

Wonder Cabinet: The Artist in Academia

by Nancy Agabian

Sometimes I have strange feelings for my computer. In the 13 years since I set up an email account, I have had a wide ranging series of emotional experiences while facing a screen. In the early days of email, I wrote long letters to friends, like the ones I used to write by hand and send through the mail. I received long letters too: messages of friendship and love and the occasional breakup, though these missives have become increasingly more brief and less frequent since Facebook. Through my writing, I've connected to communities — lesbians in Armenia, disaffected teenagers in Rochester, and immigrant writers in Queens (where I now live) — on my computer. I've written a memoir on it, which required that I carefully and honestly analyze my life over a period of nine years. I've cried while working on my computer, summoning up painful life experiences and learning of terrible tragedies. I have also received a lot of good news on it: word of grants and awards and new opportunities. Lately, with this recession coinciding with mid-life crisis-ish concerns, I have felt addicted to the computer, just waiting for some more good news to arrive to get me out of my predicament: at work, I'm an artist trapped in an academic's body. I get paid to usher young students into institutions of higher learning. This means that instead of fostering creativity, I sometimes get stuck preaching academic objectivity. So when I got an email from writer Lawrence Weschler asking me to resurrect Guitar Boy for the "Wonder Cabinet" at Occidental College in Los Angeles last April, I jumped on it. Guitar Boy was the folk-punk/performance art band that I had formed with artist Ann Perich in LA when I had lived there in the 90s. I wasn't exactly sure what the "Wonder Cabinet" was, but Ren (as he is known by his students and friends) was one of my favorite professors in grad school; I was confident it would be a worthwhile event.

Weschler won a National Book Critics Circle Award for his book *Everything that Rises: A Book of Convergences*, a tome that illustrates and documents parallels in visual images and world events, often in the most uncanny, unfathomable ways. He has also become an academic impresario as the director of the New York Institute of the Humanities, putting together events with films, lectures and discussions on such topics as modern reportage, comics as art, and relations between religions. Sometimes they get funky, such as people who are crocheting a model of the coral reef. When I Googled his name with the term "Wonder Cabinet," I discovered that the event relates to one of his books, Mr Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder. The nonfiction book is about the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Culver City, an odd little place with real exhibits (like microscopic sculptures mounted on the heads of pins) and fake (a bat that can fly through matter but gets stuck in a lead wall eight inches thick). In the book Weschler gets into the beginnings of the museum in the late 16th and early 17th centuries when collectors started displaying curiosities in their homes. These Renaissance cabinets or rooms were called *Wanderkammern*, or Wonder Cabinets, and they included things like supposed horns of humans and Madonnas made out of feathers and other weird items both real and suspicious. It was a time of the "New World," when the West met up with the East and elsewhere. In a way, the Museum of Jurassic Technology calls up this time period, with its creator David Wilson presenting exhibits that appeal to our sense of wonder. As Weschler puts it, "The visitor to the Museum of Jurassic Technology continually finds himself shimmering between wondering at (the wonders of nature) and wondering whether (any of this could possibly be true). And it's that very shimmer, the capacity for such delicious

confusion ... that may constitute the most blessedly wonderful thing about being human.”

Weschler, as a modern day collector of curious people and ideas, started creating day-long events called “Wonder Cabinets,” coordinating connections between artists and scientists in homage to the ways that art and science were more unified during the Renaissance. “In fact, with the rise of the Internet and social media we may be returning to an era in which scientists and artists, historians and digital innovators have all kinds of things to say to each other,” Weschler says in the press release for the event at Occidental, where he is an artist-in-residence. I thought of the role of the computer in my life as a writer; I tend to get distracted by digital innovation, on Facebook and celebrity gossip websites, instead of creating with it anything of wonder. Also, I wasn’t sure how Guitar Boy would fit into the program, but I didn’t question too much, since Occidental was going to foot my travel bill to Los Angeles.

