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## About the old and the new

In this online publication, we try - not always successfully - to avoid a polarising duality between the old and the new. In this duality, the old would stand for traditional, conservative, repertoire etc., and the new would be contemporary, new creations, innovative etc. In the vital and extremely diverse opera practice in Europe, this duality just does not exist as a split screen. The bulk of the opera houses produce a wide variety of stagings of repertoire, sometimes referring to a traditional approach, and sometimes wildly innovative and most of the times something in between. Quite a lot of even the biggest houses have yearly world creations of new operas.

In short, the art of opera is in reality a very fuzzy and diverse mixture of tradition and innovation. And that's exactly why it remains a vivid art. In practice, nobody gains in a non-existing fight between the old and the new. All operas are (re)created differently, applying a wide variety of techniques and artistic approaches. Most of them are performed in opera houses ranging from historic to high-tech futuristic constructions, and everything in between. Some of them are performed in new spaces: outside on a lake, or inside industrial leftovers. New contemporary creations can involve dj's and rappers and electronic instruments and amplified voices, and some of them are written for baroque instruments. Some of them involve the active participation of the public, and some are in their concept barely distinguishable from a classic tradition of centuries ago.

It would be weird and quite counterproductive if education would hang on to a split screen approach towards the old and the new. Almost every future opera singer will have encounters with a wide range of practices ranging from the very old to the very new. Opera education should not try to protect future singers from the future. As today's practice proves, the future will embrace both tradition and innovation, often within the same house and even the same production. It is - frankly - part of the job.

In our working group involving opera educators and artists from the conservatories of Porto (Portugal), Vilnius (Lithuania) and Maastricht (the Netherlands), we had - in the margin of our Intensive Study Programs - long and sometimes heated discussions about the old and the new. We all strived for the incorporation of 'the New' in education. And we discovered big geographic differences in how 'mainstream' opera was perceived. In the end, this working group tried to construct an educational path to incorporate 'the new' in the education of an opera practice with a huge tradition.

Our recommendations try to stimulate the evolution of opera in all its diversity, through education.

# Recommendation I

## Approach innovation as part of a long tradition of renewal within opera

Opera sometimes feels as one of those last surviving 'high-arts'. It's expensive, it attracts an older audience, it plays centuries old pieces, its houses used to be covered in gold and red velvet. In this framing, it's widely considered as a doomed art from a lost era, with a dying audience.

(One wonders what's wrong with an older audience? Hip-hop concerts and rave parties are rarely blamed for their young audiences...)

In this context, it's easy to ignore that opera has always been (and still is) an innovative art, incorporating the latest technologies and trends of its neighbouring art practices. From the revolutionary acoustics of the Bayreuth orchestra pit to the video set and subtitles of nowadays performances, it renews its technology. With every bespoke staging of a (repertoire or contemporary) composition by contemporary singers, conductor, stage designer and director, it renews and expands its artistic language.

In contrast to popular belief, opera is not oblivious for cultural and social changes. Neither should opera education be. As the frontrunners of new opera practices, educators should acquaint themselves and their students with all the new techniques and trends within the real, live opera world. The rich opera tradition can only be kept alive by continually reinventing its artistic practice. That doesn't exclude traditional approaches: it builds on them. It expands the range of possibilities.

### • Teaching new, contemporary acting skills for all opera students

As people on the streets change through times, they change on stage too. Acting is a skill which evolves alongside societal changes. A whole range of acting styles can be asked for in both repertoire and contemporary operas. Often, these acting styles are imported from contemporary theatre or cinema. When the familiarity of the public with the characters on stage is asked for, a film-style, more subtle, lowkey acting style can be required, especially when live video close ups are projected on stage. In abstract stagings (think of Achim Freyer or Robert Wilson), a very formally encoded acting style could be asked for.

In the EOALAB research we encountered different acting methodologies. At the ISP organised by Porto, the American singer Claron McFadden talked enthusiastically about the 'SWARM' method where she teaches how to separate the singing from the rest of the physicality of the body. Even when impersonating a Pretzl, one should be able to sing the aria.

