

Critical Acts

Music and Its Double

The Immaculate (And Not-So-Immaculate) Conceptions of No Collective

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Immaculate Conception is a play of revelational music in two halves, six acts, and one intermission, which intends to reverse causalities (remove all stains) through the miraculous workings of uncanny resemblances (between a type and an antitype, so to speak), or at least give a fleeting impression thereof. [...] The hope is for such perturbation of causes to save us all from our original sins (which is of course that of conceiving and being conceived), not through expiation, but through sleight of hand. To see is to believe, to hear is to doubt, to concert is to bind.

—*No Collective/ensemble mise-en* (2016)

Extratheatrical (History)

The problem of Western theatre has always been that of doubles—the creation of derivatives that threatens not only to replace the original, but also to blur the very distinction between an extratheatrical origin and its performed derivation. As Rebecca Schneider articulates, the sentiment against theatre concerns “the threatening potential of the seeming Second (the double, the theatrical, the rib) to unseat the prerogatives of the First” (2001:96). Antonin Artaud’s ingenuity in *The Theater and Its Double* (1958) consisted in reversing this dichotomy and capturing its workings inside “theatre” itself: instead of the double *as* theatre, he posited a double *of* theatre—i.e., life. And in order to approximate this double, he proposed “the theatre of cruelty,” which, against other forms of Western theatre concerned with representing text, focused on the physicality of the stage and immediacy of its actions. Thus Artaud’s theatre reinstated an attack against

the age-old fear of doubles in theatre by *siding* with the double of theatre. Like the workings of double negatives, the double of the double somehow approximated extratheatrical reality.

When John Cage claimed in the early 1950s that music is encompassed within theatre, the composer of experimental music was framing music with a double, quite accurately transferring the mechanisms of theatre to the concert hall. It is well known that Artaud’s text provided guidance for this endeavor: “I believe that music alone only very rarely manages to introduce us to life. When we live, we see, we smell, we touch, we exercise our body every moment. [...]t is a question of developing a form of theater without depending on a text. [...] That was what Artaud had already envisioned” (1981:166). Music for Cage bifurcated into music and its double. And this double was an exact copy indeed. It added nothing new to the original, but only enhanced the perception of some of the qualities already present in

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Figures 1 & 2. ensemble *mise-en acting* as *No Collective* during *Immaculate Conception*, 22 January 2016. From left: Sabina Torosjan, Evan Runyon, Yumi Suehiro, Mark Broschinsky, Carlos Cordeiro, Maria Johnson. (Photo by *No Collective*)

music that had nevertheless been unacknowledged. Yet precisely for this reason, in Cage's eyes the theatrical double of music appeared to have less to do with representation than music *per se*. It was still a resemblance to be sure, but one that seemed closer to what it resembled: "Where do we go from here? Towards theatre. That art more than music resembles nature" (Cage 1961:12). As Cage explicitly states, theatre's resemblance to nature or life was for him—as it was for Artaud—not an immediate equivalence, but a proximity measured only *comparatively* in relation to "music." The latter remained the standard to define theatre for the composer who actually never left his field.

Following Cage, attacks on the mimetic and representational (i.e., theatrical) workings of the double would proliferate as various forms of antitheatrical performances in the 1960s. Cage himself admitted a lineage of sorts: "I

would say the 'art of performance' began with Fluxus [...] There is a deep relationship between Fluxus and Antonin Artaud. Isn't there?" (Daney and Fargier 1982:334). Yet the fact that these campaigns against the double were carried out by taking recourse to a newly set "double" ("nature" for theatre, and "theatre" for music) points to a disturbing revelation: antitheatricality is itself composed as a theatrical endeavor. Indeed, the interplay of original and double (of original that poses as a double, and double that appears as original) has been the core mechanism of theatre *itself*. As Gregory Bateson once observed, the line separating an action from an act of action is always vague (1955:179), and theatre plays with this thin border, often exposing the duality between presentation and representation, as well as the ambiguity infiltrating this binary. Immediacy is always measured in relation to its derivatives—it is a theatrical effect. Theatre has incorporated theatre and its double all along.

