

## Designs on WIT IN LOVE

### ***Tabula Rasa***

Just as most every piece of writing begins with a blank page, so a state of neutrality - coupled with limitless freedom - forms the ideal *tabula rasa* for the creation of any installation. One wishes for a space that permits both additions and eliminations, preservations and alterations, as well as realignments and reconfigurations of existing elements. Go ahead, tear down that wall, make a rosebush grow out of the floor, puncture holes in the ceiling so it may drip vodka. No wonder I have created installations exclusively in my own Victorian home. Who is there to forbid me anything? And who else, but myself, will bear responsibility for any and all consequences?

Nevertheless, our *tabula* for WIT IN LOVE (2009/10) - inspired by a chapter from Sky Gilbert's eponymous novella - was not perfectly *rasa* as a couple of restrictions were self-imposed before my co-creator, Associate Artist Magdalena Vasko, and I even began serious contemplation. The bulk of the chapter's action - with myself conceived as Wit's brother - takes place in my kitchen. However seeing as that same kitchen had formed part of a previous DNA installation, THE OBSERVATION (2002), we decided to avoid all previous references, direct or oblique, to that work. We also obliged ourselves to create a look completely different from its normal state, meaning as it is commonly known to friends and fellow artists. Finally, we determined to closely examine each detail of Sky's kitchen-description and then either adhere to it, reject it or give it a twist.

### **Sometimes a Kitchen is not just a Kitchen**

Designing WIT also began with key principles we set out to accomplish, principles we wanted to put into play. The installation had to be infused with complexity, with richness. Resonances, reverberations were essential along with the engagement, the stimulation of all our senses. The underlying theme that emerged was constellations. And even though everything occurs in Wit's *brother's* home, we felt it important to inject some elements of Wit's *own* nature, personality, character.

My living quarters have a spacious, high-ceilinged kitchen with most everything one expects to find in one - stove, sink, fridge, table, cupboards, etc. So the foundation of the installation was already present. All we needed to do was to build upon it, to transform the room into exactly what we wanted - something more dense than just a kitchen.

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The events unfold in 1938, a time when Wittgenstein is a university professor in Cambridge, however the text is devoid of era-indications - no foxtrotting flappers, no Duke Ellington jazz tunes or mention of Depression's ravages to indicate the "roaring" twenties'-passing. A sense of timelessness pervades.

In keeping with the elimination of a time frame, we also removed any sense of place other than accepting the obvious - the performance did, after all, occur in Toronto. In the text, Wit goes to visit his brother in Cornwall but it would have been ridiculous for us to Anglicize the setting. Lake Ontario is an effortless substitute for the North Sea. Specificity with regards time and place would have necessitated a senseless "suspension of disbelief". In fact, we made a point of having nothing in the kitchen that would have spelled "Toronto". (Never mind the loose Canadian bills and change - they could easily have been souvenirs from one of the brother's tours.) This kitchen might just as well be found in any so-called first- or second-world country.

The kitchen's transformation was a gradual, leisurely process taking about two months to complete. We covered most of the floor with a large light-coloured rug and replaced my sensible utilitarian chairs with an armchair while adding other discrete chairs for the audience. A vase gushing tulips arrived on the table. Now we had the distinct feel of a living room.

We placed a little bookcase in my armchair-corner, topped it with a stereo system and placed the speakers on mini-shelves we screwed into the upper walls. That corner was soon flooded with unruly stacks of books - a wide variety of novels, cookbooks, composers' biographies, Susan Sontag's essay collections, Samuel Beckett's complete works, etc., totaling over a hundred books. Music scores landed on the floor and table. The addition of a table-lamp, a sizeable sketch-pad, a mug sprouting multi-coloured pens completed the sense of being in a study.

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Up until this point we had remained in the world of credulity - albeit a trifle strained - but it was not long before we started to edge into another realm. In one of those flashes of pure inspiration I had a vision of the air dotted with girls' underwear. It really did not seem to make any sense whatsoever, but I ventured this notion to Magda who, to my surprise, immediately agreed it was an interesting idea. (One discards such flights of fancy, without examining them more closely, only at one's own peril.)

I went to the mall and found exactly what I was looking for - boxes of inexpensive, simple, single- and multi-coloured, plain and patterned cotton panties appropriate for every-day use by your average teen girl. We sifted through dozens of these and selected a pleasing variety which we hung on three clotheslines that ran on different angles from the table-top eye-hooks up to

different points where wall meets ceiling. A hint of laundry-room became superimposed on the existing kitchen / living room / study.

Interestingly enough, it was Magda who took the undies to a new level. Once they were in place, not interfering with sightlines or any other elements, I had thought the matter closed. After all, these were not objects of Wit's brother's mention or interaction. But Magda started wondering - *What if a few pairs had not yet completely dried?* and - *Suppose a pair was so soiled as to remain forever stained?* So every few days she would take a pinch of freshly-ground coffee - more on that later - and smear it in the appropriate place. I should also note it was a particularly lovely pair, hanging at eye level, which she chose for this impudent little desecration.

Through trial and error, Magda finally managed to perfectly moisten the bottom part of one pair - she did not want them to drip. This pair was again hanging at eye level where a number of audience members had to pass them in order to reach their places or seats. I suppose the idea was that some people would bump their forehead against that wetness and possibly recoil in surprise or displeasure. I don't remember whether or not that actually happened but I do know that I became its regular target.

Magda would do this "moisturizing" while I was in the front room putting on my costume; I never saw her perform this exercise. Later, while she was "processing" the audience in that same front room, I was at the back, going through the critical connector-lines that were most likely to cause trouble. At the precise correct clock-tick I would emerge into the performance space in order to do the final pre-set - kill the fridge, turn on lights and gas, etc. I would be so focused on my pre-performance tasks I think I never even saw those panties hanging in wait for me. Most likely my gaze was aimed down at the fridge's electrical outlet. But invariably - and I mean *invariably* - I would get a sloppy moist touch on my forehead. And then I would go through the exact same sequence: curse Magda, smile at the innocent cunning of the trap, blame myself for falling into it, and then forget all about it. Only to get panty-kissed again the next night.

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Before continuing my notes on the space I think it makes sense to take a moment and strive for clarity. It is, of course, incorrect of me to say that Magda had laid a "trap". Neither of us would even think of making any alteration to the space without discussing it first. No surprises, no practical jokes. We were in concordance with every feature, every element of the installation. While it is true, in all our co-creations, I always reserve for myself the right of "final say", I can think of no instance I have exercised this. Never have I been imperious - *I want that cup to be blue and I don't care if you want it white, it's going to be blue, that's a final decision, end of story.* No, we always talk things through, explain our reasoning, our fancies. We are patient, we listen to each other carefully - and

this can be distinctly trying for Magda as I am rarely succinct and sometimes take up swaths of time thinking out loud, trying to seize an elusive idea unamenable to being grasped.

In fact, when Magda sharply disagrees with my position my reaction is never anger or even irritation. I express only curiosity - *Really? Why?* We are fortunate in seeing most often eye to eye and almost never find ourselves at loggerheads. We are both intelligent enough to make our points clearly, defend them, yet understand the other's point of view. We are open-minded, rarely aggressive and never rude or insulting. Our artistic sensibilities most often resonate with each other. And we *never* "trade". I never agree to, say, give up the porcelain vase in exchange for her desired silver cutlery. It is *not* about compromise, it is about *agreement*. So in the end, there is nothing "fortunate" about our working relationship. If we were unable to painlessly arrive at common ground, if we did not have consideration and respect for each other's views, then we would not be creating together in the first place.

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Let's consider the accuracy of my description of the space. If you were present at a performance you may well think - *I studied everything on the table very carefully and I am certain there was no money on it.* Another person may express different doubts - *Out of sheer boredom I spent a lot of time staring at the floor and I know there were no musical scores strewn about.* Well, you would both be right.

Installations, like so much else, evolve. All the chief elements of the space were in place on Opening Night but over the course of two runs we made a number of tiny adjustments. Right from Opening we were pleased with what we saw but that did not mean we were ever so satisfied as to be complacent.

