

Robert Wilson in conversation with Rhana Devenport



photo: Lucie Jansch 2011

Rhana Devenport (RD) Firstly, thank you so much for your time.

Thinking back over the four Robert Wilson productions I have experienced – *Einstein on the Beach*, *The Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets*, *Mary Said What She Said* and *The Sandman* – light remains a defining memory. Across the arc of your work, both on stage and on screens, light is at once alchemical and architectural. Can you speak about the presence of light in your video portraits?

Robert Wilson (RW) In my first year in architectural school, Louis Kahn said in a lecture, ‘Students, start with light.’ Light in my video portraits is essential. It actually comes from the old school of cinema, from German cinema and the old Hollywood films, where faces were lit. Every movement of an actor was lit. Today, light for television is harsh, and the space is generally lit. In other words, very flat. Look at the work of Luchino Visconti, he was a master.

RD When Surrealist artist and poet Louis Aragon (1897–1982) witnessed your ground-breaking and acclaimed silent opera *Deafman Glance* in 1971, he wrote, ‘He is what we, from whom Surrealism was born, dreamed would come after us and go beyond us.’¹ What aspects of Surrealism interest you? How does your work move beyond Surrealism, as Aragon says?

RW My work is a still life, which is the real life. The mystery is behind the surface, which makes it surreal.

RD For *Moving portraits*, we have selected rarely seen or never seen works of art from AGSA's collection to accompany each video portrait. For example, for *Lady Gaga: Mlle. Caroline Rivière*, we have chosen a *Balsarium*, a pearlescent first- to eleventh-century Roman glass vessel used for collecting tears, as well as a contemporary glass sculpture, eighteenth-century French furniture, an Ingres lithograph, and an exquisite painting by a contemporary of Ingres, Louise-Adéone Drölling. I know that part of your conversations and research with sitters is a discussion about their own collections. Hence, we have paired Brad Pitt's portrait with an elegant pair of Charles Rennie Mackintosh chairs from the early twentieth century, as he is a collector of chairs. You have personally collected an extraordinary and wide-ranging collection of objects spanning continents and myriad materials and intentions of making. What draws you to collecting? How have these hand-made objects changed you? How do they influence your work?

RW I am drawn to the work by the Roman glass. All can be contained in that one glass. It can be traced through all the work; the drip of rain on Brad Pitt's body; the reclining landscape of Salma Hayek. The space in back of you reminds me of the tear running down Gaga's face. It is the space behind her eyes that touches us. Suzushi Hanayagi² always told me that it is the space in the back of you which makes the space in front of you stronger.

RD I understand that there is considerable research undertaken with all sitters by you and your colleague Noah Khoshbin before filming, and that the shoot might only take one day and yet the editing can take up to two weeks to refine exactly the sensibility and quality you seek. Can you explain the journey you go through with the sitter to evolve the final portrait? How do things change?

RW Usually a portrait happens with a dialogue between myself, my collaborator Noah Khoshbin and the subject being filmed. Frequently we present sketches and research material for a personal response from the sitter. Then a dialogue begins. I ask the subjects to simply be themselves, to react, as they would like the context of the situation we create. They are not asked to portray anything, other than being who they are.

