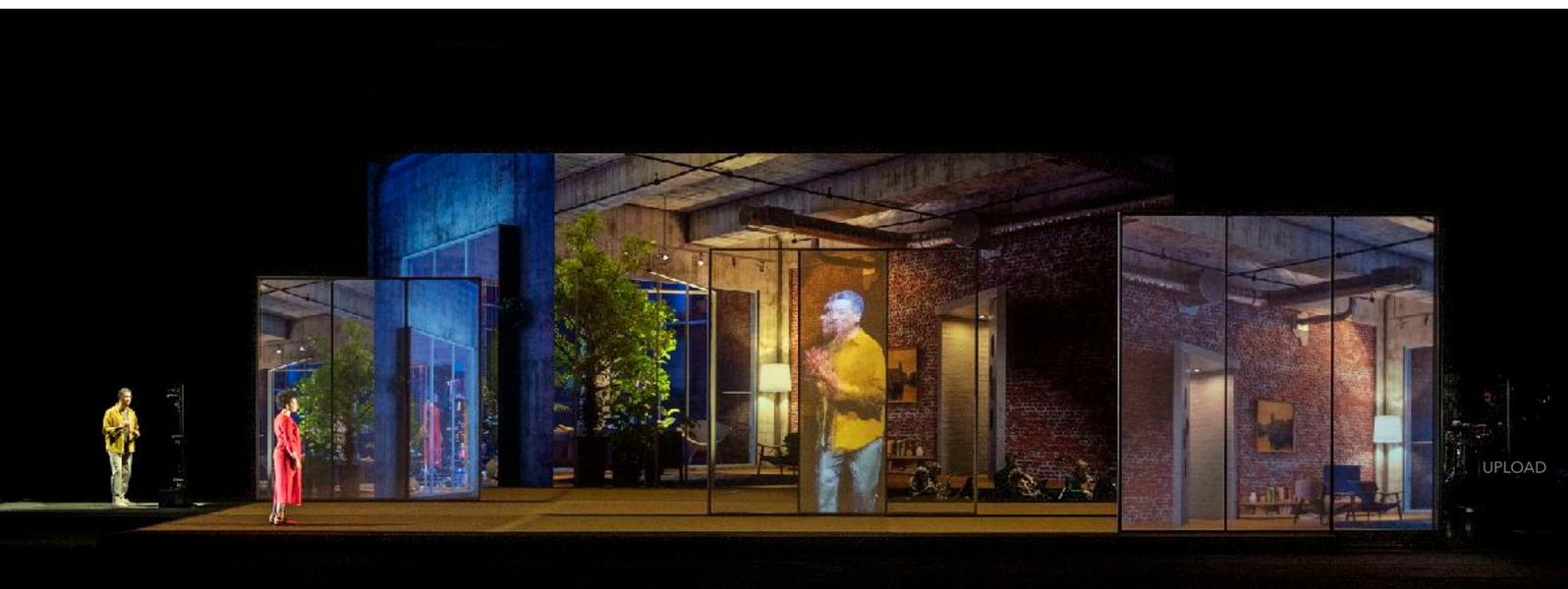


# MUSIC THEATRE WORKS

Michel van der Aa



WORKS IN DEVELOPMENT (seeking co-commissioners / co-producers)

<b>From Dust</b>	Virtual Reality opera installation	20 minutes	Available from 2024
<b>Theory of Flames</b>	Film opera (main stage)	100 minutes	Available from 2026

RECENT WORKS

<b>The Book of Water</b>	Chamber music theatre	65 minutes
<b>Upload</b>	Film opera (main stage)	85 minutes
<b>Eight</b>	Virtual Reality opera installation	15 minutes
<b>Blank Out</b>	Chamber opera	70 minutes

If you have any queries, please contact:

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# FROM DUST

## virtual reality opera installation

Explore your own identity with *From Dust*, a cutting-edge virtual reality opera installation composed and directed by Michel van der Aa, and performed by the mesmerizing vocal ensemble *Sjaella*.

