YOU HAVE TO SEE THIS

PORTRAITS OF LAWRENCE WESCHLER

INTRODUCTION

by RACHEL COHEN

A LITTLE WHILE ago, the filmmaker Michael Benson wrote to a group of friends and colleagues expressing his frustration that the wonderful work of Lawrence Weschler, a man who has written about seemingly everybody and everything, is not itself often written about. As the letter circulated, it became clear that many people had been waiting for a chance to talk about Weschler, and about the effect of his work on them. Dave Eggers offered space in the pages of *McSweeney's*, I was asked to be the guest editor, and the company whose writings and portraits fill the following pages was assembled.

One of our hopes in forming this symposium has been to try to present together something of the astonishing variety of Weschler's work, the facets of which can seem to exist in separate realms. Readers of *McSweeney's* will be familiar with his Convergences series, and with

the resulting book *Everything That Rises: A Book of Convergences*, in which Weschler finds startling and revealing lines of association as he ranges among Baroque paintings, diagrams of trees, war photographs, brain scans, and hieroglyphs. Some will know his work as a political correspondent in books such as *The Passion of Poland* and *A Miracle, A Universe*, or will have read his brilliant meditation on David Wilson's Museum of Jurassic Technology, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*. Some may have come upon his literary essays for journals like *The Threepenny Review*; Weschler's long relationship with *Threepenny* is chronicled here by editor Wendy Lesser. Others will have encountered the wide-ranging profiles—often first written for the *New Yorker*, an environment evoked here by Bill McKibben—that figure in *Shapinsky's Karma, Boggs's Bill, and Other True-Life Tales*, *A Wanderer in the Perfect City*, *Vermeer in Bosnia*, and also as book-length considerations of artists Robert Irwin and David Hockney. And then some readers will be familiar with Lawrence Weschler's life as a cultural impresario, as the artistic director of the Chicago Humanities Festival, and as the man in charge of the New York Institute for the Humanities, at New York University, a tenure now regrettably come to its close. We hoped here to celebrate, and to introduce to those who have yet to encounter his work, some of the myriad elements that go into making up the World as Weschler Sees It.

Lawrence Weschler, known as Ren in his great network of friendship and acquaintance, is a proponent of conversation where others see cultural and political life breaking up into isolated fragments. In fourteenth-century English, the word conversation meant "living together, having dealings with others," and this derived from Latin roots, where "to live with, keep company with," was based, literally, in *con-* and *vers-*: "to turn about with." In all these senses, and maybe especially the last, Ren, as a person and a writer, is a conversationalist. He keeps company with what turns about. And, in keeping company, with poets and crocheters and war correspondents and film editors and nuclear physicists and installation artists and magicians, he has, as Riva Lehrer put it, become a sort of "P.T. Barnum of the Mind." People

whose lives and work Ren first discovered as subjects for his writing have become his steady companions and the regular participants in his imaginative public events.

Who else would have had the inspired idea of inviting Jonathan Lethem and Geoff Dyer, both contributors here, together with professors and judges and DJ Spooky, to be part of a symposium on copyright called "Comedies of Fair U$e: A Search for Comity in the Intellectual Property Wars"? Could any other public intellectual have gotten people in Greenwich Village to line up around the block at seven in the morning for the chance to watch a day-long battle royale among physicists and artists and art historians over the optical theories of David Hockney?

Everyone who has written tributes here has wanted to honor at least two Rens—the public figure, his pockets overflowing with gifts, and the writer whose breadth has been astonishing his readers for decades. William Finnegan has been learning from Ren about their shared Los Angeles since he and Ren were in college together. Andrei Codrescu has been working on parallel, and sometimes intersecting, explorations of virtual reality for nearly twenty years. Film editor Walter Murch felt that it was somehow inevitable that he and his projects on the music of the spheres and on translating Curzio Malaparte would find their way to Ren, and so did Belgian political scientist Peter Vermeersch, who has written here on Weschler's *The Passion of Poland*. They, like many of us, have found in Weschler's books, and in his conferences and events, new realms—and, perhaps just as important, in knowing Ren they have found a home for their own concerns.

Throughout his career, Weschler has relied on visual artists as guides to interpretation and understanding. We are fortunate to have a significant presence of artists here, and I want to express gratitude to David Hockney, Ben Katchor, Riva Lehrer, Bill Morrison, and Lauren Redniss for allowing us to reproduce their portraits of Ren in this issue, and to Ricky Jay and Coco Shinomiya-Gorodetsky, for their playbill of the Weschler cabinet of characters. We wouldn't have been able to offer a picture of Ren in the round without them.

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I would like now to say something of my own particular debt of gratitude to Ren and to his writing. The first Weschler essay that I remember reading was the one that came to be called "Vermeer in Bosnia," which appeared in the *New Yorker* in the fall of 1995 as "Inventing Peace." For me, the piece came as a shock, as it was meant to. Not because of the gruesome war crimes that were described in its second paragraph, although these were so skillfully conveyed that I have never forgotten the details. Nor did the shock lie in the exquisite evocation of Vermeer's "Girl with a Pearl Earring," although this description was not only breathtaking, but self-consciously about breathtakingness, about the shock of contact, for there follows a beautiful analysis, leaning in part on the work of art historian Edward Snow, of just how Vermeer gives his viewer the sense that the girl in the painting has just looked *at us*. Nor, really, was the shock of the essay due to the fact that there turns out to be an important relationship between the serenity of Vermeer and the horrific crimes that people perpetrate on one another, although it is true that I shivered that first time, and have every other time I've read the essay, when Weschler points out that "when Vermeer was painting… *all Europe was Bosnia*." (It is characteristic of Weschler to be able to draw into relation the most beautiful and appalling deeds of which people are capable without trivializing tragedy or banalizing art.) No, for me the shock of the essay belonged to none of these things, except insofar as it was founded on all of them. The shock of the essay was *that it was an essay*.