I had decided to move there twenty years before, as a college senior majoring in art, when I had read in *ArtNews* or *Artforum* about the burgeoning LA art world; two days after graduating in 1990, I drove across the country (from Boston) and lived there for nine years. It was in Venice, my old neighborhood, that I had found an artistic home. Now upon my return, after living in New York for eleven years, I couldn’t believe how exotic Venice looks: palm trees and bouganvillea and jade plants growing outside. I would walk down Venice Boulevard from my apartment to go to work at a printmaking studio run by self-proclaimed Modern Primitives. And completing the triangle of home, work, and art was Beyond Baroque, the literary center in the old Venice Town hall where I started writing. Previously in college, at a seven-sister’s school, I had trouble expressing myself among all the well-spoken young women, except when I could escape to the silent realm of the painting studio. In the multicultural 90s of LA, I was now given the means to tell my angst of growing up Armenian American. I suddenly became aware of my existence as a person with a past, walking around Venice. I made performances from the insane/drug-induced propositions that were uttered to me by various sun-addled men as I shuffled by in my cut-off jean shorts and Doc Martens, just 22 years old and still squishy in my body. In my art, I

became subject and object at the same time.

Ann Perich was drawn to this subjective-objectedness, too. A musician and mixed media artist, she saw me doing a performance wearing a dress made out of rocks on Valentine’s Day, ca. 1997. I am sure I was spilling my guts about being alone, bisexual and Armenian — the subjects of all my performances. She called me on the phone the next day and said she could relate and proposed we collaborate musically. I was like, Hey, I’m kind of tone deaf, but Ann didn’t mind. In her garage, she played a dulcimer with a pickup or a Casio keyboard, and I sang improvised words, sometimes providing accompaniment on a screechy violin. We eventually called our collaboration Guitar Boy, since we did not play guitars nor were we boys; before the millenium shifted, it seemed critical to comment on the appalling way that popular music had been dominated for decades by the same type of instruments and people. I also wanted to make songs about topics other than love or longing or whatever sexual disco ditty was playing on the car radio. So we composed songs about Norman Rockwell, the Kmart Portrait Studio, and lactose intolerance, playing to small but knowing audiences at performance art spaces, dive bars, and Jewish delis. Our claim to non-fame was a folk-punk tune called “Don’t Fall Off the Getty Center (It’s a Long Way Down)” that people just went bonkers over. The Getty was so mammoth and lofty — literally and figuratively — that it seemed unlikely to contain it as a subject within a song, never mind tear it completely down. Its narrative lyrics were classic David and Goliath: an impoverished contemporary artist pitted against the most wealthy museum in the world; it hit the consciousness of the underclass of struggling artists in LA just at the right moment. To celebrate, we wore outrageous costumes: old prom dresses, middle-aged lingerie, mini-skirts made of clear plastic shower curtains — how Lady Gaga would dress if she were limited to a thrift store budget. I basked in the attention of our locally contextual stardom, a new kind of subject/object.

For some reason, when I moved to New York to go to grad school shortly thereafter, I gave our CD to Lawrence Weschler. In college I had read *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*, his book on Robert Irwin, the text that was probably more influential (than the art mags) in sending me West after graduation. I was taking a

class with him called “The Fiction of Nonfiction” in which he showed us words in nonfiction pieces that were delicately and deliberately chosen to create moments of poetry. He was the first professor I had in grad school who spoke about writing as if it were an art form, rather than a medium to record the thoughts in our minds which were supposed to come out in such a way that no one would ever second guess our intelligence.

