

Text by Oscar Wilde
Music by Frédéric Rzewski

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De Profundis

Installation and Performance
by *Kimberley Farris-Manning*



Feb. 16, 2018
5:30pm & 7pm
Baumann Centre

* Want the “Coles Notes” version? Skip ahead to the text in grey boxes! *

I discovered this piece in Christopher Butterfield’s first-year Composition class, and it was influential in my introduction to New Music; it seemed natural to choose it to be part of my graduating recital. When I began studying it last year, the incredible weight and integrity of both Wilde’s and Rzewski’s works quickly became clear to me. I decided to postpone my performance until this year so I could dedicate the appropriate time and energy that these texts demand. Over the past six months, I developed this installation with the help of my supervisors at UVic. In this time I have come to appreciate the intense vulnerability necessary to interpret the nuances inherent to both texts.

Aesthete, poet and playwright Oscar Wilde was incarcerated from 25 May 1895 to 18 May 1897; he was charged with ‘indecency’ on account of his homosexuality (then condemned in Britain). From January to March 1897, Wilde wrote a 50,000-word letter to his former lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, from his cell in Reading Gaol. He received one to three pieces of paper a day to write on; these pages were taken away at the end of each day and returned to him only on his release from prison on 18 May 1897. In the summer of 1992, composer Frédéric Rzewski adapted excerpts from Wilde’s letter into a 30-minute melodramatic oratorio for speaking pianist, in which, he describes, there are “eight sections with text [that] are preceded by eight instrumental preludes”. Rzewski explains:

“My composition *De Profundis* was inspired by Luke Theodore, an old friend from the Living Theatre to whom the piece is also dedicated. Luke went out to San Diego in the early 80’s to start his own theatre. When I visited him in 1984 he was performing a play he and his group had put together on the subject of prisons. [...] In 1989 the filmmaker Larry Brose asked me to write a piece for the pianist Anthony de Mare that could serve as the basis for a film. I knew Tony’s abilities both as pianist and actor. Remembering Luke’s performance of the Wilde texts, I suggested these as a possible source. All of us as well shared an interest in the politics of sexuality; and this aspect of Wilde’s story seemed as lively now as it was a hundred years ago.” (Rzewski)

Inspired by Wilde’s commitment to writing regularly over an extended period of time, I took on the challenge of writing three pages of text or music a day from June to August 2017. While I cannot in any way compare my experience of writing to Wilde’s, this process helped me to understand the sheer scope and impact of this space of time, the power and intimacy of thought, as well as the importance and art of asking questions. It quickly became evident how closely linked the power of language is to agency, and the extent to which it gives an individual the ability to forge their identity in confronting and resisting dominant cultural forces.

Wilde entrusted the final manuscript of the letter to his friend Robert Ross, introducing it by saying:

“I don’t defend my conduct. I explain it. Also there are in my letter certain passages which deal with my mental development in prison, and the inevitable evolution of my character and intellectual attitude towards life that has taken place: and I want you and others who stand by me and have affection for me to know exactly in what mood and manner I hope to face the world. Of course from one point of view I know that on the day of my release I will be merely passing from one prison into another, and there are times when the whole world seems to me no larger than my cell and as full of terror for me. Still I believe that at the beginning God made a world for each separate man, and in that world which is within us one should seek to live.” (to Robert Ross, 1 April 1897, p.20 in “Four Letters”)

This letter is not just a personal account or consideration of the relationships and events that led Wilde to be in Reading Gaol; it is a testament to his artistic ideals and philosophies. If it is agreed that art offers a means of engaging with ideas, then one can identify and position oneself in the world through the realization of artworks, thereby interacting with tangible sensory inputs. **In this way, it is possible that art be conceived as the mask between or around truth and reality (insomuch as these differ).**

“I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art... I treated Art as the supreme reality and life as a mere mode of fiction.” (Wilde)

...To Wilde, Art is the “primal note by which I revealed, first myself to myself, then myself to the world.” Like writing, art solidifies concepts and ideas, albeit temporarily, in a specific time and place.

In my own work, I use writing—be it music or text—to help me find and articulate the ideas that I can feel. I use art in the same way: the challenge of turning my intuitions and impressions into something concrete, even if temporary, is exhilarating. In handling and shaping physical materials, I reach places I could not previously have conceived of. I am interested in how relationships between objects are manifested through material changes over time. More specifically, I am interested in the process of inscription... of how objects hold and convey experience and time. I make art as a form of inquiry: to pose or construct a space in which to contemplate the fragility and contradictive nature of equilibrium. Material remains material until you choose to see it otherwise. It is up to the artist to find moments (or points) of friction in existence, and to give them the space to continue existing, in meaningful ways.

