

1 HAVE YOU BEEN HERE BEFORE
2 NO THIS IS THE FIRST TIME

**An evening with
Robert Wilson**

[excerpt]

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The reason I work as an artist is to ask questions. That is to say: What am I doing? What is this?

Looking back, I think there have been three primary influences on the work that I am doing today. I grew up in a rather small town in Texas. I didn't have an opportunity to go to a museum, because there was no museum. I didn't have an opportunity to go to the theatre, for there was no theatre. And it was not until I moved to New York City in the early 60's to study architecture and painting, that I first become acquainted with museums and theatre. I went to see the Broadway shows, but I didn't like them. I also went to the opera, but I didn't like that either. For the most part, I still don't like either. Then I saw the work of George Balanchine in the New York City Ballet. His work I liked very much. I liked it because of the space, the mental space and the virtual space. The works were classically constructed and were formally performed. The dancers danced from within themselves, allowing the public to come to them without insisting too much on the public's attention. I liked it because I could hear the music and I could see something. What I saw helped me hear and what I heard helped me see. So looking back on the work that I am doing today, dance was the first major influence on my work.

In 1967, I was walking down the street when I saw a policeman about to hit a 13-year-old black boy. I stopped the policeman and asked, "What's going on?" The policeman said, "It's none of your business." In utter shock I replied, "But it is! I am a responsible citizen. Why are you about to hit this child?" After a brief discussion, I decided to accompany the police officer and the boy to the police station. Along the way, I listened to the sounds coming from the boy and recognized them to be that of a deaf person. Eventually, the police released the boy from custody and allowed me to take him home. It was then that I discovered he lived in a three-room apartment with thirteen other people. Much to my surprise, none of the people the boy lived with understood that he couldn't hear. They had never been around a deaf person before so they didn't know what to expect.

In the following weeks, I learned that the boy was going to be institutionalised. The very people who were supposed to be helping him said he was "uneducatable." I had never heard that word before, so I asked, "How do you know this child can't learn?" They simply replied, "We've tested him. And the results of the examination say he is uneducatable." I was very puzzled at this, so I asked them to show me the results. They showed me this test written in words. I could tell this boy knew no words. Despite this, I thought he was intelligent, perhaps highly intelligent. After a short period of time, it became apparent to me that the boy thought in terms of visual signs and signals. So I explained to the state psychologist in New Jersey that their exam was not valid. It was invalid because this boy knew no words. He agreed and offered to test the boy again. Unfortunately, the second test gave the same results. Still unconvinced, I enquired about the exam again. I was told that they gave the child 250 blank sheets of paper and a pencil. The boy simply put one diagonal line on the corner of each page. To this, the state psychologist came to the conclusion that the boy could not learn.

I was completely convinced that institutionalising this boy would not help him at all. So I decided that I would try to adopt him. Only problem was, I was 27-years old at the time and

single. On top of that, he was a 13-year-old Afro-American boy. Nonetheless, I went to Court anyway. I asked my lawyer, who was also 27-years old, "Do you think I'll get custody of this boy?" Without hesitation he said, "No. I don't think so. It's too complicated. This is 1967." During the trial, the judge asked me, "Mr. Wilson, what makes you think this child is intelligent?" I answered, "He has a sense of humour and that's a sign of intelligence." I continued saying, "You know, judge, if you don't give me this child, it's gonna cost the State of New Jersey a horrible amount of money to lock him up." To that, the judge replied, "Mr. Wilson, you've got a very good point." And that is how I became the legal guardian of Raymond Andrews.

I never thought of having a son and it was very strange in the beginning. Eventually, I decided we would make a work for the theatre based on his observations, drawings, and dreams. I made a 7-hour production called "Deafman Glance." I showed parts of it in New York City and also in Paris, in the early 70's. Much to my surprise, it was a tremendous success. People began to ask me to work in the theatre. I was asked to direct an opera at the Scala, as well as, at the Opera in Berlin and various other places. Initially I said, "No, no, no. I don't know theatre. I never studied theatre." It was interesting, though, that my background in painting and architecture would lead me to work in the theatre.

