



the watermill center  
a laboratory for performance

robert wilson, artistic director

[www.watermillcenter.org](http://www.watermillcenter.org)

## THE WATERMILL CENTER'S LIBRARY OF INSPIRATION

Deb Verhoff, Librarian for The Byrd Hoffman Water Mill Foundation

*This article describes a library program which is in development for The Watermill Center, an interdisciplinary laboratory for the arts and humanities located on Long Island, NY. It was founded by theatre and visual artist Robert Wilson as a place for young and emerging artists to work, learn, create, and grow with each other. Watermill integrates performing arts practice with resources from the humanities, research from the sciences, and inspiration from the visual arts. Watermill is unique within the global landscape of experimental theatrical performance, and regularly convenes the brightest minds from all disciplines to do, in Wilson's words, "what no one else is doing."*

### A LIVING LIBRARY

The Watermill Center was founded as a Laboratory for Performance where artists gather to collaborate, create new works and exchange ideas. We borrow language from the science laboratory to describe what happens here – incubate, experiment, research. Our new library design supports these dynamic pursuits. An underground building will house fluid research, exhibition, and performance spaces. A robust digital library will support and amplify this multidisciplinary environment where artists and visitors learn by doing.

The Library of Inspiration will be a living library which connects artistic practice and engagement at The Watermill Center with: a collection of global art and artifacts; a digital archive documenting new works created on site; the archives of artist Robert Wilson and his collaborators; and a supporting research collection of books, media, and online databases.

The most visible of these is the collection of art and artifacts installed throughout The Watermill Center. It is highly personal and eclectic collection of approximately 8000 objects from all continents, dating from the Stone Age to the present. Tribal works from Indonesia, Oceania and Africa are juxtaposed beside contemporary works by a range of artists, including Paul Thek, Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, Dash Snow and young emerging artists. An exceptional collection of chairs is arranged throughout the space; designers include Gerrit Rietveldt, Charles Eames, Gio Ponti, Shiro Kuramata, and Robert Wilson. The primary value of each object lies within its relationship to the architecture and the other works in the space. New acquisitions become part of the whole dialogue.

A singularly unique and unifying thread that connects all of these collections is the artistic direction of Robert Wilson. The Watermill Center itself operates as a work of art, one that is constantly changing as works are added and rearranged. In this site-specific installation, many

unexpected narratives arise. Artists in residence create work within an environment in which the history of humankind is told through art. Their projects reflect a place that is dynamic and surprising. We aim to promote this experience of discovery and surprise in our organization of the library.

## INSPIRATION

An important entry through which artists experience the Library of Inspiration is an invitation to engage directly with The Watermill Center collections. Resident artists are invited to live and work in a unique setting with thousands of art objects and artifacts from all cultures.

Some resident artists choose to engage physically with the art collection as a point of departure for their work. LA-based artists Megan Whitmarsh and the collective My Barbarian created a performance and new objects responding to Watermill's site and collection. Their piece, *Tourists from the Future*, is a sci-fi, new-wave pop fable of time-travel and eco-tourism. Another artistic team, Egill Saebjornsson and Marcia Moraes, engaged in research for a new pop opera during their residency. For their resulting performance installation, the artists 'hijacked' the building and its collections to be used as their stage, actors, and props. Sites and objects around the Center were brought to life with video projections, performance and music. The Watermill Center archive contains rich audio and visual documentation of such work.

One of our primary aims for the Library of Inspiration is to make our documentation more widely available for artists and for others who seek creative inspiration. We will provide more detailed information about the existing collections in order to provide a deeper cultural context. Our catalog for the historic art collection will also promote the contemporary art works that these objects have inspired. In doing both, we aim to tell a broader story about creative process. We are exploring ways to map the traces of meanings given to these objects, from their original use to the creative acts that they inspire when moved into an artist studio.

## RESEARCH

In our experience working with artists, they often explore The Watermill Center and its environs through the lens of their own artistic practice. Hope Esser, a Chicago artist who created work for The Watermill Center summer program, was inspired by the history of the building, which was originally used as a Western Union science research laboratory in the early twentieth century. Prior to her Watermill experience, Hope developed performance pieces based on outdated modes of communication. Her initial point of inspiration was an historic Western Union telefax document, framed and installed with the art collection in the main rehearsal studio. Her investigation into the history of the site was facilitated by books and material objects held in the archive. In her resulting performance, created for the summer benefit party, Hope used a semaphore flag system to deliver messages from the roof of the building. Primary source materials from the archives collection inspired the title of her work, *Telegraph Progress*.

Library requests made by artists are often visual or auditory in nature. Non-textual modes of research include: culling patterns from the art collection, blowing into ancient vessels in order to make musical sounds, arranging objects by weight or gestures. In order to further this more tactile and associative sort of engagement, we imagine a library that will be more fluid and more active than traditional models. We will need to broaden our capacity for search, beyond language and text queries.

