

Dao Entrepreneurship

Dao Entrepreneurship:

*Westwood, Wilson and Bergson
on Business, Art and Aesthetics*

By

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Dao Entrepreneurship:
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By Clemens Thornquist

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Clemens Thornquist

OVERTURE

One cold January afternoon I was sitting on a sofa in the hallway of the Marketing Department at the Stockholm School of Business when Pierre Guillet de Monthoux stepped into the corridor and approached me expectantly. I had just had a long chat with Lisbeth Svengren in her nearby office and was waiting to catch a flight back to Borås and my teaching position at the Swedish School of Textiles. During our conversation, Lisbeth and I had discussed nearly everything classified as design and artistry, and at this point, bits of our talk were flipping back and forth in my consciousness.

“There is this theatre guy Bob,” Pierre began. “He needs a PA.”

“Who?” I focused immediately. I didn’t have a clue about Pierre’s “guy”—this person who needed a personal assistant—even though Pierre seemed absolutely sure that I did.

“You don’t know him?” Pierre inquired, his voice full of surprise.

“No,” I replied, tentatively adding “but the name does sound familiar.” Even as I said it, I knew the jig was up. Both of us knew I was clueless. Within a few minutes, however, I learned that Pierre’s “guy” was in fact the great theatre director and visual artist Robert Wilson. Pierre expected me to know him. Obviously I did not.

Undaunted Pierre pressed on. “Perhaps you could get some nice stuff out of it for your work,” he suggested. “Should I give him your number? Nothing, for sure, of course. Just a chance.”

Why not, I thought. It sounded exciting and worth a shot at least. “Sure,” I agreed. “Go ahead. Give him my number.”

But by then Pierre was already out the door. As for me, I got on the plane to Borås.

At that time, with not too long a history as a fashion designer but with a long-time interest in clothing and dressmaking, I was already questioning the way fashion design companies and companies trading in clothing approached design. I not only had doubts about the way they worked with fashion design but also what they managed to get out of the process. The traders appeared strange to me; it did not seem to matter to them whether they were trading cows, horses, or pigs as long as the money was pouring in faster than the interest rate at a bank would make it do.

While I was frustrated with this, I was also fascinated with one-person fashion design companies. They seemed to be run with passion by entrepreneurial jack-of-all-trades fashion designers who appeared to approach their design in a unique way. Though interesting fundamental differences in creating fashion seemed to exist between the bigger organization and the one-person fashion business, these differences did not seem to be related directly to their organizational size. Later, after some mail correspondence and a fifteen-minute interview in the grungy lobby of a London-based fashion designer, I began a three-month work placement and an extended freelance career; it was at this juncture the difference between the two became more clear and struck me even more powerfully.

At Vivienne Westwood's Battersea studio, fashion design was different. While it was certainly not painless, it was never ever boring. When I arrived in the summer of 1999, an in-house studio sat across the street from where the main office was located. The studio was an effort to produce all the clothing of collections in-house. As a result of the roaring textile crisis in the West and outsourcing to the Far East, not many in the industry still stuck to in-house production.

At Westwood however they thought differently. And it was a godsend they did because anyone outside the studio had a hard time grading the patterns and following the production instructions. Not even with a finished sample could one manage to get the assembly the way it was supposed to be. The devotion to the very crafting of the cloth, the very heart of dressmaking, was so profound and so determined that it often resulted in the most fascinating and at times absurd constructions that only the one person who came up with the final design knew how to make work. Inside the studio itself, the sewing operator and pattern cutter might need a two-day discussion just to straighten things out. Westwood pattern cutters were designers and design assistants and not part of an outsourced production facility. At Westwood, visions were sculpted, thought about, experimented with, directly on the body, on the stand, on the floor, or just tied to the mast. Throughout it all, body and clothes somehow seemed to merge; the border between the two dissolved when shape and fit draped and shaped into the body total. The time spent looking, touching, and reflecting on these bodies in calico and skin however was endless:

Change.

Stand back.

Wait.

Watch.

Turn around.

Wait.
Silence.
Change back.
Cut.
Pin.
Stand back.
Another change.
Pin.
Another pause.
Needles and pins.
Wait.
Look.
Cut.
Silence.

It was an instinctive and very direct approach to the sculpting of clothes. Without stories or motives, it was just a savage, straightforward, passionate, and sincere approach to the matter and its possibilities as the garments were cut or ruthlessly torn into the desired shape. It was an involvement with what was directly in front of you. When you took part in the rituals, time passed quickly. If you were waiting for someone who took part in the rituals, the clock stood absolutely still; time elapsed at two different tempos. At first the item constructed by this process appeared cheap and of poor quality. Compared to the competition, the end product did not in fact measure up to the quality one might have expected for the price. What the pieces lacked in physical quality however they boasted in their bricolage, in their intensity.

For various reasons a brief experiment with getting the in-house studio rolling did not work out. After only a few seasons, the prototyping and sales sample production, still carried out in the company as before, moved back into the main building. This of course increased efficiency, for one did not have to move back and forth between draping and pattern cutting to assembling and toile making. Instead the seven days and evenings of the week were spent in the same house: fighting with petroleum-collared fur jackets on regular sewing machines; coping with Swarovski, latex, and corsets for the “sparkling condom wedding dress” on malfunctioning fuses and an inconveniently small ironing board; draping and deconstructing flat-knit wool pieces and silk weaves for evening dresses; patching striped pieces of cotton cloth for store screens; crawling on the floor to draw pattern pieces too large for pool-sized tables or just sitting on the floor piecing together knits and gussets with hundreds of meters of calico—and

all while Ivan and Claus were making out on a studio table. The fact that the two were so thoroughly engaged in what they were doing was somewhat of a relief because it meant that Ivan did not have time to flirt with me. Over time Ivan had gotten tired of trying to get me out of the closet, and now he was dying to meet my twin brother Michael; he had heard somewhere that twins have a greater chance of being gay than singletons. He reckoned the odds were still on his side.