One day I was meeting with Weschler in his office, and he told me he couldn’t reconcile my person with my prose, since I was so mousy in class and I was so outspoken in my writing. The first of my family to go to grad school, and newly transplanted from the-opposite-of-New-York, I didn’t feel comfortable that I could reveal my thoughts in class in such a way that no one would second guess my intelligence. I gave him the CD as a way to say, You thought my writing was out there? I must have had some kind of faith that Weschler would get it. Sure, he looked academic, with his beard, glasses, and a corduroy blazer with leather patches on the elbows, and he was a Pulitzer nominee and former *New Yorker* staffer. But he also told us that he had grown up in LA, had gone to school at Santa Cruz, and had started out as a writer for the *LA Weekly*. I liked that he made fun of articles in which the writer goes out of his way to stick to journalistic standards of objectivity, to such an extent that he can’t even acknowledge his own existence, with phrases like, “It was noted that ...” or “Mr. Jagger was asked ...” Likewise, popular songs, though they often use the first person, often try to tell a universal truth, and as such, veer away from anything grounded in specific personal experience, dealing instead with cliché. But specificity brings out the universal — that’s what I learned from “Don’t Fall Off the Getty Center,” anyway. I thought Ren would like Guitar Boy’s specific songs, and he did.

We have kept in touch over the last ten years since meeting in his class, and now he wanted Guitar Boy to play at the “Wonder Cabinet.” He had invited an art historian with a theory that Norman Rockwell was a huge pervert, and our song about him would work perfectly, but it turned out the guy couldn’t make it. Ren had also been hanging out at the Getty Research Institute and playing our song around their offices, I imagined to rouse morale. But we still didn’t seem to fit in with the theme of science and art very well.

I tried to put aside this concern when I got to Ann’s house to rehearse. She now happened to live in the same Venice neighborhood that I did, composing music for theatre and art projects and working at a law firm for her day job. She looked the same as she did ten years before, still wearing her white girl dread locks. For three days, in between her work schedule, we practiced and laughed. The songs came back to us easily, engraved in our brains. But Ann thought it was weird that we were going to play at what seemed to her like a stodgy academic affair. Stuck doing academic grunt work, I saw things a little differently. I have been to many a stodgy academic affair and usually artists aren’t invited nor consulted. It sounded like a fun and funky event to me, though I was still confused as to how we could contribute to the theme of science and art converging in our present era.

On the day of the “Cabinet,” we arrived in time for the lunch break and set up our musical instruments and did a little sound check. Our little Casio keyboard sounded bizarre amplified back to us in the massive space. We were in Thorne Hall, once of those classic academic spaces, long and wide, that one usually does associate with boring lectures. But the first lecturer we heard, Walter Murch seemed kind of cool. He is an Oscar-winning sound mixer and editor, but his side interest has brought him here to give a Power Point presentation about the similarities between the ratios of the orbits of planets and moons to the frequencies of notes in octaves. Or something like this. It is interesting for about 45 minutes, especially when he talks about the early astronomers who believed that God wouldn’t create imperfectly measured orbits. But I start to lose the thread of his hypothesis, as he continues to give more complicated technical info in a series of charts. Ann gives me the “I told you so” look.

The next guy up is Ken Libbrecht, a physicist from Cal Tech who photographs snowflakes. He has a North Dakota accent and is quite earnest about describing his process. He explains how he lays out a piece of white foam core when it’s snowing to catch the flakes, transfers them to a slide, then gets out his special microscopic camera to photograph them, his hands freezing the whole time. The photographs themselves, projected onto the massive screen at Thorne Hall, are colorful, transparent designs,

multifaceted works of art. The audience oohs and ahs. It is very wonderful to see a world that we live with but don't know in detail. At some point, he tells us that he uses filters on the photographs, to add dimension to the flakes; otherwise, they're just clear crystals in black and white. Then he says he didn't use Photoshop, right as he admits that he used Photoshop to doctor the particular image on the screen and the audience laughs. He is an odd and likable character. For no reason at all, he says as a kind of conversational tic, "I have lots of photographs of snowflakes," like a kid showing you his collection of marbles.

The snowflake guy outlines the various components of snowflakes. He uses words like "sectored plates," "duck feet," "six sentinels," and "stellar dendrites" to describe the formations. He shows us some flakes that have stuck together that look like lattice work. One fun fact I did not know is that some flakes are made out of needles and hollow columns — two flakes might form at the end of one long needle. The longer a flake has to form, the more developed it will be. Besides time, the two main factors in shaping flakes into patterns are temperature and humidity.