*This 'new acting of the voice', proposed in the context of this workshop, will enable the singers and performers to better connect themselves with their bodies and with the others, with their voices and emotions, as well as it will bring them a better understanding of what should be the meaning and the act of making new opera, today.*

*António Salgado on the Vox Ludos Workshop in  
"Singing and the Expression of Emotion"  
A Research on the Performative Process of Opera Making"*

All these methodologies require training: an aspiring opera singer should encounter the same body trainings and improvisation courses, regular actors do. Preferably on an almost daily basis. In today's opera performances, the acting qualities of the singers are more scrutinised than ever. Where an extremely solid singing technique is a sine qua non, the acting capabilities (and the emotional generosity, and the believability of the performance) are the qualities that could be the deciding factor at castings nowadays.

*Some of the participants said it would be great to have some "bodywork" every day at the start of the day.*

*A reaction on the Vox Ludos Workshops at the Maastricht and Vilnius ISPs*

*This innovation challenges the dramatic qualities of the singers: more and more stage directors ask (sometimes quite unknowingly) a 'natural feeling' and 'honest' acting style which can be extremely challenging while singing at full strength. The exaggerating acting style of the past is less in demand. So at least, young singers should be acquainted with very different acting styles and strategies. Ranging from film style natural acting, over dramatic and larger than life acting, till more coded and abstract forms of acting (Robert Wilson). In all these different styles, singers should realise that the public is understanding every sentence of the plot. More than ever, one can't get away with playing the general idea of the scene. As a singer, one has to engage dramatically with the subtext of every sentence, every word.*

*Peter Missotten (technologydrivenart.org ZUYD)*

*Opera as an Intermedial Art*

## • Familiarising educators and students alike with new technologies involved in contemporary stagings

With 'new technologies in opera' educators tend to refer immediately to the fancy stuff: virtual sets, live projections of the singers etc. Most of these technologies seem out of reach - or too far-fetched - for the opera training in a regular Higher Opera education Institute (HEI). But more obvious technologies which are used in almost every opera production nowadays, such as a live video feed from the conductor, are often overlooked. Standing mid-stage facing the conductor in the pit throughout the aria, is not an option anymore, even in the most traditional performances. Getting used to trust the video feed of the conductor needs trying too. It enhances the acting possibilities of the singers dramatically - literally.

This practice - providing a few live feeds of the conductor on different screens - should be standard in all opera training. And it is not extremely expensive or very hard to achieve. It could be the first step towards building trust on the technologies that are used regularly on all opera stages.

Amplification in opera productions is too often considered as a form of cheating: 'That is no longer traditional opera'. But live streamings - or recordings - of opera performances are no longer the odd one out. And the opera houses of today more often than not don't have the acoustics of centuries ago. The sets are no longer build as acoustic megaphones, the orchestra is bigger, the instruments more powerful... It is actually very rare to see an opera performed exactly as it was at its creation. Even a traditional staging is not traditional at all. We tend to have eradicated the acoustic technologies of centuries ago and have replaced them by louder - sometimes set the border of screaming - singers. By not replacing the old technologies by the new, we actually could have lost the qualities (subtlety, range of expression) of the past.

Although most of us would prefer rightfully the purity un-amplified sound, amplification can also be seen as an extra artistic possibility in the bag of the singer. It allows for new vocal techniques, new expressions, a new reach to a public far away in the open air... That is, if the

singer has been trained for it. For opera education, there are big opportunities here for all future opera singers. Nowadays, it no longer costs an arm and a leg to provide a decent wireless amplification system to the students, if it was only to be able to explore the possibilities and to experiment with new vocal techniques adapted to amplification.

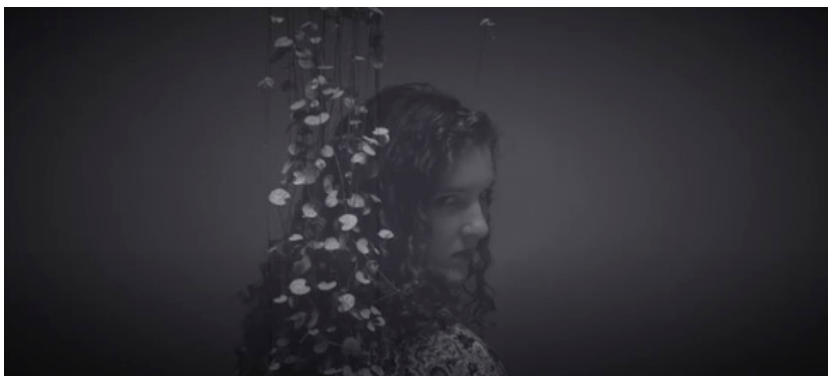
## • **Stimulating student driven experiments with new opera formats on new media**

The young student is the best ally for Higher Opera Education Institutes to introduce the experimentation with new opera formats. They are the digitally savvy generation. They are over-familiarised with using new communication technologies. They are glued to screens anyway. Alongside a well needed introduction into the very analogue world of singing, educators should stimulate the student's expertise in new media to experiment with new opera formats, for both repertoires as contemporary stagings. It could empower the student to take control over the possible futures of opera.