These tinkering came naturally. We never sat down and asked ourselves - *How can we make this installation better?* It was more a question of curiosity - *I wonder what it would look like if we were to ...* At other times there would be a nagging feeling - for weeks in the case of the table - that something was missing. When confronted with a certain lack we don't just place *anything* on the table to fill that seeming emptiness - it was already pretty crowded - but we wait for the right thing to present itself, in this case some bills and loose change.

It took some time to clearly hear that little bowl crying out for an avocado. And once she got that avocado there were no more tears. In any case, there is no point in looking for rhyme or reason, purpose or intent. All that matters is that avocado *looked* right, it felt *at home*. Nothing more is needed, no explanation, no justification.

Did I just feminize that little bowl? Hear her cry out? Yes, I did. It's not as though we anthropomorphize each and every object. But sometimes it *does* help

to give, say, a knife, a sense of humanity, to consider the potential of it possessing human emotions. Before you take these words to be a confirmation that I clearly belong on the loony fringe, consider the following: creating SHE ALONE (2007) Magda and I would often speak to objects, admonish them, ask for favours - but I suppose this should be addressed when I take that DNA work under consideration. It is clear, though, that altering your viewpoint, giving an object human perspective, may assist in arriving at a lovely solution. And I am perfectly content to be consigned - in your mind - a place among the crazies, if my thought-processes result in wholly satisfying, if not ingenious, solutions to festering artistic problems.

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The north wall of my kitchen is particularly prosaic and easily divided into three sections - a sizeable fridge; an oversize deep sink over which hang two rows of small pots and pans; a chest of drawers (cutlery, tablecloths and napkins, big pots and casseroles) below a big cupboard (plates, bowls and glasses). However once we had finished transforming that area any sense of the commonplace had disappeared.

Normally I keep a variety of sundry items on top of the fridge - garbage bags, coffee filters, Kleenex boxes, potato chips bags, etc. In this case it was the tissue boxes that provided the inspiration and, given the fair amount of space between the top of the fridge and the ceiling, we decided to build a sculpture. Off we duly went to the nearest drug store to make a selection of colours and patterns we felt would most allow a harmonious combination. We preferred the pastel-coloured boxes with horizontal lines interrupted by various-sized circles; the ones with deep-green bamboo stems; and still others with arrays of oval-shaped pebbles amongst occasional bright flowers.

Fortuitously enough our chosen boxes were all on sale - but with the irritating proviso of six per customer. So a trip or two to the drug store was incorporated into our daily routine and after two weeks we had begun to amass the many dozens of boxes needed to fill a thousand cubic inches of space. Building this structure was not stressful. Minor technical problems were surmounted with ease and box-selection was simplified as many were not visible. Boxes once amassed, within only a few hours we had our final product - an irregularly-shaped "staircase" with hints of pyramid, ziggurat, perhaps a slice of the Tower of Babel.

Then, somehow, we came across a pair of identical twins: two diminutive wooden ladders. After fastening one end to the other we ended up with an attenuated ten-foot climber that we placed near the foot of our "staircase" and extended over the sink to rest on top of the cupboard. A pathway to heaven? Well, not quite. The ceiling was in the way.

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That extra-large sink of mine is divided in half - not only very practical but perfect for our desire to convey a sense of the contrasts between Wit and his brother. The great philosopher was famously fastidious in matters of sanitation and order. Cleanliness was not only next to godliness but a catalyst for clarity and "clean" thinking. Naturally enough, his half of the sink was empty and spotless. His brother was ... not quite so punctilious. His side was crammed with pots, pans, dishes, glasses, cutlery. On top of this mess, no doubt just to irritate Wit, he would occasionally but out his cigarette on the divider between the two halves.

I must say this part of the installation was by far the easiest to create. When Magda and I would finish our soup-break or occasional dinner - always in the front room on a white tablecloth laid out on the carpet - we would simply deposit our dishes, higgledy-piggledy, into the sink, taking care only not to crush anything below. After a week the brother's portion of the sink was full and the result was pretty disgusting if not rebarbative. And once the run was over you can imagine how revolting it was to soak and scour everything to its original pristine condition.

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The solution to the chest of drawers' surface was the last piece of the puzzle to slide into place. We simply lacked a vision. No doubt we would remove the items normally there - two dish racks - but what to replace them with?

I do not remember any undue suffering on this account. We were not pressed for time and if both our creative brains were to simply stop functioning I could always take solace in my readiness to delay Opening if necessary. To succumb to frustration or anxiety is never helpful. To force a solution is to court mediocrity and regret. One learns to be patient, to have faith in one's creative powers. Give it time. Do not suffocate the problem - allow it room to breathe. The right idea will present itself when it is ready.

In the end, the idea that did "present itself" was to design a constellation of glasses containing coffee and salt. We were certainly aware that both Wit and his brother were engaged in thinking about the nature of the world and how it is ordered, if ordered at all. Wit's brother's arrangement of glasses in one field of vision, his juxtaposition of coffee and salt, both containing a range of colour, flavour and texture - all this was a possible tool in his quest for comprehension and coherence, a manifestation of his thought processes.

Once that door was opened our discussions were fertile, our decisions rapid. We wanted every glass to be beautifully shaped as well as elegant; the glasses had to be of differing heights and capacities; no glass was allowed a protruding rim; identical glasses were welcome.

We again made the rounds of Value Villages - with great success - and arrived back at DNA with more glasses than we would ever need. Not only would we have replacements in case of breakage but a very important principle was reinforced - never paint yourself into a corner, always have more materials than you need. Excess is truly preferable to falling short and then having to arrest the creative process.

Magda and I never discussed how many glasses we needed. It was clear we required quite a few but what was the point of deciding upon a number when we needed luck to find *any* glasses that met with our qualifications? We would snap up all those that pleased us and innately intuit when we'd gathered a sufficient number to work with. It is only to one's advantage to have more materials at hand - it allows room to maneuver; more choices and possibilities are now available. Besides, a glass that might have seemed acceptable in the store may, under a different light, turn out to not quite meet the standard. Excitement, having fun, may skew discernment. The relationship between glasses obliges serious consideration. Any given glass may be stunning but end up being discordant within the array. One must learn to reject a shard of beauty when harmony of the whole is jeopardized.

Magda enjoys coffee, she drinks it regularly, whereas my contact with the brew is an occasional sip from her cup. Thus it made sense for her to select the various types, making sure the beans' colours ranged from shy brown to unremitting black. She began by restricting one shade to each glass but ended up creating colour-layers reminiscent of superimpositions in the Earth's crust.

The sense of smell was a vital consideration in her choice of coffees. I have always found the communication of a fragrance to be particularly challenging. I suppose the difficulty lies in its inherent evanescence. I sometimes wonder - and surely there is a chemical explanation - why the smells most people consider intolerably mephitic are the ones that last longest. A starburst of freshly-cut carnations in a vase will exude its scent but for a short time, the nose-full dissipating rapidly. In order for that fragrance to persist one would need the audience in a closed room whose surfaces are covered with hundreds of blooms. Yet hammeringly malodorous effects are so much easier to achieve - simply place a champagne bucket of freshly-excreted shit alongside a pot of putrefying meat near a platter of week-old shellfish and, oh, don't forget to piss in all four corners a couple of days before you let the audience in.

We were aiming for something a touch more subtle. Almost directly before the house was opened, Magda would grind the beans and pour the pulverization into the selected glasses. The time-delay was, of course, unfortunate. Over half an hour would pass before the first audience member actually entered the kitchen. However most everyone was obliged to walk past the glasses in order to arrive at their placement and surely several people did get at least a whiff of the aromas. The most appreciative were those few blessed with a sharp sense of smell and seated right next to the coffee/salt display.

As for the question of salt, Magda and I are united - we both take lavish pleasure in it. We love the taste, the flavour-enhancement, but we also derive aesthetic delight in the colours, the shape and translucent brilliance of the crystals. Life is thrilling when part of one's job is to go salt-hunting!

