

Madeline Stillwell's 2015 video installation, *Prelude to Never Loving Again*, paraphrases the first scene of Richard Wagner's opera, *The Rhinegold*. In overlapping video sequences, the mysterious depths of the Rhine are evoked by groundwater collector tanks and a labyrinth of drainage pipes in a construction site cordoned off from traffic.

As for the characters from this first piece of *The Ring of the Nibelung* cycle, the nymph sisters of the Rhine—Wellgunde, Woglinde and Flosshilde—are all played by Madeline Stillwell, in which further overlaid sequences are displayed with background settings recorded from a construction site in Berlin, featuring pipes, buckets, clay, mud and rubble.

In accordance with the story of the opera, which Wagner himself cobbled together from diverse mythological bits and pieces, the nymphs are busy humiliating Alberich, the Nibelung dwarf, who has been aroused to sensual passion by the three sisters. They are hard at work finding cunning and cruel ways to trample him in the mud (or clay?)—an abundant requisite in the scene, and an essential material of the performance and the installation. Bear in mind that the root of the Latin origin of “humiliate” is “humus,” i.e. *the ground*: to humiliate someone is to bring them down to the ground, to trample them in the mud.

So this is how the nymphs of the Rhine treat miserable, ugly, love- hungry Alberich, and Madeline Stillwell—who also performs his role, as she rolls about in the mud, the filth of Alberich's mortification, which is also the mud of the construction site, as well as of her own performance.

Nobody likes to be treated like a bag of dirt.

Left on his own, Alberich (Madeline Stillwell) first wallows in his humiliation, the pain of ridicule, but then vows revenge and decides to get hold of the gold in the river—the Rhinegold—and also seize, as a part of the deal, power over all.

“...dejected in his shame and abandonment, he is forced to deal with himself. He makes his choice. Gold,” read the captions of the video.

Considering that according to *Environmental Science & Technology*, the publication of the American Chemical Society, millions of dollars' worth of gold could be extracted annually, with the appropriate technology, from the sludge

of industrial and public sewage in every major city, we must acknowledge that the solution suggested by Madeline Stillwell/Alberich, wherein the yellow mud—or should I say, shit—is turned into gold, is not all that far-fetched.

“All right,” say the nymphs as they give in to frustrated Alberich’s force, “but you should know, that the gold will only give you power if you renounce your ability for love, forever.”

This, to be honest, is not such a big deal for someone who has been repeatedly humiliated in the throes of passion. Not a big deal especially when one is to learn, very soon, that the gold comes with eternal youth—which is to say, one is to lose the ability to love not for a fleetingly short lifetime but for all of eternity. In exchange, he can reign, even over the gods. (“As I renounced love, all living things shall renounce it! Allured by gold, for gold alone shall you hunger... Beware the nocturnal host when the Nibelung horde rises from the silent depths to the daylight!” - Alberich tells the gods later.)

Allow me to digress briefly, so that I can refer back to this point later on—and even if I can’t, this is a good time to make this point. Freud reportedly experienced his expeditions into the psyche, like so many descents into the dark netherworld of the unconscious, as a journey into the belly of a mountain, where he was just as likely to find gold as filth and mud. End of digression.

Thus, the dramatic premise of *The Ring of the Nibelung* has been established: scorned sensual desire aspires to dominance, and there begins the drama of gold, love, violence, humiliation, lust, tyranny, and ultimately, the twilight of the gods—which is celebrated by the five characters of the video, also performed by Stillwell: Richard Wagner himself, in his legendary full beard, full of himself and his art, rolling in the mud and rubble. “Gesamtkunst!” cries Stillwell/Wagner, and then perishes. Which is just as well, as his faithless admirer, Nietzsche, asserted that Wagner’s music was but an endless swansong, the degradation of rhythm into chaos, and the composer was more of an actor than a musician.

But what about Stillwell? Who is she in this story? A nymph, a humiliated dwarf, a Gesamtkunstwerk “ham” of an artist who dies of his/her own arrogance? A singer, a narrator, an actor, a junk artist, a performance artist? What are these materials that conjure up chaos and destroy meanings, what are these scenes drowning in their own contingency? What is the mud, the water, the industrial pipes, the roughly shaped video? What is this? And

whence this surprising singing voice, whence the sentences that acutely articulate the premise of the drama?

“...dejected in his shame and abandonment he is forced to deal with himself. He makes his choice. Gold.”

Let us remain clueless. It probably wouldn't hurt.

In another of her performances, *Machine-pipe Drawing*, just as in her action *Stick Werfen*, Stillwell takes the archetypal journey of a Campbellian hero, with such forces opposing her as: 1) her own abilities and limitations; 2) the givens of the environment; 3) and the never ceasing temptation for interpretation.

Are you familiar with the urban sport in which acrobatically talented youths create a complex, multi-tiered obstacle course from the found elements of architectural reality (*objets trouvés*, if you will), and then navigate through it in the fastest, most spectacular and riskiest manner, so that they can get to know their own abilities—so that they can mark and race the track of self-knowledge between the Scylla and Charybdis of reality? Stillwell navigates the places she has found in a similar manner (places best described by the German word *Unort*, or, non-place: basements, factories, warehouses, construction sites, etc.), but unlike the daring youths, not in order to get through them as fast as possible. Rather, she seeks risks on her obstacle course, as much as possible, to expose herself, over and above the obvious physical hazards, to the dangers associated with interpretation (“What is this? What *is* this?”)

The gods get a kick out of sending blind poets to chronicle the journeys of heroes. (And I'm glad to have chanced upon the expression “get a kick out of,” which mixes in my speech like Stillwell's plastic pipes in Wagner's myth). Stillwell undertakes that task too. While she presses her body into the space, tracing and appropriating the interpretative adventure of the given place/situation through the occasionally slapstick yet definitely arduous journey of the body, she also comments on her expedition like her own chronicler, poet, minstrel, or, occasionally, stand-up comedian—an exercise that surprisingly leads, in *Machine-pipe Drawing*, to a catharsis that is both unexpected in the light of the torments accumulated, and modest.

Madeline Stillwell appears in these uninviting spaces as if she were their secret resident, who, when left on her own, indulges in her own strange rites. As the industrial demon, mud warrior, factory acrobat, alien pole dancer goblin, pipe pixy and hindered superheroine of these pipes, walls, nooks, and

crannies, she charts and appropriates, shapes and endures the spaces, while reflecting on her journeys, and recording her missions as epic poems on video. Stillwell, the artist, comes from a background of ceramics, i.e. shaped clay; drawing, i.e. paths planned and traced; and dance, i.e. the body that moves in space and creates space. In her performances and actions she employs all her natural and acquired skills and abilities, so that she can struggle her way through the obstacles encountered, and create her transient dramatic and atmospheric events, which are complemented by a fair amount of impertinent and cheerful self-irony. In contrast to, but together with, the spatial and temporal productions of the *objets trouvés*, the environments, the junk and its pathos, the attraction and the repulsion, the base materials and the chaos, short moments flash up, almost as if by chance: a clear female voice (Stillwell's singing); a contradiction moulded into a fleeting, dramatic scene; an informal, everyday reflection; a highly structured collage; or the image of an exhausted woman lying, a piece from Stillwell's series of drawings called *Baroque Studies*, those of which I studied carefully, again and again, as I was writing this text.

-Can Togay, 2016

(Read aloud in occasion of the exhibition opening, "Dismantled Acts," Ferenczy Museum Szentendre, Budapest, February 18, 2016).