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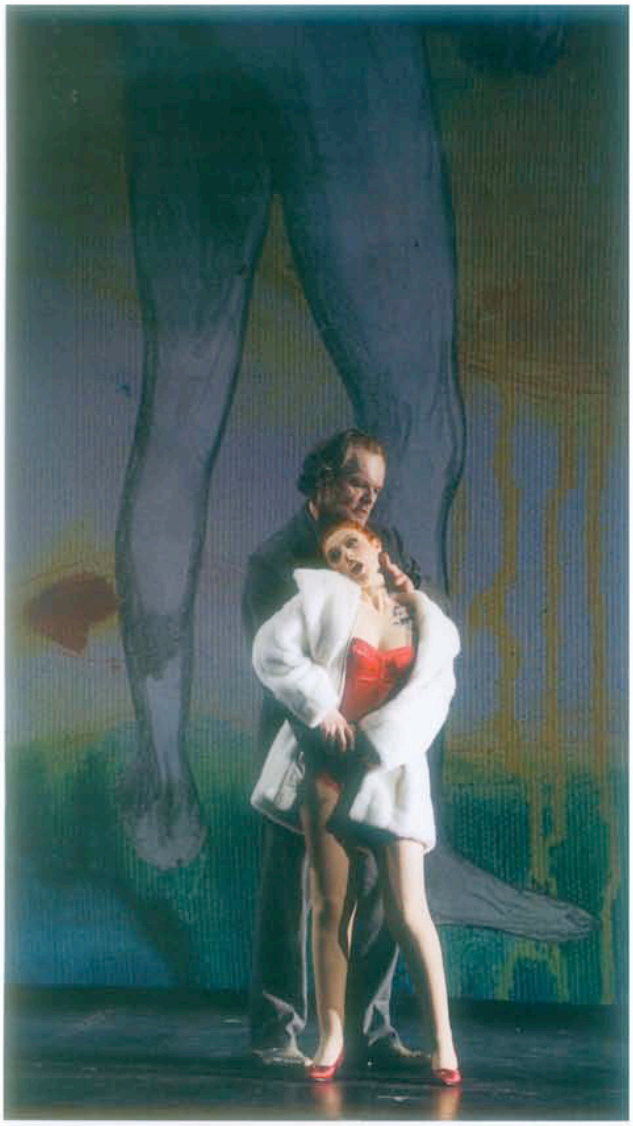
ArtReview

Daniel Richter: on set design, politics and why, if he'd had the talent, he would have been a violinist instead of a painter

INTERVIEW: **DENISE WENDEL-PORAY**



EVER SINCE OSKAR KOKOSCHKA designed the sets for its 1955 production of *The Magic Flute*, the annual Salzburg Festival has had a strong commitment to including the visual arts within its programme of music and performing arts. In the past it has commissioned sets from artists such as Robert Longo, Jörg Immendorff, Robert Wilson, Jan Fabre and Rebecca Horn. For 2010, his final season as the festival's artistic director, Jürgen Flimm continued this tradition by commissioning the German painter Daniel Richter to create stage designs for a performance of Alban Berg's unfinished opera *Lulu*, based on Frank Wedekind's expressionist plays *Pandora's Box* (1904) and *Earth Spirit* (1895).

ArtReview: *What is the importance of music in your life?*

Daniel Richter: Music is the most comforting of all arts. My musical taste is extremely varied: from reggae to blues to Scott Walker to Shostakovich and twentieth-century composition, especially German composers. I find there's nothing so beautiful as music. If I could be an acceptable violinist, then I would rather do that, I think, than be a painter.

AR: *You created the decor for Béla Bartók's opera* Bluebeard's Castle *(1911) at the Salzburg Festival in 2008. How did you come to choose* Lulu *for your second collaboration here?*

DR: In the autumn of 2009 I was asked if I wanted to do another set, and Jürgen Flimm gave me the choice of Alban Berg's *Lulu* or a new opera by Wolfgang Rihm. I asked a close friend, Jonathan Meese, if he would be interested in doing one of these projects, and we tossed it around. I finally opted for Berg because it stems from a tradition of modernity that was deeply rooted in the early twentieth century. I like to confront these traditions, not in the sense of competing with them but rather by relating to other people's works and interpretations. You can write yourself into a tradition by offering an expansion that nobody else has thought of, but that can only come from something that already exists.

