

EXCERPTS FROM

CONTINGENCY DIALECTICS IN FASHION-OPERA

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TERMS

Fashion-Opera is a methodology built on irreconcilable paradox. In this, spatial, interventionist art forms combine with their temporal, autonomous counterparts in a dialogue that reconciles the independence and hierarchical equality of each element with their integration into a logical whole. That is, fashion and opera, for instance, preserve their absoluteness, with neither submitting itself to the other to become mere costume or musical aura.¹ This idea extends throughout to govern all aspects of the artwork, including its realisation across (and beyond) the compositional process. The maintenance of such paradox is justified by the theory of a particular type of antagonism:

a **Contingent Dialectic**. In this, each pole of an opposition maintains its identity and integrity in **mutual exclusivity**, whilst simultaneously being made to **reciprocally contain** one another, and to be contained within larger structures that permit the paradoxical integrity of their constituents. Through these concepts and their application across all stages of the aesthetic process, it is hoped that works can be produced which rival and overcome given structures of perception, and allow for new forms of communal agency in a posthuman

Contingent Subjectivity, that is, a transhuman agent composed of technology (ie. texts) and individuals. It is to this — the group and its situation — that the works address themselves. While it is composed of alienated, individual perspectives, these are held to be ultimately a social and biological fiction that can only be transcended in their combination and reassembly.

The Fiction Model refers to a materialist model of the individual's relationship to its world.

A **Totality** is defined as a situation that has the power of preserving and combining **mutually exclusive** elements within it: such as a society, or certain artworks.

Mutually Exclusive refers to the Hegelian conception of the dialectic which sees an epistemological antagonism as an index of truth (Žižek 1989, 200).² This is read through

¹ Alain Badiou (2005, 62-63) talks of the irreconcilability of dance to theatre or music due to their fundamental ontological differences. I argue that such mutual exclusivity (of the art forms involved: fashion, music, poetry, theatre, dance, amongst other practices) gains radical potential via *the contingent dialectic*.

² This project shares Hegel's (1975, 99) desire to transcend finite perception, but rejects processes of synthesis and reconciliation. Thus it affirms the fact that "what man seeks...ensnared here as he is in finitude on every side, is the region of a higher, more substantial, truth" but denies the claim that such a truth is one "in which all oppositions and contradictions in the finite can find their final resolution." We must re-frame the Hegelian dictum that "the region of absolute, not finite, truth...is the resolution of the highest opposition and contradiction" (99-100) as its opposite: a place where paradox is preserved.

contemporary cosmology³ and the work of Alain Badiou (2013a; 2013b) and Quentin Meillassoux (2007; 2009), further supplemented by a theory of time under late capitalism (Adorno 2006; Jameson 1991; Lukács 1971). Together, these argue for the material truth of paradox and non-causality as the nature of the external world and, indeed, our contemporary, socially-determined subjective experience — particularly with regard to alienation and the spatialisation of time.

Finally, **Reciprocal Containment** refers both to a characteristic of the structures of experience and, therefore, of certain artworks. In this latter, I proceed from a reading of the historical bearing of western art music through postmodern conceptions of decentring and multiplicity.⁴ That is, the heart of what we might call the western classical canonical trajectory is a freedom of phenomenological perspective, where points within the work function simultaneously as both object and context: they simultaneously contain, and are contained, by one another. Central to this is the antagonism between development and polyphony. This could briefly be traced from the epic quality of Bach (1722/1983), where each voice contextualises its counterparts (Barenboim 2005), to the humanist insights of Mozart (1788/1957), where themes are developed into fully-fledged characters before being recombined as counter-contexts for one another (Tovey 1935, 195-198), to the elevation of this a level of technique in Schoenberg (1932/1984), where each note is able to operate as both foreground and background (Adorno 2006, 45). In the music of Brian Ferneyhough (1980), through the separation of parameter, the very aspects of the musical event become events — objects — themselves and, within this, function as contexts for one another's progress.

³ By this I mean the hermeneutic concepts made possible by notions such as the superposition and the multiverse. I refer to the cultural possibilities that the ability to imagine such relationships makes possible. Ours is a world still in the grip of an outdated Newtonian metaphysics: I am interested in how such knowledge could transform music, society, even ourselves.

⁴ This can be read as a reimagining of Hegelian synthesis. Regarding freedom and necessity, Hegel (1874, 243) writes that,

the members, linked to one another, are not really foreign to each other, but only elements of one whole, each of them, in its connection with the other, being, as it were, at home, and combining with itself. In this way, necessity is transfigured into freedom — not the freedom that consists in abstract negation, but freedom concrete and positive. From which we may learn what a mistake it is to regard freedom and necessity as mutually exclusive.

I contend that our historical moment and the knowledge it may deploy demand a re-imagining of synthesis as *reciprocal containment* — which allows us to maintain concepts' *mutual exclusivity*.