The force and coherence of an essay may derive from many combinations of narrative, image, argument, tone, syntax, and personality, and a Weschler essay is certainly at work in all of these dimensions. But the really unusual formal elegance of the Weschler essay at its finest has to do, I think, with his ability to keep consistently present the whole range of his preoccupations. This is true both of the sentences (the parentheticals, the ellipses, the em-dashes, the jagged subordinate clauses) and of the overall structures. You could not simply take a Vermeer and plonk it down in Bosnia and insist on their mutual relevance—if they are to converse, there has to be, in all the language about Vermeer, a consciousness that this is the same world in which

the massacres of Bosnia happened, as it must be understood in every line discussing the war crimes tribunal that this is the same world from which Vermeer painted. In Weschler's essays, achieving this integration is both a matter of great structural ingenuity and a stance of moral integrity: it matters that all of this is part of one world.

When I read "Vermeer in Bosnia," I had formed an ambition to become an essayist, and for a few years had been trying to fathom what that might mean. I was attempting to hold essays together by whatever means came to hand, including pretty much everything from rivers of gerunds to wood glue. I was also hanging around New York's used bookstores, and, after that piece in the *New Yorker*, I read all the Weschler I could find—*Shapinsky's Karma*, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*. Weschler's work was for me a kind of extended hand, and, as I've since taught overlappingly with him, at Sarah Lawrence and at NYU, I've seen it have a similar effect on many writers starting out. As Baynard Woods, who took the bus up from DC every week to sit in on Weschler's writing seminar, The Fiction of Nonfiction, writes here, Weschler's work offers fellowship, and it shows a way forward.

A year or so after my initial encounters with his writings, I had the chance to send some writing to Ren, and, with the generosity that defines him, he began reading the pieces I was working on and saw how they could be essays. I think there are probably hundreds of writers, not to mention furniture builders and paper folders and documentary filmmakers, going about their daily lives encouraged by the fact that Ren Weschler saw some significance in what they were after. Ren senses the clouds of potentiality around ideas and artworks and acts and people in the way I imagine migratory birds pick up the magnetic currents that guide their voyages.

I remember once, sitting at lunch with Ren, as he was readying for publication, or re-publication, *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*, which now represents more than thirty years of conversations with the artist Robert Irwin, and *True to Life*, with its twenty-five years

of conversations with David Hockney. Ren was saying that his ongoing discussion with these two artists was like the double helix of his career. I think he also pointed out that he had begun writing about Irwin and about the Solidarity movement in Poland at roughly the same time. He said something like, "some people plant different crops in succession, but I planted all my seeds at once, and I've been tending them all ever since." I know that whatever he said left an impression in my mind of tilling, and also of him hurrying from one plant to another to see how each was doing.

This symposium makes a partial record of Ren's long loyalties, of his indefatigable and supportive curiosity, and of how that curiosity has affected his companions and his readers and audiences. Just as writing about art is for Ren inseparable from writing about politics, so writing as a whole should not really to be distinguished from presenting; it all follows from the same Weschlerian imperative: "You have to *see* this." Our section opens with an interview that Lawrence Weschler and Errol Morris conducted for this issue, loosely on the topic of "Ren Weschler: The Most Annoying Public Intellectual in America," which explores many of the themes and efforts and delights of Ren's career to date. There is a moment in the interview that brought home to me something about Ren's relationship to politics and to art; in it, I hear his indignation that people are suffering and making beautiful things and *no one is noticing*. "In each of these cases," he says, referring to the subjects that draw him,

> there is the pleasure of being confounded, and of not taking things for granted, of waking us up to how we all sleepwalk. And, by the way, that's not only a delight, but, in some cases, it seems to me—and I think you'd agree with this—it's an imperative that we wake people up to how they're sleepwalking. You have to find ways of doing it. In some cases, I think you can make an argument that we're sleepwalking to our doom, and you want to wake people up. But if you do it head on, it doesn't tend to work. It's almost better if you can insinuate yourself into the dream and from within the dream wake people up…

It is an honor and a pleasure to be part of offering this tribute to Lawrence Weschler, whose work has contributed to so many awakenings and nourished so many dreamers.

Cambridge, Massachusetts
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THE MOST ANNOYING PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL IN AMERICA

A CONVERSATION WITH LAWRENCE WESCHLER

by ERROL MORRIS

ERROL MORRIS: [*by phone from Cambridge*] How can we start up from where we left off? It was such an auspicious start, and then I wrecked it all.

REN WESCHLER: [*at home in Westchester*] We were talking about LA, and I said, "Do you know Brecht on this subject?" And I went over to my bookshelves, because I'm here with all my books, and I read to you a passage from Brecht on LA. But since then, I found an even better passage from Brecht on the subject.

MORRIS: Well, you should read me the prior passage.

WESCHLER: I'll read you that, too. But here's one that really applies to you, called "Hollywood." "Every day, to earn my daily bread / I go to

the market where the lies are bought / Hopefully / I take up my place among the sellers."[1] Which, as you know, is the correct use of the word *hopefully*, by the way.

MORRIS: Are you sure I know this?

WESCHLER: For years Roger Angell of the *New Yorker* was trying to get people to use the word *hopefully* correctly. He would have these various pieces, and one of them was a "Talk of the Town" piece that went, "Today in my efforts to get you to understand the correct use of this word, I will present a play consisting of three characters: Self, Wife, and Child. It takes place in the morning; Self is shaving."