AR: *The three large paintings that you adapted as sets for* Lulu, *and which function as backdrops for each of the three acts, are based on preexisting works that seem to be full of references to painters James Ensor and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.*

DR: As an artist I tried to use this imagery, taking the brushstrokes and transforming them, dragging them through the twentieth century into the twenty-first, which is what I think is always the goal: you want it to look modern or at least contemporary. But more than by Expressionism as such, I feel subconsciously influenced by a certain idea of German structure, or an idea that is expressionistic. I feel way more moved by French modern painting, but that's not at all what my paintings look like, unfortunately.

AR: *But one of your paintings for* Lulu *has associations with the nightmarish crowds in works like Ensor's* Self-Portrait with Masks *(1899) or the masklike faces of the public in Félix Vallotton's* Au Français, Troisième Galérie, Impression de Théâtre *(1909).*

DR: Vallotton, Vuillard and Bonnard had a strong impact on me, as did *fin de siècle* art in general – Munch, early Kokoschka, Ensor, Hugo Simberg, Emil Nolde. In 2000, when I considered these works once again, it struck me that the whole struggle for progress had declined with the end of the Cold War. Everybody knows this, but it was revelatory to me. If you look at the French paintings you mentioned, you can see how intelligent the image is. You realise that at the time it was done it was already self-reflective, that it was crossing the line into other artforms – Japanese woodcuts, photography – and expanding the whole tradition of painting, while using dots or presenting different brushstrokes. It was already what we consider, today, to be a contemporary artwork.

AR: *Do you think that the same thing holds true for the listener of* Lulu *– a work begun in 1928, employing the serial, 12-tone techniques then in use – and Wedekind's expressionist text?*

DR: It is even more obvious with music, because in the moment when it operates on the listener, he owns it – whether he is in the present day or in 1928. Less so for the text, but then I am not a big admirer of Wedekind's literature or the libretto of *Lulu*. But he does say something in his diaries that I was able to identify with: he states that the self-established traditions of the artist are only there to be used and broken. So, if I say one thing today and the opposite tomorrow, it's OK – betrayal as an artistic concept.

AR: *What inspired the stage design for the first scene, the portrait of Lulu?*

DR: The portrait is that of the singer who interprets Lulu, the French soprano Patricia Petibon. I had only seen her twice; the result is a sort of lowbrow version of the Klimt or Schiele women. She is kitsch, sweet, too sweet, and the painting is really an enlarged version of the centrefold of *Playboy*: it is Lulu spreading out to the public. The centrefold is an icon of the twentieth century and the first respectable pornography in our society. I tried to depict Patricia as very vague and watercolour-y, without being too vulgar, and at the same time using it to tie into the Vienna Secession tradition.

The structure of the opera *Lulu* is a mirror image; her social ascension in the first half is reflected as her demise in the second. The huge mirror with the big red blotch, which constitutes the second major set of the opera, seems to refer to this structural aspect. The mirror which replaces Lulu's portrait in Scene 3 of Act

I is the transformation of Lulu from a private person into a public person. She's someone who goes onstage to prostitute herself, to offer herself to princes. We can see her in the mirror, but she can't see us: this is her nonawareness of herself. It's also a reference to early Pop art, especially Rosenquist's.

