

SPECIAL SECTION ART SCHOOLS SMART GUIDE • JOHN DICKSON: AN ÉPIPHAN

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How We Make History

EXCLUSIVE

Ross King
The Group
of Seven
in Wartime



FERNAND LEDUC: AUTOMATISTE LEGEND **GENERAL IDEA AND MYTHMAKING**
THE MASKS OF ARTHUR RENWICK **IRIS HÄUSSLER'S FICTIONAL WORLDS**

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DISPLAY TO MAR. 15



A woman with dark hair, wearing a dark sweater, is looking through a rectangular opening in a wall. She is holding a power cord that runs down the wall. The wall is textured and appears to be made of plaster or concrete. The lighting is dramatic, with the woman's face and the opening illuminated against a dark background.

Brilliant Disguise

IRIS HÄUSSLER'S
fact-meets-fiction odysseys

BY GILLIAN MacKAY

LEFT: Iris Häussler on-site at The Grange, Art Gallery of Ontario, June 2009 PHOTOS IAKUB HENSCHEN

RIGHT: Excavation view of a formerly concealed workspace in The Grange from *He Named Her Amber* 2008–10



This staged operation was a complete waste of our time at the AGO; we could have spent a lot longer viewing worthwhile artefacts and not something that was a complete fabrication. We feel we have been duped. Shame on the AGO.

—Margaret Deery to Iris Häussler

I have not had such a wonderful thing happen to me in a long time. I kept revisiting the experience. Just thinking about it fills me with a grand feeling of awe again...It is emotional splendor.

—Lynne Kenneith Brodgen to Cecilia Aldarondo

So far, more than ten thousand visitors have toured the archaeological excavation *He Named Her Amber* at The Grange, the 19th-century house attached to the Art Gallery of Ontario. I took the tour in a small group guided by Jennifer Rieger, the sensible, serious and authoritative historic site coordinator of The Grange. We were told that a diary belonging to Henry Whyte, butler at The Grange from 1817 to 1857, had recently come to light. In it, he recorded that an Irish maid named Mary had secretly made and buried a number of bizarre objects throughout the house. Unbeknownst

Who was Mary? Henry Whyte noted only that a 17-year-old “spinster” from Kilkenny began working as a scullery maid at The Grange in 1828. He gave her the code name “Amber”

to Mary, the butler was watching from the shadows and taking notes.

Alerted by Xs found on Henry's floor plans of the house, the AGO had hired Archaeological Services Ontario (ASO) to investigate—or so we were told. In the front hall, a portion of the wall had been ripped down to the lath to expose a hiding place. There, researchers had found a blob of clay and beeswax the size of a baby's clenched fist containing dried blood; it now sat labelled in a display case.

Nearby, the Victorian-era library had been turned into a CSI-style laboratory equipped with coldly lit examination tables, a stereo microscope and scientific clutter. A packet of century-and-a-half-old letters dipped in wax had been placed beneath the lens of the microscope. Twelve X-ray images revealed materials suggestive of folk magic or witchcraft—animal bones, baby teeth, nail clippings, human hair, dried flowers, a small porcelain doll, shards of china—encased in the lumpy pieces of clay and wax mounted in cases nearby.

Who was Mary? Henry Whyte noted only that a 17-year-old “spinster” from Kilkenny, Ireland, began working at The Grange in 1828. He gave her the code name “Amber.” Our guide pointed out that thousands of poor Irish immigrants came to North America in this period, often sending their meagre earnings home to support their families. It was possible that members of Mary's family were among the million who died mid-century in the Great Famine. Perhaps her obsessive behaviour was a way of dealing with her isolation and loss.

A descent to the darkened Grange basement revealed an archaeological dig going full throttle: we saw bright yellow tape, danger warnings and three large containers full of soil and rubble. The excavation of the pantry floor had yielded the biggest sculpture of all—a cone of wax the length of a woman's arm. Jennifer suggested that Mary must have dug into the earth with her bare hands, that she might have worked naked because she could not have afforded to dirty her dress. The tour guide then invited us into the bunker-like office of ASO's on-site archaeologist, Dr. Chantal Lee, which was filled with books, charts, coffee cups and clutter, a cot and a rumpled sleeping bag.

In hindsight, of course, it was implausible that an archaeologist would be sleeping in The Grange. Even more illogical was that a servant could have single-handedly plastered and walled off a secret workshop in the basement, to be discovered 150 years later by ASO (an organization whose logo included the figure of Nanabozho, the Anishinabe trickster god). But we had left logic behind long ago.