> *Self*: Ouch.
> *Wife*: What happened, dear?
> *Self*: I cut my nose.
> *Child*: [*hopefully*] Off?

So. "Hopefully I take up my place among the sellers." Hopefully. Hopefully people will someday know how to use the word *hopefully*—that is not a correct use of the word *hopefully*.

MORRIS: Brecht interests me, because I've always been interested in—

WESCHLER: Sourness as a way of life?

MORRIS: Emotionless despair. For example, the end of my movie *Standard Operating Procedure*,[2] where Lynndie England is talking in this completely de-emotionalized way, and you see her as a product of her environment and see the choices open to her—that is, no choices at all. And there's a kind of matter-of-fact bleakness to it. It's not bleakness

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[1] Bertolt Brecht, *Poems 1913-1956*, Methuen (1976), "Hollywood" tr. Michael Hamburger.

[2] About Abu Ghraib. Lynndie England is one of the people who was convicted of abusing prisoners.

underlined. It's just simply stated in a kind of dispassionate way that I think of as Brechtian.

WESCHLER: Or another way of putting it is kind of simultaneously flat and upending.

MORRIS: Upending?

WESCHLER: It turns your world upside down, but in a very flat way—and all the more shattering, or shuddering, for its flatness.

MORRIS: Okay. I told you my idea for this interview: "Ren Weschler, the Most Annoying Public Intellectual in America." It occurs to me that a lot of the people that you have profiled, interviewed, et cetera—I, perhaps presumptuously, include myself—are really, truly annoying people.

WESCHLER: You think that because I wrote about annoying people, I'm annoying?

MORRIS: I'm not saying that. I think you are annoying, but I don't think that's *why* you're annoying.

WESCHLER: Why do you think I'm annoying?

MORRIS: I'll get to that. I wanted to talk first about why you write about annoying people. Why you picked certain subjects, particularly the subjects that I find the most interesting, e.g., Boggs. Boggs is clearly annoying. Why Boggs? Why'd you pick Boggs?

WESCHLER: I don't like addressing issues head on. For instance, when I would cover Bosnia—talk about an annoying place!—I didn't want to be the hundredth person describing conditions head on there. I tried to come at it at an angle. Hence, eventually, *Vermeer in Bosnia*. I often spend a lot of time—I'm talking decades—thinking about a subject and waiting for a vehicle to approach it with.

What I used to love in the *New Yorker*, was the way that you would pick up a piece of writing—and not all of them worked this way, but many of them did—and you had no idea what it was about. You would just read it because of the narrative energy, and for the first five thousand words you might not have any idea of what it was about, and only about halfway through the piece would you realize that it was about the most important thing in the world. It seems to me that's a much more interesting way to get at something.

So, in the case of Boggs, for years I'd wanted to engage the history of art and the history of money, the comedy of art and money, but I didn't want to write a treatise on the subject. Now, as regards Boggs and for that matter several of the ones that you have in mind of my annoying subjects, they strike me as Socratic figures.

MORRIS: Well, one important point here, of course, when you call these people Socratic figures, is that—and this is a point that cannot be made often enough—Socrates himself was intolerable.

WESCHLER: He was, absolutely.

MORRIS: He was annoying; he was insufferable. It's very easy for me to understand why they gave him the hemlock. They just couldn't stand it anymore.

WESCHLER: I often think about you, in that context.

MORRIS: "Well, I could call myself the most virtuous man in the world, but if I *did* call myself the most virtuous man in the world, that, in itself, wouldn't be terribly virtuous now, would it? So, I'm in a quandary." If it was me listening to that, I'd say, "Could you please get the hemlock now? I think we've had just about enough."

WESCHLER: I agree with you completely.

MORRIS: Socrates—the Most Annoying Man in the Ancient World.

WESCHLER: This reminds me of a wonderful, wonderful moment in my own education, in my freshman class at Santa Cruz, the first week we were reading *The Republic*. And it was a little seminar led by Harry Berger, the great literary critic and theorist, and I was just mouthing off, and I said, "Well, of course Socrates always wins these arguments. I mean, look at these idiots who he's talking to, you know? 'Yes, Socrates, that is true.' 'Yes, Socrates, that is also true.' They're all a bunch of doofuses. No wonder he was—This is totally a rigged—" I was going on and on. And Berger looks at me sagely and says, "But the thing of it is, Ren, Plato was a genius and you're a freshman." Two beats. "He's playing you like a piano. Why don't you shut up for a second and listen to the music?"

And the point he was constantly making was that Plato/Socrates was someone who was never able to find an interlocutor in his own world, and that the function of the dialogues is an ongoing search for someone to have a dialogue with. And that that annoyingness is of the essence of that dialogue. I love annoyers, actually, so I don't take any offense that you call me annoying.

MORRIS: In fact, Boggs has made a career out of annoying people, existing on an edge between the legal and the subjects that I find the most interesting: the illegal. The most interesting stuff in the Boggs book is to actually see Boggs's interactions with people, which you record. So, here is this guy who has this cockamamie idea, which of course is, like many cockamamie ideas, a deeply profound and interesting idea. Do you want to explain it?

WESCHLER: The way it happens is that Boggs will take you out to dinner, let's say, and at the end of the dinner he'll take out one of his drawings. [Boggs's drawings are meticulous, but slightly altered, re-creations of real banknotes. —*Ed.*] And the waiter, or whoever, will always say, "God, that's a great drawing." And he'll say, "I'm glad you like it, because I intend to use it to pay for this meal, this record, this pen," whatever it is that he's trying to buy. And he then makes it even more confounding—maybe *confounding* is a better word than *annoying*, don't you think?—

MORRIS: I like *annoying* more than *confounding*, but go on.