Here again, it's by no means a replacement or a threat to the physical vocal training. It is a - actually rather cheap - way to empower the students in their future career. For the Higher Opera Education Institute, it is a way to incorporate and embrace new expertise in the ever-evolving contemporary opera practices.

*The music reality which underpins the classical musical education differs greatly from the contemporary situation. The differences are apparent in the musical expression, not only in the great variety of styles and genres, but also in the variety of conceptual approaches, technologies and forms of production. Hence, a wider range of musical specialisations are required in the creation and production of music theatre. Composers, singers, instrumentalists, directors, actors, visual artists and computer programmers need to be primed with a thorough understanding of current and innovative practices.*

*Vykintas Baltakas (LMTA Vilnius) in  
[New musical reality and contemporary education](#)*





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## Recommendations II

### Opera as a Collaborative and Intermedial Art Practice

As opera integrates the storytelling strategies of theatre in music, it is inherently an 'Intermedial' Art. Evolutions both in the field of music as in the field of Theatre, infect its practice profoundly. New trends and technologies are imported and exported across these art borders. This perpetual infection keeps Opera at the forefront of the Arts. It is not a re-enactment of a past long gone, it is a vibrant, contemporary art practice.

This entanglement with the other arts requires collaboration between artists and technicians of these arts. It is a profoundly collaborative practice. This is not always reflected in the Opera Education. Too often, education is organised as if opera was just music, or as an entirely autonomous art form. This does not reflect the rich practice in daily life.

Collaboration with all its composing art forms is also for opera education a necessity if it wants to prepare singers and composers (and conductors and even musicians) for the real world outside.

#### **\* More cooperation with the other art forms involved**

A close collaboration with acting departments and/or schools in the vicinity is a first step into linking opera to its collaborating art forms, within education. These collaborations sound obvious but are sometimes far from that. Differences in approaches and styles are sometimes quite hard to surpass. But as 'good' acting - in different styles - becomes a vital quality for every opera singer, incorporating best practices from neighbouring acting classes is a must.

In a more ambitious approach, collaborations with very different art studies - fine arts, media art... - should be stimulated, if only at a student level. Providing practical support for such spontaneous collaborations could make the difference. Organising lectures from artists from different art practices - somehow linked to opera - are an easy way to open the peripheral view of the opera students. Opera is not just singing music: it's a collaborative art.

#### **\* Getting to know the other arts and artists**

A better knowledge of the composing arts of opera (music, theatre, and fine arts) will help the future collaborations of singers with directors, scenographers etc. Building a network with aspiring opera directors and set designers. Integrating rudimentary lessons on contemporary fine and performative arts within the regular curriculum of all opera singers. Providing the

possibility to follow classes (or even full-blown minors) in neighbouring arts.

If one contemplates the history of opera creation and opera stagings, it is a history of close collaborations between artists of different arts. These relations often start at the Higher education level: young artists meeting each other in classes, learning to appreciate their different practices. These collaborations are often at the hearth of opera renewal.

## **\* A new profile for an open minded (highly skilled) singer, open to co-creation and collaboration**

In selecting and educating opera students, the changing social status of opera should be kept in mind. Creating a wider diversity on all levels is the responsibility of each Higher opera Education Institute too. As the ways of working evolve in the opera practice, more collaborative skills and an open mind towards concretion are needed. This quintessential, if only to assure the survival of opera in the ever-changing structure of society. This requires new social skills which can and should be trained in regular opera education.