Artists and philosophers have long toyed with the separation and segregation of body and mind, often debating over the distinction of the soul within this dichotomy. While Aristotle adopted the notion that “all living things have souls,” naming the soul as “that which makes us capable of being what we are,” (Heyd) the Augustinian view is that the soul is separable into both material and immaterial forms. Michel Serres claims that “the soul does not reside in one particular location in the body—the pea-sized pineal gland, according to Descartes, buried deep in the brain—but flares wherever and whenever the body touches upon itself.” He argues that “thinking is reflexive because it is enacted through a kind of autotactility. The soul comes into being, not in concentration but in convergence, not in simplification but in complication, not in withdrawal but in excursion.” It is possible that artists are able to explore these ideas so effectively because they deal with “the articulation of the self at the boundaries of the body.” (Hamilton) ...I’m not sure I would limit or list the boundaries that are tested, but it is in the skin (touch) where “the soul and world comingle.” (Serres)

Can a soul be touched?

Wilde talks a lot about the soul in his letter: the ways in which his own has been affected, and in which he hopes to further affect it. He asks, “Who can calculate the orbit of his own soul?”

His thinking throughout the letter marries questions of agency and identity, posing: is ‘me’ a static thing? Can it be controlled (by you, or by someone else)?

I wonder: how much of ‘you’ can be contained/restrained before it stops being ‘you’?

How much can you adapt to others and keep being yourself?

Is who I am the same as my self?

I have chosen to present this performance in a dramatic sculptural context because of the added expression and points of access I believe it offers. This installation addresses questions of human identity through formal, structural and contextual means. I’ve been thinking a lot about simplicity, and about the importance of sometimes allowing works like Wilde’s and Rzewski’s to stand on their own. I believe this piece calls for an exception, and that the addition of a visual and physical confusion in space enables the viewer to both separate and focus on each text individually, while simultaneously tying the senses together—allowing the viewer to ‘mingle’ with these works through a dynamic and intimate intrusion on the senses.

Reading Gaol was among a slew of prisons to adopt the separate system in the 19th century, wherein the prisoners were kept in complete solitary confinement in an effort to maintain order and prevent the spread of infectious diseases, among other reasons. “Common features of a separate system prison include a central hall, with several (from four to eight) radiating wings of prison blocks, separated from the central hall and from each other by large metal bars. While all the prison blocks are visible to the prison staff positioned at the centre, individual cells cannot be seen unless the staff enter individual prison blocks.” (Wikipedia) I visited the last standing separate system chapel in England at Lincoln Castle this summer, where I saw the individual cubby-stalls that inmates were ushered into, their heads covered by sacks called ‘peaks’. Once this ‘mask’ was removed, their only line of sight would lead directly to the pulpit: this enforced yet still distant contact providing one of their only human interactions in a given day.

The manipulation of audience seating/movement, sculptural materials, acoustic and amplified sound in this installation aims to focus both the body and the mind, challenging their relationships to memory, time, motion and space. An orbit implies constant motion as well as an overall feeling of stillness, or of being stationary: this idea of ‘unmoving motion’ is manifested in the overall layout as well as in the individual elements of the piece.

Wilde refers to ‘himself’ 64 times in the excerpts used in Rzewski’s setting (I, me, we, us, self). In each half of the hall you will find sixty-four 10 cm Plexiglass squares littering the ground. Please feel free to walk among them and examine their differences. Wilde’s writing allows us to track his attempts to forge his own identity: here you will find what I like to think of as the marking places for the many different ‘iterations of the self’ discovered throughout the piece.

Much of what I wrote this summer ended up posing itself in the form of a question: questions about what Wilde wrote, why he wrote it, questions that stem from his questions, and mainly questions that cannot be defined but only explored. I’ve included excerpts in the following pages from what I’ve written, highlighting some of the thoughts that have stuck with me throughout this project.

Why the green carnation?"

"The short answer is that it's a symbol of Oscar himself. In 1892, Wilde had one of the actors in Lady Windermere's Fan wear a green carnation on opening night and told a dozen of his young followers to wear them too[;] soon the carnation became an emblem of Wilde and his group.

...The long answer is more complicated. What, if anything, did the green carnation mean? On this question, Wilde was less than helpful. When asked by one of his followers, he replied, "Nothing whatever, but that is just what nobody will guess."

But as scholars have noted, Wilde was almost certainly being coy. In fact, he gave a hint as to its meaning in the same conversation, telling his follower that he should get one at Goodyear's (a famous flower shop in London) because "they grow them there." As anyone who knew the Decadent Movement would see, Wilde was playing with one of his favourite ideas: that nature should imitate art, and not the reverse. In that sense, then, the green carnation was symbolic. A flower of an unnatural color embodied the decadent and the unnatural. Did it, however, embody something more—namely "unnatural" love?"

(Oscar Wilde Tours)

May 26, 2017

A green carnation—

Not dipped in any dye; it just grows differently.
It defies the laws under which we are governed,
or are used to. It is a part of the unknown.

The laws under which I am convicted
are wrong and unjust.

How much of that carnation is overlooked?

When all you see is colour, what else do you miss out on?
How much is lost in this one-dimensional prejudice against
nature?

Pigeons see in colour hyperspace.

