In Conversation with Lawrence Weschler

by Denise Markonish and Sean Foley

Denise Markonish: Wonder is personal, it's also ineffable, and exists in a place where language stops, which makes even trying to define it really absurd. To do an exhibition about it is just as crazy and something that Sean and I have struggled with; how do you pin down this amorphous and slippery thing—or do you even try to? Sean and I have always defined wonder as the moment when you stop and enter a liminal space between knowing and not knowing, what you call the "pillow of air." Can you explain your concept?

Lawrence Weschler: The pillow of air basically connotes that moment when, facing the object of marvel, you suddenly notice that a pillow of air has become lodged in your mouth and that you haven't even breathed in ten seconds, and you have to remind yourself to take a breath.

Sean Foley: You find yourself possessed.

DM: It also relates to the fact that wonder is such a felt thing that language inevitably fails it. Yet, as a writer, your job, of course, is to put language to things.

LW: Yeah, but I think you have to earn your silence. People say, "Oh you can't talk about the Holocaust," or "You can't talk about this other thing, whatever it is"—but that's just not true. Rather, you have to come up to the limits of language by way of language, and only then let go. One way to approach wonder, for example, is to do so historically, and tie it back to wonder cabinets.

Or, conversely, one could look toward the future: indeed, present-day wonder is so interesting because we're at a moment when machines are being taught to do more and more. Arthur C. Clarke, when faced with images from Michael Benson's book Beyond: Visions of the Interplanetary Probes, which were just astonishingly gorgeous images made by space probes, made the argument that these were the first instances of art created by an entirely new species, machino-sapiens. Clarke felt that, while it is true that mere matter on Earth could not self-create space probes—you needed something in between, which would still be human life—once the organic strata had run its course, you could then transfer everything onto machines.

DM: Essentially, you could get rid of the middleman.

LW: But beyond that, the purpose of the middleman on Earth, according to Clarke, was to create the very machines that would transcend himself. And, to hear Clarke tell it, Benson's collection of photographs illustrated the first instance of that. In an afterword I wrote to the same book, I disagreed, for it seemed to me, looking at those images, that the one thing a machine cannot, and, by definition, will never be able to do, is to experience wonder, to experience awe. In order to experience wonder or awe or the sublime, you, by definition, have to be contingent, puny, unnecessary; and what awe—what wonder—addresses is your finitude and … your smallness. That's part of what the experience of awe is about: how could a human being do this? This is unbelievable. Unbelievable is not a category a machine can relate to. All of which might also account for the current upsurge of interest in awe.

The other thing that's happening at the present moment—and this was in part what my book Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonders was about—is that we seem to be experiencing a throwback to a particular earlier moment historically, when there was a debauched taste for wonder. That was roughly after 1492, when all this stuff from the intersections with incredible other worlds started flooding into Europe. In his book Marvelous Possessions, Stephen Greenblatt posits that in order to go to all of these new places, there had to have been an incredible increase in the amount of positivist knowledge about stars and tides, about sailing techniques and engineering: all the surges in science, or what we now call science, and technology that preceded 1492. The increases in those sorts of knowledge had to have been incredible. But, as Greenblatt observes, once people actually got to those places, all manner of weird objects started showing up—moose antlers, purple parrot feathers, and sacrificial urns along with reports of tribal custom and human sacrifice. All of that in turn sanctioned belief in all sorts of earlier marvels: people started thinking, Wait a second, if moose antlers are possible, why aren't unicorn horns possible? Which in turn led to travelers finding sea unicorn horns—narwhal tusks—bringing them back home, and suddenly sanctioning all sorts of beliefs they thought they'd gotten past.

SF: It's like when kids test their own belief in Santa Claus and how that wavers over the years. They believe, they stop believing, and then they believe all the more fervently.

LW: Indeed, going from belief to non-belief is not a sudden thing. It's just that kids (or explorers) gather more and more knowledge about things that blow

their minds, which in turn has them reconsidering what they had previously dismissed as fraud. So, historically, what Greenblatt and others call the Age of the Marvelous, stretching from about 1492 to about 1650 or 1700, disappears slowly. But the reason it disappears is it just turns into shtick at a certain point. The more wonder cabinets that exist, the less rare they become, the more subject to self-evident fraudulence, and soon you even get Shakespeare calling the whole endeavor gullible, at best.

DM: It turns into an art fair.

LW: Yeah. But it also reifies, for when everybody has a piece of the cross you start getting very strong critiques of the whole practice: you get Descartes who says "Whoa, wait, let's sort this all out with some scientific rigor." Which in turn leads to the Age of Science, the pendulum swinging far the other way, with less and less patience for indeterminacy and marvel and drop-jawed pillow-of-air wonder. In that sense, one might talk about the way that the post-modern, if you want to call it that, has roots in the pre-modern; they are both critiquing the same countervailing scientistic tenor. It's like the old question, why are grandparents and grandchildren so happy with one another?

SF: Common enemies.

LW: Right, precisely. In the same way that scientism and positivism had a vogue from roughly 1700 to 1950; that, in turn, has a tidal feeling to it. The scientific-positivist hegemony had created some pretty scary things: atomic bombs, ecological devastation, etc. And suddenly you had a hankering for things that positivism wasn't addressing. I don't want to make too much of this because it seems to me that you find some of the most extraordinary senses of wonder at the edge of science.

SF: Can you talk more about the alignment of science and wonder that occurs at the edge?