*Opera, by its textual nature, addresses themes of contemporaneity and as it did in the past (just consider, for instance, Mozart's Don Giovanni, Puccini's La Bohème or Verdi's Otello) and share its critical lens over society. "Culture and society can only benefit from that". This new profile might also provide a higher level of artistic singularity and create a space for the singer/artist bigger than only his/her voice.*

*Bruno Pereira and António Salgado (ESMAE Porto)  
A new singer's profile*

*New and open Profiles "The socio-cultural, artistic and also economic context have been playing an important role in the gradual transformation of Opera, allowing and obliging many singers, opera composers and opera students, generally speaking, to choose, beyond the traditional circuit, an alternative circuit to the field of opera which demands the choice of new ways of relating to the practice of collaborative and co-creative work around the Opera and the Music Theatre. This need for a more flexible and open profile of a singer, and opera students, may create proactive and attentive professionals to the reality that surrounds them. In this sense, opera may turn into this new artistic and cultural performance practice process which allows it to become intrinsically significant in the communities' history and also in the audiences' development."*

*António Salgado (ESMAE Porto)*





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## Recommendation III

### Education as a safe context for artistic experimentation

A solid technical and artistic vocal training is the quintessential building ground for a wide variety of vocal practices. During our Porto ISP, when asked about the challenges of singing contemporary compositions, the American Singer Claron McFadden - also known for her recordings of Baroque music - replied promptly: "Singing is singing." She stresses the importance of a very solid base training. After that, everything is possible.

***ISP Porto - an interview of Claron McFadden by Myriam Pascuale and Peter Missotten:***

*Claron McFadden has a very eclectic career. She grew up in the US and moved to the Netherlands. She came from early music (which was considered as a niche practice) when she was asked for a contemporary piece. Singers were scared to do contemporary music. So she also jumped into that niche. How does she manage these different worlds? Claron says it is about speaking different languages. It is approaching a different part of your brain. The vocal technique she trained made her use the voice in a healthy way. Singing modern music is not that different than singing baroque music: its all singing. But you need to do it in a healthy way.*

#### **• Don't scare away from experimentation as long as it is secured by a strong technique.**

Contemporary music isn't an infectious disease destroying voices in a snap. As long as students have a strong base technique, and are aware of (and comfortable with) their limits, experimenting freely with new contemporary vocal techniques, only enriches the artistic range of the student. Practicing with new technologies: amplified and electronically manipulated voice techniques, live video projections, computer generated backgrounds, compositions generated by Artificial Intelligence... all these experiments can lead to a unique expertise and style for the student. New intermedial opera practices can emerge from these experiments. Thus improving the chances of entering a professional career.

As most opera singers in practice meander between old repertoire and contemporary creation, this space of experimentation is beneficial for every aspiring opera singer. It helps them to define their unique approach to their artistic career.

## • Put students at the steering wheel of their opera education and practice.

Both at the 'Preview' Intensive Study Program in Maastricht, as at the last online ISP in Porto, students performed small operas of their own creation. The quality of these was quite encouraging. When students are left at the steering wheel of their artistic education, they don't end up against a tree after all. It generates enthusiasm and a positive attitude towards experimentation.

For the online ISP in Porto, students created three minutes online operas, created online - thanks to Covid19 - sometimes by students in different countries who never met for this project. It showed off at least their familiarity with digital tools. The possibility of creating an opera across the borders of countries, opens up a whole range of new possibilities, and widens the view of these students.

Education should open up to all the influences from the professional practice. Conservatory education sometimes tends to be more conservative than the market itself. Tight budgets sometimes are said to limit the scope of digital experimentation. But this as well is a conservative view. With the power of laptops and smartphones, a world of digital possibilities opens up, often at no extra cost at all. Especially since Covid19, the internet showed us the best of opera in the world, sometimes for free. This could lead to a diversification of the understanding of the opera.

### **Student - centered education**

*the focus of the pedagogical discourse should shift from the teacher to the student, from the musical product to musical processes and from teaching to learning; increasing emphasis on developing the complete musician.*

### **Student as a reflective practitioner**

*The rapidly changing environment makes it difficult to prepare instrumental/vocal education students with prescriptive instructions for all occasions and contexts. Instead, instrumental/vocal teacher education programmes should help students to learn to become reflective practitioners who are able to adapt their teaching according to the changing circumstances and needs of different pupils.*

### **Student's autonomy**

*There is a greater emphasis on more creative approaches, on developing student autonomy, on teaching students how to learn. Learning is seen in terms of developing ways of musical thinking rather than merely the acquisition of specific skills. Generally, the student's musical experience is no longer limited to the individual lesson with the individual teacher, and many young instrumentalists engage in a range of group learning contexts related to their instrument and to developing their general musicianship. (...) The teacher is regarded as facilitator and guide rather than as 'instructor'.*