WESCHLER: Well, I'm sure you do. But he then takes out a regular one-hundred-dollar bill, let's say, or a regular twenty-dollar bill, and he says, "If you want, you can have this one. I don't know what this drawing is worth. It must be worth something. But if you take it, you have to give me my change in real money." And that usually is what really drives people crazy, they can't handle that, and usually it doesn't work. But that's a big mistake, because, in fact, the drawing is worth more than the real bill—more than its face value.

MORRIS: Well, it turns out to be worth a lot more. But they don't know that.

WESCHLER: Of course not. That's the Socratic test.

MORRIS: Picasso routinely did this kind of thing.

WESCHLER: Sure. He would write a check—there are car dealerships in the South of France, where he would buy a Rolls-Royce, and on the back of the check he would do a substantial drawing, and the checks would never be cashed.

MORRIS: Yes.

WESCHLER: But Boggs is no Picasso. He's just a guy who you'd encounter on the street. The phenomenology of what happens in those two situations is different. In the case of Picasso, you don't cash it because he's a famous artist. In the case of Boggs, it becomes a test of virtue in some sense. It's a fairy tale. Most people will refuse it. But the ones who accept it will be rewarded tenfold, a hundredfold. Because there are many people who want to buy the drawings, and he won't sell them, he'll only spend them, but the next day Boggs will call one of those people and say, "I spent a drawing at such and such a restaurant yesterday, and if you want to procure that drawing I have the receipt,

I have the original bill that I used as the model for the drawing—in other words, it has the same serial number—and I have the change. And I'll sell you, Collector, all of that for ten thousand dollars." And the collector will happily pay ten thousand dollars to Boggs, because he knows he can then go back to the restaurant, because the receipt tells him where it was, and offer the waiter, for that one-hundred-dollar drawing, one thousand dollars, or five thousand dollars. And he'll do that because he knows that if he puts all those things together and puts them under a frame and takes it to Sotheby's—in those days it was going for fifty thousand dollars.

MORRIS: Really?

WESCHLER: Yes, and the comedy was, what's going on here? Why is that happening? And then, of course, one of the things that would happen is that the Secret Service and so forth would get pissed off, and they would try to arrest Boggs. He was regularly getting arrested or harassed. But the minute it was taken to a jury, he could make a very strong case. And every jury of his peers found him innocent. He argued for one thing—"How can it be counterfeit if it's worth more than its face value?"

MORRIS: But that's not the definition of *counterfeit*.

WESCHLER: There you go. You, as a serious judge—and I know you are someone who has thought about the law, and, frankly, a good deal more than you should have for the last few years, given your most recent work and how much it has confounded you… But absolutely. By the letter of the law, he is completely engaging in something weird. But juries always use their common sense and find him not guilty, which is all the more confounding.

MORRIS: And yet he is also annoying. Just what is it that he's doing?

WESCHLER: He is playing with authority. In the same way that

Socrates did, he is playing with things that are fundamental, and that people don't like played with. In fact, it's a little bit like Wile E. Coyote going off the cliff. He just points and says, "Look underneath here. There's nothing supporting this. It's all a series of conventions and unsaid, unspoken agreements and so forth and so on. And if you tug on it at all, it begins to come unraveled."

MORRIS: We like to think of ourselves as being, on some level, shrewd, so that if someone gives you a counterfeit one-hundred-dollar bill, and you take it, you've been conned. You've been tricked.

WESCHLER: You've been *had*.

MORRIS: You've been had.

WESCHLER: And to be had means that somebody else owns you, which you hate.

MORRIS: And so, we like to think, when presented with a counterfeit one-hundred-dollar bill, we either have that strange felt-tip marking pen—

WESCHLER: That's right, whatever that is.

MORRIS: And it turns the wrong color, and so we say, "You no-good blackguard. You tried to pass off a fake one-hundred-dollar bill, but I'm too smart for you." Here, it's—

WESCHLER: He does the opposite. He offers you something and you, in your shrewdness, refuse it, and hence make a mistake. But he is completely transparent in everything he does. You pull one over on yourself by being so goddamned shrewd.

MORRIS: But one second. See, what I find puzzling is, go back to the Picasso example.

WESCHLER: Okay, very good.

MORRIS: Okay, so Picasso is Picasso. World famous.

WESCHLER: Famous for being an artist and a womanizer.

MORRIS: Famous for being an artist and a womanizer, and for painting flounder-like portrait profiles where you see clearly two eyes on one side of the head.

WESCHLER: Right, exactly. Though let's stop for a second. David Hockney is very good on that. David Hockney points out that Picasso is, in fact, a consummate realist. When you want to portray the woman you love, say, when you're right up close to them in bed and looking quite carefully at them, your eyes begin to swim, and you do get two eyes out of the same side of her profile.

MORRIS: Well, Hockney, we will get to this, but Hockney as a person, who is a consummate—you know what my son used to call himself?

WESCHLER: What?

MORRIS: He would explain to us very carefully, he said, "But don't you see: I'm an annoyifier."

WESCHLER: There you go. That's good.

MORRIS: Yeah, "I'm an annoyifier." And indeed he was, and still is.

WESCHLER: Bless the annoyifiers, for they shall find calmness in the end.

MORRIS: But let's just go back to—

WESCHLER: To Boggs.

MORRIS: Because this does interest me. With Boggs, say they accept the drawing.

WESCHLER: They are being given the occasion where they can. And even when they don't, they often give great answers as to why they don't accept, very sensible answers.

MORRIS: No, that's the best part of the essay.