In the case of Cage, the dismissal of this (anti)theatrical mechanism led him to a facile dichotomy. For the exclusive focus on theatre's resemblance to nature was a focus away from music's resemblance to theatre. Instead of exploring the theatrical double of music and its indeterminacies, Cage hastily reduced theatre to what is "seen" onstage during a music concert as opposed to what is "heard." Hence the famous dictum that follows the above quote: "We have eyes as well as ears, and it is our business while we are alive to use them" (1961:12). But for theatre, what is more important than the plural nature of our organs of perception is the plural nature of what is perceived. Music is theatre, not because it involves visual elements that cannot be reduced to the presentation of sound, but because the presentation of music itself harbors a duality. Simply put, one can never be sure whether one is in "a concert of music" or in "a play about a concert of music."

Theatrical (Doppelgänger)

Immaculate Conception, a new work developed primarily by You Nakai in collaboration with Kay Festa and Dee Ali, along with the rest of the New York-based experimental music-theatre-dance troupe No Collective (Ai Chinen, Jay Barnacle, and Earle Lipski), premiered on 22 January 2016, at MISE-EN PLACE in Brooklyn, New York. It presented an interesting attempt to explore and radicalize the potentials of music and its double. For this commission from the up-and-coming ensemble mise-en, which specializes in contemporary music, No Collective was originally asked to compose two new 30-minute works, one for the ensemble and another for themselves to perform. As usual, what You Nakai and the group conceived was something quite different: an evening-length piece consisting of six acts of 10 minutes each, performed in turn by the members of ensemble mise-en and No Collective. At the base of this work was one brilliantly idiosyncratic contrivance: “No Collective” was formed as a double of “ensemble mise-en,” with exactly the same instrumentation, played by a performer of the same gender and even the same race as the musicians of the ensemble (Lindsey Drury as Maria Johnson on flute, Siv Lie as Sabina Torosjan on violin, Matthew Gantt as Evan Runyon on contrabass, Masami Tomihisa as Yumi Suehiro on piano, Davindar Singh as Carlos Cordeiro on bass clarinet, Brian McCorkle as Mark Broschinsky on trombone, and You Nakai as Moon Young Ha in the role of the conductor). In other words, No Collective “acted” as ensemble mise-en, and as a corollary, ensemble mise-en became No Collective’s double. True to the title of the piece, this peculiar setting blurred the question of precedence. Both the announcement and the program notes credited the work as being “composed and performed by No Collective as ensemble mise-en and ensemble mise-en as No Collective” (NC/em 2016). Instead of the conflict between a source and its derivation, two doubles now copied one another, as in an infinity mirror.

The work made full use of this simple contrivance. As explained in the program notes, through three rehearsals each, the two doppel-

gänger groups attempted to copy one another’s performance. But this whole procedure was conducted without either group meeting or even hearing the other. No Collective first created a 10-minute segment by only miming the performance on their instruments without actually making sound. This segment was filmed and passed over to ensemble mise-en, but with all the sounds muted. The ensemble, believing that No Collective was actually producing sound, then strived to recreate that music by copying the gestures they saw on the video. Since the video was not merely the score, but also the sole point of contact between the two doubles, every gesture seen therein had to be treated as part of the performance. This was not only true for the ensemble, who obviously had no choice but to assume that any subtle movement could potentially be contributing to the unheard music, but also for No Collective themselves who had to be responsible for every single gesture they had made during the 10-minute sequence. The erasure of sound thus meant there was no perceivable difference between the musical and nonmusical actions, collapsing the hierarchy between what is seen and what is heard that lay at the heart of Cagean theatre. Music and its double became indistinguishable, and as with movies, nothing in the video pertained to “nature” anymore. This also meant that the distinction between a performer being herself or being the flautist, or between being a musician and acting as one, was lost. Everything that happened was acted, and subject to reenactment.