CONTEXT

The postmodern spatialisation of time,⁵ and the modernist alienation⁶ from which it arises, foreground the possibility of contingency in our historical moment: by embedding non-relation and disjunction as fundamental constituents of the contemporary individual, and defining its relationship to itself, its others and its world. As capital splits the subject into a paradox of mutually exclusive pieces depending on the task they are instructed to perform — a mouth, a hand, an ear — a significant experiential ground arises. This has been alluded to by Reza Negarestani (2008, 195-207), who contrasts the openness that “comes from the outside” against negotiated, “economical openness.” I read this polemic as claiming: the exteriority of transcendence is not achieved through false claims to liminality or compromise, but rather the submission of the individual to its nonhuman alienation. **The Contingent Subject** becomes possible in a society where the social fiction of the individual is both *absolute*, and *absolutely disproven*. This is given pressing relevancy by the historical ground of the coming stage of capital, which in its quantum technological revolution unveils **the Fiction Model** within its cultural dominant. Finally, it is justified by the ontological ground of Cantor,⁷ whose demonstration of multiple infinities forms the basis of Badiou’s (2013a) ontology of multiple, processive truths. Taken together, these allow for the possibility of **mutually exclusive reciprocal containment** and, in turn, **the Contingent Dialectic**. In these, we may conceive of the unimaginable: that which lies outside the givenness of ourselves. Such an endeavour is the only true heir to the meaning of Schoenberg, the composer who understood and captured the materiality of the beyond.

THE FICTION MODEL

The quantum computer heralds a dramatic change in our relationship to reality: capital’s normalisation of quantum weirdness from specialist knowledge to everyday use-value will have far-reaching superstructural effects. “The first quantum revolution gave us new rules that govern physical reality. The second quantum revolution will take these rules and use them to develop new technologies” (Dowling and Milburn 2003, Introduction). To this should be added: those technologies, in turn, will create a revolution in culture and thought via the establishment of their own cultural logic (Jameson 1991). As subtle, nuanced and reciprocal as we know the base/superstructure relationship to be, the “vulgar” Marxist insight that the modes of production are the ultimate determinants of cultural experience is essential in its austere understanding. For, as

⁵ See section 5.1, “The Logic of The Axis (Introduction).”

⁶ “In this environment where time is transformed into abstract, exactly measurable, physical space, an environment at once the cause and effect of the scientifically and mechanically fragmented and specialised production of the object of labour, the subjects of labour must likewise be rationally fragmented” (Lukács 1971, 90).

⁷ See footnote 9.

technological forces incorporate extra-perceptual transcendence, it allows us to read the stage of capital defined by quantum technology as a moment of great opportunity for reimagining aesthetic form and the limits of the possible.⁸ I hold that the nature of this coming epoch demands artists propose a model of how their work intervenes within the structures of experience.

THE CONTINGENT SUBJECT: A MANIFESTO

Defining terms as: “the individual” as that which is imposed by non-human structural necessity; “the subject” as that which is freely created in an ongoing process of self-actualisation; and “a totality” as a complete situation that can combine mutually exclusive elements (ie. other totalities) within it.

The individual experiences a totality of imposed fictions (by evolutionary necessity that mediates data input and psychological process and drives, the resultant social ideology which mediates drives and thought content, and the random intersections of these which determine their realisation upon the individual, and then the relationship between this and its realisations in “the other” at all levels of social interaction, real and otherwise) and is composed of constitutive fictions (these as their sedimentation into a monadic, material “individual”).

The imposed fictions are a negation of reality, and combine into a series of totalities through the establishment of rigorous immanent structure that incorporates their contradictory elements.

Art is a fiction, which, when operating under the same mechanics, may function as a negation of those very fictions: a structurally cohesive and immanently complete artwork that contains and justifies its own contradictions can function as an aesthetic totality (beyond and outwith the social totality) in which non-conditioned encounters can take place.

Such art operates as a negation of the imposed fictions' negation of reality to reveal the positive content of that negation, thereby moving us to the limits of our phenomenal experience: the edge of the noumenal real.

Freedom (and therefore subjectivity) is possible through the restructuring of the structures that create us as unfree.