AR: *The pyramid that you place on the stage at this point – which looks like a giant version of Man Ray's metronome (*Object to Be Destroyed, *1923) – transforms, little by little, into a central and functional piece of set design. Did you discuss that with the director, Vera Nemirova?*

DR: I decided the whole thing and then we had a debate about what the pyramid represents: hierarchy, remnants of a glorious past, a Steinway piano in a luxurious salon, an opaque object. It represents bourgeois life and its antithesis: the guillotine or a coffin. It's also just a really precisely shaped object like that at the beginning of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

AR: *Complex alterations in the lighting trigger numerous colour changes on the paintings. How did you bring those about?*

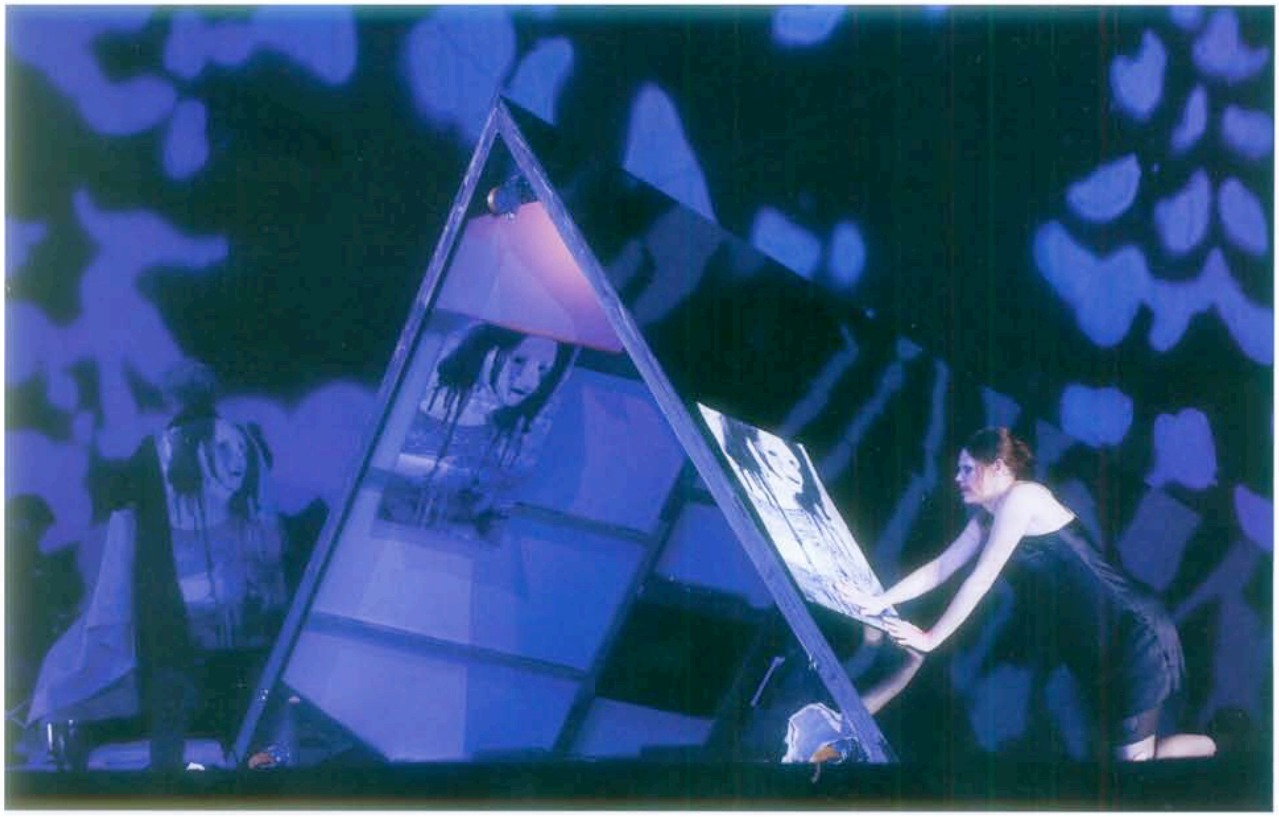
DR: These paintings are done in such a way that they can only evolve with the light, which is absolutely indispensable to the finality of their realisation. Achieving this was a complex process, and I had conflicts with everybody in the production – especially the lighting technician, who had worked for directors like Hans Neuenfels and Patrice Chéreau, and the first thing that he said to me was that my stage set was not a stage set. It was hard, and even if I knew what I wanted, I couldn't always translate it into language that the lighting crew could understand. It is really a collective, complex process, which makes you very dependent on the offers that the lighting designer makes. The light is so essential because it can change from a dominant green into yellow, and the very thin lines into deep purple, creating an infrared effect. I wanted the thing to live. I wanted the paranoia of Dr Schön [Lulu's husband, later murdered] to begin with a pulsating red and a great moment, and I am grateful to the lighting crew for this, when Lulu appears and sings "Freedom, freedom" and an amazing red-orange light makes the painting glow; it is like looking at the tone.