Theatrical (Acts)

But these were preliminaries. At the concert, the sequence of six acts in two parts intricately developed a narrative of sorts in the first half, only to collapse the progression in the second. On a grand scale, therefore, the drama of doubles restaged itself in the relationship between the two parts: The second distressing the purity of the first. The description in the program notes did not correspond with what was staged, and the sequence of events only served to accrue a feeling of groundlessness. As many audience members expressed to me after the concert, *Immaculate Conception* seemed to present itself as a giant puzzle to be solved.

Let me try to portray what the audience saw and heard:¹

Act 1 consisted of “ensemble mise-en as No Collective” (according to the program notes—for the sake of convenience, let us call this “Group NC”) performing a 10-minute sequence of music composed of various combinations of instruments extending from solo parts, duets, and trios, to all five players playing together. But the musicians only mimed the gestures on their instruments without producing any sound. The sequence also involved the performers exiting the stage at various moments, talking to each other—but silently—when they were not playing, laughing, stretching, drinking beer, as well as a section where the flautist walked around while playing her instrument.

The lights dimmed at the start of act 2, and a live-feed video was projected onto the walls behind the empty stage. It captured another group—credited as “No Collective as ensemble mise-en” in the program notes (let us call this “Group ME”)—watching what seemed to be a video of Group NC’s performance from act 1, and discussing what was happening and what kind of music was being played. The commentaries, mostly fragmentary and accentuated with constant bursts of laughter, started from genuine speculation (“Is she really playing the piano?”), but quickly shifted to harsh ridicule (“I tell you that’s not how you play the trombone,” “This is the experimental part!”), ending in a sarcastic remark about the amateurish quality of the recorded performance (“but we are musicians and we do this for a living!”).

Group ME appeared in act 3 (though this time described as “ensemble mise-en as No Collective”) and performed the 10-minute sequence of music with exactly the same gestures as Group NC in act 1, but actually producing sounds. The extent of mimicry was impressive, including all the nonmusical acts of exiting the stage, conversing with one another, the flautist’s movement, and subtler actions of touching one’s chin or hair, all performed with precise timing. The music on the other

hand was noisy, dissonant, and at times careless—perhaps inevitably, since sound was a mere side product of imitated gestures, but perhaps also somewhat deliberately, to act out the amateurish “experimentalism” they had perceived from the other group).

These first three acts therefore evoked a straightforward causal progression of events, albeit with a minor confusion of monikers: Group NC performed their 10-minute sequence in silence first, Group ME then watched this performance, muted, and discussed what the sound may be, after which they—though now credited as Group NC—proceeded to reenact it. This was in essence a theatrical replay of the rehearsal processes, a condensed double of the preparatory work that the audience did not witness.

Following an intermission, in act 4 Group NC (now credited as “No Collective as ensemble mise-en”) performed the 10-minute sequence of miming in silence again. But this time, what sounded like a recording of act 3 was simultaneously played out from the speakers. Group NC thus gesture-synced to the sounds of Group ME.

In act 5, Group ME (now called “ensemble mise-en as No Collective”) performed the 10-minute sequence, although this time only miming the gestures in silence. The video from act 2 was projected again behind them, but now dubbed with a different conversation. The tone was much more serious, more earnestly focused on figuring out the details of the gestures and the overall progression (“This is the part where my girl puts her knees together and sits there for 10 minutes”; “Am I wearing shoes?”; “The only thing I hear in this part is *Peter and the Wolf!*”). The “live-feed” status of the video in act 2 was now dubious, thus collapsing the narrative that had developed in the first half. In the recorded conversation, performers in the video were addressed mostly in the first person or by the actual name of the musician whose role was being enacted. This created an uncanny feeling, as if the actual performers of Group ME onstage were simultaneously commenting on

1. The video of the entire concert can be viewed on the website of No Collective at <http://nocollective.com/i.html>. All quotes from the performance are from my notes, which I cross-checked with this posted video. I saw the performance live on 22 January 2016.

their own performance, which they were carrying out in silence.