You walk into a dark space. Soon you see a cloud of tiny particles before you, swarming in the air like a flock of starlings. When you dip your hand into the cloud, you feel a tingling sensation and the particles slowly transform into the shape of a woman. She steps towards you and raises her hand, inviting you to make contact. As you touch, a second version of her appears and splits away from the original. The eyes of these two people meet yours, and they begin to sing.

### Are you a spectator or a participant in this world?

During this 20-minute journey, each audience-of-one will take part in a personalized story. Through interacting with their surroundings, the audience will meet the protagonist and her five alter egos, performed by the six members of vocal ensemble *Sjaella*. The audiences themselves are the ones who create new worlds by walking through and touching the installation, bringing the various alter egos to life. Each alter ego represents a distinct character trait constructed from data that was provided by the audience during their "intake". Finally, the five alter egos are reunited with the original, forming a single character - who turns out to be the audience member in question!

With everything we touch, we leave a part of ourselves behind.

This multi-sensory experience will be tailored for each audience member with generative AI. Before each audience member enters the installation, they provide an usher with some personality traits, a visual description of an essential memory, and have a 3D scan taken of their face. This information is then processed by AI to ensure each audience member an experience that is truly their own. (All personal data and images are destroyed on completion of the experience.)

Van der Aa has made a career of integrating music and theatre with cutting-edge video and sound technology. His VR installation *Eight* garnered a headline in the New York Times, "A Breakthrough for Virtual Reality in Classical Music". *From Dust* builds on these groundbreaking achievements, and will tell its story through music, live interaction, volumetric video and immersive visuals.

***From Dust* is a 20-minute opera installation that takes its audience through a dreamlike universe of impossible spaces and optical illusions. As a tailor-made experience, unique to each audience member, it invites each participant to explore their own identity and discover the concept of a malleable reality.**

*From Dust* will be available for programming from January 2025.

Performed by vocal ensemble *Sjaella*

#### Team

*Composition, director:*

Michel van der Aa

*Dramaturg:* Madelon Kooijman

*Produced by* doubleA foundation

#### Praise for Van der Aa's recent VR work *EIGHT*

"A Breakthrough for Virtual Reality in Classical Music"

- New York Times

"Spectacular installation" - le Figaro

"Top score for music and visual heaven...a triumphant merging of technology and art"

- The Adelaide Advertiser

"Pioneering work and an unprecedented experience"

- ★★★★★ NRC

"Breathtaking"

- ★★★★★ De Volkskrant



# THEORY OF FLAMES

a film opera based on a true story

Being human means that we each see the world through our own constantly changing lens. Over the past decade, technology and shifting societal norms have removed many of the filters that once enabled us to separate fact from fiction. Lizard people taking over the world, hallucinating AI chatbots, 5G networks causing Covid are just a few examples of this misinformation and disinformation. We live with a strong need to know the truth, and an existential need to feel safe. With the uncertainty that accompanies periods of crisis and social upheaval, these needs go unmet. People looking for facts on the internet and social media can get lost in alternate realities.

**At what point does the person we love - and think we know - become a stranger to us?**

In *Theory of Flames*, a new opera by Michel van der Aa, we follow director Neola Balan as she is shooting a sci-fi film based on a recent scientific breakthrough: a team of researchers have succeeded in sending a message through space-time. However, a fire started during the experiment which destroyed the lab and killed the lead scientist. Neola's film delves into the technology's potential, and what it could have achieved had the lab not been destroyed. She investigates the cause of the fire and the scientist's death. In her all-consuming quest for the truth, Neola becomes increasingly isolated, lost in a world of alternative facts and conspiracy theories.

The boundaries between Neola's film and her life on the film set on stage gradually start to blur. A mysterious woman starts appearing in the film footage. We are presented with different perspectives on the narrative, each as plausible as the other. Ultimately, alienated from her colleagues and her partner Marianne, the film's lead actress, Neola completely loses her grip on reality. In a surprising plot twist our preconceived notions are shattered, leaving each member of the audience to construct their own interpretation of the truth.