LW: Scientific advancement itself—Einstein insisted—must always start in wonder. The late great entomologist Tom Eisner talked about the moment just after you'd made an observation and you let your mind roam free with hypotheses. That's the fun moment; sure, afterwards you needed to batten things down. But actually the whole process needs to start with drop-jawed astonishment and free-reeling reverie. In that sense, there are moments in doing science that are not only susceptible to, but actually require, ecstasies of wonder.

There's a great Carl Sagan quote I have up on the wall there. David Hockney originally took this quote and did a drawing of a sort of monolith onto which the passage was inscribed—an image that later suggested a sort of tombstone for Sagan after he died. The Sagan quote reads: "In some respects, science has far surpassed religion in delivering awe. How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, 'This is better than we thought! The Universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more subtle, more elegant. God must be even greater than we dreamed'? Instead they say, 'No, no, no! My god is a little god, and I want him to stay that way.' A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the Universe, as revealed by modern science, might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe [or, for our purposes, wonder] hardly tapped by conventional faiths. Sooner or later such a religion will emerge."[1] But that's a particular non-bureaucratic way of doing science.

DM: That is what made Sagan so unique; he had a vision for science being so much bigger than us, for it being based in fact and finding, but also in awe and emotion. It makes me think of his other quote about us all being made from "star stuff"; that realization is true wonder.

SF: It also reminds me of the idea of the natural philosophers and their Pre-Enlightenment methods of studying nature and the physical universe.

LW: Yeah, that's a way to put it. And that's in turn why Sagan was disdained by many people in his own professional tribe as a "mere showman."

DM: Well, it's emotive, too, and people don't often like to think of science being entangled with emotion; but it is clear that science, for Sagan and others, contains the multitude of wonder from experience and emotion to empirical fact.

LW: I just remembered that I sent the same Sagan drawing back to David [Hockney] when Stephen Jay Gould died and added one of Gould's quotes from The Structure of Evolutionary Theory on the back. It says: "Something almost unspeakably holy—I don't know how else to say this—underlies our discovery and confirmation of the actual details that made our world and also, in realms of contingency, assured the minutiae of its construction in the manner we know, and not in any one of a trillion other ways, nearly all of which would not have included the evolution of a scribe to record the beauty, the cruelty, the fascination, and the mystery."[2]

DM: What a great quote! It gets back to that very idea of how to put these big moments of wonder into language; both Sagan and Gould excelled at that. But if I remember correctly, so did your own daughter at the age of twelve. Can you tell that story?

LW: Well, one day I got a call from my daughter Sara's school and they said "You'd better come in here." Apparently, they'd had a pop quiz in which the kids were asked to answer some question like: "Why are human beings on earth?" And given fifteen minutes to do so. Sara had responded—let's see, wait a second, here it is—"I believe that there is, despite the fact that we humans have done so much damage to the world, a reason for our existence on this planet. I think we are here because the universe, with all its wonder and balance and logic, needs to be marveled at, and we are the only species (to our knowledge) that has the ability to do so. We are the one species that does not simply except [sic] what is around us, but also asks why it is around us, and how it works. We are here because without us here to study it, the amazing complexity of the world would be wasted. And finally, we are here because the universe needs an entity to ask why it is here."

DM: Wow, that is just so incredible. That she was thinking like that at twelve is extraordinary.

LW: It took Kant three volumes to get there.

DM: Carl Sagan, Stephen Jay Gould, and Sara Weschler ... what a trio!

LW: But having said that, I do think many twelve year olds approach the world that way, though she may be more articulate than some. Another way of putting it is that there is a longing to get back to first things, and that's part of what the taste for wonder is.

SF: I think adults crave those wonder years of youth, but we're unable to slow down our lives enough to be lost in anything that's not task-oriented or constructive. That's a problem if you're looking for a taste of wonder. A. O. Scott recently wrote in the The New York Times Magazine that "we live in the grip of a technological paradox in which the proliferation of wonders dilutes the possibility of wonder. This partly has to do with marketing and mass consumption, with the democratization of the special and the rare. More of us can now see more of the world than ever before, whether literally through travel or virtually through images. Some of the mystery, the frisson of discovery, is lost because of that."[3] He goes on to say how experiences a century ago were unprecedented in

their novelty, yet that no longer happens. Artists can still find those experiences in the studio because we cultivate a faith in the unfamiliar.

Perhaps there needs to be an internal, personal quest to regain wonder. This is one reason why, as an artist, I was interested in this topic. What is it that we're experiencing that doesn't exist? How do we create a relationship to the world? How do we not know something?

DM: And not only how do we not know something, but how can we be okay with not knowing?

SF: The overwhelming pressure to understand everything makes this difficult. These days you Google an answer. You don't find it and its over; there's no seeking.

DM: I think it's interesting because, Lawrence, you're talking about 1492 launching the age of real discovery, a time for finding things that people didn't know existed. Yet today seems to be a reversal, when everything is at our fingertips, yet we are experiencing a resurgence of wonder. Why do you think that is?

LW: Well, 1492 arrived close to Gutenberg coming around and it's said that the iPhone is simply the newest iteration of Gutenberg.

DM: Maybe that creates an increased desire for wonder, because there is just so much information out there, making it easier to feed that need?

LW: It's always dialectical, we experience it every day: someone says, "Hey you've got to see this." I have "pillow-of-air moments" constantly on the Internet, and they're much easier to find. However, having said that, there's a great line of Eudora Welty's where she says, "Making the real real is the purpose of art." Similarly, Jaron Lanier says, "The real is precisely the thing that cannot be reproduced to completion." Which is to say, reduced to bits and bytes.