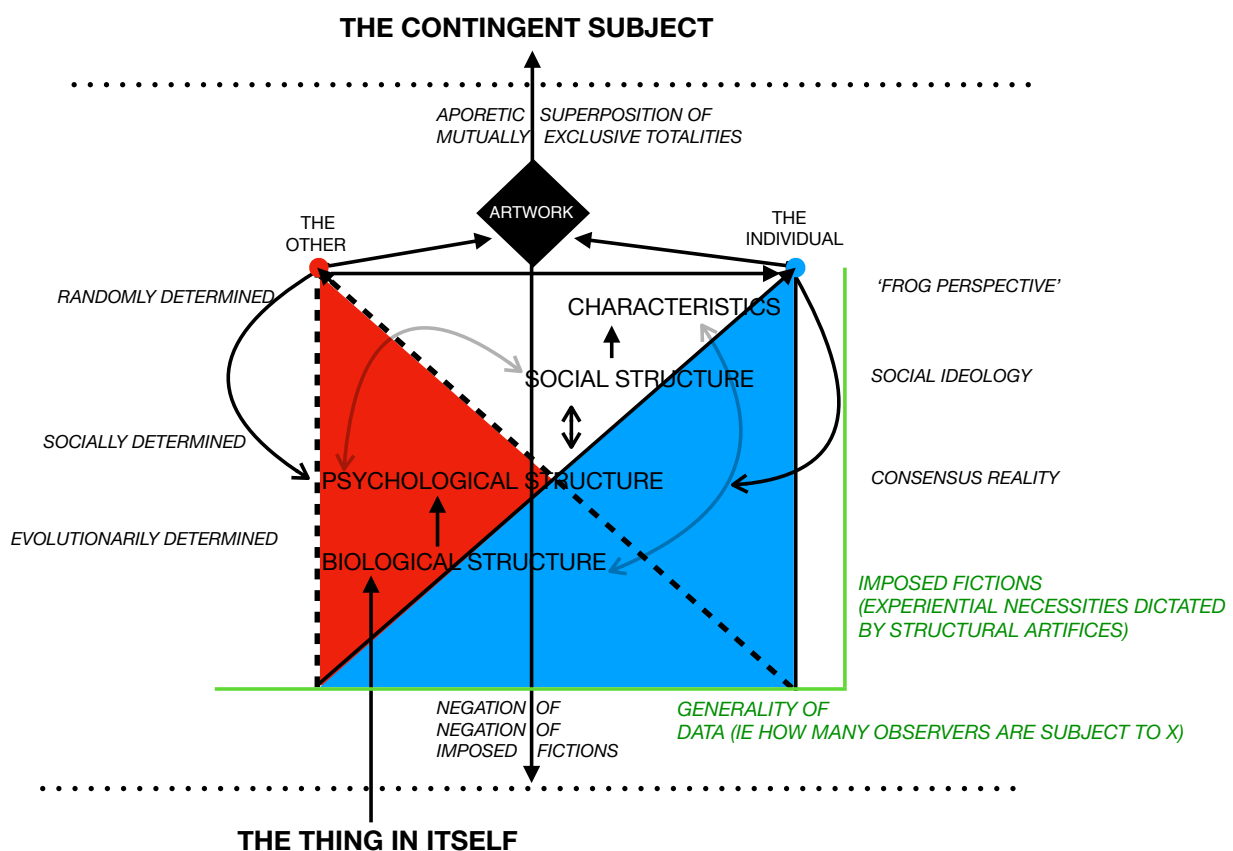
Transcendental intersubjectivity here gains new life: as the imposed fictions' filtration of external reality into constitutive fictions. Communities of observers share different elements of consensus

⁸ Indeed, already, all around us, popular culture reinvigorates forms and franchises with the dramatic potential of the multiverse. See, for instance, *Loki* (Waldron 2021) *Rick and Morty* (Harmon and Roiland 2013), *DEVS* (Garland 2020), *Dr Strange In the Multiverse of Madness* (Raimi 2022) and *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (Kwan and Scheinert 2022). Of course, this is only used to shore up existing structures through novel content. What if we pursued its implications at a formal level?

reality and ideological interpellation, while at the same time being constructed as absolutely separate from one another by that same biological construction and historically-determined social conditioning; in the artwork, we gain the possibility of transcendental community in our constitutive fictions being engaged and overcome.

The artwork of the future is that in which the subject is re-assembled by being incorporated into a community of meaning-creation: from individual to constituent of a machine that reveals the arbitrary nature of imposed individuality.

Fig. 1.⁹



That is: an aesthetic totality can function as a social totality by recombining mutually exclusive wholes (human and aesthetic) within it. Structural immanence gives this meaning; this immanence can organise information too great to be apprehended by a single consciousness, and allow it to contain structural breaks and arbitrary elements as fundamental constituents of truth. Functioning

⁹ For the avoidance of doubt, "X" refers to variables of input and "frog perspective" refers to a point of view from within a system.

in this way, the aesthetic totality can incorporate the individuals perceiving it within its structure as fundamentally necessary for its meaning production (and so integral to form). Combining mutually exclusive individuals outside of the social totality creates the possibility for a new form of subjectivity: an intersection of technology (ie. texts, artworks) and individuals: what will be termed “the Contingent Subject,” a trans-subjective agent assembled from multiple semiotic and psychological structures through aesthetic procedures.