WESCHLER: Right, right. And you know what else they're given? *A story*. They get to go home that night and tell the wife, "You wouldn't believe what I was offered today," dah-dah-dah. And then the wife and the husband have a story, or the boyfriend or the girlfriend, or brother and sister.

This reminds me—*this* reminds me—of something which I *have* to read you. That poem of Szymborska's, do you know that poem?

MORRIS: No.

WESCHLER: Okay, I've got to find it, it'll take me a second. Okay, okay, here: "An Opinion on the Question of Pornography."

And the poem goes,

> There's nothing more debauched than thinking.
> This sort of wantonness runs wild like a wind-borne weed
> on a plot laid out for daisies.
>
> Nothing's sacred for those who think.
> Calling things brazenly by name,
> risqué analyses, salacious syntheses,
> frenzied, rakish chases after the bare facts,
> the filthy fingering of touchy subjects,
> discussion in heat—it's music to their ears.

In broad daylight or under cover of night
they form circles, triangles, or pairs.
The partners' age and sex are unimportant.
Their eyes glitter, their cheeks are flushed.
Friend leads friend astray.
Degenerate daughters corrupt their fathers.
A brother pimps for his little sister.

They prefer the fruits
from the forbidden tree of knowledge
to the pink buttocks found in glossy magazines—
all the ultimately simple-hearted smut.
The books they relish have no pictures.
What variety they have lies in certain phrases
marked with a thumbnail or a crayon.

It's shocking, the positions,
the unchecked simplicity with which
one mind contrives to fertilize another!
Such positions the Kama Sutra itself doesn't know.

During these trysts of theirs, the only thing that's steamy
    is the tea.
People sit on their chairs and move their lips.
Everyone crosses only his own legs
so that one foot is resting on the floor,
while the other dangles freely in midair.
Only now and then does somebody get up,
go to the window
and through a crack in curtains
take a peep out at the street.[3]

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[3] Wislawa Szymborska, *Poems New and Collected (1957–1997)*, Harcourt Brace, 1998, "An Opinion on the Question of Pornography," tr. Stanislaw Baranczak & Clare Cavanagh.

Which, of course, that last phrase is great in terms of martial law, but it's also an inversion of the Peeping Tom.

MORRIS: Yes.

WESCHLER: Isn't that a great poem?

MORRIS: It is, indeed.

WESCHLER: And isn't it pertinent to what we're talking about?

MORRIS: I believe it is.

WESCHLER: I guess, by the way, that another word, what you're calling *annoying*, I call *delightful*. I take delight in annoying people.

MORRIS: Here's what puzzles me about Boggs, which is one of the things that I find really interesting about your work. If you've done something really, really well, you've set up a kind of conundrum, you've set up an unanswered question, which leaves people uneasy. Uneasy in many ways. Uneasy because they don't know, ultimately, what this piece was about. And can I tell you what that feeling is? When you don't know what something is about?

WESCHLER: What is it?

MORRIS: It's a feeling of enormous annoyance.

WESCHLER: No, it's a feeling of enormous pleasure. James Baldwin says that the function of art is to reveal the questions that have been occluded by the answers.

MORRIS: That's a great line.

WESCHLER: Let me see: Where did I get that from? I can't remember.

But it's a great line. And there's this other passage where Freeman Dyson—let me see if I can find you that passage—at one point Dyson says that people have the wrong understanding of what science is. They think it is—I'm paraphrasing—a compilation of facts, whereas, in fact, it's an ongoing investigation of mysteries. Isn't that good? But anyway, we got distracted here. We were having an argument about whether this is annoying or whether this is a pleasure.

MORRIS: Yes.

WESCHLER: And I guess, for me, and this comes back to why I like these people—and let's rack up who some of these people are: I mean, it's Robert Irwin, who ends up doing what seems to be empty rooms and calling them art; it's David Hockney with all these cockamamie ideas that he has about whether old masters were using optical devices; it's definitely David Wilson.

MORRIS: David Wilson is of course a classic example.

WESCHLER: In each of these cases, there is the pleasure of being confounded, and of not taking things for granted, of waking us up to how we all sleepwalk. And, by the way, that's not only a delight, but, in some cases, it seems to me—and I think you'd agree with this—it's an imperative that we wake people up to how they're sleepwalking. You have to find ways of doing it. In some cases, I think you can make an argument that we're sleepwalking to our doom, and you want to wake people up. But if you do it head on, it doesn't tend to work. It's almost better if you can insinuate yourself into the dream and from within the dream wake people up, rather than just shake them and hit them.

This is kind of what I enjoyed doing for the last twelve years, as I was running the New York Institute for the Humanities—was to find ways to come at things at a slant. For example, when Abu Ghraib happened, we did an event called "Shocked! Shocked!! Just How Many Times Can a Country Lose Its Innocence?" Which ended up focusing on of all things Norman Rockwell.

MORRIS: Right. I remember.

WESCHLER: There was this wonderful lit professor from Johns Hopkins named Richard Halpern, who'd argued that far from being one of the main protagonists of the innocence industry in America, Rockwell was one of its greatest critics, and that he understood that far from marking the transition from innocence to experience, "being shocked" is more usually a way of disguising from ourselves the fact that we knew all along.

Then, later, at the time of what was happening with the tenth anniversary of 9/11 and the kind of pornographic exploitation of that event, where every single magazine had to have a "Tenth Anniversary of 9/11" cover—that relentless lashing of "You will remember, you *will* remember," with its grotesque and pretty unseemly instrumentalization of memory—we had an all-day event called "Second Thoughts on the Memory Industry." To be able to be part of it, you had to have had first thoughts on the memory industry. You had to be people who had thought, like I did for a long time, that the most important thing you can have is memory, how you have to never forget this that or the other. But when you see what happens in the name of that spirit, the vulgarization of it—Holocaust tourism, genocide Olympics, "my genocide is worse than yours" et cetera, you can't help but have second thoughts.