To peer into our glasses was to enter a connoisseur's gallery: the finest-grained, stone-ground, sullen-grey *sel marin* from Brittany; glistening pink- and orange-flecked Himalayan rock salt (sounding distinctly more glamorous and exotic than the product's actual origin, Pakistan's Punjab); emphatically-white Aegean Sea salt, each sharp-edged crystal like an opaque snowflake, all alike, none a duplicate; and, most spectacularly, another "Himalayan" salt, retaining the scrawny yellows, dejected greens, delicate lavenders and passionate purples of seaweed-slivers.

In the centre of this coffee/salt display we placed an amphora of murky herbs-infused olive oil. Why? A purely subliminal, if not sublime, decision - that made me gasp when, weeks later, its implications became apparent.

Interestingly enough, this constellation was never fixed. We had spent part of an afternoon putting the glasses in place, working very fluidly, always taking turns. Yet every night, when all the freshly-ground coffee had been poured into the respective glasses, Magda would make small adjustments. That made sense - glass number three might receive a new-coloured coffee, the appearance of a differently-layered glass might necessitate a shift in position. I was never part of these ministrations, getting into costume and focusing on my performance ahead. Nevertheless, as part of my last-minute preset ritual, I would study the latest configuration and usually make one or two meticulous adjustments, lining up this glass with that one, moving one "star" a tiny bit closer to another one.

Please believe me now, when I say that only while writing the last paragraph did I realize how appropriate all these daily miniscule re-alignments were. We had conceived these glasses to be microcosms with the amphora as its centre. All the heavenly bodies, in reality, are in relentless perpetual motion. No stars, no planets appear in identical positions one night after the other. In that case, why should our constellation not experience similar, nightly, almost imperceptible shifts in position?

I must confess experiencing a profound rush of pleasure, just moments ago, upon stumbling upon this revelation. At its core is the huge question of volition. As well as Magda and I create together, we have profoundly differing views on a critical mystery - the role that fate or destiny plays, or does not play, in our lives. Our sharply opposing opinions became apparent as we worked on DNA's FATE ballet (2004).

I maintain that tonight, when I made myself a vodka and tonic at 7:32 pm, that was exclusively my decision. I could just as easily have made it one minute

earlier or twenty minutes later. My call. The same applies to the squirt of lime I added as well as the little stir I gave the drink to integrate the lime with every mouthful to come.

Magda would say the only role I played was physical. I poured the vodka and the tonic, etc. but had no part in the decision-making process - none of the choices (the timing, glass-selection, drink-contents, measurements, stirring) were mine. They were all fated.

Magda would go even further and claim that everything that happens in our lives is utterly beyond our control, much as we may imagine otherwise. She avers that, for example, it was not at all her decision to create this installation with me but simply the machinations of fate. Moreover, the course of everyone's life, down to the tiniest detail, from the moment of our conception to our last breath, has all been annotated by God, fate, destiny, call it what you will.

Both of us believe what we believe and neither of us has any interest in converting the other. It is overwhelmingly likely we will both die not knowing who is right and to what degree. Ultimately it makes no difference in the way we lead our lives. Magda will still ponder a difficult question even though she knows the answer (and even the pondering's route) has been pre-ordained - just as I will mull over an issue in hopes of arriving at a new, more ideal solution.

What makes this moments-ago revelation of mine so interesting - and why it has led to an unintended digression - is the way it reinforces a core belief of mine. For some time now I have maintained that if you do your utmost to realize your artistic vision, if you are as thorough, as attentive, as sensitive as possible, the end result will reach beyond your original intent. It is as though some unknowable force intervenes in the work's favour, a force not only thoroughly in tune with your vision but even more intimate with it than you are yourself.

The fact remains that Magda and I made nightly private adjustments to our coffee/salt constellation - the only one with movable parts - without ever discussing whether or not we would do this. This already is strange because from the start we truly were co-installers and neither of us would make changes without talking it through with the other. Perhaps it has nothing to do with some "unknowable force". Perhaps by this time we were so deeply imbued by the installation we were acting subconsciously, out of pure instinct.

Ultimately - I need not know. All that matters is both of us were delighted by the final results - the rest is stimulating speculation. No doubt lingers in my mind that had I been conscious of the integral logic underlying those nightly colour-changes, mini-adjustments, I would have presented that case to Magda - and I am sure she would have agreed. In the end the results would have been the same - but they would have been indisputable expressions of our agreed-upon creation process rather than ....

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The east wall may just as easily be divided into three sections: a waist-high counter-top between a chimney-cupboard and a stove/oven. The chief interest of this wall lies in the field of lighting, with one exception - the large white bowl, placed in the middle of the counter.

Late in the evening Wit's brother makes spirited offers of "really delicious" cocaine that Wit rejects with increasing irritation. These offers were punctuated by a series of sharp cork-throws aimed into the bowl. Even if they found their mark, as they often did, these corks would often bounce out of the bowl and ricochet wildly.

Early on I mentioned a striving for resonance - in this case the desire was purely literal. The sound of cork hitting clay bowl was satisfying but, alas, one-dimensional. The remedy was simple - we placed a much smaller Pyrex bowl inside the large one. Not only did we now have the contrast of a brighter-sounding *ping* but I also had the pleasure of hearing when the cork had hit the mark dead centre.

At this point I must salute the audience members who, almost without exception, never flinched and remained frozen during this mini-barrage of mini-missiles. Perhaps they instinctively - and correctly - realized their stillness would aid the accuracy of my aim. However, is it possible that awareness of my skilful marksmanship has spread much wider than I had ever imagined?

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Behind this east wall was the bathroom, which served as a separate viewing area as well as the site of another constellation - the Exploded World.

As previously mentioned, the desire to understand the world's workings was a continual preoccupation of both brothers. One approach might be to divide Earth into a number of components, the better to singly examine each element. We decided to enact this most literally. We favoured the cobalt blues of the oceans as well as the brilliant whites of the polar caps and, two atlases later, the floor was covered with dozens of sharp-edged multi-sized world-fragments that later we glued, with haphazard frenzy, all over the wall behind the bathtub. To balance this carnage we added two unviolated halves of the world yet could not resist cutting two other worlds in half and then gluing them back together a tiny bit off kilter. Roughly in the middle were our blue lights, the centre and seeming cause of this cataclysmic explosion.

Earlier we had isolated all references to the world in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the only work Wittgenstein published in his lifetime - to some the irrefutable proof of his genius, to others (like ourselves) an impenetrable incomprehensible density. We made a selection of our favourites, sentences we

thought we could actually understand - *The world is independent of my will. ... The world and life are one. I am my world.* - and then scattered these quotes amongst the Earth-shards.

In the end there was world-shatter amidst world-analysis, something to contemplate or be horrified by, yet impossible to view in its totality due to the confines of the bathroom.

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People who are not creators often fall into the trap of ascribing inevitability to works of art they consider "perfect". In their minds there could have been but one possible way this beautiful poem could have been written. They think - *It could not have been otherwise.* Thus respect and adoration may spawn illusion and deception as no role is given to chance, luck, accident in the creation of a work of art. Just like the discovery of penicillin resulted from mould ruining bacteria cultures in a petri dish left unintentionally uncovered, so the creative process is rife with fortuitous discoveries, serendipitous omissions, unlikely coincidences. The Grand Design, the product of Wit's brother's desire to better understand the philosophy of Schopenhauer, is a perfect case in point.

Alex Malow, an old friend from my piano-playing days, erstwhile painter, acolyte of Sviatoslav Richter, worshipper of Rossini, was conducting a purge and offered me various items he no longer wished to keep. I gladly accepted a lovely dark painting of a candlestick beside a rug - which found its way into our installation - as well as a slender volume full of photos of magnificent ancient Greek architecture: temples to gods and goddesses, some facing the sea. What a hoard of beauty, most of it unknown to me!

Over the next weeks I would occasionally turn the pages and gaze at the wondrous images. Amongst the buildings was the photo of a large vase, covered with writing. After admiring it for awhile my mind made a huge leap of extrapolation - this indecipherable (to me) text contained a code, the foundation of Greek existential principles. All the temples were linked to this vase. Of course! They had to be!