## DISCOVERY

In our next generation art library, discovery will be driven by curiosity. Rather than focus solely on organization or classification, we will privilege browsing as a key entry point. Artists should be able to search across all collections for: materials, such as feathers or textiles; ritual objects, such as death masks; literary references; gestures and other visual criteria.

Artists and visitors at The Watermill Center will be invited to contribute to the content and arrangement of the collections. In this way, participants will be able to view and follow paths of inquiry taken by others. The digital space will mimic the collaboration and chance encounters, which are promoted through the open design of our physical workspaces.

Some key features of the Library of Inspiration's interactive design layer may include:

- Classification for books and objects combined with the ability to rearrange these for individual use or specific projects, ie: with tracking by radio frequency.
- The ability to link physical and virtual objects together, ie: with large touch screens in work spaces and studios.
- Mobile access to locate specific objects in order to provide deeper information about cultural and artistic contexts.
- The use of semantic vocabularies and crowd based tagging systems, which would allow for collaboration and additional pathways for browsing.
- Description and retrieval of content by gesture, shape and visual criteria.
- A feedback system into which visiting artists and researchers are able to add images and documentation of their projects into a larger Watermill Center dialogue.

## PROCESS

In order to make this innovation possible, the digital services of the Library will continue to develop over the next two to three years along with the physical design. Our immediate focus is to create its core: the suite of applications that will manage and enable dynamic access to The Watermill Center's unique collections.

To this end, metadata consultants have been engaged in order to identify and recommend software applications best suited to the management of the Watermill collections. These will include: a repository for digital assets catalogs for descriptive and indexing metadata, and integrated search support for user discovery.

We have just concluded the first of a targeted three-year development plan for library systems and new technologies. Our first year outcomes include user scenarios, a gap analysis of current systems, guiding metadata standards, a plan to migrate current metadata and integrate digital assets to the recommended software. Our current focus is the selection of local taxonomies and controlled vocabulary for use across new systems. At the same time, we continue working to identify and inventory our diverse collections.

The Watermill Center is working in partnership with the New York University Libraries to design and plan the Library of Inspiration. We benefit from their experience and leadership in library design and digital library technology services.

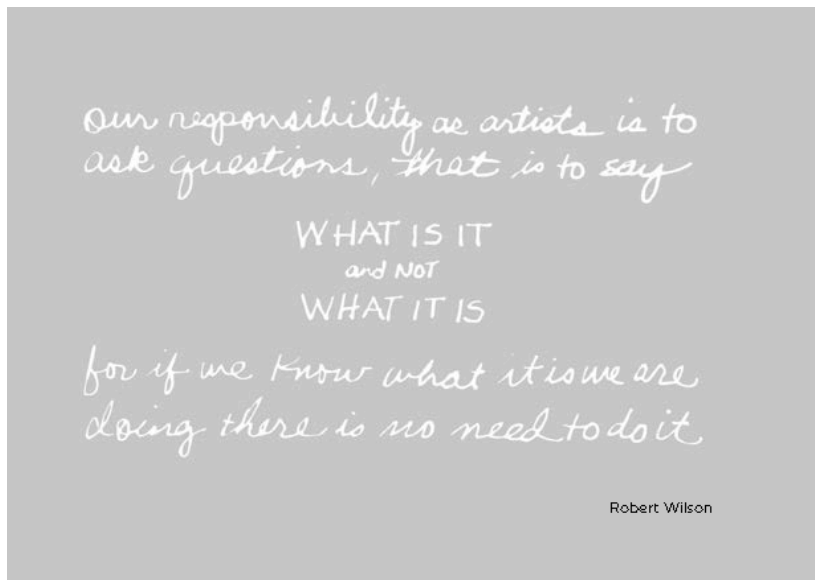
Looking forward, we will begin planning for the interactive layer in the next year. We aim to bring in design expertise to facilitate and advise or work toward integrating physical and digital workspaces.

#### ASKING THE QUESTION: WHAT IS IT?

Libraries are no longer designed as storage places for collections; they are meant to be active spaces where one can create knowledge through organized access to information. We want to push this idea further. What could a library meant to inspire artists be?

This library will operate as a studio, not a repository. The components of this library will exist in an active performance space in which engagement, storytelling, and creativity are privileged. At The Watermill Center there is a clear structure. Within that structure, everything changes. Everything is possible.

The story of The Watermill Center is in large part a story about possibilities and creative process. The works that are created on site by resident artists are considered and documented within this larger context. A library facilitating research is commonplace, but a library, documenting and facilitating the creative process will be an inspiration.



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