Some of my work took place in a loft in New York City, three floors of a factory building, in lower Manhattan. Once a week I used to have an open house. There would be three, four, five hundred people from the community attending. Sometimes I would invite a visiting scholar or an artist over. On one floor we would eat and drink, on another we would dance, and on the third floor we would have conferences, watch films or have informal talks and gatherings.

One night, a former teacher came and gave me an audiocassette. A few days later I played it and it went something like this, "Because 'A', because she likes Bugs Bunny. Because 'B', because she likes Mickey Mouse. Because 'A', because she likes the Flintstones. Because 'B', Emily likes the TV, because she watches it." So I called the professor and said, "Who made this tape?" He said it was a thirteen-year old boy named Christopher Knowles and that he is in an institution for brain-damaged children. I let him know that I found the tape very fascinating and I would like to meet the boy.

At that time, I was working on a twelve-hour play that started at 7:00 in the evening and continued until 7:00 in the morning. I named it, 'The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin.' It was a silent work and had a cast of 128 people. Now, for those of you who have never seen my work, it was very carefully put together, meticulously studied. Careful attention was paid to the angle of the space between fingers, the chair's placement, how one stands, and even how one walks was choreographed. This work was rehearsed for 8 months before it was to be performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in the Opera House.

Christopher Knowles' parents were living in Brooklyn and a few days before the performance I decided to call them. I said, "Hello. I am Robert Wilson and I am going to present a silent opera in Brooklyn and I would like to invite your son to come see my play." They were very curious since they would be in New York City that weekend. I continued to tell them that the production would be twelve hours long. They said, "Oh, but he is only 13-years-old and he cannot stay all night for a play." I agreed and said that would be okay. You can see the first act, leave for dinner, and then come back to catch the third act and then go home. I assured them that they wouldn't be lost in the third act. After all, it was not like Shakespeare, where if you miss the second act, you will be totally lost in the third. They finally agreed that they would come and that they would bring Christopher.

Since I was performing in the work, I do not like to see anyone before a performance. I like things to be quiet and had a "Please do not disturb" sign on my dressing room door. About half an hour before the performance there was a knock on my dressing room door. Then there was a voice, "Hello, this is Barbara Knowles. I have Christopher with me. We just wanted to say hi." I got up to open the door and there stood Christopher, his eyes looking barren. I said,

“Chris, do you want to be in my play tonight?” His mother said, “But what would he do?” I said, “I have no idea. How about it, Chris? Would you like to be in my play tonight?” Again his mother interrupted, “But what would he do?” I replied, “I have no idea. How about it, Chris?” Finally Chris’ mother agreed to let Chris participate in the play.

Just before the performance was to begin I took Chris by the hand and we stood together on the stage. I addressed the audience, “Ladies and Gentlemen because ‘A’” And Chris said, “Because she likes Mickey Mouse.” And I said, “Because ‘B’” And Chris responded, “Because she likes Bugs Bunny” Then I said, “Because ‘A’” Chris replied, “Because she likes the Flintstones” And again I said, “Because ‘B’” And Chris followed, “Emily likes the TV because she watches it.”

After we left the stage there was an applause. I said to Chris, “Hey, that wasn’t bad. Why don’t we do something in the first act?” This work I have been rehearsing for 8 months, very carefully detailed. So we walked on stage and I said, “Chris, this time you speak first.” And he did.

It is curious, some weeks later I took a transcript of his words. It was amazing and unbelievable. This transcript sounded very arbitrary on the first hearing. Once transcribed, however, it was not arbitrary at all. This pattern would repeat three times, then a variation would repeat four times. His father called me to say they were astonished that Chris, who almost never initiated any conversation, found it very pleasant to speak in public, was thrilled to be in the play, and wants to know if he can be in it again for the next performance. Happily I said, “Sure.” And Chris performed in all four shows.

As I took Chris back to school one day, I decided to spend the day there to see what it was like. I was shocked. I couldn’t believe what was going on. Everything the boy was doing was either being stopped or corrected. I went to the Head of the school and asked, “What’s wrong with this behaviour? I know it’s a bit strange, but I’m an artist and I find his behaviour fascinating.” Immediately, I called his parents and exclaimed, “I think it is criminal, that Chris is locked up and that his behaviour is being stopped. I would encourage more of his behaviour.” I asked his parents, “What are you most interested in regarding your son?” They said that they wished their son would become more independent. I asked them how this could be possible as long as he is being institutionalised? I ask them, “Why doesn’t he come live with me, so he can travel and work with me? This could be a part of his education and maybe he’ll adjust.”