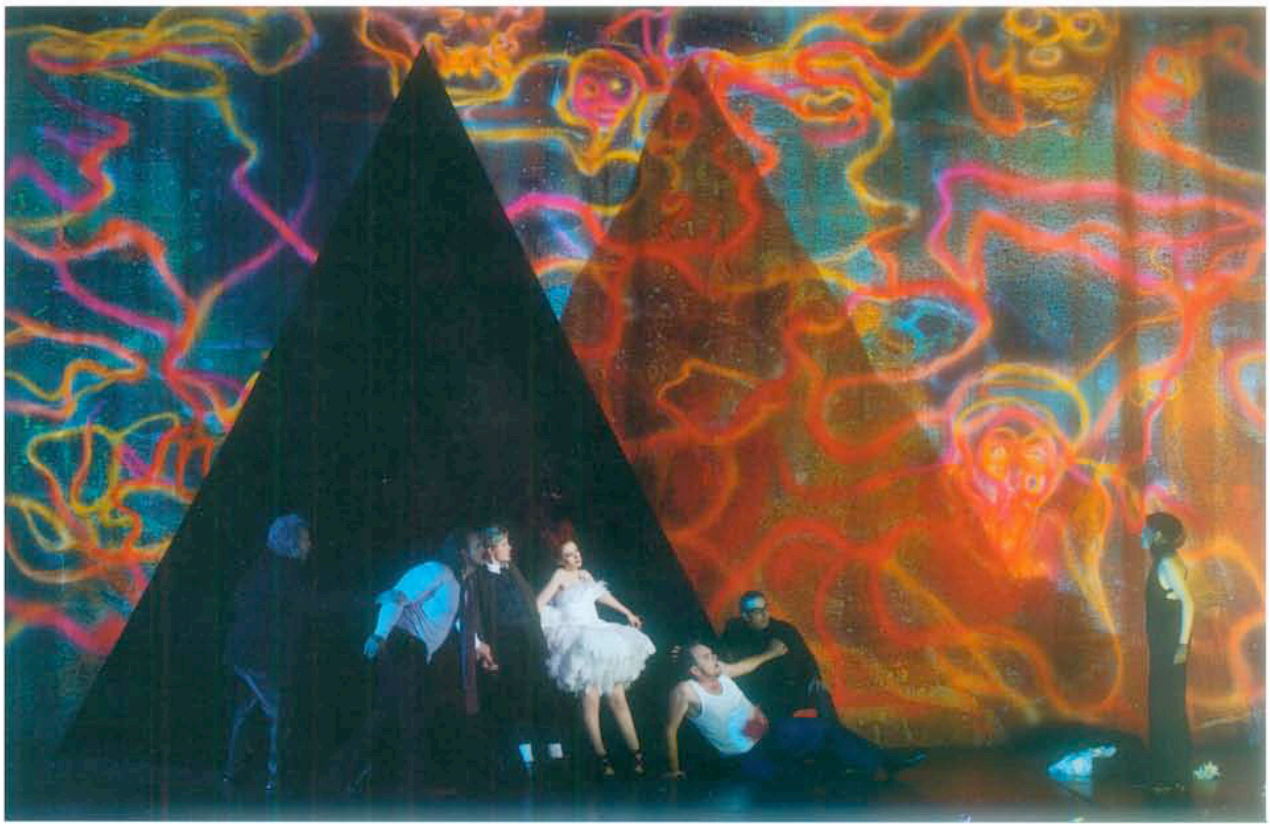
'Looking at the tone' is what Kandinsky was trying to achieve with his 'colour-tone drama' *Der Gelbe Klang* (*The Yellow Sound*, 1909), where the goal was a specific equivalence between musical tone and colour. What was so complicated for people of that generation, though, was that the search for modern painting demanded nonfiguration. Nowadays we do whatever seems right, because the debate about Modernism and postmodernism has lost its authority. Picasso despised Bonnard, saying that his art was locked in the nineteenth century: nowadays that is meaningless.