I excitedly showed the book to Magda and she agreed that this link - however tenuous - could be made. We went through the book, selected our favourite photos, cut them out and put them aside for a couple of weeks. We occasionally revisited them and began our culling process, never discarding the rejects.

My kitchen's south wall is dominated by a large window. The idea was to get a board that would cover its entirety, then fasten it to the moulding and ledge in a way that would block out all the light. We would paint the board white, affix the photos, draw the connections and, at one point, I would open the curtains and - voilà - the Grand Design.

Gord Peck, our ingenious, problem-solving, hyper-efficient Production Manager, arrived, took measurements, and soon returned with the appropriately-sized sheet of plywood and put it into place. We looked at it with awe - how was it possible that an ordinary sheet of plywood could look so beautiful? The large number of multi-sized whorls in the wood were captivating, inspiring.

This reminds me of another guiding principle in making an installation - always examine every component carefully, try to look at it with “fresh” eyes. Never proceed blindly with a plan of action. Better to stop after each step and reconsider for a moment - a different, previously unconsidered direction may prove superior. Fine ideas may well be superseded by even better ones.

As Magda and I continued to be transfixed by this “ordinary” sheet of plywood - already, in truth, blessed with a constellation - it became inconceivable to cover any part of it with paint. Instead we began to wonder how best to enhance, bring to the fore, this gift of delightful wood-knots.

Enter Seth Turack, a young writer and actor who had helped “process” the audience in DNA’s THE LARGE GLASS (2005). He had just returned from a stay in Vancouver and pure happenstance made him walk by my house just as I was outside on the porch. During a brief chat he offered his services and a couple of days later was on board. Little did I know how indispensable he would become, lugging home cases of Carmenère, seducing strangers to purchase those tissue-boxes, performing numerous time-consuming tasks.

One of Seth’s most tedious chores was highlighting those whorls by outlining the perimeter of more than a dozen of them with transparent silicone - some needed only a coat or two but others were to be much thicker, extruding by as much as an inch. Since each layer had to dry before a new one could be applied it must have taken Seth two weeks before he was finally done.

Meanwhile we made our final selection of photos and began positioning them. This task was more exacting than might seem. The photos were not exactly fragile but we could not risk damage by repeatedly fastening them to the plywood and moving them around at will. We had to take the time to get it right because once glued to the surface, they could no longer be jockeyed about.

We measured the photos, took a piece of mat paper, spread out the Sharpies, and Magda began a lovely in-scale rendering of the images. Not for the first time during this collaboration did I have the sensation of being taken back in time to a grade-school art class, looking in wonder at the girl beside me, watching her make drawings so apparently more accomplished and beautiful than anything I myself would ever be capable of. When I mentioned this to Magda, she said she had the same feeling, being eight years old, sitting behind a desk, cares of the world blotted out, crayon in hand, concentrating exclusively on drawing a picture.

That writing-covered large vase was, naturally enough, in the middle as everything emanated from it, and we drew red and black arcs with arrows to indicate our fancied relationships. We were so pleased with her drawing that when it came time to do the gluing we religiously adhered to it, making only tiny adjustments to accommodate the whorls. When it came to the connecting lines, we would always alternate turns, always stating our intention and never beginning before receiving the other's approval. First time, only time. No allowance for erasures. At the very last minute though, we made one change for greater visual effect - the red lines remained solid whereas the black ones became dotted.

So in the end, thank you Alex. With your kind and timely present we were able to fashion the Grand Design. Without it we will never know what contours would have shaped it.

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To one side of the window is an old unopenable wooden door. We both liked its slim, crested once-transparent panes, now blacked-out or paint-smeared, along with the overall grease-spattered surfaces - and just let it be.

To the other side - and now we are back in the book-stacks corner - is a wall that is nigh-covered with an over-the-years-accumulated mostly-yellowing miscellany: a Paris-rooftops postcard; numerous poems and quotes; *sake* labels with quality-demarkations; an obituary of John Leonard, the great literary critic, etc. Keeping in mind Wit's brother's character *was*, after all, based on myself, we felt it best to leave it untouched.

However one item did provoke a short discussion - R. M. Vaughan's article, *For Canadian 'freaks', a patron saint*, that lauds the huge influence of none other than Sky Gilbert. Was it excessively self-reflexive to leave it up on the wall? When we considered how poorly that part of the room would be lit, we decided the question was moot. And so the article remained in place.

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Finishing our clock-wise tour of the room, we arrive at the west wall. Between the audience-entrance door and the continuation of the "study's" library lie two identical cupboards. On top of the upper one we placed two candlesticks alongside a tilted unframed mirror; the other surface held a chopping board, a glass-dome cheese-tray containing a desiccating maple leaf, and that avocado-desirous little bowl.

Of some curiosity was the lower cupboard's door which led to the cheese I would need at a later point in the show. This door would emit a most distinct *click* whenever opened, a somewhat startling sound we were both fond of. The only problem was we had a couple of workmen doing minor repairs some weeks

before we opened. These people have a tendency to automatically fix anything they find amiss so I remember pointing out this fault and begging them to ignore it. They did. Good. I imagine it would have been considerably more difficult to restore that sound than to eliminate it.

On the floor we placed the aforementioned painting by Alex, resting it on a slim blond-wood case, the better to accentuate its presence. And now I must turn to the saddest part of my reminiscences, the role that Ed Fielding ended up *not* playing in the creation of WIT.

First and foremost, Ed was an artist whose immensity of talent was exceeded only by the complete and utter lack of recognition accorded it. Excepting DNA. Ed fulfilled several commissions for us, starting with huge portraits of all the major characters of HAMLET (1989) through the disturbing painting of Persephone for SICK (1991) and the exquisite flower-sculptures for THE OBSERVATION. What we had hoped for was a couple of miniature, not larger than 15 square inches, colour-intense abstract paintings that would hang, unframed, on a cupboard door or two.

At the time he agreed, he was already ill, but still painting on most days. After a while, when he had not produced anything for us, he explained he was presently engrossed with architectural drawings. I asked to see them, reflecting on their potential appropriateness considering Wittgenstein's interest (and occasional practice) in that field. He came for a visit and I pointed out the ones most pleasing to me and encouraged him to try his hand at a smaller format. He said he would accede to my wishes - but too late. The cancer eating away at his insides led to increasing frailty, relentless enervation and debility. The pace of his physical disintegration would only accelerate and in November 2009 he died. We mourn the passing of a friend, a man whose multi-faceted, fervent contribution to DNA is matched by only a mere few.

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The beat-up antique wooden table was the room's centerpiece and we wanted it to equally reflect aspects of both brothers' natures. Equal being equal we divided the table into two neat halves.

Wit's brother's area was a mess of clutter - sketchpad; coffee-mug blossoming pens and scissors; perspiring lemonade bottle; wooden matches and tranquilizer in shot-glass; vase of petal-shedding tulips; bowl of corks; Bombay Sapphire gin bottle; plate nestling two eggs (were they raw?); fractured cognac-sniffer or wine glass; bills and change; novels and Beethoven - a snapshot of scatter-shot turbulence.

Here I must tip my hat in gratitude to Henry Sansom, talented film-maker, DNA video archivist, warm, intelligent, generous, a man of such equipoise he would

say - *Thank you* - in response to every policeman's shove during the Toronto 2010 G7 demonstrations.

We had invited Henry for dinner - with the proviso he would endure and comment on a talk-through of my performance. This was early in the process, a time when I used wooden matches as a prop, occasionally threatening to light a cigarette but never actually doing so. Afterwards, Henry suggested we lay down a rug. (Why had we never thought of *that* ourselves?) Then he added an intriguing question - *Had we ever seen Last Year at Marienbad?*

Though I had not seen that film in decades, I knew exactly what he was getting at. In this glorious Alain Resnais masterpiece there is a game played between two people involving a number of wooden matches laid out in the shape of a triangle. The rules matter less than the fact the skilled player will always win, whether he moves first or second. Magda had never seen the film so Henry rented a projector for proper viewing.

