

Selected critical writings for EAR Magazine 1990, New York City

DIAMANDA GALAS:

Mask of the Red Death

Cathedral of St. John the Divine, NYC

Oct. 13, 1990

DIAMANDA - HIGH PRIESTESS, ORACLE, witch, diva. Revealer of our sins, and reveler in a self-created image. This was not just a concert, it was an exorcism, a flagellation of society's wrongs in dealing with the AIDS epidemic - not music of mourning, but music of vengeance: "Asking the dead what they wanted".

Drawing on her ancestry in the Greek-Spartan tradition of dirge singing, and usurping the male-dominated spectacle of heavy metal (in image, not in sound), Galas let her voice out of its cage, and like a bird of prey, it came swooping up 200 feet to the domed cathedral ceiling and back down to grab us. Bathed in red light, smoke swirling, bass drum thundering, and electronics shimmering, her performance carried echoes of human sacrifice. To this listener the music alluded to Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal* with its troops of repentant sufferers, and, near the end of the *Plague Mass*, to gospel music with overtones of the civil rights movement.

The staccato-vibrato glottal crackle of a horde of voices, one of Galas's trademark vocal techniques, served as a virtual Greek chorus, commenting on and reaffirming her message. Mingling her own text with the Bible, she alternately identified the traditional high moral ground in mean-spirited absolutes (often in a Southern accent): "He that touches the flesh of the unclean, becomes unclean" (Leviticus); and then herself became a victim or witness in a pathetic, delicate trembling repetition: "He's not sleeping."

Galas exposed and expressed many sides of this complex issue: an uncaring Catholic hierarchy, a government policy of seemingly planned genocide, a vengeful god who would inflict this plague, the voices of suffering, the stigma of infection, the question of sin, and the call to arms. In many ways there is a similarity to the work of Karen Finley, in that both women preach about the injustices of our time: poverty, homelessness, discrimination, debasement of humanity, callousness of media politics, hypocrisy of church and state; both perform with an intensity and ferocity that leaves an audience drained, exhausted, and in tears.

If Galas's non-stop two-hour performance displayed theatrical self-indulgence, it was acceptable - if an event like this is worth doing, it must be done to excess. The production quality was very high. David Linton, Ramon Diaz, and Blaise Dupuy were the excellent supporting musicians, coordinating complex sonorities, long drawn-out crescendos, and sensitive interplay with Galas, who composed the music, sang, and through gestures, conducted as well. The effect was both chilling and passionate, multiplied by the vast architecture - and the 14-second reverberation time - of this religious sanctuary. Kurt Munkacsi's sound design rose to the challenge and was very effective, as were the lighting and staging. Producers Jediah Wheeler and Linda Greenberg of IPA Presents deserve much credit for this, one of the major musical/theatrical events of the year. The concert was subtitled: "There are not more tickets to the funeral."

- David Simons

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MUNTADAS: Out of Context

You walk into an art gallery and find a large dark room. In the center is a long imposing table with plush chairs around it - a corporate board room. Lining the walls are framed photographic portraits discreetly lit: captains of industry, leaders with millions of dollars - and millions of followers. But the business is religion. Jimmy Swaggart, Billy Graham, Ayatollah Khomeini, the Pope, Maharishi Mahesh Yoga, Werner Erhart - 13 apostles altogether. In place of their mouths are tiny TV monitors showing excerpts of each one preaching, asking for money, detailing his extensive empire, and retailing expensive spiritual techniques. Up close you hear each one, but step away and all the worlds religious pitches together sound like pure babble. This is *The Board Room* by Antoni Muntadas, a Spanish artist living in NY whose focus is the way our perceptions are shaped by the media. Sound and image unite in his installations. Removed from their original contexts, we see clearly through the appropriated material the manipulative assumptions at work.

In *STADIUM*, an installation created in 1989 at The Banff Centre in Canada and engineered by sound designer Konrad Skreta, Muntadas looks at how huge crowds, ripe for emotional catharsis on a mass scale, assemble in arenas eager to be swayed and to lose their individuality; and at the need for one person to feel the power of control. This CD collage (available from Printed Matter, 77 Wooster St, NYC 10012) brings together preachers, rock stars, entertainers, political rallies, sports and propaganda. "The live audience perceives the event from a personal viewpoint . . . the media public receives a layered viewpoint of the event, which is mediated and finally becomes the worldwide reality of the event," he says.

Muntadas creates soundtracks using pre-existing music or text as part of a collage of information - hypermedia. He presents conflicting dynamics: standard/specific, public/private. In his videotapes, installations, and book (*The UnNecessary Image*, edited with Peter D'Agostino, Tanam Press, 1982), a heavy dose of the GENERIC confronts us with our programmed reflexes and encourages an ironic critical second reading. In *Haute Culture* (1983), a moving seesaw has at one end a video monitor showing a museum (high art accompanied by classical symphonic music) and at the opposite end, a monitor showing a shopping mall (consumerism with Muzak). They play simultaneously, each ascending and descending. (The piece is shown only in a museum or shopping mall). *Slogans* (1986) made from ad campaign phrases ("hooks") lose all meaning when set to *Ray Conniff's Greatest Hits*, then visually dismantled by computer process. Another atmosphere is created with Glenn Branca's music for *Video is TV?* (1989). In this tape we see how television portrays itself, building to a crescendo of disinformation overload.

The stereotypes in *Home*, an installation opening May 16 in Newcastle England, address our needs and dreams. In the soundtrack developed by Muntadas and engineered by Sandra Seymour, Dorothy in OZ dreams her way home, a lonesome cowboy pulls at our heartstrings with "There's no-o place like . . ." you need this washer-dryer in your kitchen. A special house with built-in speakers is being designed and constructed in Newcastle for Home.

After this exhibit Muntadas will embark on an ambitious project called *Forum*, commissioned by the French Ministry of Culture to open in Paris in December 1991. Visitors will don helmets that pick up infrared sound transmission from eight sites located on a circle. Walking through the sites - Gallery, Museum, Critic, Dealer, Collector, The Media, Docent, Artist - one can edit the texts to hear them singly, in different groupings, or, standing in the center of the circle, all at once.

Muntadas, who taught at M.I.T.'s Center for Advanced Visual Studies, is not afraid of making communication technology undo itself. *Exhibition* (1985) consists of blank frames, billboards, light boxes, and slides, and even includes "snow" from unused video tapes. All are media for the display and sale of objects, yet nothing but the empty vessels are exhibited. The Cageian, Zen-like qualities are apparent (and beautiful in themselves), the emptiness of the object revealing our thought processes at work. The piece is also an indictment of Art as Commodity - a process which seems to be accelerating as an alternative to the stock market. Where context creates expectation, Muntadas turns the tables.

- David Simons