Like our group, the majority of those who toured *He Named Her Amber* were unaware that it was, in fact, a work of installation art. Remarkably, the illusion held up—despite a press conference revealing the truth, despite letters of disclosure handed to visitors and despite the fact that the same artist had pulled off a similar tour de force in 2006 in a small house in

downtown Toronto with the installation *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach*.

Reflecting back, all of us marvelled at the audacity of the ruse, at the brilliance of its execution and, most of all, at our eagerness to believe. Had the combined forces of validation—which included the tour guide, the team of scientists and the AGO itself—disabled our critical faculties? Or was it the irresistible idea of an untutored 19th-century maid as protofeminist artist—embedding herself, literally and figuratively, in the structure of her master's house? Do all adults long to be children again and to fall for a good tall tale?

Yes, and no. Other visitors—much like Dorothy when she first finds out that the Wizard of Oz is just a man behind a curtain—were annoyed, even outraged, by the deception. Having put their faith in the AGO, they felt betrayed. They had expected art and artifacts that measured up to a recognized standard of worth. Instead, they received an object lesson in the slippery nature of worth itself.

A few months later, I returned to The Grange to meet the artist, Iris Häussler, a petite, intense woman with piercing eyes that now and then flickered into mischief. Over coffee, she praised the AGO for daring to support a project that not only questions institutional authority (a familiar enough strategy) but risks alienating the public in the process. “What is the ethical and educational responsibility of the museum?” she mused in her soft German accent. “I confess I do not know a 100 per cent solution. I like that. It is life.”

The project began in 2007, when David Moos, Curator of Contemporary Art at the AGO, invited Häussler to be one of a select group of artists (which also included Shary Boyle, Willie Cole, Kent Monkman, Frank Stella and Kara Walker) commissioned to create new works for the museum's reopening in November, 2008, following its Frank Gehry-designed expansion. Along with the rest of the Toronto art world, he had been bowled over by *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* and the way in which it had, in his view, “expanded the experience and the definition of art.”

Häussler came up with the idea of a tour devoted to the life of a deranged scullery maid, an inspired inversion of the standard “upstairs-downstairs” tour that was offered at The Grange for many years. That outmoded romance showcased the masters, the affluent, socially prominent Boulton family, while the servants, implausibly cheerful women in period dress who baked bread and cookies in the basement, were relegated to a folkloric background. It was time to turn the tables.

Häussler spent a year creating a script, a backstory, artifacts and a *mise en scène* as elaborate and sophisticated as that required for a film or major dramatic production. A conceptual artist who believes in the transformative potential of “direct experience,” she argued that the installation would be most powerful if not labelled as art. As she wrote in the letter of disclosure handed to visitors as they left the tour: “There is a very large difference between thinking about emotions and actually experiencing them.”

The point was never simply to trick people, but to create a rich, layered experience that culminated in recontextualizing the tour as an artwork. Said Moos: “It is an imposing work. It asks for 40 minutes of your time; you engage with a guide in a participatory manner. But it repays in an incredibly imaginative way, resonating with the viewer through time.” Matthew Teitelbaum, director of the AGO, praised Häussler for bringing The Grange back to life. “The idea that in a rela-

View of the Goldwin Smith Library at The Grange with objects and displays from *He Named Her Amber* 2008–10



tively static space you could have such a startling experience, not in the sense of showbiz or entertainment, but in the sense of truly unlocking a feeling, was deeply appealing to us."

By making Mary/Amber "real," Häussler sought to heighten empathy for a character who stands, in a sense, for all poor immigrants who sacrifice themselves for the sake of their families, a phenomenon as pervasive today as it was in the 19th century. By making Amber mysterious, she encouraged visitors to fill in the missing pieces, to participate in a historical reconstruction. "It's about enabling imagination," she says. "You give up intellectual control for a moment, and let yourself go."

That desire to take refuge in an imaginative space is the artist's own. "I am not a light person," she said. "I am best when I am camouflaged from myself." The day we met, she had left fresh Korean newspapers in the office of Dr. Lee. She had asked two dozen friends, posing as students, friends, scientific colleagues, even a beekeeper, to leave scripted messages on Dr. Lee's answering machine. It would then be rigged to go off during the tours. "I get carried away," she says. "Sometimes I have to stop and tell myself, 'No, Iris. That is enough.'"

Iris Häussler was born in a country town in Germany in 1962. As in many postwar German households (her father had served in the army as a veterinarian), her parents never spoke about the war. "History did not exist where I grew up, only silence," she said. "The people around me were deeply traumatized by memory, loss and guilt, but there was no language for that." It was left to grade-school teachers to deliver the facts and a high-school trip to a concentration camp to drive history home.