I am old enough to realize one's tastes evolve, how the accumulation of life's experiences alters perspective, making a once-gripping novel tawdry, elevating a formerly-dismissed symphony to the sublime. Yet watching this hauntingly enigmatic film I was as spellbound and mesmerized as in my mid-twenties.

Sometimes one must persist in a course of action before its error becomes apparent. *Last Year at Marienbad* made me not only discard that cigarette but gave shape to the matches' geometric patterns I began to assemble while musing about Wit's irascible nature.

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Wit's table-half was in sharp contrast to his brother's - a model of cleanliness, order, austerity, conditions all necessary and conducive to his philosophical thinking.

Sky's text refers to three knives stuck in a wall and this developed into a perfect example of us creating a twist to his kitchen-depiction. We really had no choice. Sky's inspiration for those knives in the wall came, in fact, from THE OBSERVATION - references to which we had disallowed - where there was an entire congeries of knives either plunged into a wall or captured in a mid-flight liberation-struggle from another wall's grip.

Yet the knives formed a significant part of the brothers' conversation so their presence was ineffaceable. We landed on the idea of creating another constellation, not of the brother's sensuous coffee/salt variety but something more cold and implacable.

As with the glasses, we devised criteria for the knives - Value Village needed to supply us with a wide selection: varying sizes, wooden handles, blades both

serrated and true, duplicates welcome. Seth would stain any excessively light handles to their desired darkness after enduring the tedium of removing the blades' protective scotch-tape sheathing and restoring their brilliance with lighter-fluid.

We knew we were going to lay down a placid white tablecloth which would be impaled by these knives, all blades facing outwards in the same direction. We began to make sketches - again that invaluable mat paper was cut into scale-size pieces with each dot representing a knife, Magda claiming the black colour, myself the blue. However we soon realized our attempts were dissatisfying, lacking coherence. Rules were needed.

We decided the one who goes first must always place three knives in the shape of a triangle. The next one must not only form another triangle but have it intersect the previous one. And so on, my dots always in relation to hers and vice versa. No maximum number was ever allotted to the knives. Right at the end of each sketch we took a red pen and made final single additions, remembering to take advantage of the entire surface and making sure at least a few knives ended up in close proximity to each other.

Once we had made around a dozen sketches, we laid them out and chose our favourites. And then put them away. It is important to remember we never completed any of the installation's design components at one go. Advancing bit by bit we allowed every step to gestate. Distance cleanses and freshens the mind. Revisiting these sketches weeks later we would invariably arrive at new favourites.

Strangely enough, considering all the effort we had put into the prototypes, we never even bothered to consult them once we got down to the business of hammering those knife-tips into the table. Yet, perhaps not so strange after all. Our method was deeply ingrained, well rehearsed. Most likely we both sensed, without any discussion, the best approach was to just attack.

Just as with the Grand Design, we always described each placement pre-hammering, thus allowing for discussion - *Are you sure you want that tall one in the corner?* - and suggestions - *What about placing that little guy a little closer to the big guy?* Patiently, cautiously we would proceed, holding our excitement in check. What immense pleasure to finally see our imaginings begin to take shape and become real!

Little did we know what recalcitrant creatures some of those knives were, repeatedly swerving from their assigned direction. Addressing them in a reasonable tone to no avail, we needed to devise techniques of trickery and deception in order to make them toe the precise line. Despite the nature of some refractory characters I don't think it took us much longer than an hour to complete the constellation. We stood back and examined our handiwork - from all angles, high and low, up close and from a distance. Very important, this. If any

aspect of your installation will be looked at from different vantage points it behooves you to take the time to consider all audience members' perspectives.

Magda and I were very pleased - the constellation bore up to our scrutiny, no changes were necessary and the knives remained in their original position for the entirety of the run. I seem to remember we were both proud enough to beam. We had - without ever directly intending it - realized our own interpretation of one of the Exploded World's lines: *Objects make up the substance of the world.*

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One day Magda came over all excited - *Guess what? I'm going to Norway. With Ola and Dorota.* Ola, a ballerina at the Polish National Ballet, and Dorota, a masseuse and beautician, are Magda's two closest friends for over half her life. I remember once asking her - *So who do you consider to be your absolute best friend?* No hesitation - *That's an impossible question. All three of us are equally close to each other.* The three Musketeers come to mind - *all for one and one for all.*

I was, of course, very happy for Magda because I know how much she loves travelling, but, selfishly enough, even happier for myself. The chapter we were performing ends with a revelation on Wit's part - he must escape the confines of Cambridge and go, alone, to Norway, back to the isolation of his lake-side cabin, the solace and refuge from where his most productive thinking always emerged.

Norwegians in Toronto seem to be a self-effacing reclusive bunch. We most certainly wanted to have some reference to that legendarily troll-infested country, perhaps a keepsake or two Wit had brought back home to remind him of the tranquility so lacking in England. So we tried to find a bookstore, a delicatessen, a ceramics shop. Nothing. Not even a Norwegian House, an edifice most European ethnicities in Toronto deem necessary to introduce and take pride in their culture. Yes, Magda in Norway could certainly be put to good use.

I asked - *So where do you plan do go?* Her clear voice - *We land in Oslo and then go on to Bergen.* I could not believe my ears. Bergen, the environs of Wittgenstein's real-life retreat. An innocent vacation was rapidly lurching into a business trip. I reverted to my most peremptory manner - *So here's what I want. Photos. Simple, plain, small, isolated, wooden cabin. Ideally beside a lake or water of some kind. No people. And you're obviously going on a boat-trip up some fjords, right? Good. More photos. Water, mountains, ocean, forests. Beauty of nature, solitude, yes? And Magda's response? - I will do my best.*

Regardless of the commanding nature of my demands I knew Magda would not be displeased. She is a talented amateur photographer - witness the WIT postcard - and I knew she would be happily snapping away anyway. My "assignment" in no way diverged from her own interests.

She certainly did not disappoint, arriving home with over a hundred photos. After leaving aside those of no use to us, there still remained dozens to consider. Every week or two we would go back to those photos, pulsating in the task of separating the most intense from the more common beauty, always striving for balance in both subject-matter (sea, mountains, trees, light) and colour (blue, green, white, gray, a bite of red).

Once we had finally reduced our list to the needed twelve, we attended to details - where precisely was that hill to be cropped, did this shadow need darkening? We also wanted to retain the grandeur of nature before the time of civilization so all electrical wires had to be Photoshopped out.

Our final step, before affixing the photos to the ceiling, was to decide their placement. The imposing 1000-watt naked lightbulb at the centre had to be removed - it was far too significant an element in THE OBSERVATION - and we replaced it with a sunset over mildly turbulent sea, all the other photos emanating from that dark centre in a widening circle, misty waters contrasting snow-flecked mountains with ardent reds in opposing corners. The earlier decision to make every photograph the same size made the final to-scale design proceed smoothly. No hand-wringing here.

But why the ceiling? Disturbingly enough, towards the end of their meeting Wit's brother displays the razor-line scars on his inner forearms. He has ostensibly been "practicing his Schopenhauer". Wit excuses himself and retires to his hotel-room to mull things over - he knows that suicides often *do* carry through on their threats yet his brother is prone to playing narcissistic games.

At that point in the performance I suddenly crumple to the floor, lie on my back and mutter half-sentences. I segue back to Wit's brother's character by breathing the ghosts' words from *Richard III* ("*Despair and die*") and during my catatonic state Magda, now *dea ex machina*, has turned the table-lamp's head to illuminate the ceiling. When I snap open my eyes, all I see is a fjord and then, shifting my eyes around, more of those familiar northern land- and seascapes - my siren-call of solitude in backlands Norway.

How satisfying was this overhead pictorial panorama? At run's end, the kitchen was restored to its original condition, knives removed from table, books returned to shelves. That huge bulb was screwed back in but the photos remain. I don't think a week passes without me tilting my head back for a minute and then gazing, wondering - *Will I ever pay a little homage to Wittgenstein and actually experience this magnificence myself?*

## Lights Blues

This is by far the most difficult aspect for me to write about for reasons that will become apparent soon enough. Mostly it lies in the fact I was not “present” at critical times due to unaccountable spasms of distress.