At some point he shows us some man-made snow; after some of the elegant, intricate, fern-like flakes we have seen, the man-made flakes look totally crude, like misshapen clods of dirt. The audience chuckles. It made me realize that people just can't ever be superior to God. But then I have to give humans credit, since they have created incredible moments of genius; some might cite Bach or Van Gogh or Patti Smith. But something about seeing those primitive man-made flakes reminds me of how I cringe when I see old paintings I have done, or read texts I have written years ago, or watch films that I thought were great as a kid, only to find as an adult they are completely sophomoric. (Rent "Breaking Away" if you want such an experience.) Everything we make seems retarded, unless it has something of God in it, I guess.

The snowflake guy decided to make his own flakes in the studio, I mean laboratory, with equipment that can control the temperature and humidity (or saturation). He shows us proof sheets of flakes taken at various temps and saturation points. He describes how he can watch the flake forming on his monitor, and thus adjust the temp and saturation as it's growing to alter formations, to get more

ducks feet or plates or stellar dendrites. It is at this moment that I realize the science/art connection. This guy sounds like an artist working in his studio, playing around with his media. He is filled with wonder.

But, he is human, too. His lecture goes on maybe half an hour too long. Ann and I are zonked out from sitting in the dark air conditioned auditorium for three hours straight. At the break we head outside to the California sunshine and walked around the campus to stretch and get psyched up to perform. In the meantime, the artists took the stage. Lauren Redniss was showing her project about Marie Curie. Matt Shlian was discussing folded paper. Ryan and Trevor Oakes, college-aged-looking twins had these pen and ink line drawings that were set inside concave shapes; in the green room backstage, I stuck my head into one and told them that it was cool.

Before we went on, Ren insisted that I watch a film that David Wilson had given him by a Soviet Armenian filmmaker, Artavazd Pelechian. It just happened to be April 24, Martyrs Day, the day of commemoration of the Armenian genocide. I felt a bit guilty for getting gussied up in clashing tights and an animal print leotard with a tail and gallivanting around on such a sober date, so I was relieved he took a moment to honor the day. The film shows a flock of sheep being guided through a tunnel. It's in black and white, and at one point, one of the sheperds loses a sheep in a river with many rapids. He dives in after it, and you watch him holding on to that sheep as they keep getting sucked under, his feet disappearing into the waves. It is incredibly poignant.

At Ren's request, we start with "Victim" ("I'm not gonna be a victim anymore") which ties into the subject of the film, with its echoes and suggestions of genocide; then I give a little speech about wonder being the opposite of genocide, since genocide is stupidity and hatred taken to its ultimate form. The "Wonder Cabinet," I explain, values and studies and loves the unusual, so we're going to celebrate unusual and tortured artists today. We sing a song called "The Artist's Way" (with a chorus of "We're all artists, we just don't know it"), and the one about Norman Rockwell ("Norman, oh Norman, you weren't normal ..."). Sitting on chairs next to each other, I make sure to yell and scream in the right places, and Ann plays her dulcimer with dramatic

flourishes. But things aren't going well. We're making tons of mistakes; it's the worst time we have played, when in rehearsal we were doing so well. And the audience doesn't match up with my memory. The Cabinet-eers seem dead; there are far fewer numbers from when the snowflake guy gave his talk. They're just sitting there catatonic instead of looking delighted. I remember moments of glory from the Guitar Boy days, when I once had a bowl of Matzo ball soup sent to the stage at Canter's Kibbutz room, and Ann and I played an homage to it, to the tune of "Girl from Ipanema" ("Large and round and spongy and starchy, the Matzo ball soup at Canter's is yummy") or the time when Sonny Bono died and we paid tribute to him to the tune of "Sunny" ("Sonny, thank you for the Sonny and Cher show. Sonny, you had a really really really big nose.") Thinking about it now, I realize those inspired moments were few and far between. There were many times, I am sure, when audiences just stared at us, not knowing what to make of us, like they are now.