If the late nights were not spent with aching hands and shoulders in the studio, sometimes balancing wine glasses on ironing boards and sewing machines next to should-have-been-finished-yesterday garments, patterns, or toiles, they were spent in the Barbican area talking rhythms and gymnastics with my sweet roommate and ballet dancer Maria and drinking pints of red wine while stuffing my mouth with crisps. Later as I occupied a floor somewhere in the lower part of Fulham Road, the diet changed to movies and books on the everyday fashion agenda. Red buses roaring down the road replaced red wine pouring down the throat, a real disruption to the already limited time of recovery between night and day. Once you entered the studio doors, you surrendered to Vivienne Westwood Ltd. and put everything else on hold. You were either a part of it or not. No wonder then that this approach to fashion design made a noticeable difference in my understanding of the process.

When Pierre suggested that I join up with Bob, it provided a great opportunity to once again drop into a scene with a possibly similar approach to design and art. In fact it already had the smell of similarity. This world-renowned, prized and awarded, highly acclaimed visual artist, theatre director, curator, artistic director and designer, and essentially master of all things in the art business devoted himself to anything that could be staged and visualized; he had after all done so all his life and certainly as long as Westwood had. Furthermore, the world of Bob seemed to have plenty to satisfy my curiosity. He had a collection of more than eight thousand items, including photographs, clothing, fabrics, chairs, doors, stones, tables, and ladders. He had every kind of design, from other artists as well as those of his own creation. What's more, in my very first encounter with Bob, I realized he and his cohorts dealt with things in a fashion that reminded me of Westwood.

A little more than a month after Pierre had suggested me as a PA for Bob, a person with a slight French accent to his English phoned me late one Friday evening. It was Charles Fabius, in Paris at the time, and soon-to-be executive officer of Byrd Hoffman Watermill Foundation and the managing director of R.W. Works Ltd. He phoned to ask if I were still interested in being Bob's PA. Hearing his description of the work was

exhausting: the whole business of being fully committed, of being “part of the family,” seemed so time-consuming. The work itself did not sound too scary, only occasionally painful, and sometimes even amusing. A few months after the phone call, since I was still very interested, I made my way to the Stockholm City Theatre where Bob had been asked to restage Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*.

The first trace of Bob’s world was something pinned to the back wall of the rehearsal room. It was a list of names with figures next to them. Though I was very curious, I did not have time to take a close look at the list before a lot of people started to drop in. Some assembled on the stage, and others sat down at two long tables in front of it. It seemed to me as if an experiment were about to be carried out. The observers at the long table outnumbered those being observed up front, and by the time all the actors, directors, and light and sound people gathered, an atmosphere of anticipation had settled on the room. People stared into thin air, looked at their hands, scanned the device in front of them, gazed at each other, and even leaned over to talk to the person sitting next to them. Then he came rushing into the room. In came Bob, and just as quickly he sat down.

“Okay,” he opened. “Let’s start.” In just a few moments the room fell silent...but not quite silent enough. Time for a second announcement from Bob: “There will be no talking!” And that was all it took. A new obligatory silence replaced the voluntary one. Getting my notebook out of my bag would have been disastrous because of its zipper; it would have sounded like a terrifying scream in the unconditional silence. And what in the world was there to take notes about anyway, I reasoned.

On the rehearsal stage, marked out with tape on the wooden floor, slow and careful movements began. A well-known Swedish actor sat there, played with a feather, and made childish funny faces. No one else moved or made a sound. In the middle of all this action--the Swedish actor by now had his mouth fully open--an odd scream pierced the room. It was Bob. He stood up, imitated the actor’s face, twisted the fingers on his left hand, and let out a scream. It was just Bob...giving his instructions. Next he walked across the imagined stage to the sitting actor, turned the actor’s head slightly to the right with his own hand, and made the same sound over again. A dialogue of shrieks began as they together tried out the character of it. What on earth is going on here, I thought. What bizarre world is this?

Bizarre, maybe, but also strangely familiar. And it was not only the familiar names written on the long list on the wall, a list that spread over a couple of white photocopied pieces of paper with the heading “Watermill Patrons” or “World Sponsors.” No. It was something about the way they

rehearsed, the way they produced theatre. It was something about how they experimented and tried and retried that reminded me of Westwood. It was something in the way Bob approached the actors, how he instructed them and touched them physically to make them change and move in different ways. In my recollection I was at Westwood again because there was this similar kind of direct and instinctive approach, not only to the actors, but also to the stage and the props in front of me.

“Okay...from the second cue. This time lower your hand. More. A bit more. Lower.”

Pause and watch.

Silence.

“No. Again.” Then more instructions from Bob and another hasty trip across the room to where the actor was, this time to raise the actor’s hand.

Step back. Watch. Pause.

“Okay. We’ll take it again from where we just started.”

Watch. Reflect.

New directions on how to walk. Watch. Change.

Back stage. More.

“Okay.”

And again. Pause. Watch.

Change back again.

Another change. Another pause.

After about two hours of rehearsing the second staging phase of *Three Sisters*, Bob took a break and went to his office. I followed. We sat down at his desk in a room that was cleared for his temporary presence, and we talked about me. And just like Pierre, Bob asked me a question I felt I should have been able to answer directly. I once again decided to go for a half-truth, however, hoping it would deflect detailed questions. Did I know about the Watermill Center? But of course! Was I interested in coming even if there was no PA job available this year? Absolutely.

“It seems like an amazing place,” I remarked. My comment was really no lie, I thought, justifying my hesitation. After all I did happen to know a little about the place, at least what was available on Mr. Wilson’s official website.

