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Dena DeCola and Karin E. Wandner

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BY DAVID BALZER January 28, 2009 21:01

EDITORIAL RATING:

Part of "Where the Wild Things Are." Opens Jan 31 (screening 6pm & 7:30pm; curator's talk 7pm). To Feb 19. Tue-Fri 11am-5pm. Vtape, 401 Richmond W. ste. 452. 416-351-1317. www.vtape.org.

Vtape's new programme, curated by Erik Martinson and entitled "Where the Wild Things Are," concerns family relationships, and contains a mesmerizing video by LA-based (and Miranda July-endorsed) artists Dena DeCola and Karin E. Wandner, in which the two engage in an initially strange, subtly funny and ultimately poignant role-playing game based on DeCola's girlhood. If this intrigues you, read no further and go see it (it's on request at Vtape until Feb. 19), for its success depends on a concatenation of events even its creators don't seem to have fully anticipated.

The work, from 2005, is entitled five more minutes (though, importantly, it stretches to almost 20) and begins with Wandner and DeCola at a dinner table. Wandner is in a platinum-blond wig and speaks in a thick Italian accent; DeCola is calling her "mommy" and speaks like a child. The game is perplexing: that Wandner is addressing DeCola by her first name suggests she is intended as her real mother and that this is not a detached sketch; that DeCola breaks down a few minutes into the scenario suggests this is indeed much more than a game, that even its camp aspects are meant as earnest routes to reverie — which is, essentially, the camp of the mind. Is DeCola doing this, then, as a way to cope with the recent death or departure of her mother, in short to relive a last goodbye? That simple question has profound ramifications for Wandner, for if five more minutes is improvised, and DeCola is on emotional tenterhooks, she is in danger of becoming a sadist. Yet as the two go into the bathroom, and DeCola asks Wandner to draw soap birds on her back, we see the immense empathy of the project: Wandner, in character, at first objects to replicating this childhood ritual (again, is this a test, or resistance from a friend who feels things have gone too far?) but DeCola, breaking out of her child's voice, urges her on, and Wandner obliges. What follows is a completely genuine, and not at all perverse, moment in which the lines between friendship, motherhood and theatre become fantastically indistinct. Among other things, it is one of the most compelling arguments I've witnessed for art as therapy. Echoing Cassavettes, five more minutes seems foremost about the symbolism of life, created and carried by memory — a tough load to be sure, but one worth bearing and even, occasionally, setting down.

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