The bathroom was to contain the key lights source for the entire installation as well as one quarter of the audience who would be looking from there into the kitchen. We began by being confronted with a mostly-removed bathroom wall; the contiguous kitchen wall was dotted with small crude peep-holes, all residue of EMBER (2006), a previous DNA show. Fortunately enough I had never gotten around to making the necessary repairs.

What kind of vantage point did we want to create for the bathroom-dwellers? Magda insisted the walls were to be different from each other. We had the bathroom wall’s upper and lower parts re-built leaving a 30-inch-wide horizontal quadrangle running the width of the room. The vertical wooden beams naturally divided the space into four sections, one for each spectator.

Fashioning the kitchen wall to our desires proved considerably more laborious - we wanted, yes, another constellation, one of oval-shaped apertures, multi-sized, some upright, others on an angle or lying on their side, some as perfectly-shaped as possible, others unbalanced, wibberly-wobberly, none identical. Each quasi-egg-shape had also to be well-rounded and invitingly smooth inside, silently encouraging you to place your fingers inside one for a grip. Were you to indeed succumb to this beckoning, your fingers would soon be coated with the chalky substance of the drywall’s insides ...

Nothing to “design” here. All we needed was to enlarge those peep-holes, often joining adjacent ones to form the requisite shape, always making sure each quadrant had at least one large enough to allow a fine view, granted you might have to place your face quite close in order to peer through it. All this is so easy to describe but painstaking care went into plotting out and carving each sphere. When testing each potentially-grippable oval some part might crumble, dust would flare, necessitating re-smoothing. Day after day we found ourselves profusely thanking Seth for his persistence and forbearance.

Our first session with real lights was short as we experimented with a few colours and soon landed on an imposing cerulean blue. I remember it being stressful, though. I did not at all like this light pointing at me in my chair. Steadily I deliquesced into despair. For whatever reason, this harmless little lights-test had smashed home the reality of the performance awaiting me. Yes, I had previously fallen prey to brief panic-attacks, reasonable expressions of anxiety for an ex-pianist who gave up that career largely due to an excessive number of memory-slips. But this was on a completely different scale. I could not wait to get out of that chair.

Seeing we had accomplished everything intended, Magda, empathetic as always, made me a drink and we went out on the porch. My ears were soon filled with words of comfort and encouragement, my spirits restored by assurances, declarations of her faith in me, her certainty I would be “just fine”. Half an hour, two drinks and three cigarettes later I truly was “just fine”.

In the ensuing days work continued as usual with nothing amiss - until Gord returned for the second session with three small but powerful lights-fixtures which he proceeded to attach side-by-side to the bathroom’s back wall, aiming them directly through roughly-adjacent larger ovals. I was told to sit in my performance-chair.

Magda was cheerful, perky - evidently relishing her first crack at designing lights. I was preoccupied, morose. The longer I sat in that chair the more engulfed I became by mounting forces of doubt. Magda was telling Gord to aim one light a bit higher - *What do you think, Hillar, is that better?* Me, distraught - *I don’t know.* Then - *Look at the colour on the tablecloth, the reflection off the knife-blades! Isn’t that great?* Me, mumbling - *Good.* Magda was delighted, she had found a new element to swim in - *I love the way the blue divides your face in two, one part Wit, the other part his brother, it’s perfect, yes?* Me, barely audible - *OK.*

I had become terrorized, quaking with fear, reduced to mush amidst the stomach-churning, vomit-threatening, mind-paralyzing certainty of the collapse so clearly visible on the rapidly-advancing horizon. Magda’s kindness was no longer able to penetrate. The only solution was to postpone the show, embarking me on a daily regimen of memorization so strict, so methodical, so relentless, from which the only conceivable emergence would be one of total assurance, unassailable confidence, victory.

Six weeks later? Close - but still a cigar.

Our final session with Gord, not long after my melt-down, was a breeze. We knew those fixtures were not perfectly placed and were determined to finalize ideal positions as well as angle each light in its optimum direction. We were both fully engaged, bustling about, studying every option, talking everything through. I had regained my opinionated decisive nature but ended up obeying a rule I was, at the time, not even conscious of: never sit in that chair for longer than a minute.

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Irrespective of the suffering those blue lights caused me, I soon grew to love them. Their lability, their inherent instability became stimulating. They were all aimed at the bathroom-spectators’ heads or backs, depending on their stature, and whenever bodies would move, the illumination would accordingly shift. It soon became impossible to distract me. The intensity of light was at a level my

direct gaze could just tolerate. Over time I would become more aware of the light though I can't say I ever manipulated or used it for effect.

These lights clearly allowed the possibility of direct audience influence, even playfulness. I have no doubt there were those who, prizing their unobtrusiveness, made every attempt to stand rock-still. Similarly there were others who took pleasure in tilting to the right for a clearer view of my cheese-butchering, bending to the left to ascertain whether it really was glass I was scissoring, or - and of this I have no doubt - suddenly ducking just to see what would happen if my eyes were to get a direct blast of light. No one ever saw me flinch.

So in the end, Magda - as so often is the case - was right. Those continual shifts of illumination, gradual or abrupt but always vicissitudinal, dividing my face or body into equal or unequal halves was supremely apposite as I would continue to reveal disparate aspects of the brothers' contrasting, conflicting natures.

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After making the first DNA shows some thirty years ago, I thought it might be a good idea to read a couple of books on theatre, just to get some perspective. I was untrained, unschooled - no doubt there was much for me to learn. Since the most famous innovative director at that time was Peter Brook, I purchased *The Empty Space* and read it from cover to cover.

I found the book interesting, well-written, but cannot say it had any serious impact. Brook, despite being heralded for his imaginative stagings, is still at heart a man of the old school. There is much talk of acting techniques and different approaches to directing but my budding work with DNA had little to do with "character" and "plays".

However he did make a point about lighting that immediately struck me - white light is by far the most difficult medium with which to convey mood and emotion. I remember taking those words as a direct challenge and resolved henceforth to eschew lights of all colours. Instinctively I knew that within "white" light there was a gamut of variety and there must be countless ingenious ways of using it. For some two decades there was nary a coloured light in any DNA work I directed.

I mention all this to illustrate what a radical move it was on our part to have the chief light be blue. Once started, I would not stop and pushed the issue - *How about avoiding white light altogether?* Magda saw no reason to object.

Soon the coffee/salt chest-of-drawers' corner had a small table-lamp with a proudly glowing blood-red bulb covered with a circular white shade - blue and red were rapidly becoming WIT's defining colours - and we made sure to place our reddest photo almost directly overhead.

We turned on a gas burner on my stove and admired the flickering flames, constantly shifting shades of blue tinged with red. Alright, orange. I would turn on the burner every pre-show, adjust the flames' height, and leave it on for the duration of the performance. Seeing as it was directly behind a sitting audience member, it may well have cast more heat than light. Some were not even aware of its existence. One person noticed it only towards the end of the show, during my first cork-toss. He came to believe the cork hitting the bowl had triggered the burner's on-switch and later approached me, his voice belying a sense of wonder - *How did you do that?*

Despite our new-found embrace of coloured lights we did not become crazed enough to try and fill in the entire spectrum. Nonetheless we did add a tinge of green by turning on the sound-system's receiver - though the speakers never emitted a sound - and then called a halt.

My desk-lamp created the biggest problem - we simply could not find a blue bulb that would provide sufficient light for me to draw my start-of-the-show sketch. And we needed enough light for *dea's* photos-illumination. Thwarted in our quest for colours-exclusivity, we had no choice but to scrape off some of the bulb's blue casing - white light's jealousy and revenge.