“Okay. Great!” Bob enthused, bringing an end to our three-minute conversation. During our brief exchange, he had been busy multitasking, sketching some kind of square structure on a blank sheet of paper with a yellow pencil. He got up from his chair.

“Okay. I’ve got to go down again. Why don’t you stay and talk to my assistant?” he suggested.

“Okay,” I mumbled.

Bob left, closing the door after him. The room felt weird. I felt weird...and watched. Left alone in the world of Bob. The room was quiet, still, and full of things: sketches, papers, faxes, prints, photos, books, a black suit on a hanger, and a pair of shiny black shoes on the desk. The room was full of order and disorder, but it was still very different from the other rooms along the hallway on level five in the theatre; these “things” were artefacts from someone’s life and times.

I didn’t have too much time to think about it because the door suddenly opened again, and a guy in his late twenties dressed in a black turtleneck entered. His gaze moved restlessly from spot to spot. Anxious. He waited to introduce himself until he had sent off a fax. Then he asked me to help him write a summary of a play script. It was a short play, but I cannot remember the title...or the content either. It took me around fifteen minutes to compose the summary. Meanwhile the assistant hurried from thing to thing in a fast, scatter-brained manner: fax machine to notebook, notebook to files, files to huge black suitcase, huge black suitcase back to the fax machine.

“Stressed?” I questioned. He grinned in reply. Three weeks later the guy in the black turtleneck quit while travelling in Spain. He could not bear it. Apparently it just did not work. Could this mean it was my turn now, I wondered.

Regrettably I had to turn down the PA offer. And unfortunately I still have not managed to do the PA job, though once in late 2002 at the opening of White Town outside Copenhagen, Bob asked my mother to be his PA. “Her son apparently could not...maybe she could,” he laughed. My mother never made it either, but she was very flattered to be asked. Instead I was invited to the Watermill Center on Long Island to be the Associate Program Director. A couple of years later the word reached me that I had been chosen because of my seemingly different style and experience; the other candidates had a more traditional management profile.

After two hours of assisting the assistant with various types of correspondence--which felt like days of work in isolation from the rest of the world--I left Bob, his assistant, and the City Theatre and walked out again into the relatively ordinary city of Stockholm. What I could not stop wondering about was: outside of the fact that the work of Bob and of Westwood seemed to be miles apart in material and expression and separated by who knows how many –isms, what was it the two shared in their artistry? What did they share in their so-called artistic approach to design that the fashion design businesses did not? What kind of approach

to things did they engage in inside an otherwise systematized process? What kind of approach did Bob and his fellow designers and creators take? Even though this kind of approach was interesting in itself, the more intriguing question was: how could it be handled? What does it take to manage such a process without depriving it of its quality? And how to nourish it? Or more precisely, how on earth was I supposed to handle it?

This work is a road map of a journey that originated in my experience as a fashion designer and as a design/art manager. My twofold experience of practice constitutes the foundation for the work. As much as the work is dedicated to those managing design processes within discursive contexts, it has also become devoted to the approach and methodology of practicing designers. The kind of design of particular interest is that which borders art, as it involves a person with the creative qualities and personal style of the auteur. Auteur is here used in the sense of a creator in any field that has a personal style and keeps creative control over his creation or authorship, even in collaboration with other designers and artists.

This work grows out of a particular notion about the creative process within the fashion context found in the Battersea studio of Vivienne Westwood. In addition, the idea becomes of particular interest when it reappears, this time in the rehearsal rooms of Robert Wilson's theatre making. As the concept takes center stage in Wilson's distinctive way of working, much of which is conducted at the Watermill Center where the work flora of Wilson and his collaborators co-mingles, the question concerning this approach to artistic creation begs the central question of how to manage a creative process of such quality. Using a methodological and epistemological perspective, we begin our odyssey toward an enlightenment of this question.

CHAPTER ONE

ABSOLUTE BOB

Barrier Without a Gate

I am staring at the gate. It is closed but not locked, suggesting that no one is really prevented from going through the gate if he or she is prepared to make the effort to live in the world inside. In these surroundings, which stand in full flower only once a year from mid-June to late August, concrete walls, access cards, and security details do not exist. Only an old wire fence stretches around the property, and the fence itself does not even designate a legal area of minor importance to the world inside since it runs both inside and outside the actual territory. Rather than functioning as any sort of a barricade, what the fence does do is relate to the place, an artistic abstraction of the actual. Obviously no special key or vehicle is required for a person either to enter or to escape from what is inside.

At seven o'clock the evening of June 24, the old factory site at Watermill, Long Island, New York, is silent as a silver minivan rolls through the gates and along what remains of a gravel path. The van peppers the quiet with a crushing sound as it continues over the scattered islands of bluestone gravel leading to an open area in front of a factory-like, three-story main building. At first the branches of tall trees meet far above the path, but on down the trail as the boughs part, they expose an open area covered by sand, grass, and woodchips.

The place is abandoned, as if it were left in a hurry and without explanation. There is no sign of human activity. Nothing is moving, yet something is breathing. Slowly. Calmly. A sublime breath of life. I am strangely conscious of being watched and wait for something to jump out from its refuge behind one of the ancient monoliths dwelling in the woods or for something to sprint through the plywood doors of the building and sheds. I stop, and as I step out of the van, the presence of this something intensifies. I feel the existence of things. A slight wind sweeps across the open fields, cradling the trees but making no sound, causing no trace. Moments pass and with them, I leave all time behind.

