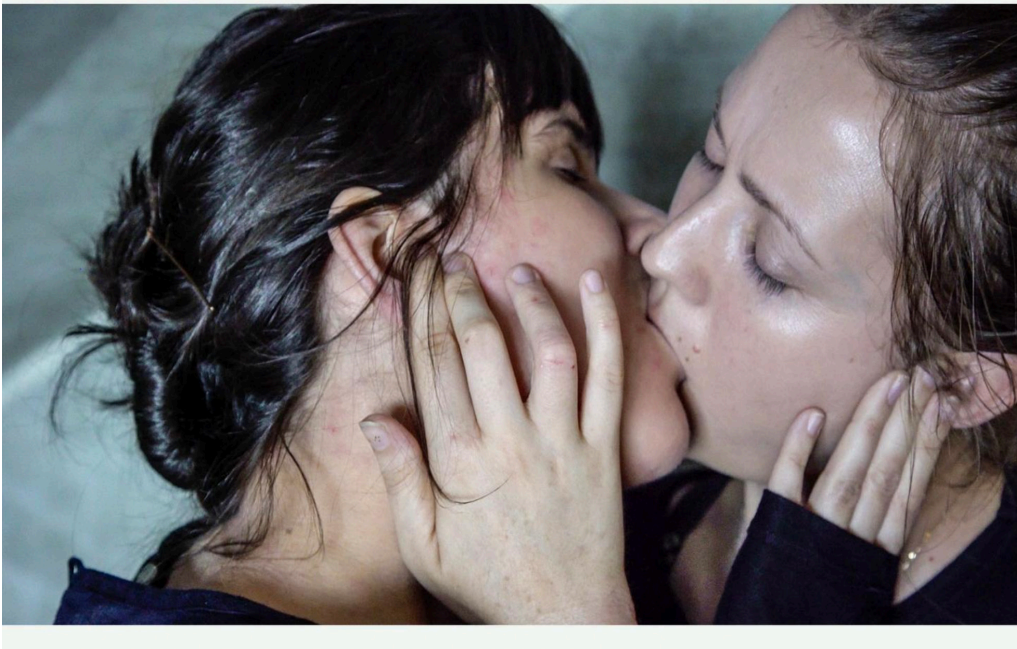


Wallpaper*

Oliver Beer's mouth-to-mouth performance art resounds through Paris' Opéra Garnier

By Amy Serafin, September 30, 2021



Oliver Beer, *Composition for Mouths (Songs My Mother Taught Me)*, 2018, HD with sound, 4mins 10s and 4mins 05s. Commissioned by the Biennale of Sydney and the Sydney Opera House with generous assistance from the British Council. Image © The Artist. Image courtesy the artist; Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London; and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne

This week, the Opéra Garnier in Paris is vibrating with strange sounds, at once contemporary and primitive, first composed by the British artist Oliver Beer in response to a crisis.

In 2017, Beer was in the bowels of the Sydney Opera House, exploring its sound frequencies as part of a residency, when activists climbed the building's façade to protest against the conditions of refugees on Manus Island. Though Beer was sympathetic to their cause, the protest wreaked havoc with his plans. Since the opera house was a national monument, the national guard showed up, found Beer and his singers rehearsing in the foundations, and kicked them out as a potential security threat. Beer managed to sneak his way back in, but was ultimately locked out, and had to quickly come up with a plan B.

Exploring the acoustics in architecture

Trained as a musical composer, Beer (who created a 'Vessel Orchestra' for his 2019 solo show at the Met Breuer) works with the acoustic fingerprints of architecture, asking vocalists to stimulate their natural harmonics. 'Since I was a kid, I could hear the notes of buildings,' he says, explaining that a room is like a seashell, constantly making its own sounds.

When he found himself on the wrong side of the Sydney Opera House, he led his four local singers to an external nook of the building, then asked them to lock lips and treat each other's bodies as architecture. 'The acoustic space that they're working with is

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the empty mouth of the other person that they're singing through.'

Because their mouths created a seal, he says that sound could only come out through their noses. 'Something wild and magical happened. It was like a third voice appeared at the meeting point of those two voices. They were literally playing each other's faces like instruments.'

Beer asked them to sing the first piece of music they could remember hearing in childhood. In Australia, with its complicated history, that request brought layers of significance (on top of the fact that the Sydney Opera House is built on sacred Indigenous land). One male singer sang an Aboriginal song whose words had been lost along with its language, while his singing partner sang a Christian missionary song he learned in the 1970s.

An immersive sound and video installation at Opéra Garnier in Paris
The artist filmed the experience for five or six hours, then distilled it into two short films, called Composition for Mouths (Songs My Mother Taught Me). At the Opéra Garnier, he has installed the work as an immersive sound installation for the first time. It is in the Espace Devialet, a room off the foyer outfitted with Gold Phantom Opéra de Paris speakers, renowned for their exceptional sound. A video screen sits at one end of the room, facing a round red velvet banquette and surrounded by a small army of space-age speakers.

The first video starts, a close-up of the two men locking lips, each one singing in turn while the other maintains the harmony, their voices vibrating together like spiritual chanting. Eyes closed, they look like they are kissing. The speakers' woofers flutter silently like wings along with the music.

In the second video, the female singers tilt their heads a little more, their noses flaring as they breathe. Each holds her hand to her ear to hear her voice, and in close-up it appears that she is gently cupping the other woman's face. The performance is extremely intimate – but then again, the human voice is an intimate thing. 'We are constantly penetrating each other, making voices vibrate' says Beer.

Architecturally, the opulent 19th-century Opéra Garnier is the polar opposite of its counterpart in Sydney. 'It is exciting to push a building like that to express itself in a different way,' says Beer, and he recalls taking a walk around the space while they were setting up the installation. 'This sound piece is super loud, and it echoes throughout the entire building. So as you walk through these extraordinary corridors, the sounds of these embracing singers make every atom in the building vibrate in synchronicity with a sound that came from the other side of the world.' §