### **Wit's Brother's Identity Finally Revealed**

One evening in early spring, Mike Hoolboom, erudite, sharp-principled, a wonderful writer and arguably Canada's most brilliant avant-garde filmmaker, was over for dinner. I mentioned working on a piece in which I would be playing both Wittgenstein and his brother. He thought out loud - *Wasn't his brother a pianist?*

That set off an irruption. First, it made me think that no wonder Sky, knowing my pianist background, had decided to model the brother after me. (I was wrong - he had not been aware of the philosopher's brother's pianistic fame.) Then the outpour - *Oh my god, wasn't his name Paul, wasn't he the one who lost his right arm during the Great War, wasn't he the one who commissioned Ravel's magnificent Piano Concerto for Left Hand?* Mike confirmed - *Yes, and he also (news to me) commissioned numerous compositions from other great composers.*

Soon after, Magda and I sat down and listened to much of that stunning concerto, dispensing with the last movement which I have never liked. Magda agreed it was gorgeous. I asked - *What do you think about using it for WIT?* Two words - *No orchestra.*

I remember being taken aback by the severity of her pronouncement - and never questioned it. Perhaps I was too stunned by her response. This is atypical Magda, though she can, on rare occasion, be so direct and forceful in expressing

an opinion it leaves no room for argument. *No orchestra*. Nothing to discuss. And she was right - we'll get to that in a moment.

Now, we always knew we wanted a musical component for WIT and suddenly we had a composer - Maurice Ravel. I went to HMV and ordered CDs of his complete piano works as played by Jean-Philippe Collard, little known in our country but, in my opinion, one of the great pianists of our time - and a Frenchman to boot. The order would take at least two months to process. Fine.

When the package finally did arrive, Magda and I, on our own, listened to the two discs. I was prejudiced from the start. Being familiar with most of Ravel's piano compositions those CDs contained very little new for me - but I had always had a special affinity for his exquisite, enigmatic *Gaspard de la nuit*. (When he wrote the first of the three movements, *Ondine*, he set out to compose the most technically difficult piano piece ever written. He succeeded. It took a couple of decades for its vicious complexities to be decidedly surpassed.)

Happily enough, Magda shared my affection for this piece. However she was also strongly attracted to the spirited, exuberant first section of *Alborada del Gracioso* from the suite *Miroirs*. This is a piece I had long enjoyed and we had no difficulty incorporating both our favourites into WIT.

We arrived at a relatively simple conceit. Sky's text refers to a student painting the floorboards in the hall leading to the kitchen. Well, we envisioned this student instead being in another room practicing the piano. That made sense. He was most likely staying behind to reinforce what he had been taught in a just-finished lesson. (Never mind that later in the evening the brothers go upstairs to the bedroom where there is a piano and no one playing it. It is common for a pianist to have several pianos at home.)

So what the audience heard was a series of stops and starts, repetitions, different stabs at specific passages as the student worked his way through *Gaspard*. And then the delicious interruption of *Alborada*, tossed off twice in a row - pure joy opposing hard labour - before his attack on the haunting *Scarbo*.

*No orchestra?* No kidding. Magda intuitively knew it was the right call.

## **A Tale of Tails**

Every once in a regular while Magda arrives at DNA and finds me in bed, drunk. Alright, perhaps only tipsy. This may be due to a particularly disturbing nightmare, despair over the stock markets, but most likely part of the ongoing saga of my insomnia. I will wake up ridiculously early, turn on the TV, take a wedge of sleeping pill, have a couple of shots of Dorlan cognac and soon try to fall back asleep. Failing that, I repeat the process. Re-failing that, I once again

repeat the process, a practice I learned from Fassbinder. Sleep still eluding me, Magda arrives.

On this occasion, however, I was simply fortifying myself - for courage. Now this is a curious admission as I really don't need bolstering in order to speak about *anything* with her. However here was the exception that *probes* the rule. I was concerned about broaching a topic excessively intimate. I will return to this feared transgression after setting the stage.

While in Estonia, making my one-and-only proscenium-arch show, JÄTA MU HING RAHULE (1995), I visited several second-hand stores and landed upon gorgeous tails - the highest-quality wool, impeccable classic cut, seemingly never worn. Knowing full well my piano-playing days were far behind me I could still not resist trying it on. This perfect fit was purchased for a mere verse of a song. Little did I know ...

Having recently been reminded of Wit's brother's career as a pianist - no doubt here, as Wittgenstein's other ones had all committed suicide - I suggested the tails anchor my costume. Magda enthusiastically agreed - *Try it on*. For whatever reason I put it off for weeks until finally relenting. Flawlessly preserved, still a perfect fit, my body-shape not having changed in the ensuing years. Sweet. Yet I had my doubts. Something did not feel quite right. Was formal concert-garb an excessively obvious solution? Once my nagging fears had crystallized and I had found an intriguing new possibility, I knew I had to tell Magda something deeply personal .

Some ten years ago I decided one day, out of the blue, to derive an inkling of what it was like to be a girl. I realize it is preposterous to imagine gaining awareness of any aspect of girlhood by simply donning clothes, but there I was, once again, in Value Village, trying on various clothes before landing on the choicest item - a lovely pleated school-girl kilt which I combined with a pink frilly blouse, white knee-socks, bra, and ambi-sexual black flats. As it happened, I was scheduled a day later to see a show at Montreal's Festival des Amériques and, after arriving, managed to quickly find not my ideal, but panties nonetheless.

How perfect was this? More than fifteen years had passed since DNA's performances at that very same festival; I had but few friends in the city; surely I could make my schoolgirl-debut unnoticed. Back in my hotel after the show, I carefully shaved off body hair, drank more than a few drinks, got gussied up and went out for a middle-of-the-night walk in downtown Montreal. Not that I was remotely "passable" - that was never my intent. It was a little scary, but I was not about to venture into any park where recent brutal attacks had occurred. I was not looking for sex, just a sensation.

The June air was warm with a touch of breeze and I felt wonderful and sexy, living out a possibly long-repressed fantasy as, years later, I had a memory-flash of my father doubled up in laughter one Hallowe'en as his eight-year-old son

flounced about in my that-night-absent mother's lingerie and make-up. Today I can still remember feeling the delicious freshness of Montreal wind caressing my glabrous legs, the delightful kilt-taps on my thighs at each step as I walked the innocuous side-streets, finally venturing into the gay-hub section of Rue St.-Catharine where I felt safe.

But just before that, a young woman in her backyard saw me and could not resist - *Peut-être que je ne devrais rien dire, mais tu as l'air tellement chic!* I turned towards her, made my best curtsy - *Merci*. Her remark I cherish to this day.

This - shall we call it a predilection? - continued to hold me in thrall and soon I decided I really must purchase a fine pair of girl-shoes, go to, say, Holt Renfrew, be fearless, spend a couple hundred dollars and then take religious care of them. Is it fate that intervened? Right after making that decision I found out about a female-shoe store that was closing, having a blow-out sale - and they were hoping to find big-footed customers, most females apparently being small-footed (ask the Chinese). I rushed over and tried on everything that appealed to me. At one point one of the owners said - *Are these for you?* With conviction, if not pride, I said - Yes. Hours later I emerged with seven exquisite Italian black-leather high-and-low-heeled shoes, among them two pairs of (single- and double-strapped) Mary Janes, my favourites.

I wonder now, as I remember telling Magda about this cross-dressing foray of mine - *wherein lay the fear of transgression?* It's not as though sex, for us, is a taboo topic. I know we share certain core beliefs regarding total freedom of sexual expression - neither of us would look askance at any sexual practice between consenting adults. She is certainly aware of my "queer" nature just as well as I know that her curiosity - one of the defining aspects of Magda's character - does not extend to bi-sexuality. However we both have an ingrained respect of privacy and neither of us has even a remote interest in probing beneath the surface of the other's sexual interests. Was I stepping over a line here, was her mind cringing? - *Hillar, please don't go there.*

Well, no, Magda was not distressed, she listened with interest and probable amusement - this is something I don't take all *that* seriously - yet at the same time she certainly was aware I was revealing something clearly intimate, while no doubt wondering why I was even going down this road.