In the concluding act 6, Group NC (still called “No Collective as ensemble *mise-en*”) performed the 10-minute sequence, producing sound on their instruments for the first time in the whole evening (and as I later heard, for the first time ever). The gestures remained the same, though this constancy only served to highlight the difference between this music and the one performed by Group ME in act 3. The sound was still fragmentary for the most part, alternating between sections of noisy atonal dissonance and slow long tones held in unison, with brief insertions of rapid exchanges of notes approximating free jazz (mostly between the bass clarinet and bass). But the performance was overall more confident and the resulting music solid, enwrapped at the same time with a flair of playfulness that in several moments incited big laughter from the audience (as when the flautist, holding the instrument to her mouth, nonetheless sang her part). Presented with the production of sound that fit convincingly to the movement of the performers, this final act seemed to explicate the idiosyncrasies of many of the repeating gestures we had observed—but not heard—throughout the evening.

Theatrical (Derivatives)

Frantic discussion among the audience ensued after the concert. Which group was No Collective and which was ensemble *mise-en*? At what point was the video, projected in act 2 and act 5 with different sets of conversations, filmed? Which group actually had those conversations? (If the first conversation was actually by No Collective members acting as ensemble *mise-en* musicians talking about their performance, it would explain the somewhat nervous and paranoid tone of the mockeries.) Was the recording to which Group NC



Figures 3 & 4. *No Collective as ensemble *mise-en** during *Immaculate Conception*, 22 January 2016. From left: Siv Lie, Matthew Gantt, Masami Tomihisa, Brian McCorkle, Davindar Singh, Lindsey Drury. (Photo by *No Collective*)

gesture-synced in act 4 really that of the Group ME in act 3? The simplicity of each act marked a strong contrast to the complexity of the overall piece. Or more accurately, things started to appear complex when we, the audience, tried to deduce how the sequence of events cohered as a whole.

At the heart of the puzzle was the play of doubles—the eerie proximity between the two parts, between one act and another, and between the two groups. The consistent attempt to bring the doubles as close as possible resulted in foregrounding the nature of its means: the theatrical effort for achieving precise resemblances, which generally goes by the broad name of “acting.” Whether in the endeavors of one group to copy the gestures of another, or the struggle of one performer

to sync her movement to the recorded sound coming out of the speakers, acting brought together dissimilar elements as well as fissured similarities. And the layers of acting accumulated to the point of tragicomical absurdity and unintelligibility. But just as the doubling of ensembles served to dismantle the hierarchy between original and double, the proliferation of pretenses had the curious effect of blurring the representational basis of acting: each act started to appear singular, despite its derivative status. Complexity resided in this indistinguishability between acting and its reference. Instead of the dichotomy between action and the acting of action, we were presented with the *action of acting*.

Immaculate Conception thus pushed the escalation of doubles until it collapsed the delineation between presentation and representation, original and double. The aim of this theatrical maneuver was explained in the program notes in the form of a strange declaration of intent—that the work “wished to reverse causalities” (NC/em 2016). There are two levels of causalities in any theatre piece. One is the relationship between the sequence of events that are staged, and the other is the relationship between those staged events and the concept that governs their occurrence. Even if one “reverses” causalities onstage by distorting the linear progression from an original cause to its derivative effect, these maneuvers can themselves be seen as a mere realization subordinate to the primary concept behind what actually meets the eyes and ears. What seems to escape the all-encompassing condition of theatre is its conceptual mechanism. And this invisible system finds its perfect correlative in the audience, who similarly does not appear onstage, nor enters the chain of causalities developed therein. For this reason, as spectators of theatre we tend to harbor a strong desire to grasp the mechanism of the piece—to solve the puzzle. And by solving it, we are released from dealing with the complexities of the actual events staged, and can happily take home—along with ourselves—a much more simplified truth of the matter. Like all things economical, this condensed solution provides comfort and assurance.

