

NEW YORK

## Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Originale*

The Kitchen // November 7–8, 2014

"EPATER LA BOURGEOISIE!" ("Shock the middle class!") has long been the avant-garde's motto, and Karlheinz Stockhausen devoted his career to its pursuit. But the German composer, who died in 2007, found his work overshadowed by a tone-deaf remark he made soon after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center: He infamously called the event "the greatest work of art imaginable." This presentation of *Originale*, staged 50 years after its New York debut, sheds fresh light on the composer's early, irreverent theater work. Curated by Nick Hallett for Darmstadt: Essential Repertoire, an annual festival of experimental music, this version and its diverse cast update Stockhausen's bare-bones score for the digital age.

*Originale* is structured around a performance of Stockhausen's landmark quasi-ambient composition *Kontakte*, ostensibly interrupted by a parade of avant-garde figures competing for the audience's attention. The now familiar premise in our social media-saturated era—that watching outsize personalities, or originals, perform everyday actions might trump a traditional theatrical experience—stunned the audience during its 1961 Cologne premiere. When the piece traveled to New York in 1964, the cast included countercultural luminaries like Allen Ginsberg, Allan Kaprow, Charlotte Moorman, Nam June Paik, and James Tenney. Yet Stockhausen, already no stranger to controversy, aroused anger due to allegedly dismissive statements he'd made about jazz and folk music. A group of radical artists, including Fluxus's founder, George Maciunas, and filmmaker Tony Conrad, protested the event under the collective name Action Against Cultural Imperialism.

The 2014 performance of *Originale* aimed to rehabilitate these tainted perceptions about the work's elitism, with great success. (A group tried to organize a protest like the AACI's via Facebook, but momentum sputtered out before the show's two-night run.)

Hallett's casting reimagines the downtown spirit of the 1960s, carefully redressing the balance of that era's male-dominated, whitewashed art world with a number of artists who are female, queer, trans, and of color. With the Kitchen's black-box theater cordoned off to a quarter of its size, the audience is free to roam among various stations of action. Media artist Joan Jonas plays the Action Painter; the poet Eileen Myles takes Ginsberg's role; Alexandro Segade of the performance collective My Barbarian dons a Playboy Bunny costume and recites "naked cellist" Charlotte Moorman's monologue; trans performers Bishi and Justin Vivian Bond replace the models of days gone by. In tune with today's fractured attention spans, A.L. Steiner produces a four-screen film component of 3-D animations and social-media how-to videos, interspersed with live feeds from the room's four corners. Among the most compelling sequences is a contortionist-inspired dance by Narcissister—a masked performance artist who cut her teeth both on the burlesque scene and at the Whitney Independent Study program. In her turn as the Animal Handler, she dons a Red Riding Hood getup and a wolf's mask on her hindquarters. Performance stalwart Lucy Sexton pairs with dance artist Ishmael Houston-Jones for an especially poignant duet: Houston-Jones stands by her side, alternately racked with sobs and stoic, as Sexton reads from a melodramatic script, from the day's newspaper, and orders pizza for the crowd.

The actions seem simultaneously to celebrate New York's avant-garde past and mourn its gentrifying present. If Stockhausen's original *Originale* sought to disturb the audience's sensibilities, this restaging shows how far audiences have come. But with New York's rapid transformation from bohemian mecca to playground for the rich, one might wonder where, in another half-century, such downtown energies will reside. —Wendy Vogel

**Karlheinz Stockhausen**  
Joan Jonas as the Action Painter (left) and Ishmael Houston-Jones as Performer II in *Originale*, at the Kitchen, November 7, 2014.



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