At the age of 21, she enrolled in the Akademie der Bildenden Künste München to study sculpture. Students there were given free rein, but her professor wanted them to be "alert to German history" and "to question all authority that goes against humanity." Her self-guided program ran the gamut from classical figure modelling to process-art experiments such as throwing a plugged-in electric toaster into an aquarium filled with hot wax. Along with every other postwar German artist, she absorbed the towering legacy of Joseph Beuys (1921–86) and his influential theory of a wound in the German psyche that could, in part, be healed through art and ritual, often through the deployment of elemental materials such as wax, felt and lead.

In the 1990s, she built a reputation in Europe as the creator of hyper-realistic living environments fashioned around reclusive fictive characters. Each had an illogical obsession: wrapping canned food with lead in preparation for a nuclear disaster (*Ou topos—a Synthetic Memory*, installed in Vienna in 1989); sticking newspaper photographs of criminals and their victims on thousands of numbered household candles and recording the crimes in notebooks (*Ou topos—a Synthetic Memory*, installed in Munich in 1990); taking plaster casts of the feet and hands of schoolchildren (*Monopati*, displayed simultaneously in Munich and Berlin in 2000).

In Europe, her *modus operandi* was to create installations in rented apartments or hotel rooms, then make them accessible to the public by leaving a key with her dealer or elsewhere. Trust was implicit in this arrangement as there was no on-site security. Occasionally that trust was violated—one visitor used the shower, a couple had sex in one of the beds—yet the privacy facilitated a deeper identification with the fictional inhabitants (who were, of course, never at home). Although the gallery

Deception/Disclosure

Revealing the fiction, Iris Häussler claims, is as important a part of the experience as concealing it. But it has proved trickier than expected to get the truth out about *He Named Her Amber*.

The system she had devised for *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* was to ask visitors to sign an insurance waiver as a pretext for obtaining contact information. The next day, Häussler would call or email visitors with the truth about the installation. In September, 2006, a month into the project, she made a formal disclosure at a public panel discussion at the Goethe-Institut (unfortunately rendered somewhat redundant by the *National Post's* publication a few days earlier of a hostile front-page story entitled "Reclusive downtown artist a hoax").

With the AGO project, the practical challenges around deception and disclosure were far greater. In the hoopla surrounding the AGO's November, 2008, reopening, Häussler's name was absent from the list of celebrated artists who had been commissioned to make works. She was not in the artists' group photograph, and she was not at the splashy artists' party. Instead, she sent the Korean friend who had posed in photographs as her fictional archaeologist, Dr. Chantal Lee.

The AGO deliberately held back before going public with the truth. At first, visitors were given Dr. Lee's card and urged to get in touch with her. There were hundreds of emails, speculating on everything from Celtic folklore to Amber's possible liaison with a beekeeper. Häussler would reply, explaining that the project was a fiction. Those who did not email Dr. Lee, however, could not be told.

In February, 2009, the AGO held a press conference, and from then on, visitors received a sensitive, if elliptical, letter of disclosure. Some found the process too impersonal, as if they had been seduced and abandoned. Others missed the media coverage, or never opened the letters at all ("I don't blame them," said Häussler). As a result of this slippage, the secret held up surprisingly well—especially among people from out of town and outside the art world.

Among those visitors who wrote to Häussler, reactions were split between pro and con. She responded to them all, by either email or phone. After a conversation with her, she claims, most people came around. "First, they want to have their feelings acknowledged and to be reassured that no one wanted to fool them," she said. "Then we talk about recontextualizing the experience as art. People who bother to write are generally open-minded."

Inevitably, however, some visitors have remained in the dark. Somewhere out there, people still believe in Amber, no doubt happily so. GM

identified Iris Häussler as the maker of the work, visitors sometimes ended up believing the fiction—or some part of it—in spite of themselves.

Häussler's immersive narrative installations, which Mark Kingwell has described as "haptic conceptual" ("haptic" from the Greek word for touch), bear affinities with a growing body of artworks that freely mix genres and invite the viewer into a voyage of discovery. Among those she cites are Gregor Schneider's ongoing reconstruction of his childhood home (*Totes Haus u r*), Christoph Büchel's nightmarish, labyrinthine installations and Janet Cardiff's lyrical headset tours. The fact that Häussler's works usually revolve around a central character brings them even closer to theatre or literature.

In 2001, she moved to Toronto with her husband, a scientist, and their two sons. With the move, she lost country, community and professional identity. Throughout this difficult period, a character who had haunted her for some time was taking shape in her mind: an isolated, elderly German immigrant who is obsessed with making sculpture.

