

# the kitchen

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MARK SAVITT

Electric Affinities  
Ann Wilson  
The Kitchen

In Goethe's novel of 1808, *Electric Affinities*, the characters entertain one another by presenting a series of tableaux vivants enacting mythological and classical themes. Placement, gesture, glance, serve narrative purpose as well as indicate levels of interrelationship. The novel is important as well for its sensitive use of landscape and architectural motifs to reveal individual emotional force. Ann Wilson's pun on the title of the German novel when used as the title for her recent work, reveals both her acknowledgement of the romantic classic (and its relevance for an understanding of the emotional reverberation of a reverie on 19th century figures and themes dealt with in the piece) as well as her (our) distance from Goethe.

Unlike the spectacles in the novel in which each piece is isolated, Wilson's work is about the simultaneity of the age of electronics. Scarlet O'Hara (Robyn Brentano), Rhet Butler (Jim Neu) and Melanie (Kit Cation) engage in a somnambulistic discussion in one room, while Delacroix (Rick Britzenoff) paints, diligently from the model in the next space. George Sand (Ann Wilson) and Chopin (Chris Miller) sit in loveseats on one side of the audience, while directly across from them a young dynamic Goethe (Robert Levithan) and an older, more contemplative Baudelaire (George Ashley) are found in a similar arrangement.

The program notes indicate that the work was very much a collaborative effort, with Jim Neu responsible for the *Gone With the Wind* sequence, George Ashley and Holland Cotter responsible for the literary gentlemen, Chris Miller and Bob Mory for the Chopin material, Bill Tudor for the sound

design of each character, and Andy de Groat for lighting and painterly framing. The very special contribution of Carolyn Valschmidt, whose rendition of Mimi's aria from *La Boheme* romanticizing the joys and sorrows of the sensitive individual, sets the mood for the piece.

Ann Wilson maintains the dreamlike imagery with slow pace and simple gestures from her work with Robert Wilson (*Ka Mountain... Ouverture*) but adds a taste for discourse. The characters quote

liberally from their own writings as well as from sources removed from their context (Simone Weil is quoted—or at least mentioned—by George Sand). This textual grounding prevents the spaced out viewing one gets into with a Wilson (Robert) piece and instead directly engages the audience with ideas. Although, like in Godard's *Weekend* which employs similar strategies (including a sort of euphemistic pessimism—compare Godard's "Fin du Cinema" with

Ann Wilson's stressing the 20th C's "Fin du Fin" vs. the 19th C's "Fin du Siecle"), the views on art and thought are clearly expressed in expository prose, we are bombarded by so many views we cannot rationally analyze and sort out. Indeed for Wilson this is indicative of the eclecticism of the 19th C (and for Godard of the confusion of the 20th C). Still we emerge in a delighted stupor, not distanced with Brechtian evaluation of the battle of ideas, but rather subjected (again a connection with Robert Wilson) to an immersion in an aestheticized milieu. Undoubtedly we will mull over ideas and images for days to come.

The simultaneity of the fragments enables us to feel present with the figures from our mental museum, yet their movement around us and the stylized artificiality of their gesture shields them from us, emphasizing the void between the centuries.

Ann Wilson creates an environmental painting using gesture, words, ideas, and movement as

brushstrokes, playing the painted windows and perspectival spaces of her backdrops against the real windows of the Kitchen. The painting metaphor is embodied in "Delacroix"'s painting continuously throughout both performances (the work a charming impressionist interior had little to do with Delacroix's romantic art).

One might have had minor qualms with the piece. I found the dance of the Madonna's a bit weak in its too prettified choreography and was hoping that Isadora's dancing would have more of the sense of weight and freedom one associates with her work. Yet even these misgivings are consistent with the elegant mode of appearance of the piece. Perhaps even though I was moved by the work—and impressed, with its modernist self-consciousness, I'm not at all sure how I feel about a return to the genteel salons of previous centuries and to a mystical conception of the quasi-divine romantic artist-individual.

Electric Affinities



Martha Armstrong as the Quatracento Virgin in Fra Filippo Lippi grid up for electric affinities