

Robert Wilson: The World is his Studio

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Robert Wilson's studio, The Watermill Center, is an international think tank and work space that is continuously evolving in its relationships with nature, its art collection and buildings, and the communities it serves. Two among many lessons I learned from my two visits there are that "it takes a village" to fully nurture and nourish every individual artist, and it requires intensive and sometimes grueling work on the part of each artist to realize his/her/their individual and collective dreams.

Picture this: artist chef Illenk Andilolo, the son of the king of Toraya, South Sulawesi, Indonesia prepares daily feasts beyond description since each dish is a work of art, nutrient-rich, colorful, and oh so delicious. Whether he is cooking tilapia or salmon, garbanzo beans, quinoa, veggies with spices, or an exotic mango salad, the fresh flavors, unique preparations, and presentations are a gift to one's body. It's lunchtime. The artists, filling two long wooden community tables that each seat about fifty people, come and go. At the suggestion of a playwright from Paris, each person rises to introduce her/their/himself to us: Dorian, a composer from Slovenia; Debra, a poet from Singapore; Ann, an American poet, Fran, a curator from Sidney, Dario from Rome, Miles from Paris, and on – artists from Florida, Lithuania, Russia, Finland, South Korea, Mexico, Berlin, Chicago, Chechnya ... a feast of individual talents – and a harmony of mixed flavors in the spirit of the place.



Carlos Sotos working in the Grand Room. ©lovis ostenrik

I'll focus here on the unique ways that the Watermill facility and summer residency program operates. You can find my essay on the architecture, grounds, landscape, and art collection of over 8000 rare and sometimes sacred objects [here](#).

Watermill comprises eight and a half acres that border a protected natural reserve called the Peconic Land Trust. When I arrived on a Wednesday, the first thing I did was spray myself against deer ticks since, Maria, a photographer who was spraying herself, told me that Lyme disease is on the rise. Staff and artists alike were preparing the grounds for the annual Summer Benefit and Auction— planting shrubs, trimming, weeding, building sets and building a wall for Jenny Holtzer's word art, raising tents, laying down a pine mulch path, setting up torches along a prescribed circular path, and more. The grounds were alive with artists who were improving nature as well as setting the stage for their own upcoming performances and installations. Sacred stone dolmens and wooden art objects from all over the world are among the landscape made up of beech, Japanese weeping maple, and grasses, trees, and shrubs. The original setting of indigenous weeds, blueberries, and trees has been enhanced 1000%.



BARBARA TRAN- Homo Schizophyllum. ©Maria Baranova

The practices of the summer artists and the full time residents vary, but all stay for limited periods. Mr. Wilson kindly gave me a personal tour of the large U-shaped main building. Its central courtyard, called the Knee, has open doorways facing east and west— so that the sun literally rises and sets over and through the building. The lower area has the kitchen and eating areas, and an extensive library. The next level has a super-large rehearsal, meeting, and performance area, and smaller galleries with art installations and objects. Above this is a small computer room with work stations and other small rooms. In general, the rooms in the building have no doors, including Mr. Wilson's personal living and work spaces. Also, the rare art objects, some over 5000 years old, are generally unframed so that one can touch the beads, the designs carved in stone, the surface of a long outdoor teak bench, and even the Frank Lloyd

Wright window, an art object Mr. Wilson acquired early in his career as he lived frugally in a one-room studio.



Grand Room 1. ©lovis ostenrik

Artists do not have designated work spaces where they can collect and construct objects in the formal sense. Instead, they use large and smaller common rooms to work, together or alone, and then leave the rooms as they were – each filled with a few select priceless art objects, such as Marlene Dietrich’s favorite shoes with rhinestone heels or a door from Timor.



Pulp on a Bed of Moss. ©lovis ostenrik

STEPHEN SHANABROOK- Beaten to a

Many performance artists presented unique programs during the Gala that Saturday. Miles Greenberg (from Paris) turned himself into a blackened, cloven-hoofed satyr and hung upside-down from chains for Chandelier (Hunting Lodge). Robert Wilson created a 20-foot by 90-foot wall for Jenny Holtzer's word art SHE OUTWITS HIM/ SHE OUTLIVES HIM. [Stephen Shanabrook](#), performing Beaten to a Pulp on a Bed of Moss (but not a resident), slumped in a chair as another artist made & fanned cotton candy – a hot, stinging mess– onto Shanabrook's body. Some passersby couldn't resist licking or biting him. Architect [Enric Ruiz-Geli](#), a former resident visiting for the Benefit) built a long roofless building for Vesna Mačković's Salute, a wordless performance depicting a worker with deformed hands whose endless labors seem in vain. [Mačković](#) had told me earlier that in Chechnya more workers were unemployed due to capitalism than under communism.



VESNA MAČKOVIĆ- Salute . ©lovis ostenrik

A guest, artist [Derek Glenn Martin](#) summed it up as he told me, “The event had me feeling the power of expression and the importance of standing for what you believe in even if that is wading into deeper waters. Regina José Galindo's video (Tierra) intimately housed in the black tar papered huts to the open-air performance by Dana Davenport (Heugin) and the cold walls of Vesna Mačković's (Salute) awoke the nerve of life. The universality of art to the visceral and how the wand of such power spans all ages — and holds vitality as Laurie Anderson's unforgettable performance showed us ...” Patrick Bensard, Founder of the Cinématèque de la dance in Paris and an old friend of Mr. Wilson's pointed out that Wilson has championed theater productions full of mystery, irony, and fun, adding, “Audiences instantly connect with Bob Wilson's productions. He invents a magic land they unconsciously and secretly await and desire For us in France, where structuralist philosophy was so strong in the early years, Bob suddenly brought us structure and fiction in the same gesture.” Robert Wilson's vision at Watermill merges intermedia arts and concepts relevant to all humans.

Thank you to Robert Wilson and Danielle Mayer for making my visits to The Watermill Center extraordinary. See also robertwilson.com and watermillcenter.org

By [Jan Garden Castro](#)