Which in turn reminds me of Nicholas of Cusa, the fifteenth-century philosopher, archbishop of Cologne, churchman, diplomat, numbers mystic, and all-around visionary. Long before Copernicus nails down his theory of the Earth circling the Sun, Cusa already believed that stars are suns and that they likely have planets. At any rate, at some point Cusa was arguing with Thomas of Aquinas's followers about how to get to God. Aquinas, coming out of Aristotle, had suggested that if you catalogued all of Creation—if you had a book about all the fishes, a book about all the ethics, a book about all the mountains, geography, etc. then you would eventually get to knowledge of the Creator.

Cusa counters that way of thinking in his book On Learned Ignorance—talk about a great title for what you guys are aspiring toward!

And in that book Cusa says, no, actually aren't things more like this, that knowledge of God is more like a circle. And inside the circle you have an n-sided regular polygon. You start with a square, add a line to get a pentagon, another to get a hexagon, and so on. Eventually, the more lines (science) you add, the closer it might seem you're getting to the circumscribing circle (God), the million-sided polygon being damn like a circle. But, in fact, aren't you getting further and further away? Because a circle is just one line and this drawing you've got has a million lines. A circle has no angles and in this drawing you've got a thing made of all angles. And indeed, considering that drawing, Cusa says that at some point, if we really want to attain knowledge of the Creator, we have to make a leap—his phrase (Kierkegaard got it from him)—the leap of faith, from the line to the arc. And Cusa suggests that this leap can only be accomplished by grace, which is gratis, for free. As with wonder, we know that something has achieved that state of grace, because when you tap it, it rings true. Artists and scientists are both trying to achieve that leap, to attain that wonder.

SF: Absolutely, creativity is our common core and wonder is the goal. Achieve that and the important work will always follow.

DM: I think that's why there's so much connectivity when artists and scientists get together, because all of their work is essentially about the leap of faith.

SF: This reminds me of Rebecca Solnit discussing Walter Benjamin's call for "different schooling" required for getting lost. In her book A Field Guide to Getting Lost, she says, "To lose yourself: a voluptuous surrender, lost in your arms, lost to the world, utterly immersed in what is present so that its surroundings fade away. In Benjamin's terms, to be lost is to be fully present is to be capable of being in uncertainty and mystery. And one does not get lost but loses oneself, with the implication that it is a conscious choice, a chosen surrender, a psychic state achievable through geography."[4] In a sense, being lost produces a fruitful ambiguity. It's like being in the studio. I have to forget about the external world. I have to be in an undeniably present moment, vulnerable with this thing (painting) that I know nothing about.

LW: What is the word "knowing"? Can you have a knowing ignorance … a learned ignorance, a knowing surrender of knowledge? Northrop Frye tells a fantastic story somewhere about an arctic explorer and his Inuit guide who get stuck in a horrible white-out blizzard as they're trying to make their way back to base camp, a storm that gets worse and worse, till the explorer finally cries out to his Inuit guide, "We are lost," to which the guide mildly replies, "No, we are here." The reason we want to get lost is so we can be here. But this notion also reminds me of kindergarten.

SF: When I teach college-level art majors, I talk about kindergarten; I talk about Reggio Emilia, about play and play theory. I do this because I worry about their desire to accumulate knowledge over embodying knowledge, and I stress that one's best option to leave this world is through play, which is necessary in order to be fully present.

LW: Well, yes. The thing is—and here I am drawing on Norman Brosterman's terrific book Inventing Kindergarten—it turns out that kindergarten was invented at a particular time in the 1800s, at the peak of positivitism, when there was all that Victorian interest in natural science. At that time, people all over the world began to notice how the rule that they'd been following for generations, that you didn't need to bother to start teaching children until after they were seven years old (because there was a good chance that they were going to die before then), was no longer really applicable. Instead, they realized that if the kids made it to four, they were likely going to make it to adulthood, and you might as well start teaching them sooner. At which point this one guy in particular, the German Friedrich Fröbel, came up with the idea of kindergarten, which literally means "the garden of children." The kindergartners were the teachers and the ones being gardened were the children. But it is of the essence to understand that Fröbel's prior job and formation was as a crystallographer, which at that time means he was interested in patterns in nature; in ferns, the Fibonacci series in pinecones, the splay of sunflower seeds, etc.

DM: It was about sacred geometry and the fact that in nature there are patterns everywhere, whether we can see them or not.

LW: Exactly. So for him, an appreciation for the sense of pattern in nature is what needed to be fostered in children. To do this, he developed a series of gifts to be given by the teacher to the children over time. There are twenty gifts, each in boxes, starting with a balsa wood sphere surrounded by webbing with a little string and a hoop at the end, so the children can figure out centrifugal force. The second one, as I recall, is three blocks—a cube, a cylinder, and a sphere—so they can puzzle out the way that a cylinder is kind of like a cube and kind of like a sphere. Other things include blocks made out of golden rectangles or perfect rectangles, tiles, grids with holes and thread, and dried peas with toothpicks. It