*"Instrumental and vocal teacher education: European perspectives polifonia working group for instrumental and vocal music teacher training" AEC Publications 2010, Handbook <https://aec-music.eu/publication/aec-handbook-instrumental-vocal-teacher-education-european-perspectives/>*





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## Recommendation IV

### Education as the incubator of future opera practices

Outside of the vast amount of opera productions in the established opera houses (Germany on its own had 7082 opera performances in one season 2017-18), there is a growing alternative practice outside the big houses. As an example, the O. Festival in Rotterdam (formerly the Operadagen) features a vast amount of hybrid opera practices. Telling different stories in different ways to a different audience... Flirting with the ever-expanding boundaries of Opera as an art form. These new practices revitalise opera and reach out to new audiences in new spaces.



'A Revue' by Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe © 2020 Fred Debrock

It should be noted how quickly these 'outsider' projects are picked up in a regular opera circuit. The first hybrid opera 'A Revue' by the young performance artist Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe, in 2020 got raving reviews, and was chosen as one of the ten best theatre productions in Flanders. It was immediately coproduced by Flanders Opera, among many

others. Benjamin Abel Meirhaeghe is now part of the new artistic team of Toneelhuis, the biggest theatre company in Flanders.

Education prepares the future, building upon today's craftsmanship. Higher Opera Education Institutes should provide a creative space for the development of this future. It should train new tools needed for a different practice, alongside the craftsmanship inherited by tradition.

## • Reconnecting to socio-cultural diverse, new audiences, in unexpected spaces

The world became more diverse, inclusive and has new pre-occupations (social and cultural): these evolutions should be reflected in a new opera practice. This is a challenge for an opera education focusing on a faithful re-enactment of the past. The real challenge is to relink this past to today's society.

*It's also important to allow things, to make people dare do things. We need to experiment. We cannot stick to convention, like it's always been done. The complexity of the new music is also something that singers sometimes run away from, not only the use of voice. The way contemporary music is presented is sometimes repelling the students to join. Maybe we should tackle: first bring this music in, so language is not new anymore. And to give free space to body and voice, to find the pure space where you express yourself. Also, important that she stressed the conversation of the singer with the composer. That there should be dialogue.*

*Bruno Pereira (ESMAE Porto), during the ISP Porto*

Outside the classic opera houses, new opera practices are being developed, attracting new audiences that would find it hard to visit a classic opera house. This again requires the development of new formats, adapted to new spaces, close to the socio-cultural environment of new audiences. These formats could help to build bridges towards the rich diversity of opera practices. Higher Education Institutes could encourage projects that look beyond the walls of opera houses and create new hybrid forms of opera. Here again, by collaborating with other art practices - community theatre, rap concerts etc. - opera can show its intermedial strength again.

*"Focusing on how an artistic experience can face an experience of a landscape, develop new cultural and nature experiences and create new stage room and meeting places. The terms of the interaction between the audience and the actors change radically when one stops to consider the landscape as background/scenography for a stage event or performance and instead using the landscape's characteristics and historical layers involving the location with people, resources, history, heritage, and gives the audience /participants relationship and status as co-creators. Thus, enabling visitors and audience to transform into participants and co-creators, and what clearly changing the mean of performance for artists and participants."*

*Sara Erlingsdotter (SADA Stockholm) and António Salgado (ESMAE Porto)*

*In this new borderline performative context, Landscape becomes more than just a physical domain, a view, or a 'scenery' where artistic and cultural performances are played or re-presented to audiences. It becomes a meeting-place where the interaction between the performer, the audience and the structure of the work being performed is radically altered; a semiotic process in which all participants become expressively engaged in an act of deliverance and mindfulness, politically interventive and capable to enable radical transformations of the communities' life, of the space/time of their existence and, not less essential, of their development and emancipatory processes. It is, subsequently, a new significance process where music and musical structure, written and/or improvised, may be*

*engaged within a completely new relationship between performer, dramaturgy, audience and Land-Scape-Substratum.*

António Salgado (ESMAE Porto)  
*In-Between Time and Space*

- **Exploring new spaces and new economic models: both physical as online spaces. Developing new cultural and nature experiences and create new stage room and meeting places**

