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Robert Wilson Keeps It Weird at the Watermill Center

Dozens of artists are working up to the wire on avant-garde projects for the center's summer gala



The director Robert Wilson, founder of the Watermill Center, with one of the more than 8,000 objects in his museum-worthy collection of art that hails from around the world and dates back 5,000 years. *PHOTO: HEATHER WALSH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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Secreted behind banks of stately trees and tall grass swaying in a gentle Hamptons breeze, the Watermill Center—a self-styled “laboratory” for creative experimentation in the arts—is in a clutch of manic activity.

Late last week, dozens of artists, all under the sway of veteran experimental-theater director Robert Wilson, worked on projects meant to blur the boundaries of convention, familiarity and even simple sense.

Mounds of dirt were piled high from construction under way to add 10,000 square feet of building space to an already sprawling architectural complex.

And, in advance of an ambitious benefit event Saturday, plans were being drafted for the arrival of some highflying guests.

The Watermill Center's annual summer gala is a gathering of partygoers and patrons that ranks among the biggest and most outlandish of the art world's summer season. Last week, however, the specifics—as with most artistic undertakings at Watermill—were set to remain a work in progress until showtime.

Getting Ready for the Gala »

Artists prepare for the party of the year at experimental-theater director Robert Wilson's Watermill Center



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“This is monumental in terms of scale and the timing of it all,” Watermill Curator Noah Khoshbin said of the yearly fete, which calls on a cast of artists to create carnivalesque work for the occasion. “It’s like theater—you just keep working till curtain.”

The gala supports an enterprise founded in 1992 to incubate new ideas about performance and related visual forms like painting, sculpture and stage design—all by a rotating cast of artists in residence. This year, the center's summer program hosts 100 emerging artists from 28 countries, all creating work to be presented at the benefit. During the rest of the year, residency programs and fellowships offer access to workshops, lectures, open rehearsals and communal life on the pastoral 8½-acre campus.

Central to it all is Mr. Wilson's museum-worthy collection of art spanning 5,000 years, which visiting artists are encouraged to engage.

“Here we live with some awareness of the history of man, and we understand the history of man through the history of art because it’s one of the few things that remain,” Mr. Wilson said while strolling through displays of his 8,000 objects from around the world.

Holdings include jewelry from Java, African masks, an early Agnes Martin drawing and a papier-mâché sculpture by musician Tom Waits. A photograph of a bewildered-looking Albert Einstein hangs on a wall—a source of inspiration, Mr. Wilson said, for his 1976 postmodern opera “Einstein on the Beach.” Other highlights include early modern furniture, Marlene Dietrich’s shoes and scores of antiquities that can be treasured by hand.

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“You can hold this,” said Mr. Wilson while

placing a piece of Chinese pottery from 3,000 B.C. in a reporter’s hands. “You hold it the way you hold a baby’s head.”

Drawing inspiration directly from art has long informed Mr. Wilson’s own work—from his early 7-hour silent play “Deafman Glance” to his breakout “Einstein on the Beach,” a collaboration with composer Philip Glass. Later collaborators included William Burroughs, Laurie Anderson, Marina Abramović and more.

Mr. Wilson wants to make his collection available to young artists who come to Watermill.

“I don’t want to have a school or a way of doing things,” the 74-year-old artist said. “The situation here is open-ended. You start with a blank book and fill in the pages.”

“He didn’t balk at anything,” said Seth Cameron of Bruce High Quality Foundation, an artist collective creating an elaborate series of performances and sculptures for the benefit, including an old boat converted into a hot tub and a 35-foot-tall inflatable jet plane plunging into the earth.

Brian O’Mahoney, a 23-year-old artist from New Jersey participating in Watermill’s summer program for a fourth consecutive year, is creating a mountain of more than 100

pillows on which performers will writhe and squirm as they might during fits of insomnia.

“It makes no sense,” he said of an anxiety disorder that often keeps him up at night. “I like how nonsensical it is.”

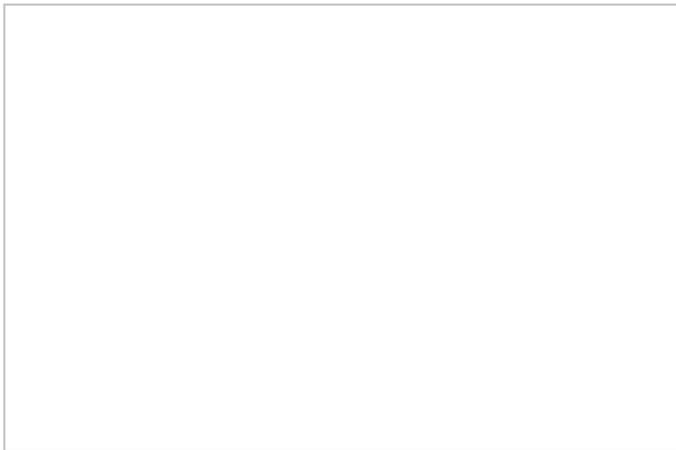
Other offerings will include a sculpture by Russian punk-protestors Pussy Riot, a sound installation by musician Anohni and John Margaritis’s “One Ton Tank,” a water-filled vessel with room for a performer moving in patterns devised by a choreographer.

The event is expected to raise \$2.2 million, about half of one year’s operating budget for Watermill. In addition to viewing art projects by current residents, attendees will also see early work on the coming expansion, which will include a new residency building for artists and a meditation garden.

Last Thursday as the sun went down, Mr. Wilson sat outside at Watermill sketching ideas for spectacles still in the creation stage. A collaborative project with the hip-hop star Kanye West had been announced for the benefit but then became uncertain, with talk turning to possible postponement or perhaps something impromptu.

In keeping with the spirit of a gala known for being experimental and unpredictable, the fate of the collaboration remains in the balance just days before the event.

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