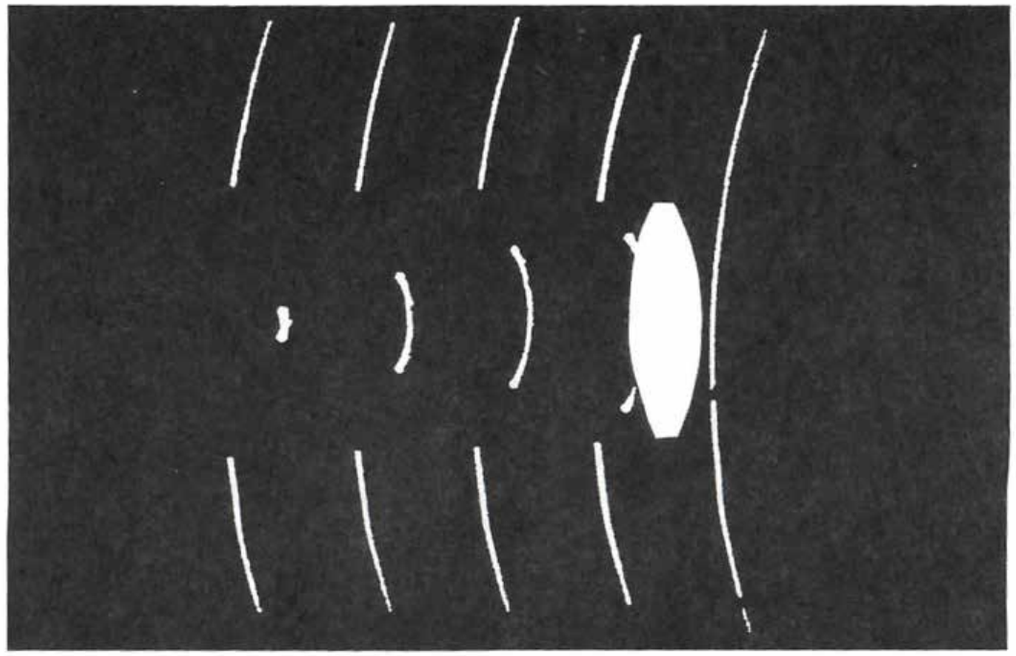
was all about intuitive learning; there was no reading, writing, or arithmetic and certainly no testing; it was all pattern recognition and delight and play. This all eventually becomes Montessori.

DM: It's interesting to think about these notions of childhood, because so much of the writing about wonder is based on the fact that wonder is supreme in childhood and that for adults it's more and more elusive, so we have to condition ourselves, open ourselves to it as a kind of mindful practice. And I don't mean mindfulness as in meditation or yoga, etc. What I am talking about here is a kind of hyper-vision and attentive awareness.

LW: I just had an interesting experience reading a Rebecca Solnit piece in The New York Times about this. In it she recalls going on a long walk with medical workers in Nepal, which ends by going into all these Zen practices. And as much as I love Solnit, that turn just made me roll my eyes. It's similar to the end of Mad Men, with Don Draper at an ashram, basically, going on to invent the famous Coca-Cola ad. Which was upsetting because it's such an effective ad, you know: we all would like to teach the world to sing. The ad had all of these people in their hippie clothes singing that stupid song all over the world. Granted, in 1970 it connoted a certain thing. But it was so juvenile, so mindless, and so commercialized at that point. That's the hard part of it, because when you're feeling that, you're feeling something similar to what René Descartes was feeling when faced with an excess of, or a debauch of, wonder … I felt like saying, "Come on, people, grow up!"

DM: I completely agree; wonder shouldn't enter the realm of sham novelty or kumbaya! But, in his Passions of the Soul, Descartes always places wonder in the mind; wonder is the first passion, but it is solely in the head, which I disagree with. He goes on to talk about passion and astonishment, which are things that get the heart pumping and our veins opened up. But why does wonder only have to just be in the head? I think it's in the whole body, that it is a felt thing—the "pillow of air" is a physical thing in our mouth.

LW: Alva Noë makes a great point that our mind is not inside our skull, even though our brain is; it's in the world. Mind is our hands, it's our grasping. The point I was going to make though, coming back to children, is that it is doubtless a fact, as anyone with children will know, that all children are geniuses. I mean that literally and technically; when you watch a child, the first three years of their lives, the stuff they learn in that short time: language, how to move around the world—it's simply mind-boggling.



It's unbelievable what's going on in that period, and one definition of an actual genius is someone who doesn't lose that capacity. Another way of thinking about it is the fantasy we tend to have—and by the way, this is part of why wonder goes in this direction—of Cro-Magnon man as somehow primitive, knuckle-dragging, and so forth. Whereas it's obvious to me that every single caveman had to be a thousand times more intelligent than we are today, simply to get through their day. Otherwise you could get eaten or starve to death. Just think of the amount of practical knowledge you had to have just to stay alive.

The point is that everyone, in the childhood of the species, had to be that smart. I sometimes fantasize about a scenario, kind of like The Planet of the Apes, where, for instance, the three of us get thrown into a world with cavemen and have to contend for survival. We'd be wiped out in a minute. Every invention the species has made—the wheel, the printing press, the television, the iPhone, for example—has just made us that much more stupid.

SF: It's the hubris of knowing and thinking that you are moving on.

DM: The hubris of thinking you know.

SF: I think it's important to note that in the arts and in teaching art we're fortunate to have the freedom to welcome subjectivity into our practice. It's exciting to be wrong about something and find that the outcome is better than expected and that we can choose to work with that particular failure. This comes back to the question of whether we can cultivate a sense of wonder. Some of the strategies I've been thinking about involve pataphysics, constraints like those of John Cage, or even Hans Hofmann's idea of the push and pull—really simple ideas that can create new ways of seeing and knowing.