Negation of imposed fiction occurs simultaneously in the assembly of individuals into a trans-subjective agent: truth and community are, as processes, indistinguishable.

THREE LOGICS: SPATIALISATION AND TEMPORALITY IN WEAR

Fashion-opera is impossible. Fashion will always collapse into costume according to opera’s hierarchy; or music will reduce to that of mere aura in support of the garment. It is the same with opera and dance; dance and fashion; fashion and poetry; etc. While opera itself represents an art form of plurality, it is one that still demands a stratified order¹⁰ — privileging the utility of one-directional, unipolar signification.¹¹

That is, unless we take Badiou’s claim that infinity is *generic* and *plural* seriously. This allows us a conception of theatre as a paradox of absolutes: a superposition, a multiverse of coexistent, separate, yet reciprocally containing worlds — one appropriate to 21st-century materialist knowledge. There is more than one universe; there is more than one infinity; there can, therefore, be an art of true plurality — one that contains even that plurality’s dissolution in meaningful structure; and that structure’s abdication in pure contingency; and the emergence of a logic from that contingency; and so on.

¹⁰ Despite this, at the heart of opera’s historical inheritance is the contingency of its art forms, and how these interweave to produce new demands upon one another, creating, often (as in the work of Monteverdi, Gluck, Wagner, Schoenberg, Stockhausen) explosions of progress in musical or dramatic development. Indeed, in its design, the opera house is an ancestor of the contingent subject — an immersive, tangled structure of beer vendors, sex workers, gossip and parties, the seats curving away from the stage to face one another rather than the drama itself.

¹¹ A historical manifestation of the truth of this might be the discipline of *Regietheatre*, which becomes most interesting when the text is made to bear a reading that it cannot sustain; the mutually exclusive but non-reciprocally containing disjunction between the opera and its production is often the site of fascinating and original art, but it is precisely this spatialised anti-relation, this absolute, non-superpositional break, that the theatrical work is upheld by. In my opinion, one of the greatest works of this century is Frank Castorf’s (2013) centenary production of the *Ring* for Bayreuth; in this, it is the limits of the work that become the material — how they may be negotiated and surpassed — but also how they can function as content for a discussion of subjectivity and history in the 21st century.

WEAR

Fashion is, like music, specifically concerned with time. On one hand, it is fleeting and ephemeral, a constant flow of changing trends with their momentary beauty made even more vivid by its impending obsolescence. On the other, great clothes have this magical power to almost freeze their wearers in time and protect them from the rot and decay of disintegrating life — as though together they had become an artwork, an object, that is: become *spatialised*. It is in the contradiction and interplay between these opposing aspects that fashion derives its meaningful beauty. This offers an answer to the impossible choice of modern temporality in composition — a spatialisation in which its *anti-human properties* can be harnessed to transcend capital's frustration of *all that is human*. This works according to three logics: firstly, that of the division and alienation central to spatialised experience, which we will call *the logic of the break*; secondly, through this alienation, the establishment of separate totalities (for instance, the immortality of the model transformed upon the runway) which shall be referred to as *the logic of the infinite*; thirdly, *the logic of the axis*, implied by the previous two, which is the (divided) intersection between historical periods of time (seen as absolutes) — and what these imply.

But fashion takes on another meaning in its incorporation into the methodology. For while it deals in time and its transformation, it is, in a material sense, *spatial* whereas music is *temporal*. And so, while both contain the spatialisation-temporality antagonism within their discrete logics, together they form an expression of this key contradiction. This gives the first meaning of the name of fashion-opera:

spatiotemporality, the contingent dialectic between object and process, disjunction and logic, space and time.

These are the themes of *WEAR*, the first in the fashion-opera cycle. Scored for piano and three sopranos with two dancers, it was developed with director and curator Gemma A. Williams to present the Irish designer Derek Lawlor's graduate knitwear collection at The Crossing in London. The plot, which contrasts biographical reality drawn from Lawlor and Williams with apocalyptic mythicism, could be read thus:

A designer prepares to display what will be their final collection: the world around them is disintegrating, a catastrophe brought about by the commercial use of time-machine technology. The arrival of an old friend sets in motion a series of recollections of their lives and the work that gave these meaning — but what significance can anything have in a world devoid of memory and reason? As spacetime unravels around them, they are thrown into a collage of passion, recollection and dream — until all that is left are the objects they created.

In this, *WEAR* uses the science fiction trope of the time machine to satirise a world where true stories are no longer possible. It asserts that multiple timelines, beloved of modern fantasy media, are a contradiction in terms — they could not exist alongside one another. Rather, they would be experienced as a constant erasure and reworking of history. This works as a polemical metaphor for the digital post-truth west, where the past seems so distant from its amnesiac, ever-modernising present — and where the online excess of information permits the justification of any argument imaginable. The opera makes the case that the only way forward from such a moment is not through the dull, methodical reconstruction of the past, but rather the possibility of something totally new, something utterly unexpected — that no one had thought possible before — that didn't need to happen — that was, until now, in this shifting, tumbling present, impossible to imagine.

