

Rock Operas: Derek Liddington conflates arena rock and Regency England

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Derek Liddington: Dandy Gangs: Performance, 2011. Images courtesy the artist and Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto.

By Charlene K. Lau

A whippersnapper once asked me at a party, during a confrontational conversation: "So, why *do* you write criticism?" Somewhat taken aback by his audacity, I responded about how I write to know art. Had I really done my research, I would have been able to cobble something together à la Irving Sandler who once wrote:

"But art, if it is of consequence, does have multiple layers of meaning. Shouldn't critics try to make sense of these? If they refuse, don't they miss the point of art?"

Emerging Toronto-based artist Derek Liddington's performance works are fine specimens for exactly this kind of inquiry. Full disclaimer: when I first saw documentation from Liddington's *Coup de Grâce* (2010) performance at the former Clark & Faria gallery (the gallery has since returned to its original incarnation of Monte Clark Gallery;

Faria has opened his own space, Daniel Faria Gallery in Toronto's west end), I was flabbergasted by it, and had no idea what I was looking at. So, when I was asked to write this feature, I gladly took up the opportunity to further investigate.



Derek Liddington: Coup de Grâce: Performance and installation, 2010.

Needless to say, documentation of *Coup de Grâce* doesn't replace **the real-live deal**. Functioning like a director (he does not physically participate in the performances), Liddington works with musicians, costume designers and choreographers to incorporate aspects of music, costume and movement/dance into his pieces. Viewed together, these elements are brought together as total theatrical show pieces. Often staged for unwitting spectators in public spaces, the resulting works have a 'pop-up' character, which seem to be only temporarily *in situ*. For Liddington, music plays a significant role in his performances. As he has no musical training, he often collaborates with classically trained musicians who then "translate" the score from a pop original into a classical idiom. The end product is a score where, in the act of translation, qualities are lost or gained (or both). Sound is manipulated for theatrical effect in Liddington's works, which also serves to convey historical, cultural, social and autobiographical meanings. Regarding his recent piece *Dandy Gangs* (2011) presented in his hometown of Mississauga, he says:

"I am interested in the history of opera in North America, and the class

distinctions with which it is associated. For Dandy Gangs, I asked soprano Kristin Mueller-Heaslip for a duet that had the feel of "The Flower Duet" from Léo Delibes's 1883 opera Lakmé. I saw the song as a struggle between two lovers, and wanted to keep that tension. The difficulty of this translation, in her words, was "to transpose the melody into the operatic idiom—to its shape and spirit in an incongruent style, and turning the result into an attractive piece of music." This piece, in the end, I like to think of as a romantic comedy in the broader scene of a tragic love story—the comedic interlude.

"The Flower Duet" reference not only stylistically translates a low-brow lyric to high-brow libretto, but reveals more class distinctions within classical art music itself. In classical music circles, this over-played piece is likened to classical "pop" music. Such songs elicit dual recognition: as high-art opera, as well as soundtracks for commercials. While classical in form, the duet has instead become ubiquitous by commercial means; "The Flower Duet" has been featured in advertisements from British Airways to Ghirardelli chocolates, and entertained mass crowds at events like the 1992 Summer Olympic Games in Barcelona (the latter of which is a vivid memory from my 10-year-old self). Already, several layers of oppositions are at play in the transposition of musical scores in Liddington's works.



Derek Liddington: Coup de Grâce: Performance and installation, 2010. The multitude of historical references extends beyond music to fashion. In the piece *Allegory for a Rock Opera* (2010), the viewer is introduced to two dandy-esque rockers (opera singers in real life) who are engaged in a loop of Italian-operatic versions of Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run" and "Born in the U.S.A." Each is dressed in a leather tailcoat, white turtle neck, light blue jeans, and riding boots. What would the original dandy Beau Brummell think? Brummell was known for his sartorial genius that reformed late-18th-Century men's dress in Regency England. His refined taste made him King George IV's favourite, as well as his fashion consultant. In other words, Brummell was the antithesis of a working class person and would have despised a working-class dandyism. But, I digress. The "Working-Class-Dandy-Springsteen-Flâneur", as Liddington calls this central character, has evolved through successive performances. In *Coup de Grâce*, we see a version of the "hybrid