After some months and many conversations with his parents Chris left school to live with me. On the second day he said, “I’mtheredsecondaryplantuphis...madnessinthesky. I remember all my life.” I said, “What?” “I’mtheredsecondaryplantuphis...madnessinthesky. I remember all my life.” A couple of weeks later he said, “Dear Madam, most gracious of ladies, I will be in no way possessed of an honour of an introduction” I asked him, “What? What is that?” He said it was a letter for Queen Victoria. I recognised it was 19th century English and inquired, “How did you get this letter?” He replied, “No, no, I don’t know. No, no, I don’t know.” Maybe he didn’t know. After all, he had never read a book before. Because of this, the next work I made for the theatre was called, “A letter for Queen Victoria”. And, of course, it had text by Christopher Knowles.

This was the first time one of my plays had text and it began with this letter for Queen Victoria. We first performed it in Paris, who was a co-production between the Avignon Theatre Festival and the Pompidou Centre. It was so amazing to perform it in a conventional theatre. It was Pontus Hulten who had the idea to be a co-producer. He was forming the concept for the Pompidou Centre to have a place for contemporary theatre. That is how we were given the possibility to perform at the museum.

As you can see, looking back on my work, meeting Raymond Andrews and Christopher Knowles were the second and third most important influences on my work

In 1968, I was asked to do an outdoor sculpture in Ohio. I did my first work that summer for the theatre and performed it in a barn, which had been converted to a chapel. I worked with the local people from the village. I call them theatre activities. I built a sculpture for the local community with 676 telephones put in the ground vertically. You could walk up them like a giant staircase, you could sit on them and you could walk around them. It became an identity for the community.

In 1969 I made the first part of what eventually became the performance of the “Deafman Glance”.

For means of further demonstration some slides will be shown.

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This was a work called “The King of Spain.” The people who performed in the work were non-professionals. Most of them were not interested in being actors. They were factory workers, schoolteachers, lawyers, students, children and even a Russian immigrant who spoke very little English in the play.

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Then I made a work called “The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud.” In all of my plays since the very beginning, I have made sculptures, like this chair. Many of them are now in museums or private collections. This is the hanging chair for Freud. I made it out of wire mesh. When lit from a certain direction, it casts a shadow. When seen from a distance it is difficult to distinguish between the shadow and the chair.

It was all a part of a drawing in space.

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This is a man I met in Grand Central Station. He was a retired house painter who looked somewhat like Freud. Therefore, I asked him to be in my play.

This was a woman I worked with in a hospital in New York. She played Anna Freud.

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Then I created the third act. This act had a cave with a dark interior. In front, on the edge of the stage, was a table with an Egyptian figure, a Chinese figure and a chair, which would be slowly lowered. A boy would come in through the mouth of the cave and lay down beside the table. Then a man, who looked like Freud, would sit down at the table.

Many people said that this play had nothing to do with Freud. In some ways, they were right. However, for me, it had everything to do with Freud. When Freud was 68 years old, his grandson died. Freud said that he suffered a depression he had never known before. He also said, "Something within me, passed away forever." Towards the end of his life, he revealed to his daughter, Anna Freud, that he never overcame that depression.

To me, this moment in his lifeline was slowly coming into focus, being woven into a longer span of time. This was not a kind of a report you would get in a history book, it was a work by an artist, it was a poetic work. It was really like a structured landscape of pictures. Still at this time, especially in New York, people really did not know how to classify it.

In 1993, I won the Golden Lion for sculpture at the Venice Biennale. Someone told me recently that one of the jurors said, at first, that they had awarded me the prize for painting. Then there was a debate. Someone else on the jury said that it was neither a painting nor a sculpture. Others said, "Well, it's sculpture. It's theatre." It was simply an installation in a warehouse with a mud floor. There was a figure buried up to its shoulders in the desert. His head was shaved and the fresh skin of a camel's neck was tied down on its head. Within 5 days, if the man was still alive, he would lose his memory. He would become a perfect slave. All the while you could listen to a recorded text from "The Waste Land" by T. S. Eliot. The text was manipulated and destroyed with many gaps towards the end. It was based on a Mongolian torture. I call this work "Memory Loss".