LW: This reminds me of Robert Irwin's argument that scientists and artists, in many ways, are pursuing similar things, but the way they do it is opposite. He makes a distinction between logic and reason. It took me a long time to understand this because we tend to think of logic and reason as the same thing, but he makes the point that you can reason but you cannot logic. You can only use logic, which is to say that logic is an external tool deploying meters and liters and minutes and hours and similarly quantitative measures. Reason is where you use yourself, your own experience, as the measure. It is not irrational; it is profoundly rational. Irwin often talks about it as a sense of feel, assessing the texture of a situation, and he uses the word "feel" as the opposite of quantitative; it's quali- versus quanti-. This goes back to Welty—it's what you do to make the real real. That is the job of the artist. And it's one of the reasons

it's fun to watch artists work with scientists, because while the latter can analyze the quantitative nature of reality through generalized condensations, it's the artists whose job it is to make things real for people.

DM: But I also think, for me, the process of research, of conceiving and making exhibitions, exists very much in that same realm. It's not a traditional studio practice, but it presents a similar set of problems. As a curator, you have to practice a sense of forgetting, or learned ignorance, and you most certainly make constant leaps of faith when putting things together. It's interesting to look at the ways writers, curators, and artists (and scientists) come from the same essential grounding, even as they take things in different directions.

LW: It's interesting though, because as a curator you have a problem that might be summed up in the caption, "you know stuff." For example, take Ryan and Trevor Oakes: they just delivered to you a large sculpture of their hyperbolic perspectival drawing of Chicago's Millennium Park. This piece is mind-blowing if you know why it's mind-blowing, if you know the story and mathematics behind it. However, there's a whole style of curatorship that came out of theory and critique that I think is bullshit, which is "just let people confront it and they'll figure it out for themselves, by all means don't privilege any special knowledge that we as presenters may have" and the like. To which I say, no, in fact it helps to position things in a way that gives people enough information. (It's the other way that is weirdly hierarchical.)

DM: But I think the key word there is "enough." Because things can get too didactic and that brings it into the opposite realm, where you give so much information that you explain it away, that you burst the bubble of wonder and individual interpretation. For me, it's a delicate balance, letting people wander and get lost, but also saying, "I'm here."

LW: So, another way of putting it is to say that your job is to make the real real real.

DM: Yes, real to the third power!

LW: I had a similar problem with Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonders. I was struggling with how to write about The Museum of Jurassic Technology without demystifying it.

DM: I remember that when I went there for the first time I was worried that, because of your book, I would know what it felt like to be inside the space.

Then I walked in and my first thought was, "How did he do that?" The magic was still completely there, even as I sought out displays you'd thoroughly written about. Again, you gave just enough to allow it to fold open.

LW: It's interesting that you describe that; it makes me think of the two essential gestures Irwin constantly deploys. The first goes, "If you're going to do it, you've got to do it," and, with a screwdriver-like scrunching motion, he goes on to say, "you've got to screw the thing to the wall, you've got to do it, you've got to commit all the way." This is serious, this is the big task, and he illustrates all that by this screwing motion with his hand: he's screwing this thing to the wall. But then, he'll declare in the next moment, "And then you've just got to let it go." And with that last phrase comes his second gesture, he does this tulip thing with his hand, the petals opening: you just let it go.

DM: Exactly! I was talking about research the other day and how to determine the moment of letting go. It is so easy to go down the rabbit hole, which I know you know. But at what point do you just let go and write. It's terrifying and exciting. And, of course, we never really stop researching, do we?

LW: Well, my motto for all my work is "Receive them ignorant, dispatch them confused." Years ago I asked my daughter Sara, who was studying Latin, if there was a Latin way of framing that idea. She thought about it and said, "Well basically, you're saying 'Confuse the ignorant' and that's easy, that's just disturbado ignoramus or some such."

DM: But it's not quite the same when you say it that way.

LW: No, it isn't. But in effect the challenge is to bring people to a fertile confusion, which is another definition of wonder.

DM: It's funny, neither Sean nor I have articulated it quite that way, but I think that's exactly what we are aiming for within this book and exhibition. Thinking about this experience as a provocation.

LW: Provocation, but also giving an occasion, an invitation.

SF: Yes, an invitation to provoke a receptive response. Of course, the brilliance of The Museum of Jurassic Technology is that David Wilson knew when to let go and to highlight the spaces in between things. What an invitation!

I realized early on that wonder is not curiosity. Curiosity is post-wonder, or it could be pre-wonder; but wonder has all these conditions—the fantastic, the uncanny, the horrible, the marvelous, the terrible, and even the abject—that

further complicate experience. Still, you can't quite pinpoint them. However, I think being aware of these conditions can help you brush up alongside wonder in a way that makes you slightly more engaged with not knowing in the sense of Cusa's learned ignorance. With these conditions, you can become receptive to wonder, but you can't quite pinpoint it. It's in the space of knowing ignorance that slippage happens.

LW: There's a great line in Rilke's first Duino Elegy: "For beauty is nothing but the beginning of a terror that we can only just barely endure, and we revere it so, because it calmly disdains to destroy us." Or words to that effect.[5]

SF: Yeah, wow. That's amazing.

LW: There are a few other poems that are pertinent here. This is "Postscript," the last poem from Seamus Heaney's book The Spirit Level[6] (a spirit level, of course, being that framed bubble device used by a curator to make sure things are balanced and parallel to the ground).

> And some time make the time to drive out west
> Into County Clare, along the Flaggy Shore,
> In September or October, when the wind
> And the light are working off each other
> So that the ocean on one side is wild
> With foam and glitter, and inland among stones
> The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit
> By the earthed lightning of a flock of swans,
> Their feathers roughed and ruffling, white on white,
> Their fully grown headstrong-looking heads
> Tucked or cresting or busy underwater.
> Useless to think you'll park and capture it
> More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,
> A hurry through which known and strange things pass
> As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
> And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.