With the support of Rhonda Corvese, a curator who had known her work in Europe, Häussler embarked on the colossal undertaking of bringing to life the man she named Joseph Wagenbach. The earliest Wagenbach sculptures are sensitively modelled female heads and nude figures in clay. Over time, they morph into rabbits, and by the end are just crude masses of concrete, plaster and wax. In the end, 120 pieces—what she called a "pandemonium of sculpture"—thronged the tiny downtown bungalow she rented for the project, some hanging from the ceiling like carcasses. Clues about the origin of Joseph's trauma were scattered throughout the dirty, chaotic, claustrophobic space and included a hidden room kept as a shrine to a model and lover and a map showing his birthplace, near the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen.

Häussler made the sculpture for *Wagenbach* and *Amber* through a demanding process that involves a kind of channelling of her characters. She says the strategy releases her from the "burden of influence"—the inhibition engendered by too much art history: "It's like taking off a corset. These characters give me permission. You allow yourself to play, then things come up." Then she added: "Play is what our society is missing so much—it is almost healing."

The *Wagenbach* project was well underway when she learned that Ontario insurance law would not allow strangers to wander through a rented house unaccompanied, as they had done in Europe. She or a designate would have to be present, a situation she had always avoided. It was at this point that she realized she could take this strategy she calls "disappearing the artist" all the way.

In the "real" house of a recluse named Joseph Wagenbach, a man who had suffered a stroke, she would play the part of an archivist in white lab coat and gloves, on-site to assess the "cultural value" of work that was, ironically, her own. Many artists—one thinks of Sophie Calle and Vera Frenkel—have built narrative art around fictive personalities. But as far as she knew, no one had gone to such lengths to camouflage a major work as a found discovery.

People still speak of the installation with a kind of awe. Four filmmakers wished to make it the subject of a documentary or a feature drama. Neighbours left flowers outside the house for Joseph, who was meant to be in a nursing home. Matthew Teitelbaum, who knew in advance that it was an artwork, visited twice. "I liked seeing it as a work of art," he said. "I'm not

saying I wouldn't have enjoyed it as a found experience, but the fact that it was so fully thought through was part of my engagement."

So was the ruse really necessary? Martha Baillie, a fiction writer who published a perceptive account of her experience of the *Joseph Wagenbach* project in *Brick* magazine, still debates that question. An early, impassioned visitor to the house, she felt annoyance, then a sense of loss, when she discovered the truth the following day. "Trust was broken and that, to me, is a serious act," she says. Yet Baillie also realized that the experience of betrayal provided a forceful illustration of our vexed relationship to authority: "Iris asks us to look where we place our trust, and how often we see what we want to see. And that, of course, connects to German history."

Playing games of trust and challenging the authority of the museum is *de rigueur* in the art world. But the general public, whose members expect museums to establish rather than question value, could be forgiven for missing the point. "It shatters what they want to believe," said Jessica Bradley, a Toronto gallerist and former AGO curator. Yet she admires the AGO for taking the risk. As she said, "It takes courage and commitment on their part to acknowledge that they are not sacred or untouchable."

For most art lovers, however, to enter Iris Häussler's world is to embark on an exhilarating voyage with no clear end in sight. Part of the fascination of the *Joseph Wagenbach* project, as Kingwell observed in a panel discussion at the Goethe-Institut in 2006, lies in trying to locate the essence of the artwork. Is it the building, the sculptures, the narrative, the deception or the revelation? In the end, he concludes that "the work in fact is ever expanding, like ripples in a pool of water in which a pebble has been dropped."

Last winter, Häussler took a respite from heavy-duty cultural arguments to create a more upbeat interactive installation at Honest Ed's, the storied discount department store that has long been a mecca for new immigrants and is also Häussler's favourite store in Toronto. For *Honest Threads*, which was curated by Mona Filip for the Kofler Gallery, she asked people to loan her garments with a story attached to them. Those treasured garments could in turn be loaned to and worn by visitors—another kind of exercise in trust and empathy. Among the included items were Ed Mirvish's shoes, Mashel Teitelbaum's jacket, Jamie Kennedy's chef's jacket and a Second World War pilot's jacket.

Framed photos of the donors and their often poignant stories were displayed on the wall. "I was amazed by the courage of the participants,





View of the bedroom from *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* 2006

by how open they were. That seems to me very Canadian. I find that people here introduce themselves by telling their stories," says Häussler. Though she still misses Germany, Häussler now feels she belongs in Canada: "I am lighter here. History is not pulling so much in my limbs."

The artist is currently developing four projects—two of them international—based on new characters, and is more than ready to pull off another deception "if the concept demands it." Even so, she doubts that she could fool Toronto again. "I know I will live all my life being called a trickster, but that's okay. There is no easy way out." ■

View additional images of Iris Häussler's projects at canadianart.ca/haussler