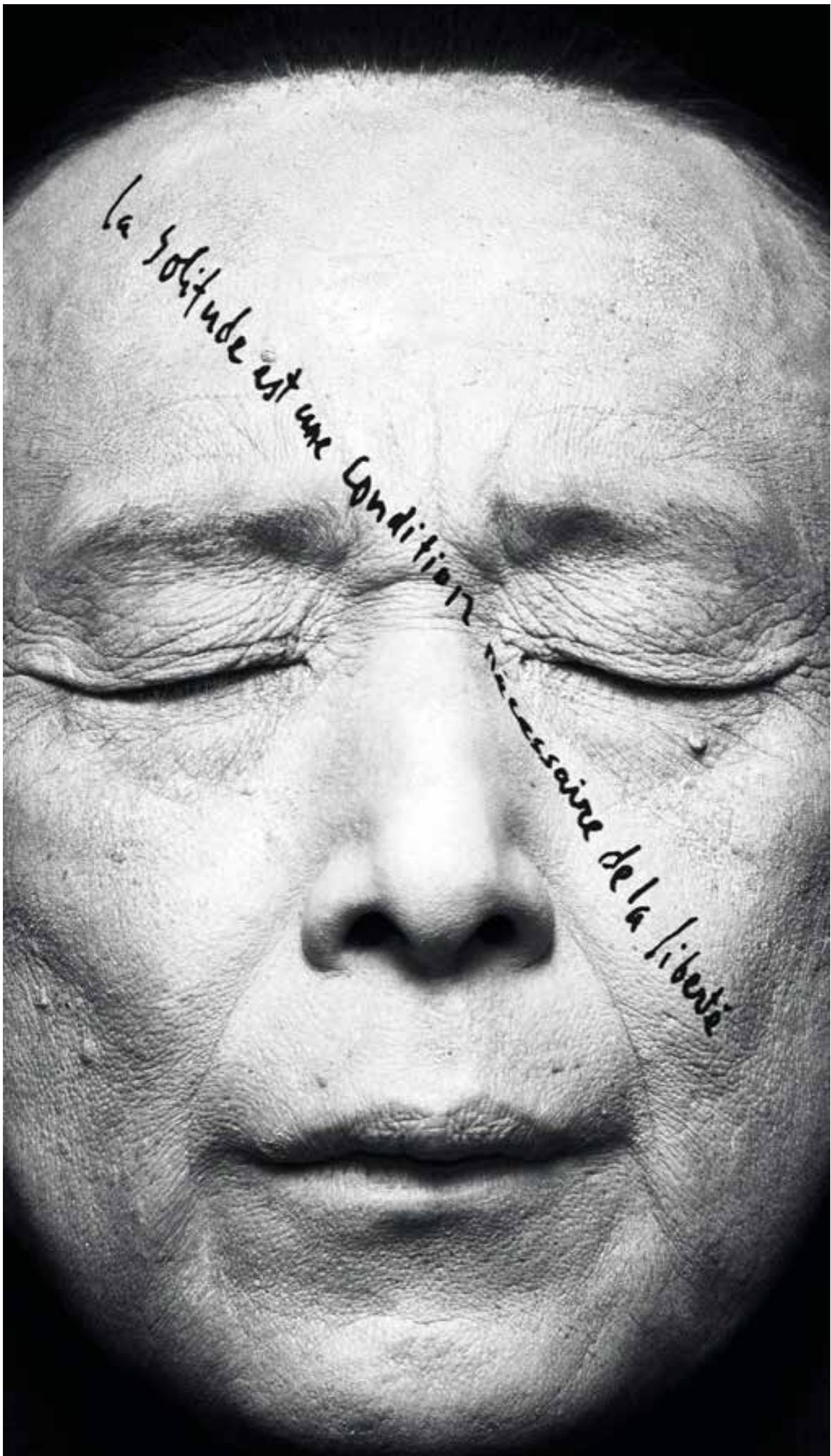
RD Your inclusion of animals as subjects in your video portraits creates an expanded dimension to your project. The portraits of animals provide moments of connection, a brief covenant between the subject and the viewer, and between animal and human worlds. Can you speak about how you came to work with animals and what compels you to continue?

RW I grew up in Texas in my family home with animals. I have always been fascinated with animal behaviour, the way a dog walks to a bird and listens with his whole body – not just with his ears, but

also with his tail and the feet touching the ground. The way a grizzly bear listens with his eyes. Kleist,³ the German author, said, ‘A good actor is like a bear: he’ll never move first.’

- RD Time and duration are key components in all your work. For the video portraits, you restrict yourself to three or four minutes and yet they are endlessly looping and have no beginning or end. Can you speak about time as a tangible element in the video portraits and your work more generally? Can we shape time?
- RW Time does not exist without space. Time for me is a vertical line that goes to the centre of the Earth and upward to the heavens. Space is a horizontal line that goes as far as we can stretch it from left to right. It is a cross of time and space that is the basic architecture of everything. It is a drip of milk in a Vermeer painting. It is a black strip in the middle of a Barnett Newman painting. It is how the thinker touches a key on a keyboard or piano. It goes up and it goes down, and it goes out on a string. It is a tension that exists between the vertical and horizontal that creates the sound. It is time becoming space. When making the portraits we do not restrict ourselves to any measure of time.
- RD You have recently created works as NFTs (non-fungible tokens) and clearly you embrace the potential of new technologies. You are in a truly unique position of having worked with the technology of theatre and art for six decades. Many years ago you talked about a future where you might see video portraits on screens on ‘billboards, taxi backs and watches’ – these screen spaces are now a part of our daily lives. What are your thoughts about the ubiquitous presence of screens in contemporary culture? What is the place of art within screen life? What do you envisage for screen culture in the future, both for your own work and beyond?
- RW Screens are reflections of our lives. They are transparent layers that record the memory which are our histories. If we lose our memory, we lose our history, our culture.
- RD What is art for?
- RW Art has the possibility of bringing people together regardless of social, political or economic backgrounds. In the case of the video portraits where there is no text, it is a visual language that can be understood by anyone. Art can be whatever you need it to be.

- 1 Louis Aragon, ‘An Open Letter to André Breton on Robert Wilson’s “Deafman Glance”’, *Performing Arts Journal*, 1, 1976, p. 4.
- 2 Suzushi Hanayagi (1928–2010) was a Japanese dancer and choreographer and the subject of a suite of video portraits by Wilson entitled *dancing in my mind*, 2010, with a score by David Byrne.
- 3 Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811) was a poet, dramatist, novelist and journalist aligned with Romanticism.



still: Robert Wilson, *GAO XINGJIAN, Writer*, 2005, HD video, music by Peter Cerone