage” that serves to “embrace the full range of human experience, and to reflect [this] in his operas.” (109). It is in this sense that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* aims at the full *representation* of human experience—the ‘total work of art’ that should *express* all of life’s experiences but does not create a *new* life experience.

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