The answer lies in Wittgenstein's sexuality. He was gay - perhaps only vaguely so - and while there is no absolute proof, this presumption lies in inference and probability. Though for a time, early in life, he intended to marry a young Swiss girl, a look at some of his correspondence with certain boy-students leaves no doubt of his desires, if not undeniable confirmation of a certain degree of consummation. (When once asked whether his philosophy was affected by his homosexuality, he was angered and instantly responded in the negative.)

Having digested these sexual clues, I had arrived at a conceit - perhaps he was attracted to girly-boys or being one himself. If my upper half reflected the elegant concert pianist, why couldn't the waist down be an imaginative expression of Wit's sexual fantasies? Magda's mind was nothing if not receptive.

No longer needing a drink, we went downstairs to have a look - over the course of time I had acquired more clothes and now, like any self-respecting girl, had several pleasing outfits though far from anything resembling a wardrobe. This underlines why I *had* to tell this story to Magda. We really don't hide things from each other. Had Magda gone with me to hunt for girl-clothes only to find out I had a selection in the basement, she would have been perplexed. So much of our relationship is based on the foundation of honesty and trust. She would have felt bewildered - *I don't understand. Why didn't you just tell me?*

Going through the kilts, it was effortless to decide upon the stylish blue-and-red one, and all we needed to add to the kneesocks and Mary Janes were red leg-warmers. Later, shopping for a fine white shirt, we agreed on the ideal one. I looked at the label - *H & M* - and was ecstatic. I had no idea an entire chain of clothing stores had been named after us!

The bottom half of the costume was not revealed until well into the show. While the audience entered, I was sitting in a chair behind the table and only when I stood fully up and opened the curtains hiding the Grand Design was the kilt fully exposed. I do not remember any audible reaction, just a hint of *frisson* - but at that point we were at such a critical juncture in the piece, I believe most attention was directed at my explanation of the world's workings - revelations of considerably more import than my nether regions' covering.

This may sound like just a bit too much fun, indulgence on a high level. It is time now to disabuse you of this notion. Never for an instant did I derive anything even resembling sexual pleasure - either before, during, or after the performance. There were far too many other concerns to pincer my attention.

During the final days of the run I was feeling mild pain running up and down my left leg. It only got worse. After Closing I went to see my family doctor and as soon as he heard about the WIT footwear as well as me walking on pretty thick carpet, not ideal for balance and stability, the diagnosis was irritation of the sciatica nerve.

This discomfort did, however, lead to some amusement. That nerve troubled me for six weeks - but at least it had the courtesy to heal just before the Free Fall festival run. I had no desire for a repeat performance. As my regular doctor was away I had an appointment with a wonderful female physician in the same office. Perfect choice - she was a sciatica-sufferer herself. I had brought four of my shoes and asked her to examine them - pumps suddenly became surrogate patients - and to put them in order of least- to most-likely to cause problems. This she did - goodbye Mary Janes - as well as giving me exercises to prevent

re-occurrence. When I next saw my family doctor he gave me an arch look and read me the notes from that appointment, notes which suppressed her amusement until the final clarion call - *But the show must go on!*

## **Walking away**

This has been an exhaustive survey of what began as only a room and one would think it time to call a halt. Yet I am not quite ready to do so. Is this a classic case of monomania? Megalomania? Perhaps the only saving grace will be the brevity with which I manage to note the final, sly, touches.

Did you notice the butt plug calmly poking its cock-head out of the pens-holding coffee-mug? Did you smile when your eyes caught the pair of riding-crops hiding behind the pots and pans? Did you knowingly nod when you landed on Sky's laminated bathhouse bar-pass? What about his novella on the floor, the paperback you were not allowed to step on - was that bookmark really the Norwegian flag? And that hunky roach sitting atop a cupboard, was it not appetizing? Surely before exiting you could have shared it with a few people. You certainly knew the sink-divider was the perfect place to but it out.

Speaking of calling a halt, how did Magda and I know when to stop? What made it clear to us the installation was finished?

Recently I spent almost an hour sitting on the floor, staring at a large masterful Jackson Pollock painting (*Number 1A, 1948*). To some, no doubt, this is a chaotic mess but my admiration only grew amidst the austerity of his almost-exclusive use of white and black. Mere wisps of red, maroon, blue and yellow, scattered throughout the canvas, gave such a satisfying balance to the whole. This was not the case of, say, a landscape painter who could put away his brushes once everything in his chosen field of vision had been represented in the desired detail and colour. Here was pure abstraction, hundreds of superimposed ejaculatory gestures. How did Pollock know enough was enough?

I do not, of course, have the definitive answer to this question but I cannot help but feel that having started with some idea of what he wanted the painting to look like he could sense, at a certain point, that he was very close, it was time to circle it again and again, look at every square foot and then perhaps add something, perhaps not. The painting was finished when it *felt* right. And only he could know when it *did* feel right.

What I have just outlined - and some reading on Pollock confirms my conjectures - is a precise description of how Magda and I created both the disparate elements as well as the installation's unified whole. We started with certain key principles and stuck to them. Our vision evolved but did not stray. Every constellation developed rules which were obeyed and executed. One day there seemed nothing left to do. We stood together and let our eyes rove all over

the room. We moved around and - closely - re-examined everything. After awhile I nodded - *It's all good*. Magda agreed - *We're done*. We turned off the lights, closed the door and walked away.

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Those blue tissue-boxes sidling up to the Atlantic Ocean smiling at the Blue Sapphire gin-bottle boasting to the blue pen pointing at the kilt flirting with the panties - reverberations all bathed in the light spilling from the ovals that, in turn, were beckoning to the eggs guarded by the scissor-heads hiding the spoon - a veritable echo-chamber.

The Grand Design's magisterial vase mirroring the coffee/salt amphora, both taunting the mug-handle that finds comfort in the wine-glass curves; the unexploded entire world glowing with pride over all the pots, pans, bowls and glasses, all caroming off the lamp-shade, the celebrated whorls, the tissue-box circles, down to the knife-handle rivets - ricochet riches.

That soft red light imparting its hue to the Norwegian fishmongers' knives directing their glare at the scarlet tulips waving at my legwarmers encouraging the match-tips - a complexity of resonances.

The severity of straight lines contrasting gentle curves, the clutter of one table-half amiably neighbouring the purity of the other, the sharpness of the knives menacing the tulip-petals' softness, the disorder of book-stacks clashing with the calm neatness of the coffee/salt - a measured balance of yin and yang, the resolved conflicts of each constellation all submerged within the mysterious world of our installation.

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Few questions remain - was WIT a fine installation? And who, exactly, is the judge of its quality - the audience, the critics, our peers?

The answers to both questions are simple. Yes, WIT was a marvelous installation. And the only *true* judges are Magda and myself. Everyone may have their own opinion, anyone can have their say. The answer's key, however, lies in the word "true". For it is only the creator who knows what he set out to do, only she can outline the vision that was to be realized.

By now it must be clear we were both more than merely satisfied. We were, in fact, proud. Had we been dissatisfied, we would simply have continued plugging away. With Opening drawing near and the work falling short of our standards? We would have postponed the run. Had we come to the excruciating realization we were not up to the task, doomed to failure? The project would have been abandoned, the grant money returned - followed soon after by a long dinner focusing on one question - *how on earth could we have failed so miserably?*

Fortunately enough, such despair was not in our cards. In its stead was a deep sense of wonder. Entering my transformed kitchen - even in daylight - was always to be transported, awed, posing quite the opposite question - *how on earth did we manage to execute our vision so acutely?*

Beyond our own personal satisfaction, the compliments in the Guestbooks, the appreciative observations of friends who stayed behind for drinks, there was one more source of delight, something I never saw, but only heard.

When Magda was leading each group from the dark hallway she would open the door and, one by one, people would enter. At the time I was entirely focused on making my drawing and never looked up. Nevertheless I could sense the trepidation of slowly-moving bodies, the amazement, the discombobulation - but amidst the murmurs, most gratifying of all, was the occasional sudden involuntary gasp of astonishment - *Oh my God!*

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A slightly altered version of this piece appeared in *Compulsive Acts: Essays, Interviews, Reflections on the Works of Sky Gilbert* (Guernica Editions, 2014), edited by David Bateman.

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