If I were to summarize your curatorial problem with this exhibition, it is how do you get people to be caught off guard and hit sideways and have their hearts blown open, when you've advertised the museum as a place to "Hey, you, stop! Look over here, look at this!"

DM: That poem is beautiful. I remember early on, when Sean and I were talking about wonder, he said to me, "You're not thinking about doing an exhibition about this?" and I said, "Well, no, I thought we would." He responded, "But it's impossible!" to which I countered, "Well, that just makes me want to do it even more." My boss once called me a natural contrarian, and I've never been one to shy away from a challenge! And here we are, five years later, and we are still puzzling over what it means to tackle wonder as an exhibition and in writing. I think what we've come to realize is you can't prescribe wonder, so instead we decided to work with artists who are intimately engaged with wonder as part of their practice (and life, I would add) and who might provoke wonder in visitors to the exhibition. I think we will succeed if this show makes people more attuned, so when they go on with their lives they can encounter moments that will blow their hearts open.

SF: In that sense, the exhibition becomes propositional.

DM: Yes, exactly. And in choosing artists it was very important for us that this sense of mindful wonder is ingrained in how they function. The contributors all approach the challenge from different perspectives, but the thing that links them all is a philosophy of wonder. It's a strange but inspiring problem, though, how to have it coalesce into an exhibition.

SF: I think you have to upset the expectations of the viewer. As an artist, whenever I have a show, the fear is that I have worked in the messy studio environment surrounded by other things and then I have to take the work out of the space of creation and hang it up in a neutral setting. What happens to the translation of the work when that shift takes place? It's unsettling. Yet museum audiences are conditioned to shift into a different mindset and behavior. So, then, how can we introduce the unfamiliar so that the audience doesn't just shift into autopilot? How do we create an environment that gives permission to let go?

DM: I think we're conscious of that balance. We don't want the show to be one heart explosion after the next, because then it starts...

LW: You become dulled to it.

DM: Exactly, you become dulled to it. So I think that idea of invitation and provocation, fertile confusion, those are the things that...

LW: Allow for the re-enchantment of the world.

DM: I think this gets at the fact that there is something about wonder that it is both immediate and slow. It is a thing that hits you, but the way it stays with you is lifelong. So to be able to play with that is really important, we want there to be moments in this show that people really remember and that they excitedly want to share with others. This can then become a collective wonder.

LW: This makes me think that the problem of the curator trying to evoke wonder is an issue of precision.

DM: Yes, even though precision within something so amorphous feels counterintuitive.

LW: There's a great poem on that by Linda Gregg called "The Precision," from her book Things and Flesh[7]:

> There is a modesty in nature. In the small
> of it and in the strongest. The leaf moves
> just the amount the breeze indicates
> and nothing more. In the power of lust, too,
> there can be a quiet and clarity, a fusion
> of exact moments. There is a silence of it
> inside the thundering. And when the body swoons,
> it is because the heart knows its truth.
> There is directness and equipoise in the fervor,
> just as the greatest turmoil has precision.
> Like the discretion a tornado has when it tears
> down building after building, house by house.
> It is enough, Kafka said, that the arrow fit
> exactly into the wound that it makes. I think
> about my body in love as I look down on these
> lavish apple trees and the workers moving
> with skill from one to the next, singing.

What's funny about that poem is the way the word "singing" has been placed there with such precision. The whole poem is a setting, kind of as if you have this great diamond with all these wonderful facets and you have to get the exact setting for it.

DM: I love that line, "when the body swoons, it is because the heart knows its truth." It makes me want to go back to Descartes. He has this whole passage about fainting. He writes: "Fainting is not very far from dying: a person dies

when the fire in his heart is completely extinguished, and he merely faints when it is smothered in such a way that traces of the heart are left that afterwards rekindle it. Many bodily indispositions can cause us to faint; but the only passion that we observe doing this is extreme joy."[8] It's melodramatic, but again, he is getting at how the passions affect the whole body.

LW: But Descartes is making fun of that, too, distaining the excess.

DM: Absolutely...

LW: "Enough with the fainting already!"

DM: But he doesn't align fainting with wonder.

LW: Well, it's complicated, what he's trying to do. And Shakespeare, too, is making fun [swooning noises], just as Stephen Colbert does in his over-the-top imitations of Lindsey Graham.