MORRIS: How do you put these events together?

WESCHLER: One of my last Wonder Cabinets, as I've been calling them, was this past Saturday. This one was called "Should You Ever Happen to Find Yourself in Solitary."[4] And it began with a whole slew of playwrights and artists and mosaicists and monologists and insect people and scientists talking about how they imagine they might be able to keep from going crazy if they were ever in solitary.

The whole thing was my attempt to figure out some way to do an

[4] Indexed video of the event is at nyihumanities.org/journal/video-of-solitary-symposium.

event to highlight the fact that the United States currently has something on the order of eighty thousand—eight, zero, thousand—people in solitary confinement. Which is arguably more than any other place in the world has ever had at any previous time in history. By comparison Canada has three hundred. It is a truly, truly horrendous thing. But the thing is you can never get people to come to a conversation about that if you just do it head on. So as usual I was trying to approach things, as I always do, at a slant. It's a way of ensorcelling people into the room who might otherwise not come. And it turned out to be quite terrific, very interesting, and maybe even moved things forward a little bit.

Haven't you had that fantasy of what you would do if you ever found yourself by yourself?

MORRIS: Not really. I have this ongoing terror that someday I will discover that other people actually exist!

WESCHLER: So you're *already* in solitary. You know that E. M. Forster story?

MORRIS: Which one?

WESCHLER: There's this E. M. Forster story that he wrote in 1909 or something, called "The Machine Stops." And basically he is anticipating today—a world where everybody lives in little monads, in cells by themselves, and they have all kinds of Gchats with each other. They basically Skype each other. This is all written in 1909. And nobody ever actually sees anybody else in the flesh. An entirely web-based reality. And the whole story is about a guy who kind of breaks free and tries to go to make his way to the world on the surface. It's an amazing story. It's so, so prescient.[5]

MORRIS: Prescient?

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[5] E. M. Forster, "The Machine Stops," archive.ncsa.illinois.edu/prajlich/forster.html.

WESCHLER: Just because it seems to me that we are increasingly finding ourselves like that. Except that in terms of this solitary event, it turns out that any fantasy you have—including your fantasy that you're the only person who's real—none of it would be of any use to you. We had Breyten Breytenbach, the exiled Afrikaner poet and painter who returned incognito to pursue the anti-apartheid struggle and got captured. He spent the next seven years in prison, the first two in solitary on death row. He'd spent years studying and practicing Zen, he was a virtual master, but in the crunch none of it was of any use: he fell apart almost completely. We heard from Robert Hillary King of the Angola Three, who spent twenty-eight years in solitary for a crime from which he was eventually exonerated! And Shane Bauer, who was one of the three people who were arrested by the Iranians for hiking and were held for two years—four months of that in solitary. And when he came out he was commissioned by *Mother Jones* to go look at Pelican Bay, the supermax in California, and he talked about how he basically considers the conditions at Pelican Bay much worse than anything he was subjected to by the Iranians. But the point is, when you get testimony from people who've actually spent time in solitary, it's just completely shredding. The bottom line is, even phenomenologically, even a misanthrope like you—your reality is formed on the basis of other people looking at you and responding to your misanthropy, and if that were taken away from you, the possibility of that sort of interaction, it would be horrible.

MORRIS: Okay. I give up. Solitary would be the worst fear of someone whose raison d'être is frustrating others because in solitary, there is no one left to frustrate beside yourself.

WESCHLER: There is this part of me that really does enjoy this particular thing of, not only bringing things before an audience, but bringing people together who wouldn't otherwise meet each other. Introducing people who have set out to pull the rug out from under the rest of us. So Boggs is an example, but for that matter, David Wilson is a good example.

MORRIS: It reminds me of the Duchess's poem in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*.

> Speak roughly to your little boy,
> And beat him when he sneezes:
> He only does it to annoy,
> Because he knows it teases.

WESCHLER: [*Laughs*] That's not exactly the first thing I would think of, thinking of David Wilson—and you call *me* the most annoying person in America! David Wilson is an absolutely extraordinary and completely lovely man.

MORRIS: We should talk about Wilson. And solitary confinement. Given a world to populate, why populate it in the same way as everyone else? Why not figure out a new way to repopulate it? Inherently, we all live in a form of solitary confinement. Some of us use that opportunity to sort of reimagine the world; others, I suppose, repeat the world in all of its boring exactitude. I don't claim to understand the Museum of Jurassic Technology, and in fact I think I have no understanding of it at all, even though I adore it. It's incomprehensible and that's one of its great virtues.

WESCHLER: It doesn't demand comprehension.

MORRIS: Well, it's an essay, even, on the stupidity of explanation.

WESCHLER: Uh-huh.

MORRIS: Where all imagined explanations backfire on you. It's this weird combination of Dada, surrealism, and existential hopelessness, coupled with a desire to annoy, perhaps the highest art form there is.

WESCHLER: And coupled with a capacity for marvel, for wonder—the splendors of things that can't be known for sure.

MORRIS: Why is the world constituted the way it is? Why do we accept the world as constituted the way it is?

WESCHLER: When I first went to the museum, one of the first things I saw was this display called "Protective Auditory Mimicry," and it had an iridescent beetle and an iridescent stone on little stands inside of a glass vitrine. You picked up the phone over to the side, which had the voice of institutional authority, and it explained, "This beetle has learned to make exactly the same sound when threatened that this pebble makes at rest." The voice has absolute authority when it says this, and you look at it, and there's this kind of slippage, and you go, "Uh-huh." At first you begin to think that it's all some kind of postmodern spoof—that it's one of these elaborate send-ups of institutional authority. But the more time you spend there, it is pitch perfect—somewhere between parody and reverence.