This work was a complete crossover in the arts: I used together architecture, lights and sound. You experience the sculpture, the painting, the architecture, and the theatre.

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Then I put a fourth act to this work. I called it "Deafman Glance". Each one of these parts was very different. However it is all part of one thought. A reporter asked Albert Einstein once, "Mr. Einstein, can you repeat what you just said?" He said, "There's no need for me to repeat what I just said, because it's all the same thought." Proust said he was always writing the same novel. Cezanne said he always painted the same still life. I think an artist's work is always one body. You could run it backwards, you could run it forwards, or you could put it in a different order. It really does not matter.

I made for the fourth act a silent prologue. It went something like this: There was a woman in a black Victorian dress. She had a glove on her left hand and nothing on her right. There was a table to her right. She would slowly put a glove on her right hand, then take a bottle of milk. She would pour some into a glass and take it to a child who was reading a comic book on a stool. She would touch the child twice on the shoulder and offer him the glass of milk. The child would take the glass of milk, drink it, and then give the empty glass back to the woman. The woman would then return to the table and pick up a large butcher knife. She would return to the child and touch him twice with the tip of the knife. The child then would fall over. The woman would repeat the same procedure with another child before putting the

knife back on the table. Finally, she would put her hand behind her back and look straight ahead. This one scene could take as long as an hour to perform.

Part of the thinking behind this silent scene with the bottle of milk and the knife came from a study conducted by Dr. Daniel Stearn. Between 1967 and 1968, I met Dr. Stearn, who was the Head of the Department of Psychology. He was making films of mothers picking up babies. He made over 250 films. He slowed the films down so he could analyse them frame-by-frame. In 8 out of 10 cases, the initial reaction of the mother in the first three frames was unkind. The next two or three frames the mother looks like someone else. In one second of time it is easy to see that something very complex is happening between the mother and the child. When the mother sees the film, she is shocked and terrified. She exclaims, "But I love my child!" Perhaps the body is moving faster than we think.

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It's curious how Raymond Andrews began to put his language and his thoughts together. First he knew 20 words, then 50, and then 100. You could really see how the mind works. He didn't know grammar. He just knew words. Sometimes he could say in one or two words what would take me many words to say.

This is a letter he wrote me, "father mother child boy girls loves boy father mother love father mother peace and love and father mother child and son son son and son and love father love Raymond." In this letter he drew a mountain. At the top of the mountain, he put a dinosaur. This mountain was also erupting. So in the next play I made a seven-day play. This play went on for seven days and nights continuously. On the seventh day we performed outside on the foothills of Persia. The highest hill was painted white and we had a dinosaur on top. And at the end of the seven-day performance, we blew up the top of the mountain with dynamite.

It was not possible for me to write a play that lasted 7 days. And I couldn't direct seven days worth of material. What I did was to make a large mega-structure. Day 1: This is the theme of the flood and from 7 in the morning to 8 the following morning this would be one theme. From 8 to 9 would be another theme, 10 to 11 would be another. This is how we mapped out 24 hours in the day. Then I could say, "Okay, you direct this part. Here is the theme and the idea. You can research and present what you want." We had a mega-structure that had cohesion and organization the way an architect builds a building. This man can have an apartment in the building, he likes Victorian interior and I like something else. We live in the same building. We have different aesthetics and tastes, but the building has an overall organization: a mega-structure. We worked with over 500 people, filling in this mega-structure. On the second day this theme would come back with a variation. On the third day it would come back with yet another variation. But maybe this one had an overall theme that was different than the others. At the base of each of the hills, each evening at 8 o'clock, we would see a family. The first day, there was an old man leaving the family. He would go on a journey and we would follow him on this journey. On the 7th day, he would come back to the family making the base of each hill a platform. On the first day, we used hill one. On the second day, hills one and two. Each new day would see a new platform added until we had activities happening on all seven hills. As before, I still had no professional performers. I was not interested in actors. I was interested in people, in looking at people and if someone could be themselves and be comfortable working in a context of these theatrical situations, then even they could have a dialogue with the public. I was interested in seeing people. I thought of theatre that could go on all the time. If you wanted to go on a coffee break, sit in the park, daydream, watch clouds, watch people walking by, you could go to this theatre. If

you wanted to go at midnight or at two in the morning, or if you couldn't sleep, if you wanted to go when you woke up in the morning, this theatre would always be performing. There wouldn't be so much difference between living and art. It would all be part of one thing.