THE LOGIC OF THE INFINITE

This constant stitching, unpicking, and restitching, and then re-unpicking, and so on, both in *WEAR*'s temporal progression, and across its compositional levels, has implications beyond the domain of signification — it is the textual ground for the contingencies that improbably hold the work together. In this way, the logic of the break operates not only upon the text but the work as a whole.

That is, the alienation of parts from one another unleashes their generic infinity, allowing them to function as totalities rather than constituents. This is in opposition to the conservative tradition in opera of simplicity, clarity, and apprehendability, a hierarchy that privileges dramatic explication — with music and all other art forms reduced to being in its service. Fashion-opera rejects this completely. In it, each discipline holds the same central position; is each an absolute; is the fundamental, the origin.

The significance of this is considerable, and I want to begin by explaining it using the following thought experiment. For according to this logic, we may glimpse the awesome metaphysical power of the aesthetic.

Imagine a person in a red dress at a bus stop. Imagine the most wonderful dress, and imagine the same person, the same dress, even, both on stage, and waiting on the street. On stage, it is the world that changes the dress. The costume only becomes what it is within the realm of signification activated by the artwork, of which it is a non-necessary constituent. But at the bus stop, it is the world itself that is changed, transformed by the power of the garment which, by aestheticising the scene, and through the negation of the negation of imposed fiction this enacts, creates reality.

Until the contingent dialectic, the latter dress was always doomed to become the former. We now know that this does not have to be its fate.

1. Setting

WEAR provides proof of this in its set design, where The Crossing — a truly huge, imposing and distinctive space — was transformed through the simple placement of Lawlor's work. Whereas costume would have turned its volumes into a mere (immersive) theatre, I hold that the garments did something far more powerful, like the red dress that makes the world itself real.

Fashion-opera is possible anywhere: in black-boxes, as in *ROBE*; or even within a screen, as in *WOAD*. But it is at its most powerful in a space that has not been sanitised for the rituals of theatre. In this way, three of the most successful stagings were *WEAR*, *RUNE*, and *Hareflight* due to the nature of their venues. The latter two are old buildings, each marked by a very specific historical character. Despite this, for both of these we made the decision to keep the house lights on and not employ any theatrical lighting. This was a wager upon the power of the dress over the bus stop, on the garment's capability to re-make its surroundings in its image. Without the enclosures and limits of the stage to carefully demarcate between the social and aesthetic realms, a contingent dialectic is formed: the work spills over through the windows, onto the streets, into the sky above as you watch a dancer become, for example, the waters of Khye-Rell — only to collide with a fire extinguisher, a man in jeans, an exit sign. A contingent dialectic between the world and its undoing, through which both are transcended.

I have no proof of this. In fact, it cannot be captured on film or video (and actually ends up looking almost a little underwhelming). But — it occurs. I have seen it. And if anything, this only reinforces my belief in its power: as a purely theatrical excess, one that escapes all documentation. The presence of the contingent subject itself.

2. Staging

Just as, in being addressed to this agent, the texts wield a narrative excess too great to be apprehended by an individual, the direction makes this the case biologically.

This can be seen in how *WEAR*'s use of multiple "stages" makes impossible demands of audience members' discrete perspectives. By staging vital events concurrently outside of a single eyeline, the work can only be "seen" in a physical sense by the group. This technique is similarly pronounced in *RUNE* and *Hareflight*: while *WEAR* was staged in such a way that freedom of perspective was encouraged, in *Hareflight* much of the dance took place *behind* the seated audience, and was only visible to those who were prepared to look backwards, through the

audience, away from the stage. Similarly, the use of balloons to hang the garments in mid-air allowed for vertical as well as horizontal axes of perception.¹²

The methodology's multi-perspectival conceit was commented on by Dominica Plummer (2021), who, misunderstanding the nature of her individuality, wrote in a review that

if *RUNE* as a whole fails to connect in live performance, it is because each disparate part of the event commands the whole attention, whether it's the singing, the playing, the dancing, and yes, the fashion. It's a challenge to take in so much in one gestalt.

It is more than a challenge — within the fiction of one's own individuality, it is impossible.¹³

3. Collections

This leads to a central principle of fashion-opera, which is the fundamental, absolute nature of each discipline. In this way, creative participants are free to work as they choose without (or, indeed, with) collaboration. It is fiercely anti-interdisciplinary in that each aspect of the work must be complete in and of itself: the creation of the contingent subject demands conflicting, mutually exclusive perspectives, reciprocally contained by one another through the work's power of producing structures from its immanent creative force.