MORRIS: A great way to describe it.

WESCHLER: It's funny, but it's also deeply profound. And in fact it's not at all postmodern, it's premodern. It's a throwback to a time before everything became certain, before the Scientific Revolution. David just loves the undertow. That is something in a lot of the pieces I write, and for that matter in many of the seminars and the Wonder Cabinet extravaganzas I put on as an impresario. I love that moment where you're on the beach, the wave came in, and then the water's rushing back out, and you *feel* the rush at your toes. Are you going backward or are you going forward? That undertow—it's just a great feeling. It can be an intellectual feeling. And I think Boggs is one of the people who is like that. David is like that. You know he's just an extraordinary character. A deeply profound and at the same time wonderfully antic human being.

MORRIS: A modern form of Dada?

WESCHLER: The Museum of Jurassic Technology? I don't think of it

that way. I have the sense of Dada as being a profound response to World War I, to the despair of World War I. Meanwhile, there are people who think the Museum of Jurassic Technology is a deeply spiritual place—a reliquary where the relic of the saint would be a funny bone.

MORRIS: What's really interesting about many of these characters—it's certainly true about Boggs, because Boggs was incarcerated, so that you know through that fact alone that he irritated the authorities. What is the greatest sign that you have irritated the authorities? It's incarceration. That's *proof* that you've irritated somebody.

WESCHLER: Which reminds me of Ryszard Kapuscinski, the Polish foreign correspondent who lived this incredibly insane life. He'd been… he'd been present at thirty-seven civil wars, some ungodly number of coups d'état, constantly getting himself arrested, subject to twelve death sentences, all of which he somehow survived and when he was subsequently asked how he had evaded execution or murder at all the various checkpoints—these terribly scary situations he'd kept putting himself into—he said, "I always tried to make myself *unworthy* of the bullet." And he was! As a person, he was the mildest, most self-effacing, seemingly bumbling and harmless presence. Why would anyone want to waste a bullet on such a person?

MORRIS: But Kapuscinski's annoying, too, because he called himself a journalist, but then ultimately you have to ask yourself the question of whether any of it's true. I don't think of him as a journalist, per se. More as a writer, an artist. I would never ask Franz Kafka whether Gregor Samsa literally turned into a dung beetle. It seems irrelevant. He is trying to capture a state of mind, not a literal reality.

WESCHLER: We once talked about the way various people have pointed out that the only place where you can be absolutely sure that things happened the way they are alleged to have happened is in fiction. In any work of nonfiction, or at any rate any work of nonfiction that's any good—any work of biography, autobiography, reportage, and so

forth—the question arises, "Was it actually like that?" And it has to.

MORRIS: Let's get back to the annoyers. You have David Hockney, who is an immensely successful artist, one of the premier establishment artists of the twentieth century, who actually infuriated curators, really pissed everybody off. Which is fantastic. You may have artists thumbing their nose at the establishment in one way or another. But he wasn't just thumbing his nose at the art establishment. He was also taking on the entire art-history establishment. You throw out the bait—you draw the counterfeit money—and then you see what happens. And what happens is that many people go batshit crazy because they just can't deal with it.

WESCHLER: You're referring, in the case of Hockney, to when he basically claimed to have discovered that Old Masters, long, long before anybody thought they were, were using lenses and all kinds of curved mirrors to make their marks and to establish a certain kind of look—the "optical look," he called it—which lasted from 1430 to 1839. You can see it happen out of nowhere, and you can see it fall away at the end.

MORRIS: It was as if he had accused the Old Masters of painting by numbers.

WESCHLER: Oh, he wasn't saying that! But what he was saying was deeply, deeply disconcerting. He claimed to have found that artists—certainly Caravaggio, but presently even all the way back to Van Eyck—were using these instruments. And you're right: the assertion just drove art historians crazy. At first they claimed that there was no evidence. First it was, "No, no, that can't be true" and then, "Oh, we knew that all along." And I think Hockney will basically be proven right, not on any particular painting but on the fact that very early on, projection, camera obscura, camera lucida, curved lenses came into the world and established the standard for a certain kind of visual reality which then held hegemony over the art world for four hundred years. And whether or not any particular work was done that way, I think he's right. But it was hilarious to watch the reaction of the art world. I do

love the sociology of response to these sorts of things.

MORRIS: Have I told you about my "Fuck-You" theory of art?

WESCHLER: No. What's that?

MORRIS: That the greatest works of art are thinly disguised forms of "fuck you." Take Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. Perhaps the greatest work in the Western canon. When Bach took his new job, he was required to sign a codicil to his contract, which stipulated three things: no overly dramatic music, no overly complicated music, no overly long music.[6]

WESCHLER: I see.

MORRIS: Bach agreed. And subsequently produced the *St. Matthew Passion*. I imagine the church elders arriving for the mass and asking, "What's with the two orchestras? And the *two* choirs? And there's also a boys' choir?"

WESCHLER: And he said—?

MORRIS: "And why is this work almost three hours long? And why is it so incredibly dramatic?" There's a very simple answer. It's because Bach was replying to the elders of the church by saying, "Fuck you."

WESCHLER: So that explains your work. What about mine?

MORRIS: I believe it explains your work, as well.

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[6] Denis Laborde, "The Strange Career of Musicoclashes,"*Iconoclash*, Latour, B., and P. Weibel, eds., Cambridge: MIT Press, 254–280. The language from the contract asked Bach to promise that "to contribute to the maintenance of good order in the churches, I will arrange the music in such a way that it shall not last too long, that it shall be of such a nature as not to seem to belong to a theater (*opernhaftig*), but that it shall rather inspire its listeners to piety" (264).