I said to Christopher Knowles after a couple of months, "Why don't we do an improvisation at the end of the play? Each night you initiate it, you start it. It can be something completely different every night and it will be a surprise for everyone." He easily agreed. One night, while we were performing in Persia, he decided to say the word 'tape-recorder' for 10 minutes. Tape-recorder, tape-recorder, tape-recorder, tape-recorder... It sounded more beautiful than I could ever do. The colour of his voice was like delicate modulation. I started to cry. Crying in another way, "My God, gonna say tape-recorder."

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Here I added three more acts. We had Act 1, the beach. Act 2, the Victorian drawing room. Act 3, the cave. Act 4, the forest. With the addition of the final three acts, we now had seven acts. Sometimes we would do the first four acts alone. Sometimes Acts 1 and 7 were seen together. Sometimes Acts 2 and 6 were seen together. It could be shown in multiple ways, in any order. It was all one body.

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I made, "A Letter for Queen Victoria," with Christopher Knowles. I said to Chris, who was writing the text, "Chris, what's the last line of the play?" His reply was, "No, no, I don't know." Again I asked him the same question, "Chris, what's the last line of the play?" This time he replied, "It's the angle of the thing angleing."

It is very interesting, you show him a page of printed material and he would say the 68th word on the page. Asking him how he knew, he just responds, "No, no, I don't know." He would follow the diagonals of an envelope. You could read it this way or you could read it that way, there was no wrong way of reading it.

One day I asked my 90-year old grandmother from Texas to take part in a play that I was doing called, "A letter for Queen Victoria" that was to be performed in Paris. She liked the idea of being in the play and having the chance to see Europe. So she joined us in Paris. While we were driving from the airport into Paris, I asked her how she was doing. She said, "Oh, I'm pretty good, but you know, Bob, I have to take nine pills a day to stay alive. I have to take one heart-pill, one sugar-diabetic-pill, one liver pill... and without all those pills I just collapse." She added, "Bob, am I going to have to say anything in your play?" I answered, "Grandmother, I think you can say what you just said." She walked on stage in a grey Victorian dress every night in Paris and said, "Do you know, I have to take nine pills a day to stay alive? I have to take one heart-pill, one sugar-diabetic-pill, one liver pill... and without all those pills I just collapse." She was a big hit in Paris.

I was once directing a play in Cologne, Germany in the early 80s with a child, Steffen. I asked him, "Steffen, do you like this play?" After hesitating a while he said, "You know, Bob, it's a little slow."

Several years later I was directing a play in Boston. Talking to a Japanese costume designer, I asked, "What do you think about this play?" His reply was, "You know, Bob, it's a little slow."

I had not seen my sister for nearly 20 years. She married a racist and I adopted a black boy. As you can imagine, there was a lot of tension in the relationship. However, since I had a play in New York, I called her and said, "Suzanne, this is your brother Bob. I am doing a play in New York and I'd like to invite you to come and see it. She responded to the play with, "That was real pretty. The colours were gorgeous, the lights were fabulous, and I had a real good time." "Suzanne, tell me something. If you didn't know that your brother had written, directed and designed this play, would you have known it was my work?" She said "Sure." Then I asked her how she would know. Her answer was, "Because it is so slow."

For me, time is a line that goes to the centre of the earth and goes to the heavens. Time and space make the basic architecture of everything. It is in the theatre, the building we are in. It's in the chair you are sitting on. It is how you play Mozart on a piano. It is how you stand on a stage.

In 1973, I went to a concert in Paris. There were five singers, four of them were sitting on stage like they were waiting for a bus and one was sitting differently. It was so beautiful. Then the one singer stood up. It was so beautiful when she began to sing. This lady could sit on a stage. She could stand on a stage. It was beautiful when she sang. Western theatre has become bound by literature. If we look at the classical theatre of Japan, they learn at the age of two how to walk on a stage. They learn how to make a gesture. And even when they are 62 years old, they will still go back to their teacher thanking him for teaching them a gesture of weeping. The very same gesture they started when they were two. We never completely learn everything. We are always learning.