I feel very disconnected from this audience. So as part of our onstage banter, I tell Ann that we don't belong here. I ask her, "Do you think they think we're weird?" Someone from the audience yells out, "Nooo!" and he sounds like Weschler. "Judging by the weirdos we've seen here today, I'd say we do fit in," she says, and the audience laughs. I tell Ann that we're old, and outdated, and we've been taken out of context, the way that items in a museum are often plopped into a sterile environment; this is the segueway to "Don't Fall Off the Getty Center." When we launch into it, people wake up a little bit. I have updated it with some lyrics about how the Getty can't hold onto any museum directors, because these poor souls always have to report to the head of the trust to make any purchases. I purport that it is fundamentally a stingy place because of the cheap legacy of J. Paul Getty himself, who let his grandson's ear be cut off by kidnappers and later demanded that his son, the boy's father, pay him back the ransom.

Afterwards, old friends appeared, people I hadn't thought of in a while, and we got caught up and reacclimated our eyes to each other. We are all invited to the Occidental president's house, where we eat tacos and talk about the event and reminisce. My friend Jennifer Gentile, a filmmaker and set decorator, was telling us about

the Oakes twins and how they identified a more accurate way of drawing perspective by acknowledging human biology and structure.

They reminded the audience that when we see an image, we don't see it as a rectangle in an unobstructed frame; in fact our noses usually get in the way, but our visual cortex works to leave it out. So they compose images within a series of small sections, which are measured to be the same width as the space between their two pupils. They also believe that we experience space spherically and thus, the surfaces that we draw on should be concave. Jen said the talk was mind blowing, given that the artists twins; here you have two different people with four eyes working out a theory on perspective. I found it interesting that the subject made its way into what's meant to be an objective process.

As a nonfiction writer, I often have to think about subjectivity and objectivity and how they play out in writing. When you are a subject, you act. An object is acted upon. To be objective often means remaining completely separate from the action, to just observe, like an emotionless scientist. Being subjective doesn't just mean being a subject of a piece of writing, but inserting yourself into the action to acknowledge your limitations to see a subject clearly. Embracing the subjective means embracing your humanity. Maybe God is objective, the ultimate omniscient observer, but humans can never be anything more than subjective, no matter how hard they try to play God. And yet God is in the details, the ones that we create. So are artists human and god, subjective and objective, at the same time?

The university has been structured around subjectivity and objectivity, with its different disciplines, categorized and separated from each other: colleges of science, colleges of liberal arts, colleges of arts. In English departments, you have people dissecting literature like frogs, and you have kids getting inspired to compose their own poems. I started teaching English because I needed a job after graduate school; as a performance artist, I had always hoped an MFA would give me more stability to get a salary and benefits. Academia was a refuge I entered only because public arts funding had been drying up for a while. I found my English students weren't looking for a wacky artist, and neither were my employers. But I did the best job I could, since I liked my students, and I didn't have a big beef with

academia: it encouraged having an open mind, something artists have to rely upon. Artists sometimes need to do research, and they have to stretch their minds around new information in order to inform their work. Academia also focuses on having a discipline, which artists need when they go to their studios every day. In a way, I am creative with teaching, structuring writing exercises around readings. And I bring my performance persona into the classroom to improvise during lessons, based on the students' comments. So as an event — and as a tradition — the Wonder Cabinet reminds me that there are even more possibilities for bringing together the disparate parts I have been struggling with: the sober, objective professor, and the crazy, impulsive performance artist.

At the after-party, some of the Getty research fellows approached us to buy our CDs. They really liked our Getty song and they gave us some dirt about the institution, which warmed my heart. I started to feel like it all now made sense, the reason for Guitar Boy being here, the convergence of our songs with the topics and projects of the day. We were the entertainment for these art and science nerds. Jennifer said that today was essentially a day about people who are weirdos, and we exemplified that most directly, with our bizarre songs. She saw people who became totally committed to an idea that might not be especially popular, hip, or even practical. I was happy that I had kept Guitar Boy's flame burning. For in essence, creativity — whether scientific, artistic, objective or subjective — is a wonder.

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