It takes me a while to realize why I feel this presence. Far back in the woods something *is* moving, something that catches the eye as it sparkles in the light of the setting sun and fills the woods with the characteristic glowing orange eastern Long Island light. Something glittery lurks in the trees; it sways and blinks as if it were performing a kind of dance. Suddenly it stops. It is gone. Gauzy sunlight splinters through the trees. Then this *it* manifests itself again, this time far up in the middle of the area. Seconds later it is close to the ground. All of a sudden it is all over a tree from far above to down low. Skipping lights create an image of a beautiful tall being. It twists in the fading sun as it seduces everyone caught by its fleeting there-ness. Last summer it revealed itself in its full magnificence in hundreds of tiny mirrors. And even though some mirror pieces did not make it through the winter, it still rose in full glory. And then the moment is gone. No goose bumps. No magic. Even though each and every one of the small mirrors seems to hold the memories of the lost world, my mind has strayed to thoughts of last summer and The Watermill Summer Program.

People are everywhere now. Tassy, the young Scottish woman, attaches the last of the hundreds of mirrors to strings hanging down from the branches of the tree. Carlos, the fashion victim, is running around in circles in the back of the woods shooting a movie on a Mini-DV camera: his own version of the 1999 *The Blair Witch Project* by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, which stars the grandiose German opera singer Barbara and the modest Swiss performer Serge. Brilliant. Noah, deep in the woods with a jackhammer and cell phone, plows his shoes through the mud, sweat dripping from his forehead, as he tries to get the ancient Balinese stone sculpture together again, piecing the cracks caused by the slightly overly neurotic dispatcher. Close behind, Daniel, armed with a power drill and some pieces of wood to splint the sculpture, keeps up in nothing but a pair of black shorts. Bob and Christopher are in the dinner tent performing *Emily likes the TV* to everyone's admiration: "*Emily likes the TV, Emily likes the TV, because she watches the TV, Emily likes the TV, Emily likes the TV, because she watches the TV, because she likes it, Emily likes the TV, Emily likes the TV, because she watches the TV.*" It just goes on and on.

Makram and seven performers, moving their bodies at a speed slower than slow motion but still faster than fast forward, rehearse a scene from *Aida*. Time stands still. The assistant director Jean Yves, sitting at the desk, appears not fully convinced. And the opera tunes from Barbara's romantic voice in the woods just seem to make things worse for him. Marianna and Zoe stretch out on the Marley floor next to the seated stone

Buddha. Ismael laughs about the Tom Jam soup getting cold and the vegetables not being properly chopped; they should be “small and even. Next time I’ll give you a rice bowl!”

Nixon carries in another load of Bob’s beloved ferns and cosmos to be planted around the Center and in a loud shout announces that there are still more plants and woodchips on the way. In the woods, the Russian artists paint large plywood billboards and fill them with different anti-capitalist statements and cute deer in bright oils on canvas; this thoroughly confuses a lady in her white stilettos and heavily branded handbag. Then there are the three yellow fairies. Short and shiny. Just to see them makes me laugh out loud. They are standing in the woods among the stones and trees. Like mushrooms in shiny yellow costumes they pop up, smiling, laughing, and wishing UPS, FedEx, Watermill Lumber, Norsic, Southampton Spring Water, Donna Karan, and Isabella Rossellini an enchanted welcome to the “out-of-the-blue” Watermill Center for new works in the arts! Then slowly, very slowly, they all creep back and disappear into the woods; Bob, Makram, Carlos, and the fairies vanish behind trees and stones, leaving the Center in hushed silence.

I too am alone, left with a bittersweet aftertaste of what was but also confident about what will be. The place has aroused a powerful feeling that now slowly fades in intensity as the fairies and the others vanish out of view. It brings to clear daylight a memory of the past that really never ceased to be. It is as if this “International Center for the Humanities” is not only a place for the arts but also a living piece of art in itself: one grand installation. The Center in its continuous creation is a work of art to enter and a creation to surrender to and be absorbed by. Under the perceived surface, a living being, a creative force, is enclosed and preserved by a superficial membrane of all things. That is why I clap my hands before entering the world of Watermill, and for the second time make the mistake, or choice if you like, of confusing virtuality with reality, possibility with actuality, all the while acknowledging that once I have passed through the gate I will not be able to escape from this confusing tension. Not for the next two months, and probably not for a long time, or ever after. Even though the gates are not locked and my body can leave through the fence, there is no way to escape the connections that have been made by the place. There is just a fence that has no lock. The last thing I remember from the year before is the song of The Eagles : “You can checkout any time you like, but you can never leave.”¹

Bricolage

In the village of Watermill, located near Southampton, Easthampton, and Sag Harbor, Long Island, and therefore about two driving hours west of New York City, visual artist and theatre director Robert “Bob” Wilson established The Watermill Center, which he himself defines as “an international facility for new work in the arts, conceived to foster communication and innovation.”

Founded in 1992, the Center inhabits an abandoned Western Union communication research facility. Situated in a neighborhood of nineteenth-century farms and newly constructed family homes, the Center is located at 39 Watermill Towd Road, just north of Montauk Highway and the city of Southampton.

In 1967, a quarter of a century before he founded The Watermill Center, Bob established *The Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds*, his own theatre factory and school. Housed in a loft on Spring Street in lower Manhattan, this trans-cultural social fantasy and cultural factory organized with the goal of becoming one of the most productive and successful interdisciplinary theatre institutions in the twentieth century.² Soon after the school opened in November 1969, Robert Wilson performed his solo performance *Baby Blood* on five occasions. The story that follows is by now common knowledge.³

Robert Wilson was not the only one involved in the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds. From the beginning and continuing in its later form as The Watermill Center and the Byrd Hoffman Foundation, the school is a community of people coming and going on a more or less regular basis, a place where performers, choreographers, designers, singers, and directors collaborate as participants and members of the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds. Altogether they constitute Wilson’s own performance factory, where Wilson himself led a workshop. Byrd Hoffman, a dancer and therapist that Robert Wilson had known from his youth, became patron saint of the school and of Wilson’s work. In a wise financial move, Robert Wilson later reorganized the foundation as a non-profit organization, and the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds became the Byrd Hoffman Foundation. At that time, public support to artists and other cultural institutions was mainly split between such foundations, so the change in organization was a necessary step to Bob’s future plans.