***Theory of Flames* is a profoundly human story about someone becoming trapped in her own created reality, and its impact on the people around her.**

Van der Aa has made a career of integrating live music and theatre with cutting-edge video and sound technology. His work is often inspired by the ways in which science and technology affect the human condition. Building on the groundbreaking achievements of the 3D opera *Blank Out*, and the film opera *Upload*, *Theory of Flames* will tell its very human story by combining music with live action, pre-recorded film, and immersive live film. These elements are inextricably bound to one another, each constantly enhancing the other, to the extent that ultimately, neither the characters nor the audience can tell what is real, and what is not.

WP Dutch National Opera - March 2026  
GP Staatsoper Berlin - Fall 2026

## Team

*Composition, director, libretto:*  
Michel van der Aa  
*Musical director:* Elena Schwarz  
*Dramaturgs:* Madelon Kooijman, Niels Nuijten  
*Duration:* 90 minutes

## Cast

*Neola* - Mary Bevan  
*Marianne* - Emily D'Angelo  
*Josh* - Roderick Williams  
*Woman on film* - Julia Bullock

Choir (12 singers, on pre-recorded film)

Large instrumental ensemble (27)

## Praise for Van der Aa's recent opera *Upload*

"A masterly weaving of music, film and motion-capture technology...the work of an artist in absolute command of his toolkit"  
– New York Times (Critic's Pick)

"Highly original...Fantastic music"  
★★★★★ – NRC

"Unimaginably stunning beauty"  
★★★★★ – Trouw

"I have seldom experienced opera more intimately"  
★★★★★ – Bachtrack

*Upload* won the 2022 International Opera Award in the category 'digital opera'.

"Ein genialisches Gesamtkunstwerk"  
– Opernwelt (*The Book of Water*)



# THE BOOK OF WATER

chamber music theatre

for actor, string quartet and film

2021-2022

Duration: 65 minutes

[Watch here](#) | Password: rain

Narrator/Geiser (live) - Samuel West  
Geiser (film) - Timothy West  
Corinne (soprano, film) - Mary Bevan

Composition, director, script - Michel van der Aa  
Dramaturgy - Madelon Kooijman  
Light design - Bart van den Heuvel  
Costume design - Judith de Zwart  
Director of Photography - Joost Rietdijk  
Film producer - Arjen Oosterbaan

Commissioned by: La Biennale di Venezia, Hong Kong Arts Festival, Tongyeong International Music Festival, Ensemble Modern, Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ, Amsterdam Sinfonietta, November Music, and Philharmonie Cologne.

*The Book of Water* is a chamber music theatre project based upon the novella *Man in the Holocene* by Swiss author Max Frisch. The work centres around the character of Geiser, a 73-year-old widower, who is dealing with memory loss.

In the adaptation of Frisch's book by Michel van der Aa and dramaturg Madelon Kooijman extra focus is given to the continuous rain and flooding isolating Geiser in his house. These dangerous weather events link the work to the current topic of climate change. Not only is Geiser's mind eroding; the landscape is also crumbling away.

*The Book of Water* is a chillingly beautiful portrait of a man who is surrounded by erosion, nature's and his own, and who struggles for one last moment of clarity in which to make sense of himself and of civilisation.

"Typically elegant and thoughtful music theatre work...the integration of the live and the recorded is immaculate, the cinematography coolly elegant"  
- The Guardian

"An ingenious synthesis of the arts"  
- Opernwelt

"Inventive multimedia theater... a penetrating portrait of a demented man who clings to knowledge, while the water rises"  
- NRC (best of 2022 list)

"A multimedia spectacle... Flawlessly put together, with striking visuals and a topical subject, *The Book of Water* reinvents melodrama"  
- South China Morning Post



# UPLOAD

film opera

For soprano, baritone, chamber ensemble (12) and film  
2019-2020

Duration: 85 minutes

[Watch here](#) | Password: mind

Michel van der Aa - Composition, libretto, director  
Otto Tausk - Musical director  
Theun Mosk - Scenography & light

With Julia Bullock, Roderick Williams, Katja Herbers (film), and Ashley Zukerman (film)

Commissioned by:  
Dutch National Opera, Oper Köln, Bregenzer Festspiele, Park Avenue Armory, Ensemble MusikFabrik, DoubleA Foundation

What if our minds could live forever? It sounds like science fiction, but in the not-all-too-distant future, it will be possible to transfer our memories, thoughts and experiences to an artificial brain. A utopia for some; it means we can exist forever and that our loved ones would never have to miss us. But what are the consequences for our humanity, our identity and for our relationships?