Springsteen-Dandy" in quadruplicate. A reference to Rodney Graham's photowork *Fantasia for Four Hands* (2002), *Coup de Grâce* features four pianists, two against two, who play arrangements of "Born to Run" at an increasing tempo until exhaustion and eventual musical destruction. Pages of piano score are dramatically torn and thrown aside as the pace quickens, leading the viewer to wonder if there will be more damage. Will the pianos be set on fire? Picked up and smashed like guitars? Thrown off the stage? No, not really, but it is with this intensity that the duelling sides carry out their musical task, all the while sporting these uncomfortable looking, over-the-top costumes. I wonder, how does one play the piano in a restrictive leather tailcoat and exaggerated cravat? Answer: with great gusto. All three elements – music, costume and dance – come together in *Dandy Gangs*. For the general public, the performance might appear as a flash mob and, as Liddington suggests, an advertisement for no product. To the art-going public, this work was more an experiment in the psychogeographic of the (sub)urban fabric. Part *West Side Story*, part working-class warfare, *Dandy Gangs* tells the story of two duelling gangs through dance and conflict: the Stallones and the Warhols. In one such instalment held at Mississauga's Celebration Square (a civic city-space complete with fountain), two of the Warhols (one dressed in a wig and leather tailcoat and the other in a costume inspired by the singing bush from the film *Three Amigos*) sang an operatic arrangement of deejay Apache Indian's 1993 single "Arranged Marriage." Meanwhile, a member of the Stallones cranked out a continuous loop of the 1992 Guns N' Roses's resplendent hit "November Rain" on electric guitar from across the square. During this sonic face-off, members of both gangs engaged in a graceful and balletic clash in the fountain, constantly assembling and disassembling a Sol LeWitt open cube structure. Dressed in buffalo-check flannel (the Warhols) and leather/denim vests (the Stallones), along with appropriate wigs and masks, both sides duked it out in the fountain, using the cubes in place of pocket knives. As the cubes began to break, so did the music, disintegrating into a mess of sound. The gang members fell away while the lovers, one Warhol and one Stallone, were left to meet in the centre of the fountain, together at last. Liddington's autobiographical details really come through in *Dandy Gangs*, which is a common thread that runs through his work. One of the instalments previous to the Celebration Square staging was held at Kariya Park where, as a suburban teenager, Liddington would hang around with his friends.



Derek Liddington: Dandy Gangs: Performance, 2011.

Viewing performance art in the public realm and not isolated within the confines of a gallery-type setting can be a challenging, confounding experience. As a viewer, I always ask myself the question from the David Letterman sketch, "Is This Anything?". Liddington provides the answer: not only is it something, it is everything. While some contemporary art seems to deliberately avoid delivering anything of worth or interest to the public, general or not, he gives the audience exactly what they want: live art spectacle. Liddington insists on neither challenging the viewer, nor attempting to collapse the boundaries between art/artist and viewer. Rather, he says he is interested in the simple "act of looking, where no details are wasted," and "different levels of viewership" that the audience can achieve. For spectators, there are familiar and recognizable elements in the performances that, when combined, become maximized, bizarre and disorienting. Yet, Liddington's viewers are neither alienated from, nor subjected to,

painful interaction with the performers. Perhaps this is to be expected from an artist who suffers from a different kind of performance anxiety. He is very aware of the theatricality of performance art and is uncomfortable with performance artspeak.

As a result, Liddington sees his work more as sculpture than theatre, where the costumes of his actors are like movable objects. The outcome is a toned-down Matthew Barney-esque display of aural and visual splendour and, to use a Siegfried Kracauer quote, an "ostentatious display of surface." This surface is legitimate, and represents the malaise of our present times where everything is everything. If we are so beyond anything relatively sane in contemporary society, who is to say that we shouldn't keep going? The aspect of self-destruction, the "too much of too much" is a constant threat to our contemporary condition. We have come to the point of no return. Liddington's melding of low culture (Springsteen, Stallone, Guns n' Roses) with high art (Warhol, LeWitt, opera, contemporary dance) itself coerces the viewer into looking, watching, staring at the spectacle. We can't look away.

The fictive history Liddington provides in his performance works is uncanny and spectral, like seeing the past few centuries of Western culture flash before one's eyes. This, however, is how the story of the West is delivered today: read laterally, with meta-referencing of predetermined seminal developments. Gone are the universalizing tenets of a colonial and a classicist history (or the canon, if one prefers). Liddington equalizes these historical events into one great big moment. It is coherent when observed from the context of these contemporary times: everything happens all once. His performances synthesize disparate parts into a knowable mass of creative fiction. And that could not be more representative of the state of contemporaneity.