In the early years of the Foundation, Bob envisioned building a center on a piece of land outside the city in a natural environment. He believed this center would provide a totally different way of living and working, which would serve as a contrast to life in urbanized Western society. Even

today the central aim of the center is to provide a place where people can come together for work, study, and research. Bob explains the place as a sort of library where instead of books, his collection of things can be brought out from the archives for research and then put back again like a book on a shelf. In this way, situations can be created where people with different perspectives can work together in the creation of something new in the arts.⁴

In 1974, Wilson developed an international center for the development of human potential, including an interdisciplinary institute, which at the time was known as *The Byrd Hoffman Foundation International Community Center*.⁵ Sixteen years later in the 1990s, a new concept for an international community center was again drafted, this time under the name *Foundation Watermill*.⁶ The Watermill Center at Watermill Towd Road is the result, completed twenty-six years after the first draft and thirty years after the initial plan. Ten years after the first summer workshop in 1992, the September 2002 description on the Robert Wilson Website reads:

Upon its completion, the Center will house workshops, residencies, and educational programs, and it will operate as a study Center for Tribal Arts, as part of the Watermill Collection, which focuses on aesthetic and formal themes in world art. In addition, besides the Robert Wilson Archive, a collection of papers, films, and artefacts documenting the activities of Wilson and his collaborators the Center will show works from other artists, including a major permanent collection by Paul Thek. The Watermill Center is administered by the Byrd Hoffman Water Mill Foundation, a tax-exempt, not-for-profit organization chartered by the State of New York. The Foundation is governed by a board of directors and administered by a professional staff. Contributions from foundations and corporate and individual sponsors throughout the world make the foundation's programs and activities possible. While the Watermill Center is under construction, activities are limited to a summer program led by Robert Wilson, focusing on new projects he is developing in all areas of the arts. Beginning in the year 2003, the Foundation anticipates that this program will be expanded to a year-round schedule of workshops, artist residencies, and educational programs involving besides Robert Wilson an Academy of prestigious personalities from the world of the Arts and the Humanities.

Summer program

In the ten seasons since its inception in 1992, the Watermill Center Summer Program has developed over 50 new works for the world's stages and museums.... The summer program provides an important opportunity for young people to learn from established professionals in a laboratory

environment. The free interaction of students, artists, and scholars in a secluded, natural setting makes the Center unique among the world's arts institutions. To date, the Center has hosted over 400 student interns from all areas of the world, introducing a new generation to Wilson's distinctive methods based on movement and dance. In addition to workshops for Mr. Wilson's projects, all participants take part in daily chores, establishing a live-work environment that reflects the idea that an artist works differently in an environment that he/she has helped to create and maintain.⁷

With its grey concrete-like panels, the main building of the Center has an industrial look, and with its many windows, the structure is unusual for Long Island. Classic in form, it has an almost-square courtyard with two perpendicular axes running through the building and an intersection point in the center of what is known as the Knee building. For Bob, "the base of architecture is time and space: space as a horizontal axis; time, vertical." The building plans included a sound dwell located as a vertical axis through the center of the Knee, making it a contrast to the horizontal. As Bob put it, "I don't want any marble palace. I want to keep the industrial look. It was a factory before and I want to keep that look. I like that fact that it is a factory, spaces can change depending on needs and wants."

The place is rough, with no softness or weakness to its substance, yet it is very much alive in that it carries expressions from different directions, scars from a long and eventful life. It is like a bricolage carrying traces from different processes with different intentions. Located on the first floor in the south wing is a large open space where the metal structure of the building is bare. Both walls and the ceiling are unclothed; the inside is just a skeleton, a structure without inner tissue.

Not being able to fully use the building because of ongoing construction has resulted in the use of tents for work areas and dining. Four 40 x 50 foot rectangular white tents form a quadrangle, leaving an open square in the center. Next to the kitchen tent, another white tent houses a dining room. Since the Knee building has no access to inside toilets, a bathroom trailer sits beside the dining tent. The tents and sheds and trailers make the site a blend of permanence and temporality, of the rooted and the rootless.

Crossing the grounds is hazardous and requires a person to watch out not to step on pieces of used and unused construction materials and equipment randomly scattered about. Concrete blocks are precariously stacked together. Sawhorses stand between some bushes. Large and small piles of sand and sod can be seen in many places. Cables from the bygone Western Union era stick up through the ground, and pipes lie between trees. The north wing, the resting place of a twenty-yard roll-off container

and a smaller five-yard commercial bin, also accommodates stacks of iron bars. Two different prototypes for a concrete wall stand like sculptures in the sand next to the roll-off container. Mounds of iron profiles, sofa frames, and table legs accumulate behind the kitchen shed. An old icemaker stands next to my favorite outdoor shower. (Even though the water jets are uneven and sharp, and the platforms to stand on are rotten or broken so that the grass grows through, it is still an amazing shower.) The whole site is made up of prototypes, tests, and remnants of ideas.

Considering the condition of the site waiting in the setting sun the evening of June 24, two days before the white tents were to go up, four days before the water would run in the copper pipes, five days before the kitchen was usable, with power in the basement, and still another ten days before the delivery of the bathroom trailer was scheduled--but only six days before Germany will lose the world cup soccer final to Brazil--I have to agree with my dear friend Marianna, a Greek performer who has been at the Center ten consecutive summers, the last five with her seven-year-old son Nikitas, who was more or less born and raised here. "This place looks like a war zone," she assessed, looking slightly worried but still wearing the confident grin of someone who had already been through "the war" a couple of times.