*Upload* explores these ancient philosophical questions against the backdrop of present-day and near-future technologies."

"A masterly weaving of music, film and motion-capture technology"  
– New York Times (Critic's Pick)

★★★★★ "Highly original [...] Fantastic music"  
– NRC

★★★★★ "Unimaginably stunning beauty"  
– Trouw

★★★★★ "I have seldom experienced opera more intimately"  
– Bachtrack



# EIGHT

## virtual reality installation

For mezzo soprano, actress, choir,  
soundtrack and VR (all pre-recorded)  
2018-2019

Duration: 15 minutes

[Watch trailer](#)

Michel van der Aa – Composer, director,  
script | Theun Mosk – Design installation  
and set VR | The Virtual Dutch Men – VR  
creation & production

With Kate Miller-Heidke, Livia Kolk, Vakil  
Eelman, Nederlands Kamerkoor,  
Boudewijn Jansen

Commissioned by:  
Holland Festival, Festival d'Aix-en-  
Provence, KunstFestSpiele  
Herrenhausen, Beijing Festival, Helsinki  
Festival

You're surrounded by darkness – a path  
on the floor is the only thing you can  
make out. You hear footsteps; an old  
woman comes walking towards you.  
Her hand reaches for the wall, it bends  
with her touch and stretches out into a  
curved hallway. When you follow the  
woman around the corner, you  
suddenly find yourself face to face with  
her younger self.

*Eight* tells a woman's poignant life story  
in reverse chronological order. Visitors,  
equipped with VR glasses and  
headphones, move one by one through  
an installation. They can manipulate  
physical and virtual objects, and meet  
the woman at various crucial moments  
in her life. The woman's memories are  
spread out all across the flexible walls  
in the form of interactive hieroglyphs,  
ready to be activated. Actual hallways  
merge almost imperceptibly with virtual  
hallways, creating an infinite space.

"A Breakthrough for Virtual Reality in  
Classical Music"  
– New York Times

★★★★ "Pioneering work and an  
unprecedented experience"  
– NRC

★★★★ "Breathtaking"  
– De Volkskrant

"spectaculaire installation"  
– Le Figaro

"Innovative tour de force...Van der Aa  
keeps surprising the world"  
– Het Parool

"Top score for music and visual  
heaven...a triumphant merging of  
technology and art"  
– The Advertiser, Adelaide



# BLANK OUT

chamber opera

For soprano, baritone (film), choir (film), soundtrack, 3D film  
2015-2016

Duration: 70 minutes

[Watch trailer](#)

Michel van der Aa - Composer, director, libretto | Floriaan Ganzevoort - Lighting design | Sophie Motley - dramaturge

With Miah Persson, Roderick Williams (film), Nederlands Kamoroor (film), Klaas Stok

Commissioned by:  
Dutch National Opera, Lucerne Festival, and Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Using the intersecting and reflecting planes of live action and video to explore the human condition, *Blank Out* centres on a dialogue between a man and his mother. The libretto is based upon the work and life of South African poet Ingrid Jonker. A deeply human story, *Blank Out* uses innovative techniques of interactive 3D film and electronic music to consider memory and the way in which people reconstruct and deal with traumatic life events.

The set of *Blank Out* is constructed in miniature, like an architect's model. A 3D film acts as a backdrop, and is projected live via a camera that the singer moves around the model. As the woman moves the camera she not only changes her visual surroundings but also appears to be 'playing' her environment.

"Rarely have modern techniques and ancient musical virtues coexisted more naturally"  
– The New Yorker, Alex Ross

★★★★ "A wonderfully fluent and effective piece of music theatre"  
– The Guardian

★★★★ "Van der Aa is nearing his masterpiece step-by-step"  
– NRC

"Van der Aa proves a master of allusion"  
– New York Times

★★★★★ "Few composers have managed to articulate today's crisis of identity with such potent force and individuality as Van der Aa"  
– Bachtrack