That's the problem of the temporality of a work of art. But there is also the question of how it is perceived in the moment, as in a museum, as opposed to sequentially throughout the duration of a theatre piece. The perception of an artwork within an opera is different to the contemplative process of looking at a single painting in the context of a room. It's just the opposite; it's 1,500 people sitting in that hall, from left to right, from poor to educated, from stubborn to shallow to sensitive, and they all kind of bring it alive. It's a collective. Even if we all look at them as individuals, we smell and breathe the moment together as the music evolves, and in that moment we're not alone.

AR: *The theatre is clearly an ideal forum for the themes that engender your work. Where within the operatic repertoire might you go next?*

DR: There is one piece that I have loved since I was a teenager, which has unfortunately become the cliché of leftist bad art, and that is Kurt Weill's *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. It's a very beautiful, weird mix of Gershwin, Brahms and Schoenberg, and in it are some of the most beautiful melodies of the twentieth century.





AR: *You also love Shostakovich, but a piece like his* Die Nase (The Nose, 1928), *for example, would seemingly pose the dilemma of historical and political context versus the true nature of the music as well.*

DR: *Die Nase* is a masterpiece, and Shostakovich is the tragic, struggling, politicised, hailed and dismissed figure he was under Stalin – a crucifixal figure of the twentieth century in my eyes. I see him as very different from Furtwängler or Strauss, who collaborated with the Nazis. He was more of a hysterical madman, and you hear that in works like his 1944 piano trio in E minor. I can't distance Shostakovich from his music and the man from the Soviet Union at all.

AR: *Shostakovich is a prime example of a political artist. Do you feel yourself to be one?*

DR: I can't compare myself to a figure like Shostakovich, but I do consider myself as political. That is really where I'm coming from, but at the same time I'm not very moral about it. In art, I'm searching for contemporariness, something that is unknown to me and not necessarily political in the sense of being active.

There was a moment in the 1970s, thanks to the productions of Patrice Chéreau with his famous Ring Cycle and the first three-act version of *Lulu* in 1979, where there was a glimmer of how opera could be intensely political. I think this opportunity still exists, but for that you need people who are immanently political and not just moralists or bigots. The problem is also that directors don't destroy a form; they take an opera libretto and try to give it a provocative interpretation, which is mostly disappointing. How often has the bourgeois form of theatre been destroyed in the last 50 years – every weekend – so that in the end you just don't care. As a political person, I want change in the streets and the society, which can be reflected in the arts. Everybody jokes about the stupidity and conservativism of the audience, but this is also lying about oneself as an artist. I don't like that attitude; I don't like it from [the philosopher] Boris Groys and I don't like it from stage directors.

AR: *Groys says that political art does not exist in the contemporary art market.*

DR: He's a person who thinks he knows it all but who never has to deal with public response. Those who really respect and love art trust the people. I am interested in truth, which is a very vague word. I like the 'truthfulness' of art.

AR: *So in art we are not only dealing with the different questions of movements and aesthetics but with the unfolding of truth.*

DR: There is still too much dogmatism in art, whereas there are so many artforms that offer something profound. I am not a one-man political party who says that painting must go in a particular direction – I do my stuff and I hope that it makes sense for some years, and I hope others do the same.

ALL IMAGES

Alban Berg's *Lulu*, performed at the Salzburg Festival in 2010, dir Vera Nemirova.
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