There are a lot more green carnations in the world
than we know of.

Who knows whether it's a lack of pigeons,
or an overdose of dye.

"I wanted to be you so I could live."

"I don't know who I am anymore."

how can I live?

Am I alive because of who I am,

or am I who I am

because of how

I am

living?

Am I alive because of who I am,

or because of who

I am

not?

Am I alive

because I am able to be me?

Is living the same

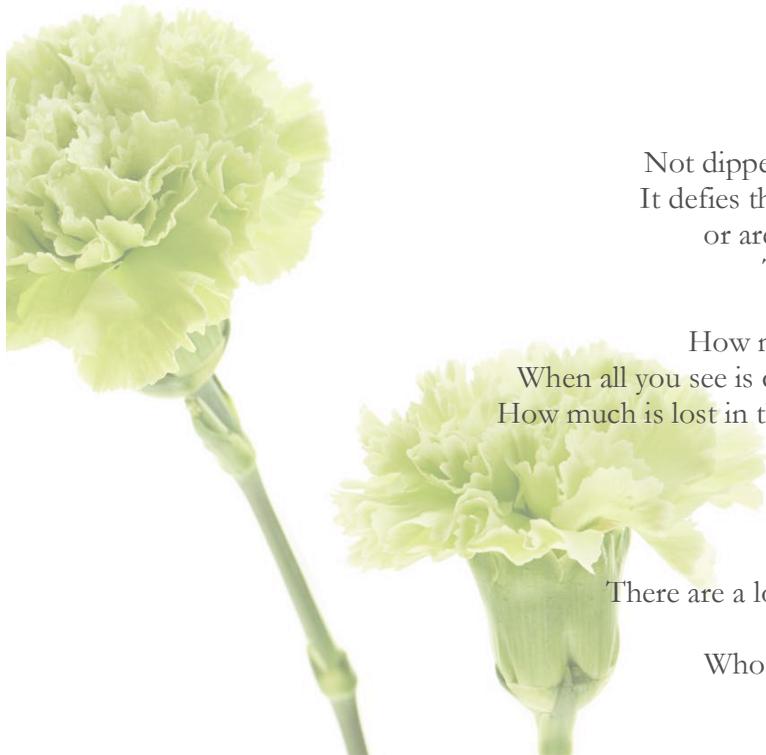
as being

who I am?

I don't know who I am anymore.

Why

am I



(masks)

Wilde, a playwright, has many interesting, sometimes contradictory, thoughts about masks. On the one hand, he criticizes their falsehood: “A man whose desire is to be something separate from himself succeeds in being what he wants to be. That is his punishment. Those who want a mask have to wear it”. During Wilde’s imprisonment, however, “he took it as obligatory that he must displace and disguise his motives and actions even as he explained them.” (David Foster, *Rhetoric of Agency*) In order to earn permission and the materials to write his letter in prison, Wilde had to address the head guard in a letter. He wrote that “he had committed ‘monstrous sexual perversion’, was still capable of ‘loathsome modes of erotomania,’ and feared ‘the terror of madness’ if he were not given more freedom”. (Letters, 403) In order to reach what might be considered the greater truth, then, a falsification and direct contradiction of his reality was required.

On the other hand, Wilde acknowledges the liberty that hidden identity can offer. He proposes that “[man] is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.” A deliberate mask allows space for individualism and enables one to pose, in an act of self-definition. The ‘catch’ here is two-fold: 1) the mask cannot merely be assumed; it must be voluntarily and fully embraced, and 2) this pose must then be interpreted, and not left to be read at face value. A mask has the potential to offer an entryway into a new way of thinking or of interacting with a stimulus; however its influence must be carefully considered from all angles.

Michel Serres gives a lot of weight to the power of language in defining identity, explaining that:

“the ‘I’ thinks only when it is beside itself. It feels really only when it is beside itself. The linguistic ‘I’ is shrunk down to the large memory of language, the indefinite integral of others, the closure of its open group, freezing itself in habit...I only really live beside myself; beside myself I think, meditate, know, beside myself I receive the given, vivacious, I invent beside myself. I exist beside myself, like the world. I am on the side of the world beside my talkative flesh.” (119 *The Senses*)

In a sense, then, all language is a mask, even if, at the same time, it is the means through which we define reality.

Wilde latches onto this paradox of ‘surreal truth’, highlighting the role of language in defining memory, and in articulating the distinction between identity and existence. “Suffering,” he writes, “is the means by which we exist, because it is the only means by which we become conscious of existing; and the remembrance of suffering in the past is necessary to us as the evidence of our continued identity.” (Wilde) In a video at the *Queer British Art 1861-1967* exhibit that I saw at the Tate Britain this summer, one of the interviewees spoke of their own identity, asking “I wonder who can see me?” It is clear that there are many types of masks and that the reasons for ‘wearing’ them are varied; however, it is saddening to think of how many are donned simply because of society’s expectations or denunciations of who people are, or aim to be.