*“Social space is considered as a scenic space, with the ability to trigger ephemeral events and to give us clues about the way individuals project and organize their personal path and make sense of their lives, by reinventing them. Today’s new artistic proposals give rise to a plethora of real and virtual spaces with the potential to become scenic spaces. In this sense, the social space has become a privileged place for artistic production and for theorization in the field of social sciences. As such, space can be understood as an open narrative structure that reflects individual opinions and dramaturgies that, in turn, will contextualize a specific social moment. Thereby, we can put forward the idea that social and interpersonal memories play a crucial role in the creation of the scenic space. This is based on the assumption that the public space is a space where acting and performance are in strict connection with the artistic and operatic discourse.”*

Claudia Marisa, António Salgado, ESMAE)

- **Stimulating out of the Black-Box – New and Alternative Circuits of Opera Making. These practices will inspire and influence the ‘middle-of-the-road’ stagings of opera’s repertoire.**

Within the proliferation of alternative circuits of contemporary making opera which purpose is to come closer to the audience by getting out of the black box into the urban or nature landscape, creating by this gesture the possibility of crossing information with the landscape’s historical background, the public’s own history and the opera performative content; and by doing this giving the public the oper(a)tunity of being participative, not just by listening or thinking while they ‘comfortably’ seated on a theater chair, but actually by being participative as a part of the opera itself.

*Out of the Black-Box – New and Alternative Circuits of Opera Making* “Opera has been facing, since its birth, challenges and transformations that are consequence of the positive or negative interaction with the socio-cultural and artistic context of each moment in history. Surprisingly, in the last decades, there is a feeling that opera is losing the ability to rethink itself in line with the referred artistic and socio-cultural context of our contemporaneity. In the midst of the major opera houses in Europe we read statistics that point to the continuation of the demand for the Grand Opéra, with monumental interpretations within Opera Tradition. However, the proliferation of an alternative circuit around the opera is evident, with new repertoire being created or with bold approaches to an existing repertoire. Once again, the socio-cultural,

*artistic and also economic context is playing, of course, an important role in this gradual transformation.”*

## • **Creating engaged singers. Opera is a political art.**

Opera as an art is in an ongoing search of relinking itself with society, it would help if engaged singers (and musicians, director, stage designers, conductors...) brought society within the opera. Even if opera would be some kind of a pre-heaven for the elderly rich and famous (which it sometimes is in the fantasy of people who never entered the opera), it is a quite influential space. As an art, it should continue to ask the relevant questions on stage. Even if an immediate revolution is out of reach in some of the most conservative Opera houses, it can and should be prepared outside of them, in alternative operatic formats. These will turn out to be vital of the survival of that same opera house, refusing to relink with society. In this revolution, it would be nice to avoid the head-chopping part, but to use an immensely rich tradition as building blocks for a relevant and extremely diverse art form. After all, this tradition was built by small revolutions of engaged artists.

*This makes Opera a very political art form. It is one of these rare ‘high-brow’ art forms where approval and disapproval is vocalised very explicitly. A challenging staging at Bayreuth guarantees a stampede of reactions at the applause (and Booring), rivalling a football game. I vividly remember the applause of a regular performance of C(H)OEURS, an operatic performance directed by Alain Platel at Teatro Real de Madrid. Animated (and quite heated) discussions erupted at the third balcony between fan’s and foes of the piece, continuing onto the streets long after the presentation. Controversy between the new and the old is at the heart of the opera practice. That has always been the case. One shouldn’t take these musical revolutions lightly - after all Belgium was founded on an opera presentation.*

*Peter Missotten (technologydrivenart.org ZUYD)  
Opera as an Intermedial Art*

## • **More real-world/down-to earth/market activity modelling within the school**

Every renewal - and even a revolution - needs a good plan and some entrepreneurial skills. As an art, opera should not be exclusively driven by demand: it thrives on its exciting proposals by engaged artists to the public, not really knowing what to expect. A good thumb of rule of what the spectator expects: **Surprise us us, but don't scare us to death**. That happens to be the golden rule in good marketing.

This adagio put opera again in the middle of society. All progress - from Tangerine Blue iMacs, over strangely colored washing tabs to button-less smartphones... just to name a few - was in essence driven by exciting new proposals nobody asked for. This contemporary and engaged form of entrepreneurship has always been at the heart of art (and Art). It's time Higher Opera Education Institutes upgrade their curriculum and incorporate exciting new visions on the marketing and production of the future. After all, we're not training accountants of the past



*Komar & Melamid, America's Most Wanted, 1994.*

*Photo by D. James Dee. Courtesy of the artists and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.*  
This painting was based on a questionnaire on what Americans wanted their ideal painting to look like.  
In 1994.