Marlene Dietrich was such an actress who could stand on a stage. I once saw her 17 times while she was performing in Paris. In 1972, I had dinner with her one night. I thought we would have dinner alone, but there was this gentleman from Munich who was writing a book about her. He told Marlene, "Oh, Miss Dietrich, you're so cold when you perform." And she said, "But you didn't listen to my voice." And that was so true. The voice could be very hot and erotic, while her movements could be icy-cold. She turned to me and said, "The difficulty is to place the voice with the face." That was her power, that icy-cold movement and that hot-erotic voice. It is like in "Rheingold", the music is rushing and rushing which compels the singers to go with the music. No, no, no, no, no... Go against the music. That is the tension. That is the architecture. John Cage said that there is no such thing as silence. There is always sound. So, I hear this little sound. I hear myself breathing. Whether I am always listening, or I am speaking, or I just stop speaking. The line always goes on. You cannot start or stop anything. You must continue. If you are walking on a stage and you stop, the movement does not stop. As long as we are living, we are moving. There is no such thing as no-movement. So, when I begin to walk, the line continues. And if I stop, the line goes on. It is all one thing. As Einstein said about space and time, "It is all the same thought." If I see my hand here, it is a portrait. If I see my hand there, it is a still life, but if I go a mile away, it is a part of a landscape. Traditional ways of measuring space. So I divided my piece in that way.

Light is architectural. It is like an actor. Maybe light is the most important element in the theatre, because it is the element that helps us hear and see.

There is not one way, to start a work. You could see with the “Death Destruction in Detroit.” I started with a photograph. I was just attracted to it. I had it on my desk in New York and someone said, “You know what that is?” I said, “No.” “It’s Spandau Prison in Berlin,” they retorted. I started doing some research and found out that’s what it was and then one thing led to another. I usually start with a structure like this, something very abstract so I can see it quickly. The theatre is not about one thing. It’s too complex. It should be about one thing first and then it can be about a million things. I simply have to see the whole quickly.

The best class that I ever had in school was History of Architecture. The teacher said, “Students, you have three minutes to design a city. Ready-set-go.” So, as you can imagine, you had to think in a big way real quick. I drew an apple. And inside this apple, I put a crystal cube. “What is that?” the instructor queried. I said, “This is a plan for a city.” The community needs a centre, a core. It should be like a crystal cube that can reflect the universe. Like a Medieval city, you had a cathedral at the centre of the village for enlightenment, for gatherings, for knowledge or for whatever. So the class helped me to think and to see quickly. It’s interesting that this piece was first performed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

I start all works silently. If I am doing the ‘Ring’ of Wagner, it drives the singers absolutely mad, that I say, “No music, nothing. We do the movement first.” They have never done this because they are singers. They want to sing. But we do the movements first and we see what it is and what these relationships are. Then I go back and I put the music on. And I did this silently a year ago and the year before I worked on the visual book.

I think that today there is so much crossover in the arts. The people who always supported my work in the beginning were the visual people. They were the people from the museum world. They were the painters and the sculptors. In the past, the people in the theatre found my work very strange. I think that more and more people today, those who live in cities with all these crystal cubes, see too that museums should be a part of the cultural life. Whether something is performed in the museum or outside of the museum, I want to see how we can work together. I see the museum as a perfect place for this artistic crossover to take place.

In the United States, we think very much in terms of categories. I suppose, it is similar in Germany. We tend to put labels on things. But we have to work together to support the art of our time, to support the art of what happened in the past and to support art all over the world. That is our responsibility. It is a balance between the past and the present, the past and creation. Artists are the diaries, the journalists of our time. In these diaries, these works, what the artists are doing is what will remain of our time, if anything remains. If you go 5,000 years from now, what the artist has done is what society will go back to and look at. Have a look at the Egyptians, look at the Chinese, look at any culture. One of the few things that we go back to is what the artists did. If we do not support the art of our time, we will not have it.

We have to support it wherever it is happening.

So, I think that all cultural institutions should find a way of working together. This crystal cube can be the museum. It can be a place where we go back for learning, for gathering, for congregation. This can be the cultural institution in your city.

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