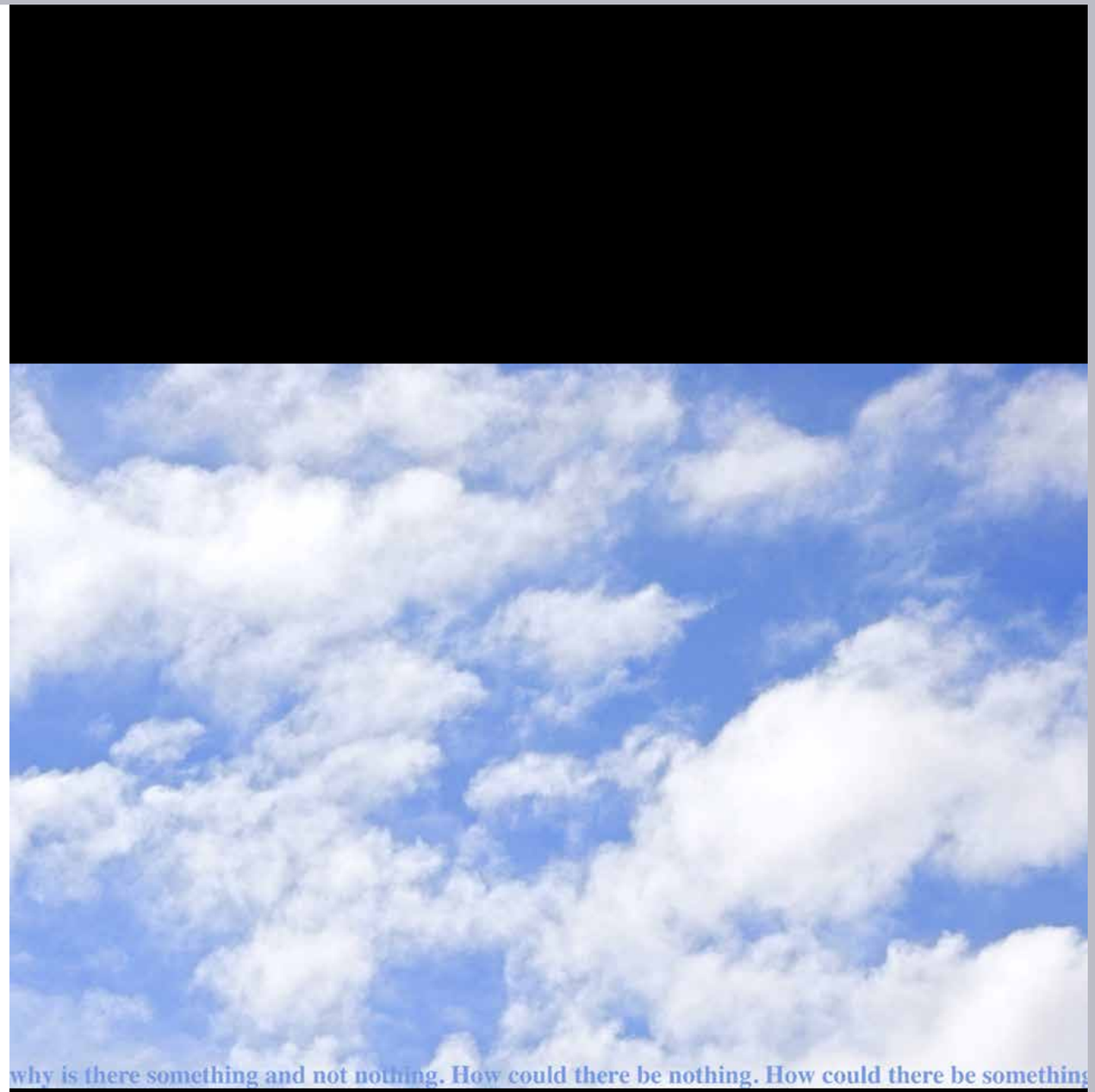
DM: Thinking about those last few poems reminds me of the title for this exhibition: Explode Every Day. This comes from a great Ray Bradbury quote, where he said; "You remain invested in your inner child by exploding every day. You don't worry about the future, you don't worry about the past—you just explode."[9] So much of the writing around wonder talks about it as such a rare experience, but those poems are very much in the everyday and in the small moment. Personally, I think it's more interesting to think about how you find wonder in the everyday rather than in the extraordinary.

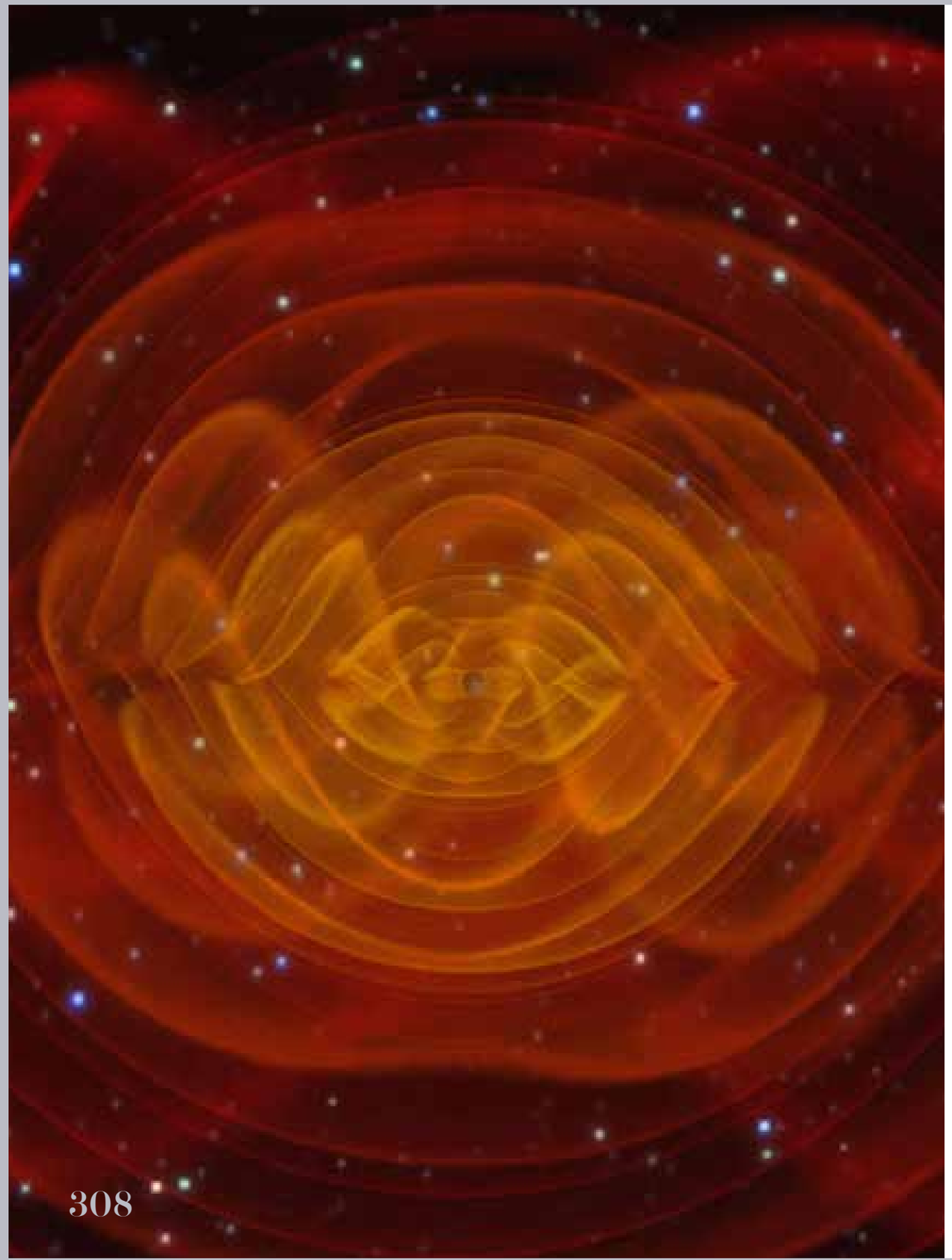
LW: It comes back to this business about autopilot that Sean mentioned. David Hockney speaks wonderfully about how when driving you are alert in a passive way—you're making sure nothing has entered into your field of vision that's a danger—but you can go for minutes on end without actually noticing anything. This is the exact opposite of a pillow of air—the two minutes at the end of which you suddenly realize you can't actually remember anything you've seen. They are both about gazing—looking and seeing—but there is a distinction between the two. This reminds me in turn of R. B. Onians...

