

*This week's postcard comes from renowned artist Doug Hall, creator of "Wittgenstein's Garden," a new sound-based installation in collaboration with the San Francisco Girls Chorus, located at The Oliver Ranch in Geyserville, CA.*

In 2016, 40 members of the San Francisco Girls Chorus had the special opportunity to participate in a new sound-based outdoor installation by renowned artist Doug Hall, commissioned by The Oliver Ranch Foundation. The work, titled *Wittgenstein's Garden* and now fully completed, is integrated visually and acoustically into the rugged landscape to provide a temporary resting place where visitors can experience the surrounding beauty while navigating the spoken word score heard coming from 16 speakers situated around the site.

This fall, a group of the girls who participated in the process got to tour the installation with Doug Hall. Afterwards, Premier Ensemble member, Ruby Recht-Appel, sat down with Hall to speak with him about creating the work and working with SFGC.



*Photo by Marion Brenner*

### What gave you the idea to create Wittgenstein's Garden?

I was invited by Steven Oliver to submit a proposal for a permanent installation on his ranch (Oliver Ranch) in Geyserville. I presented him with a couple of ideas, one of which was a sound installation based on the text by the philosopher of language, Ludwig Wittgenstein. We agreed that of the two this would be the most challenging technically and conceptually, and for those reasons the most interesting to attempt. The Wittgenstein text has the portentous title, *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*. It consists of a series of short, enigmatic statements, the meanings of which continue to be debated. Most philosophers would agree that it attempts to define the logical limitations of what language is capable of saying. My, perhaps unorthodox, interpretation is that it is a poignant lament to language's inadequacy: its inability to express those feelings and emotions that transcend language's expressive limitations. Therefore, rather than consider the *Tractatus* as a discourse on the logic of language I approached it as a poetic text that could, ironically, through Wittgenstein's words, access the ineffable that I was seeking.

### Why did you want to collaborate with the San Francisco Girls Chorus?

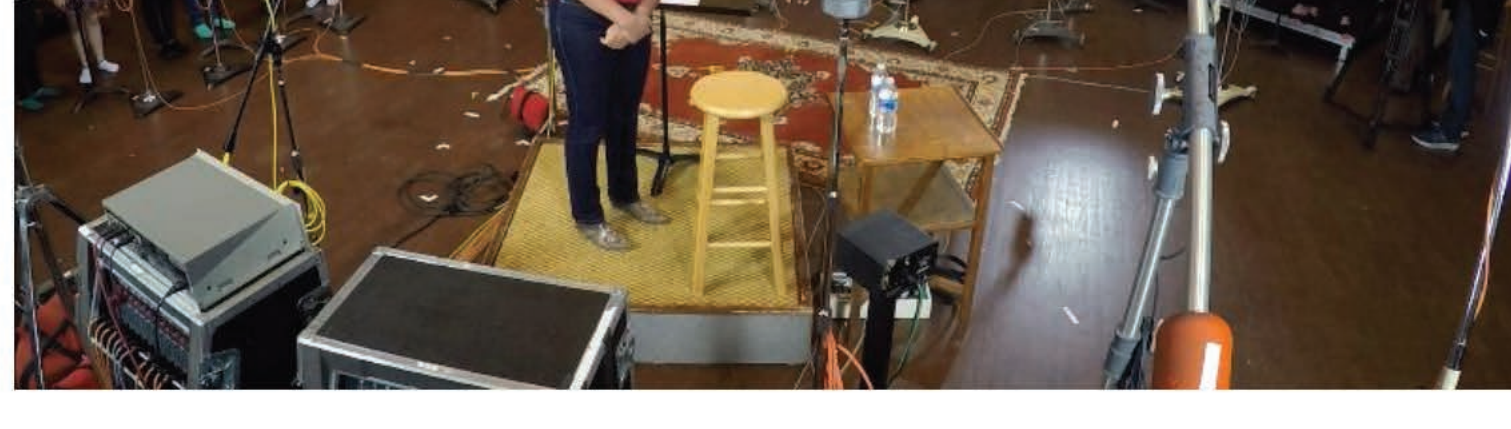
Once I was given the go-ahead by Oliver and his board, I had to move beyond the theoretical into the actual. From the start I knew that hearing adult male voices reciting the text would be pretentious and completely counter to what I was after. I knew that it would only work if I could find children to work with. Preferably a chorus of young children whose voices could extract the emotion that I believed was buried in sections of the text. I had heard about the innovative programming that was being done by Lisa Bielawa and Valérie Sainte-Agathe at the Girls Chorus and I thought young, trained female voices would be perfect. I initially approached Lisa who, after I made a fairly short and garbled presentation, enthusiastically supported the project, and, after bringing Valérie on board and with the full support of the Executive Director, we were off and running together into the mysterious and delicious unknown. I would add, looking back, that it was one of the most exciting and enjoyable collaborations I've ever had as an artist.



*Early Rehearsal with artist Doug Hall and SFGC Artistic Director, Valérie Sainte-Agathe*

### What people inspired you to make this project?

Of course I was inspired by Wittgenstein's text and also more generally by my interests in literature, philosophy, and music, although I'm not a musician. I am a visual artist who works with media, sound and video, and their temporal aspects have much in common with musical composition. I was also inspired by Lisa who worked with me to translate my score, written graphically, into a notated score that Valérie could teach the girls. I was further inspired by Valérie, who worked with a chorus of 40 girls, patiently, lovingly, and rigorously to prepare them for the recording session we would do at Skywalker Ranch. And lastly I was blown away by the girls themselves: their enthusiasm in the face of an unusual and difficult project and their endurance during an eight hour recording session.



*Recording Session at Skywalker Ranch*

### What was the beginning of the process like?

Exciting. Challenging. At times a little bit terrifying.

### What were doubts you had throughout the process?

Doubts are at the very center of any creative endeavor worth doing and there were more than a few with this project. My role became one that I am familiar with: more like that of a movie director who organizes artists, technicians, and craftspeople to fulfill diverse jobs in the realization of a shared aesthetic goal. And I had great people to work with in addition to Valérie, Lisa, and the girls, incredible artists and technicians like Starr Sutherland, project coordinator; Jim McKee and Jeremiah Moore, sound designers; Chris Paddock, programmer and problem solver; Andrea Cochran, landscape architect; and, importantly, Steve Oliver, an adventurous and fearless client who gave us the support we needed to first imagine and then complete the project.



*The listening stations being installed onsite at Oliver Ranch*

### Do you plan on doing more projects similar to this one in the future?

I have no immediate plans to do a project on this scale but am currently working on several projects, one of which is a three-channel video (three separate videos that are synched and simultaneously projected at large scale) filmed over the course of a year at Ocean Beach in San Francisco. It will premiere at the ICA, San Jose in 2021.

### What are you most proud of?

I am proud of the work we accomplished at the Oliver Ranch. But quite honestly (and forgive the sentimentality) I think I'm most proud of the relationship I have with my family and close friends.



*The SFGC choristers and Doug Hall touring the final installation this fall.*

### What effect do you think this project will have on people?

Of course I really have no way of knowing. I would be pleased if it could elicit in others, thoughts and feelings similar to those that motivated me to do the project in the first place. But beyond that I'm happy to allow whatever responses might arise, from boredom to elation and everything in between. I make things and put my ideas out there but I understand I can never control how people might react to them, which is fine with me.



*Completed listening area. Photo by Marion Brenner.*



Click the play button above to take a tour of the installation.