This means, for instance, fashion collections that have already been made in a wholly different context can be featured within a work as both what they are and have been, and something entirely new: like the use of Lawlor's graduate collection in *WEAR*; or Renli Su's fashion design in *WOAD*. This is not a repurposing, or an archive display; rather, the contingent dialectic reinvests an (already) complete totality with another that is paradoxically opposed. Similarly, in creating new

¹² It is worth contrasting this with its postmodern inversion. Jameson (1991, 31) comments on that cultural dominant's "paradoxical slogan: namely, the proposition that 'difference relates'" in that the heterogenous disjuncts of postmodern culture demand to be read through "differentiation rather than by unification;" thus, in a reference to *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (Roeg 1976), he claims that

the postmodernist viewer...is called upon to do the impossible, namely, to see all the screens at once, in their radical and random difference; such a viewer is asked...to rise somehow to a level at which the vivid perception of radical difference is in and of itself a new mode of grasping what used to be called relationship: something for which the word collage is still only a very feeble name.

In fashion-opera, like the relationship that the contingent dialectic organises, the difference is external to the individual, and can only be captured by the group.

¹³ Rather than the gimmicks of immersive theatre, this is the tradition of the fashion show and early modern and ancient theatre: the amphitheatre that staged the festivals of Aeschylus, London's Globe Theatre, and even, as mentioned previously, opera houses — all remarkable technologies for producing contingent subjects.

collections, as with KA WA KEY's capsule release for *RUNE*, the house is freed to work according to the logic of the garments themselves, rather than creating to the impoverishing limits of a brief.

What is striking is the way that this manifests *contingency as causality*, rather than a *causality from contingency*. This is not the Hegelian notion of a retroactive synthesis where arbitrary fragments become re-invested with temporal direction.¹⁴ Rather, pure spatialisation is revealed to contain its own logic — a meaningfulness shorn of causal relation. The dancer's garments for *RUNE* offer an example of this: not only are they at odds with one another in style and material, but are divested of their single scripted "purpose" (the transdimensional "Waters" through which Kes sails), and, similarly, exist only in a negative relation to the pieces worn by the staged singers. While the effect of this is not that of an organised whole or neat signifying totality, neither is it that of decentred plurality or meaningless assemblage. It is the organising force of pure contingency and the appearance of multiple absolutes, as the critic Mark Berry (2021) apprehended in the relation of the opera's elements to one another: "asking what came first was less beside the point than a question that never arose."

4. Dance

Like its counterparts, choreography is free to work according to its own demands — as an infinite, separate totality. But, because it bears the most similarity to the other disciplines, sharing elements with each of them (as some of the others do not), our production of the cycle used, in the choreography's global locations, a subtle positioning through the logic of the break.

To show this negatively: dance in fashion-opera does not function as an explication of the drama, as in, for example, ballet. But neither is it a random appendage grafted upon the music like much experimental opera and music's use of movement. On the other hand, though dance exists both in space and time, it cannot be deployed for synthesis, or used to bring a reconciliation, a dialogue, between fashion and opera, or the arbitrary and the causal. Such an act would collapse the contingent dialectic.

And so dance must become the opposite of a reconciliation — it is *displacement*; a cleaving, a cut, according to the logic of alienation: a separation of the drama from itself.

For though the singers are often presented as stationary, performing from scores, they are not in concert or semi-staged. Through the metaphysical insistence of the garment, they enact a static

¹⁴ "The key philosophical implication of Hegelian retroactivity is that it undermines the reign of the Principle of Sufficient Reason: this principle only holds in the condition of linear causality where the sum of past causes determines a future event — retroactivity means that the set of (past, given) reasons is never complete and "sufficient," since the past reasons are retroactively activated by what is, within the linear order their effect" (Žižek 2012, 213).

drama.¹⁵ This, via the contrast of the activity of the dancers against the singers' inaction, works to displace the primary events onto the choreography: to form an antagonism between stasis-sound and movement-silence. Within this relationship, the dance occupies an infinite multitude of spectra in relation to meaning and signification. In *WEAR*, aspects of the choreography move between total dissolution and total signification of the themes, and the specific instances of movement themselves occupy a contingent relationship to the drama. In *ROBE*'s first act, the dance is mobilised to emphasise the "spaces" in the narrative, such as the Storyteller's intrusions, and in this way create signification through structure, while the content remains utterly separate. In *WOAD*, the movement is integrated into the sung performance as physical theatre, but remains estranged from the text. In *RUNE*, a similarly alienated relationship is created through game-choreography that is stitched to the opera's storyline only through the necessity of ending.

This intensifies the function of the displacement in the refusal to occupy a space — but which, through its occupation of a variety of relationships within the cycle, achieves immanence rather than postmodern "flight." It is the logic of the bombmaker rather than the nomad: a machine for infecting structure with movement, and movement with structure: the reciprocal containment of two mutually exclusive concepts — stasis and entropy.