DM: What's the title of that book again?

LW: [gets up to grab the book off his shelf] The Origins of European Thought: About the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time and Fate.

DM: Best book title ever! The title alone needs its own bookshelf.





LW: Exactly! He was a philologist and around 1950 published this book, in which he goes back through Pre-Socratic, Pre-Hippocratic Greek thought to find, by a close examination of the language, what their view of all those things was. How they, for example, imagined the workings of the human body. I have a whole footnote in Mr. Wilson about this, where it's revealed that they imagined the fluid around the brain to be the same as spinal fluid, which in turn was the same as semen, and in language that vision persists to this day in the way that words like "gene" and "genius" or "cereal" and "cerebral" or "hysteria and "hysterectomy" all align.

But Onians has this other wonderful section about how the ancient Greeks thought that the seat of the mind—of thinking and hence also of the soul—was in the chest, which is interesting, by the way, because why would you think the mind is there in particular? (For that matter, what would lead you to think it was in the skull?) But, for those Greeks, seeing and breathing had the same roots, so you get inspiration, respiration, and so forth—and Onians is not just looking at the Greek but also Sanskrit—such that in both cases, the activity of seeing is in and out, it's not just that the world is flooding into your pupil. Rather, at the same time, and in a sort of dystolic relation, the attention of your gaze is going out into the world through the pupil at the same moment that the world as a whole is coming in through the same pupil.

SF: So it's a complete circuit.

LW: It's back and forth, just like breathing.

DM: It reminds me of a great quote by Anne Carson in Eros the Bittersweet. She writes, "The chest is regarded by the Greeks as a receptacle of sense impressions and a vehicle for each of the five senses, even vision, for in seeing, something may be breathed from the object and received through the eyes of the seer."[10]

LW: Either she's figured it out, or rediscovered it, or she's channeling her inner Onians there. There are several different things going on in the everyday mess of the world and sometimes you are just on cruise control—and that's not necessarily bad because you're having some interesting thoughts—you might, for instance, be thinking about the Elena Ferrante novel you were just reading. The truth is, though, that as a result you may well miss the earthed lightning of the swans … but, on the other hand, suddenly that'll come at you sideways and it'll blow your heart open, thereby provoking the delicious, vertiginous, free fall into wonder.

1. Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Figure in Space* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994).
2. Stephen Jay Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002).
3. A. O. Scott, "The Art of Flying at the Movies," *The New York Times Magazine*, December 10, 2015. nytimes.com/2015/12/13/magazine/the-art-of-flying-in-the-movies.html?_r=0
4. Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (New York: Penguin, 2005), p. 6.
5. C. F. MacIntyre, in his translation of the *Duino Elegies*, launches into the first one as follows: "Who, if I shouted, among the hierarchy of angels / would hear me? And supposing one of them / took me suddenly to his heart, I would perish / before his stronger existence. For beauty is nothing / but the beginning of terror we can just barely endure, / and we admire it so because it calmly disdains / to destroy us. Every angel is terrible." Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans. C. F. MacIntyre (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 3.
6. Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997).
7. Linda Gregg, *Things and Flesh* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 1999).
8. René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, Part II: The Number and Order of the Passions and Explanation of the Six Basic Passions, Section 122: Fainting. earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/descartes1649part2.pdf
9. Sam Weller, *Listen to the Echoes: The Ray Bradbury Interviews* (Chicago: Stop Smiling Book, 2010). Originally recorded at Comic-Con 2010 by Jeff Goldsmith, maker of the free storytelling app Backstory. brainpickings.org/2012/09/04/ray-bradbury-comic-con-interview/
10. Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998), p. 48.