The overtly complex structure of *Immaculate Conception* was precisely aimed at discouraging (or rendering impossible) this reductive tendency on the side of the audience, so that causalities could truly be reversed on all levels. In other words, the appearance of the “puzzle” was itself a decoy—a stage prop, if you will. Throughout the concert, every causal ground one managed to glimpse turned out to be itself fabricated upon other grounds, similarly unstable and derivative. This “mechanism,” for instance, explains the projection of the video in acts 2 and 5 showing one group seeing and discussing the other group’s silent performance. What we saw in the film, twice projected, was none other than the figure of “audience” staged inside the work—our own double. And by rendering the identity of this double ambiguous through the dubbing of two differing conversations, *Immaculate Conception* ultimately dismantled the status of “reality” pertaining to the audience, the unmoving ground thought to exist outside the incessant play of doubles. The feverish discussion among audience members about how to solve the puzzle in this way stemmed from the anxieties of their own position in relation to what was staged. But the truth of the matter—since I do adhere to my role as a critic here—is far more simple: actuality lies solely within what is acted. *Conception*, if any, is thus rendered immaculate through the proliferation of doubles.

Extratheatrical (Economy)

But these are formalities. And formalities aside, there is an outside to the play of doubles in *Immaculate Conception* that evokes a peculiar “reality” the work is embedded within. There was a discrepancy between the two doppelgänger groups—ensemble *mise-en* and No Collective—that was in no way immaculate. Ensemble *mise-en*, a “contemporary music” group dedicated to “examining the unusual corners of the composition world”—in the words of one *New York Times* review (Kozinn 2014)—had commissioned No Collective, known for its experimental and conceptual works that problematize the very notion of music, because they “felt [they] needed to do something different” (Nakai and Ali 2016). In other words, a contemporary music group

wanted to perform a piece by an experimental music group because it would provide the “difference” that it needed—presumably to differentiate themselves from other groups in the market. However, despite this evident capitalization of experimental music, or perhaps because of it, ensemble *mise-en* did something quite extraordinary: it commissioned an evening piece without any intention of paying the composers. Nor were the No Collective members paid as performers.

Meanwhile, not only were the ensemble *mise-en* musicians getting paid for their services, but according to the poster and the program notes, ensemble *mise-en* had secured a long list of funders for the series ACOUSTIC+, which the concert with No Collective was part of: the New York State Council on the Arts, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, New York University, the Alice M. Ditson Fund, the Aaron Copland Fund for Music, and the Amphion Foundation (No Collective/ensemble *mise-en* 2016). The only obligation that seemed to ensue from this financial support, however, was to make a poster for the concert to show the funders that their money was well-spent—a poster that was only completed on the day of the concert and thus never used for actually announcing the event (Nakai and Ali 2016). Paying the commissioned composers was apparently not part of the funding requirements. And what was not dictated, was not necessary. Moral imperative seems to have merely replicated institutional demands.

The problem of music and its double in *Immaculate Conception* therefore reveals a *political* hierarchy and an *economic* flow of causalities that are not as easily reversed as happenstances onstage. “Contemporary music” and “experimental music” form an uneasy double in the world of new music today. The tendency is for the former to capitalize on the latter, while discrediting it as derivative (and therefore free) resource. Ensemble *mise-en* does not “examine” as much as “exploit” the “unusual corners of the composition world.” But the perception of an apparent hierarchy between the polished and professional music and its unusual and amateurish double must be reversed. In most cases, the repertoire of a “contemporary music”

ensemble comprises none other than the “experimental music” of yesteryear—ridiculed in the past, but accepted and institutionalized over time. Until the moment of acceptance from its double, experimental music remains a peripheral origin of what is generally regarded as “contemporary” in music. That the refined copy can retroactively author the primitive original is no secret in the social sphere of new music. The fear of double persists therein.

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