Nikitas, who was still sleeping in the car, and Marianna had already been in New York for a few days when I picked them up somewhere on the lower part of Second Avenue. We are all here to work in a place where nothing of what can be expected in a modern working environment is detectable, only an unreliable fax, a phone line, and some electricity. We cannot be totally sure of having power until we have drawn some cables ourselves.

The kitchen, storage, and woodshed all look like run-down shacks, their windows covered by water-damaged plywood sheets and their rickety doors tightly screwed into the walls. Bodies of sculptures, partly covered in soiled plastic and slowly collecting evaporating pools of dirty water, stand here and there. Other bigger stone pieces rest close to the temporary storage shed made from last year's white walls for the auction, the pieces still tied to their wooden transportation pallets. Insulated with clear plastic, which extends through the joints, the shed makes a clattering sound when the wind catches the plastic.

I unfasten six rusty screws, breaking two in the process, and I open the door into the kitchen where I come face-to-face with a mountain of stuff stacked to the ceiling. It is like a wardrobe of a thousand different things silently crammed away and waiting to tumble out when the door is opened. The atmosphere is creepy. In fact the scene reminds me of an

abandoned warehouse in a scary movie. As I cautiously move into the shed, right at eye level I confront the piercing blue eyes of a plastic doll and the hollow gaze of African wooden masks. The rest of the stuff was not that scary, but the atmosphere was still creepy. The props stacked here are from one of Wilson's earlier pieces, *Einstein on the Beach*: primitive wooden chairs and stools from Java, teak tables, ladders, crockery, and a significant amount of outdated audio and telephone equipment. I get the feeling I am crawling around bodies almost dead and those already dead, bodies that could be brought back to life again or buried even deeper.

At this point before the program has started, the storage shed, kitchen shed, and woodshed are completely stuffed with parts of Bob's ever-growing collection of things. Now, after months of serving as storage areas, they finally have to be cleared to release the space for other purposes. The kitchen has to once again become a kitchen, and the woodshed needs to once again become a wood shop. In addition, the shopping list includes a new freezer, refrigerators, water pipes, tools, woodchips, sod, tables, and a door, and its accompanying to-do list starts with repainting and rebuilding. It is much like stoking the remains of last evening's fire from what was left to fade out and is now well hidden in the ashes. Last summer's office in the basement is now a storage place for iron profiles, cardboards, paint, and concrete blocks and has to be completely refurbished; wet leaves and worms have colonized the corners of the space. New telephone cables, new power cables, partly new lighting, and office desks have to be built or rebuilt. With the Center in this shape, the amount of work required to get the place in not only a workable condition, but also one where every detail is "neatly done," seems almost impossible. In addition to the one hundred volunteers needed to accomplish just the "workable," there is also the overwhelming aesthetic perspective of Bob that has to be taken into account. That "neatly done" part was the core concept of Summer 2001 and was drawn attention to by Bob's comment when the computer cables were drawn alongside the office table in a way he did not exactly appreciate.

My private agenda starts to move from a weekly five-day/nine-to-five job to a six-day/eight-to-nine schedule and then to an everyday eight-to-nine timetable, landing finally at an everyday around-the-clock reality. A person really has to live it, to give up everything else in order to share the world of Watermill and Bob. The outside world only reminds you that you have to give up some things in order to devote yourself exclusively to the inside world.

Considering the condition of the Center, the number of people available to work, and my last summer's experience when I was first introduced to

Bob's mission in life, I felt totally overwhelmed, especially in the legally designated hard-hat zone. Truth be told, Bob's "mission" was really nothing more than a construction site in the years between 2001 and 2005. The only thing that looked unnaturally alive in the whole muddle was the amazingly green south lawn. To no one's surprise, however, for the lawn, along with some plants and other vegetation, is one of the few things taken regular care of year round.

We enjoyed some moments of silence in the orange light of the setting sun, twisting and casting long shadows in the middle of one person's lifelong project, in "the only thing that matters anymore." Then Marianna and I, a half-Swede/half-Austrian with no experience in theatre except for a two-month stint as one of the kids harassing the soldiers in the opening scene of *Carmen* at the Malmö City Theatre in the late 1980s, quietly agreed to keep cherishing the calmness of the evening as we left the site for the night. Whatever these conditions might demand, they would wait until morning.

We exited through the gates and headed for what would be our temporary quarters for two summer months. Housing is provided for each of the about seventy to one hundred people who come to work on the Summer Program, with accommodations in rented places in the villages around Watermill. Each house also has its own van for transportation back and forth to the Center.

One of our housemates was the short but nevertheless loud Mexican, el Director Felipe Fernandez del Paso, a hardcore production designer for various Miramax motion pictures; his first comment to me in 2001 when we first met at the Byrd Hoffman office was: "Oh my God: Those legs!" A three-year veteran at the Center, Felipe knew exactly what it was all about. Back then I did not have a clue, and it seemed as if some of my later co-directors the following years really did not either. They had only gotten a verbal and a written introduction to a site that during their initiation was empty of activity. Or maybe we were brought up in different schools: me *out here* and them *at the office in there*.

Another housemate was Kerstin Spitzl, *die deutsche Sängerin, möglicherweise mit einer "Millionen Dollar Stimme,"* with a past as project manager for *die Salzburger Festspiele*, and known as "*Panzer Spitzl*" by those who feared her directness and at times crushing replays. A third and fourth were Sue Jane, the all-American stage manager, and Argentinean-tempered workaholic Laurita. A lot more people were to show up along with the year's participants.