5. Audience Participants

It should be obvious that, according to the fundamental and absolute nature of each of the artworks, and the mutually exclusive perspectives of the audience demanded by the methodology, one is free not only to engage in interpretation, but in cataloguing the work within a genre — a tradition — and its strategies of meaning-production. *WEAR* may be a fashion exhibition; *ROBE* a score; *RUNE*, a ballet; *WOAD*, a play. Though this sounds like an abstract philosophical concern, it has a distinct material effect.

An example of this — which is so quotidian in its everyday reality as to be considered banal — can demonstrate its significance. It regards performances of *WEAR*, which was presented three times in two different venues. To take the 2019 run at the Bridewell Theatre as a case study: the two audiences for the two nights were audiences *for entirely different shows*. Friday night was a fashion audience, Saturday, an opera audience. This altogether transformed the work. At the former, participants wandered through the set, examining the clothes as the production was underway, colliding and interacting with the dancers, recording the experience on Instagram; at the latter, they stood motionless around the periphery, attempting to remain as still as possible, policing one another's perceived disruptions with the usual social tools.

¹⁵ We should not forget that stillness can be as thrilling as its opposite: throughout, there are always moments of interaction or performance — even in the most indefinite, vanishing ways.

Now, this is merely a description of the external habits that a practice fosters. But it speaks to a greater ontological question of how a work's being organises its manifestation, and further sustains the argument concerning fashion-opera's establishment of contradiction in the entity rather than (only) its analysis. For while this instance offers a clear break between two different volumes of individuals, and the visible impact of their respective characteristics, other evenings have included these audiences within them, with each containing the other's mutually exclusive perspective — such as the original 2018 performance of *WEAR*. Two individuals in the same venue at the same time, but like two versions of one person split across the multiverse, they are situated in two separate, mutually exclusive events, reciprocally containing one another by virtue of the fact that *they are the same*.

6. Performer Participants

It should be no surprise that these logics impact performance practice also. Here I include a quote from an interview with Kelly Poukens (2019) following her performances of *The Designer* in *WEAR* in both productions and *The Storyteller* in *ROBE*.

When you take two things that aren't really connected with other, and you have to find a connection between them, your mind is going to have to work in a very different way. That's how I feel when I perform fashion-opera. It's not that you are just performing a piano and a vocal line, it's a series of ideas, colours and feelings that you have to exert creative effort to make connections between. The way I think of it is as a pencil and a pancake: two 'strange' things, and to connect them together you have to push yourself further than you normally do. It's very easy to find a link between a pencil and a piece of paper, but when you have two 'strange' things, your brain has to go further, you have to be very creative in a way you couldn't before. Every time I've finished one of your pieces I've learnt a lot about myself and my way of performing — and it's something unique, I always find something I've never done before.

7. Text

Poukens goes on to reference not only the nature of the art forms but the compositional methodology, particularly with regard to vocal writing. One of the most important consequences of the logic of the break and the logic of infinity is the separation of text and music as fundamental absolutes. These imply a number of methodological principles.

Firstly: *the poetry of the libretto must exceed that which can be caught in music*. Language may be strange, complex, unwieldy; the story multi-layered, fragmentary, excessive. The libretto is read from rather than projected, allowing the world of the text to be perceived according to its own internal logic — that of reading, of books, of the visual element of the line, and the internal,

imaginary monologue of the reader. *WOAD*, *RUNE* and *Hareflight* developed this further by incorporating typographic design into the poetry; for example, in the spaces between words at the end of *WOAD*, the dissolving sign of the hare in *Hareflight*; and the excess of both words, fonts, shapes and even un-scored dialogue that characterise the libretto of *RUNE*.¹⁶ This is, of course, another demand upon the limits of the individual perspective — to move from the text to the drama, to the music, to the fashion, to the dance, and back, perceiving all of it at once. But, as with the excess of the musical material, such infinities only allow greater freedom: to traverse these worlds as one wishes — to trace one's own path between textual apprehension and the ecstasy of abandon.

