

Understanding what Ecclesia/Synagoga Is.

By Stella Bahin.

A friend told me that she'd been interested in seeing the ECCLESIA/SYNAGOGA durational live performances and ANIMA/ANIMUS video installation at Portsmouth C of E Cathedral, as advertised, but, unable to work out 'what it was', had let it pass her by instead. On throughout April 2015 exclusively, the events had now finished. Unlike my friend, I had attended, several times, including at Buckland United Reform Church where it had shown earlier the same month. I'd also attended the original ANIMA/ANIMUS Installation at Winchester Cathedral's 10 Day Festival in 2013; had spoken to its creators, the pair of artists and producers collectively know as WE (after Kye and Helena's surnames as in Wilson-Eflerová respectively), about their work; and had read some relevant essays and reviews. So, I was able to talk to my friend about 'what it was', at least from my observation and understanding.

Though its essence both invites and eludes definition in complex ways, it's a simple matter to describe the presenting artistic situation of WE's April 2015 events. Their events featured embodied representations of the pair of figures from religious art, Ecclesia and Synagoga. In medieval times, the main portals to the church were often flanked by a sculpture either side of a youthful, beautiful, woman, one known as Ecclesia, the other, Synagoga. Ecclesia personified the Christian church AD: 'Church'; and Synagoga personified the Jewish church BC: 'Synagogue'. Whilst the Ecclesia statue, typically crowned and upright, would look confidently and regally out into the future; the Synagoga statue would usually have a submissive stance and be blindfolded or have downcast eyes. Whilst Ecclesia would securely hold a cross-mounted staff and a chalice; Synagoga would often limply bear a broken lance and be almost dropping the Jewish sacred scriptures.

Like mythical Pandoras, brought to life from the 'clay' of their traditional sculptures, Ecclesia and Synagoga have been brought to life by Eflerová dressed in carefully selected and minimal costumes: Ecclesia in white with a touch of muted gold; Synagoga in white and earthy brown. Eflerová's sole 'prop' is Synagoga's blindfold, either in her hands, or firmly binding her eyes shut. Blinded. Initially inspired by the medieval statue believed to be of Ecclesia which was discovered in the grounds of Winchester Cathedral, Eflerová has perfected her characterisations of Ecclesia and Synagoga over the past few years, employing a technique with distinctive slowed-down movement she's developed over many years more.

Like a pair of Pygmalions, Eflerová immersed responsively in her sculptural depictions, and Wilson using a digital camera and directorial and editorial techniques; WE created a silent film of these brought-to-life statues to be played in a loop leading from one character to the next in turn. This is the ANIMA/ANIMUS element of their work; their installation. It takes the form of a freestanding, recessed, Roman arch, inspired by the arched windows of its conceptual birthplace, Winchester Cathedral, onto which the film ANIMA/ANIMUS with Synagoga and Ecclesia is projected life-size. Both of these filmed characters meet the audience's eye, one after the other, like the depicted form in Ingres' La Grande Odalisque meets the eye, yet there is no distortion of bodily proportions here, no physical nudity, and no sexualisation.

It's a full-length mirror-like depiction in scale; with a mirror-like, eyeball-to-eyeball gaze. Perhaps, it seems to me, in the way that the portrait would have met the eye of the eponymous Dorian, in Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray. Partially alive. Disturbingly animated. Speaking, mutely to him, about matters of morality. Conscious and unconscious. The evident and the hidden. In WE's ANIMA/ANIMUS double portrait, however, the image is always beautiful, as were the original depictions, ever beautiful. It's the intense bare emotions of Synagoga's endurance in bewildered pain,

and Ecclesia's peace in overflowing joy that challenge. The acceptance of the characters in and of their emotionally naked roles challenges the viewer, within the characters' quasi-reflective gaze, to accept.

Not only does the film deliberately engage the viewer in a mirror-like way, but there's also a mirror-like narrative within its loop. That the two characters are one person, in Eflerová, emphasises that they are a juxtaposed, reflected, image of each other. Although the pair will remain inextricable - also as in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* - one image is destined to overcome; the other to be overcome. That is, in both stories, the 'mirror' will 'break', narratorially; as the viewer must break from his or her engagement with ANIMA/ANIMUS.

In Will Self's retelling of Wilde's story, the portrait is modernised to become an installation called *Cathode Narcissus*; a filmic portrait created and stored on low-permanence video cassettes. That WE chooses to represent former statuary as a projected silent digital film, one figure at a time, is a meditation in itself. It is modern, but not what we're used to seeing on film either in pace, content, or style. WE's choice of representative medium reflects the era, yet also seems to reflect upon the modern use of media with a big, personal, HUSH, SLOW DOWN.

That WE has taken Ecclesia and Synagoga as a pair of peripheral objects to pass by on entering the church and made them a central part of a physically impassable, framed, 'light-portrait', containing arresting gentle motion, inside the church, is likely to cause the viewer to stop in front of them. To still the viewer. Also, along with the peaceful rate of the intensely concentrated movements, the viewer is invited to enter emotionally. WE has therefore made, with ANIMA/ANIMUS, an empathy portal. But beyond all this, the second way in which WE represent Ecclesia and Synagoga is in Eflerová's live performances, in character. These live performances are hosted and curated by WE. When Eflerová performs blindfolded, as Synagoga - as she does - Wilson will, when necessary, be her subtle guide. Wilson's role was to steer Eflerová away from dangerous situations, time keeping, welcoming attendees and participants. Wilson often observed the Ecclesia and Synagoga characters through a camera lens documenting performances for engagement with online audiences as well as directing the photographer. These performances, within both what was, for me, the previously unknown setting of Buckland URC, and the familiar setting of Portsmouth Cathedral, were extraordinary.

The very element of uncertainty as to 'what this was' that had held back my friend, drew me back time and again. It wasn't that I had, or needed, any one answer. I liked the question as an interactive experience, which, drawn into the present, my emotions could answer for me. There and then. Or, I could interrogate 'what it was' with my own written word. Or photography. Or sketchpad. Whilst I also attended as a traditionally receptive spectator, or, 'gazer', as any audience member might; written into WE's work is an invitation for audience interpretation, invention and participatory response which I found exciting and irresistible. As did others. At one visit, I found a filmmaker filming, a dancer dancing, an artist painting, and a musician rapturously humming. A profound highlight for me at an earlier visit, was in holding Eflerová-as-Ecclesia's gaze and accepting her offered cupped-hands-as-chalice in my own hands, when we both, spontaneously, shed tears. As if to fill that conceptual cup. My friend's going to get along to WE next time.