Fortunately for the few of us, it was still ten days before the actual program would start and the majority of participants arrived. Even with ten

days though, we had a long way to go to bring the Center into a somewhat viable condition and in more detail arrange and rearrange the environment to get to the level of “Bob-neatly,” where literally everything would not just be done, but *neatly* done. The challenge itself included how the cables were to be drawn between screens and computers under the office tables and how cabinets containing pencils, paperclips, batteries, and a whole range of other office supplies should be arranged. From a perspective of neatness, the place looked terrible, and we were all certain that if Bob were to see it in its present form, he would not be very pleased, which was one of our all-time most obvious understatements.

Faxes from Bob’s assistant Mark, with different phone numbers and country codes and including Bob’s instructions concerning ferns, gravel, stones, sculptures, photos, paintings, and the like started to reach the Center as soon as we managed to draw new phone lines and power cables. A lot more work of this kind was needed, and we were the only ones to do it. Calling on professional painters, carpenters, electricians, bricklayers, forklift drivers or excavators, desktop/art directors, computer support, photographers, and gardeners would seem legitimate in most operations, but here at the Center, it was only for certain things that required authorized craftsmen (such as the finishing details on phone lines because of construction codes covering the risk of electrical charges in outdoor cables when struck by lightning and other such issues) that professionals were called in. At least this seemed to be the operating concept.

Not even Watermill could work without professionals, however. What Bob really seemed to need was not professional people per se, but a jack-of-all-trades with a professional attitude. This would conform to his idea of creating one’s own workspace and getting a special feeling for the place. If you have planted the flowers and built your desk yourself, you get a different feeling for them. A different esteem, a caring respect.

A Changing Stage of Ten Thousand Things

At this point, a key player in the operation was still missing from the line up. Noah, Bob’s right-hand man, managed Bob’s entire collection of things and fixes, tricks, handles, drills, bends, and repairs Bob’s beloved pieces from Bali, Bauhaus or Betty Nansen Theatre. Noah traces and oversees every piece in the collection, every piece born on stage in some theatre or gallery, every piece bartered or bought, no matter where its dwelling happens to be at the moment. With a Frisbee in his left hand and the crazily shaved but heavily bearded French guy Ur to his right, Noah finally passed through the gates with a truckload of things and a gang of

Brooklyn and Jersey kids. Ur, a manager of and performer in his own two-person opera in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, along with co-performer Harry – “*five sold-out performances*” I am told – teamed up with the other kids for yet another summer of arranging, rearranging, arranging, rearranging, arranging, rearranging, things, things, things, over, over, and over again. Like underdogs, the guitar guru Chan with his own CD for sale and days booked at Sidewalk Café in East Village, Manhattan, Dylan, the untiring zombie from the Jersey side, the garlicky wiseguy Jason, and Chris Green, a Harvard law school graduate, who turned out to be the slowest painter ever facing a wall with a brush, were expected to bring both chaos and order to the Center. Noah supervised them over their shoulders and never ever released his firm grip on his worn-out cell phone. Since the kids were not visible to other workshop participants because they were gone when they arrived and did not return until the participants had disappeared at program’s end, they broke the law doing everything themselves. The kids--well, they were not really kids, but they answered to that name--sweat under the sun and puffed heavily as they leaned over megaliths in their effort to get the place neatly done before Bob arrived. After the participants were gone, their return assignment was to get the site in winter mode before the autumn soaked the place in rain and snow.

Along with Noah and the kids came Eugin, who drove the first load of things from Bob’s loft in downtown Manhattan to the Center. Chairs, paintings, photos, religious artefacts, and vases were all carefully bundled in blankets and bubble wrap and packed in a rented twelve-foot yellow Penske truck. Upon arrival, the things were carefully unloaded, unwrapped, and distributed wherever they belonged across the Center. The Penske load included “things” that were more often found in museums, some of them behind glass and could easily be sold for \$200,000 plus. Here at the Center these museum objects transformed into everyday friends, utensils that received their own wounds and scars. Some of these objects, as well as some things in the sheds, were placed as if exhibited. The massive three-foot Chinese stone torso of Buddha from the Tang Dynasty, an addition to Bob’s collection, was one of those specimens. Everyone circled the piece and joked about who was going to kill himself putting it into location; each “kid” was well aware that the duty would fall to him or her, not only once, but a number of times as the desired spot would change on two, three, or even four occasions depending on where we were in the summer. Despite an initial directive from someone in charge, forms and shapes continued to change, since all the people at the Center took part in the creation and maintenance of their own environment; Bob believed that “people work differently in an environment that they have created themselves.”

After the first major staging and rearranging, anyone wandering the property would confront the most curious things behind every tree and under every bush: heads, chests, turtles, and funny grins carved in stone, wood, or lava. They were everywhere: ceramic sculptures of dancing female monkey-demons from Indonesia, stone turtles from Bali, Kayan sculptures from Borneo, stone jars, and four-legged animals with cracked tails and of unknown origin, big, tall, short, solid, dense, and shiny matte sculptures that each gave the woods the look of a sacred place.