Secondly, *word setting need not obey the sense or perceivability of the language*. This is perhaps at its most pronounced in *WEAR*, where the vocal parts are written at the top of the range of both sopranos, with the bars often understood as blocks rather than organisers of strong/weak stresses for the metre. This creates a pervasive affect both of apocalypticism and brittle, luxurious beauty — thus conveying its own form of sense alongside the separated poetry. Rather than impoverishing it, such an act frees word setting to its own highly expressive, multiplicitous potential. It can be used developmentally, moving from, for instance in *RUNE*, isorhythmic overlays¹⁷ to the poetry's metre across the course of the work¹⁸ before climaxing in impossible demands of speed (in performance), polyphony (in apprehension) and the dismissal of metrical realisation altogether.¹⁹ It can also work non-narratively to control expression, as in *WOAD*, which is divided into two contrasting sections of processive and arbitrary organisations: the first four scenes see a gradual move towards traditional word-setting, as though the text were coming into focus; scenes five to seven use a variety of strategies in an arbitrary order. Though the shape of this has no specific meaning, the diversity of approaches (and the respective temporal and spatial organisations of the two sections) embody the opera's theme of absolute change and contingency.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the following stylistic trait in the cycle: that vocal writing often occupies a different musical world to that of the ensemble, justified by core musical procedures. While not a strict principle, by creating a sense of its separation through immanence (rather than mere juxtaposition), the previous aspects are intensified.

¹⁶ *ROBE* and *WEAR* use very subtle elements of these ideas also.

¹⁷ See *RUNE*: track 2 “The thing is, I don't feel any older” on the album; page 16-46 in the score.

¹⁸ See *RUNE*: track 8 “I clasp it. It is like touching a water-damaged page” on the album; page 109-132 in the score.

¹⁹ See *RUNE*: track 11 “Transdimensional Canal II: “Sing it, then”” on the album; page 158-178 in the score. Specifically, the mezzo-soprano's line between bars 1340 and 1388, taken up by the soprano from bar 1390 to 1412.

Ultimately, it is not a case of whether an individual understands the work, and then may go home, content with their entertainment. It is a question of whether the contingent subject is given the space to emerge. The piece is not a riddle to be solved. It is a process of enabling reality and revolution — produced by all participants, writers, performers and audiences.

These ideas relate the logic of the infinite to the logic of the break via the question of insurgent negativity. The dictum is this: to do the opposite of the prevailing liberal consensus regarding “opera” — to crush the meanness of its imagination, the arbitrary stupidity of its rules. We must reject it as we reject its reactionary politics, as we reject the institutions that facilitate such well-written rubbish. For the relation between the two logics is ultimately thus: *the break opens upon the infinite*.

5.5 THE LOGIC OF THE AXIS (CONCLUSION)

Ultimately, all of these considerations can be considered historically by apprehending our contemporary moment as the production of the contradiction between modernism and postmodernism. In this way, we can read the previously stated manifesto on the contingent subject as a production of a historical truth, entirely “contingent” upon this moment in time, awaiting the production of a future defined by the material basis of the quantum computer. The artwork appropriate to this age is one that is both closed and open; and for meaning creation that is produced by the reader, but contained by the work’s logic. How?

The participant enters a system structurally orientated by the work’s immanence, beyond the limits set by the social, biological and physical. The work’s immanence nevertheless organises information which in its excess, complexity and use of breaks, aporias and spaces, demands that the participant themselves produce meaning through an original, creative effort. If this seems paradoxical, we must remember the Lacanian lesson on the lack as constituent; of Badiou’s on the in-existent and the generic nature of truth: all realities are composed of meaning and non-meaning; structure and its negative require one another. Thus, through the logic of the break and the infinite, the contradiction (that is named *the logic of the axis*) between the modernist monad and the postmodern assemblage is held in a contingent dialectic. There is no author (Barthes 2001), there is nothing beyond the text (Derrida 1976), and there are no grand narratives (Lyotard 1984); there is not even this postmodern negative grand narrative, for the revolution comes inevitably, even eschatologically (Marx 2008), and in “These fragments I have shored against my ruin” (Eliot 2010) and their “insolent challenge to the stars” (Marinetti 2011) the impossible occurs: meaning beyond meaning.

This is exemplified in the story of *WEAR*; but that narrative’s passage — to uncover the truth of fragments — is also the passage from the individual to the group. The methodology produces

conflicting interpretations through its own immanence; a structure that allows, even demands, mutually exclusive perspectives that in fact contain one another via their simultaneous incorporation into its formations.²⁰

For me, the enduring proof of the contingent subject is the image of the audience at the world premiere of *WEAR*, curved around, watching one another as much as the show, looking from between the stages, to the fashion, dance, and drama, and up, finally, into the sky as the clouds parted to let a rush of violent light through the high attic windows. Alienated, splintered, smashed to meaningless pieces, we can never again be a community, or look to that sky as our ancestors did. But from those fragments — who can tell what wonders may emerge?

²⁰ One critic explained the experience of being a part of *WEAR* in the following way:

It's not just a show you sit back and watch, it really is a show that you engage with, partly out of necessity but also out of a desire to immerse both in the world of the story and the design which surrounds it. Similarly, it's a show that you could take to any place in terms of transposing its themes; if I hadn't of read the online book, I might have taken a completely separate narrative away. Some might not enjoy that level of freedom when seeing a show but if you can get into the right head-space, it's a liberating feeling (Sam Lawrence 2018).