Before the stage became sacred, before the phone worked and the faxes came in, before light was available in the sheds and the basement, before there was a table to work on, before all the thousands of things were placed and hung on the walls, and before everyone else arrived, the only clue that something was about to happen was the flurry of our running around dripping of sweat. When the flurry stopped, the kids departed. They had done their job: driving, carrying, and placing all imaginable shapes of stone and wood where they belonged. They have dug ditches, installed and buried miles of phone and electric cables, painted walls, sanded tables, nailed cardboards, spread RCA, cleaned bluestone gravel, raised monuments of stone and bark, chewed woodchip, and even finished a couple of games of Ultimate Frisbee on the sandy beach between the tents and main building. One of these contests resulted in a major fight between Noah and Chris and caused some minor injuries among the kids, but the issue soon became irrelevant because Ur and Harry, the opera performers from Williamsburg, cleared the dining tables of everything but some bottles of red wine, a saxophone, and a hand-pumped table-sized organ. We were in the first act of the *Lonesome Town* for the second time that evening. "Heaven town, heaven town," they crooned more than sang as we drank more red wine. After some cheerful reruns and the performance of Ur and Harry had finished for the time being, Chan strummed the strings on his acoustic Guild and took us all away with *Counting Fire Flies*. How easy it was to forget about the yellow stones that had mixed with the blue gravel and had to be taken out one by one and placed back in the little square where they belonged or the circular stone sculpture that had to be buried another quarter of an inch down or the dining tent that had to be moved six inches south to be aligned with the storage shed or the rehearsal tents that had to be placed in reverse order or the weeding, planting, and painting, and the continuous changes and paradoxes in the ceaseless hunt for a materialization worthy of the splendor of a vision, worthy of Bob's vision.

Apart from the collections in the woods, the highest concentration of things was down in the basement of the south wing, which then resembled

something between an overcrowded exhibition space and a very badly used storage area. Things stood huddled side by side. On the west side of the basement were four Alcanphor-wood Sakalava Bird sculptures with their usually very unique patina from late nineteenth-century Madagascar. The birds used to be placed on long posts located on burial sceneries near the ocean. On the wall to the right of the sculptures on a black metal stand attached to the white wall was a tiny sculpture of a wooden doll from Greenland, a 2 ½-inch tall Sermermiut, dating from the thirteenth or fourteenth century. These objects as well as others crowded the entrance and shared space with photo prints, stools, and chairs. In the office space, located in the main area of the basement, stood four 80 x 80-inch wooden tables resting on 2 x 2 metal drawers and centered in a line along the middle of the room from east to west along a white concrete wall--the very wall that took Harvard graduate Chris more than two days to paint. The fresh surface was then filled with photographs and prints. Among the pictures was a Mapplethorpe photograph of Bob and Christopher Knowles; Christopher was not only present at the Center through this portrait. Every summer Christopher Knowles, an autistic forty-two-year-old with whom Bob began to collaborate in 1973 when Knowles was only 14, joined the program. In a fluid almost drifting way, he moved around the site, seemingly deep in his own thoughts, self-sufficient, and with an intense fascination with things; he shifted from far-reaching mindfulness to a deep focus on his writings. On the basement wall the portrait of Christopher hung beside many black-and-white photo prints of Albert Einstein, fire fighters grouped together in front of a burning shed, Peter Hujar portraits of Edwin Denby and Andy de Groat, *Altered Image of Andy Warhol* by Christopher Makos, and a Buckminster Fuller metal chair.

One person, even though he was missing from the wall, was also present in the spirit of Watermill, and that was Raymond Andrews. In 1967, Wilson met Raymond who, after breaking a window with a stone, had been beaten by a cop and left on a street in New Jersey. This marked the beginning of a long friendship and collaboration, and Bob eventually adopted Raymond. Bob was deeply fascinated by the non-verbal intelligence and imagination of this deaf-mute child. Christopher and Raymond, autistic and deaf-mute, with their perspective of and approach to the world, not only have made a noticeable impact on Bob's work but have also constituted the foundation of many works; they continue to do so. A third person that came and went during the summer was Daniel Stern, former head of the Department of Psychology at Columbia University, who also brought his family along. In addition to other artists who have inspired Bob's work, Stern's research into and interest in the

non-verbal inter-subjectivity and interrelation between infants and mothers has also been a great source of inspiration in Bob's work.

But back to the group of basement things. A line of chairs sat on the floor running east to west against the wall. At the eastern end was a white Zig Zag chair by Gerrit Rietveld and produced by Metz & Co in 1935, and the line ended eighteen chairs and another Gerrit Rietveld later, but this time the cream-grey, black-and-white Berlin chair from 1923 executed by G.A. van de Groenekan and Armchair #48 in copper by Donald Judd from 1984 completed the line. Not to imply that the other eighteen chairs were insignificant, let's just say they were all in good company.

In between the desks, Massaro Ecu's silk pumps with rhinestone-studded balls on the heels, Marlene Dietrich's last stage shoes, stood on a metal table in a plexiglass box. Farther away on the floor beyond the staircase leading to the upper level stood a sculptural fragment in limestone of a Northern Wei Buddha Torso, this time with his right hand raised.

One more thing in the basement needs to be mentioned...at least Bob would have given it some press. On its own and separate from the long line of chairs on the short side of the basement, a nineteenth-century Enfield, New Hampshire, Shaker side chair, still with original tilters, hung not upside down as it was accustomed to, but in "the right but wrong" way. Judging from the way Bob cared about it, it was a centerpiece in his line of chairs. Things might change, but this Shaker chair hung in the spot it had the former year and the year before that.

Pieces did not circulate back and forth for the summer program. They stayed where they were put. They just were. Nine of these pieces together comprised what the participants referred to as the Watermill Stonehenge. These were ancient graveyard megaliths from Sumba, Indonesia. They marked the west end of an imagined west-east axis, running through the center of the Knee building and the planned new entrance to the building from the east side and Watermill Towd Road. In their different heights and shapes and by then all eroded, they showed no trace of carving or any other sign of man. Originally they stood in a circle but currently were simply grouped together. Standing tall in the evening, they cast shadows in the orange sun. They appeared to be the spiritual heart of Watermill and attracted everyone who reached the Center in the evening, but also they were intimidating as powerful monuments of an ancient time. A piece of similar magnificence, placed next to the lawn close to the woods, was an antique teak table from Java. It was made out of a single 180 x 24 x 4-inch piece of wood and rested on two slabs, each of which was cut from one single block of wood in similar shapes 32 inches high. This piece was also