WESCHLER: I suppose so!

MORRIS: Or take Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*. Diabelli had given a rotten theme to some twenty different composers, and asked each of them to write one variation on his rotten theme. Beethoven was one of them. At first he refused. Absolutely refused. For many reasons: his total contempt for Diabelli, his contempt in particular for the rotten theme that Diabelli had written, and that he didn't want to do Diabelli or anybody else's bidding. He was *Beethoven*. And then he thought, at least as I imagine it, "Why, this would be a perfect opportunity to say, 'Fuck you!'" And proceeded to create one of the great immortal works of art. Thirty-three inspired variations on an insipid theme. A supreme work of art based on Beethoven's contempt for something utterly worthless.

WESCHLER: Once again, I hear you talking about yourself. I assume you're not talking about me! [*Laughs.*]

MORRIS: Let me read to you this passage from this essay by Denis Laborde. Laborde's description is drawing on the writing of a man named Christian Gerber, who wrote about the first performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*.

"In the clamor of the two orchestras playing at both ends of the nave, in the chaos of the two choirs responding to each other in waves of dissonances, while in the center the congregation struck up their Lutheran chorales, one believer was becoming irate. Christian Gerber saw her stand up suddenly and leave the church, crying out: '*Behüte Gott ihr Kinder! Ist es doch, als ob man in einer Opera oder Comödie wäre*.'" ["May God protect your children! It is as though one were at an opera or a comedy!"]

Laborde goes on to say that, "Under the pretense of composing a musical piece for the Passion, he let effusion, that is, confusion, take hold of the believers' hearts…"

WESCHLER: So you are talking about yourself.

MORRIS: It's still Boggs, in a simplified form; it's a version of "Fuck you."

WESCHLER: Socrates, too.

MORRIS: I haven't really read recently I. F. Stone's argument for why Socrates should have been killed.

WESCHLER: Well, according to the letter of the law, he really was corrupting the youth of Athens, is his argument, basically.

MORRIS: He was *annoying* the youth of Athens, properly considered. So there is something really strange about the real need, ultimately, to tell people that they have it all wrong.

WESCHLER: I don't think it's so much that they have it all wrong, but that they're taking it all for granted. I think it's rather—it more has to do with the way in which, "You're sleepwalking, you people. Wake up!"

MORRIS: *Wachet auf!*

WESCHLER: [*Laughs*.] As said by the great annoyer, J. S. B.

For further conversation between Lawrence Weschler and Errol Morris, see publicbooks.org/interviews/errol-morris-forensic-epistemologist. For further glimpses of the world of Weschler, see lawrenceweschler.com.

REMINISCENCES

by WILLIAM FINNEGAN, LAUREN REDNISS, BILL McKIBBEN, BEN KATCHOR, WENDY LESSER, GEOFF DYER, BILL MORRISON, AND RIVA LEHRER

Ren Weschler has taught me a lot about, among other things, my hometown. We both grew up in Los Angeles, but when we first met, as undergraduates at the University of California, Santa Cruz, I thought Ren, while he might be from LA, technically, was not *of* it. He was both too worldly and too open, too febrile, too urban in a good sense. He lacked the half-assed carapace of Southern California cool—in conversation, the brief, wary, laidback pause. He had none of the early-onset world-weariness of our site-specific desolation. There are and always were many LAs, of course, but this was 1970, and a certain shared generational experience seemed particularly intense and inescapable; and yet, I thought, Ren and I had not crossed paths at any rock festival or hitchhiking spot or Topanga Canyon acid test. Maybe at a peace march. It wasn't important—I wasn't hoping to meet in college the same folks I might have found at some hippie hot springs while ditching high school. But it was a resonant first misunderstanding and underestimation of this bright-eyed, exceptionally well-read enthusiast from (was it possible?) Van Nuys.

We studied with some of the same professors. Then, after graduation, Ren did something inspired: he moved back to LA.

I don't think I can describe (Ren would disagree, in any case) how poorly an education at the hands of teachers like Norman O. Brown, the classicist turned counterculture oracle, or Maurice Natanson, the phenomenologist, prepared one for journalism, but Ren boldly started freelancing for the *LA Weekly* and the *LA Reader* nevertheless, doing his trade apprenticeship, while working a day job at something called the Oral History Program at UCLA, which led him to interview, among others, Robert Irwin, the Southern California artist. It's tempting to say that the rest is history, oral and otherwise, as if the meeting of Irwin and Weschler just naturally produced something remarkable, but the truth is that only Ren's hard work and polymorphous originality could have turned those Irwin interviews into anything like his extraordinary first book, *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*.

Through that book, I for one saw many things I hadn't seen before, not least of them a new Los Angeles. Irwin was such a strange, splendid native, his work and his sensibility inseparable from the city's streets and buildings, its racetracks and drive-in restaurants. He had gone from abstract expressionism and a conventional studio in the '50s and '60s to installations of extreme simplicity and subtlety, and Ren managed to trace his career and the evolution of his thinking in a way that opened up both local art history and a provocative set of aesthetic conundra through narrative. I wasn't the only astonished reader. William Shawn, then the editor of the *New Yorker*, ran a two-part excerpt from the book. Shawn had already published some of Ren's early reporting from Poland, and Ren soon moved to New York, became a staff writer at the magazine, and began taking on the great range of subjects, political and artistic, that fire his voracious curiosity to this day.

Unlike some of us prodigals, however, he never forgot LA. He kept up with Irwin, who went on to create and design the spectacular Central Garden at the Getty Center, and he wrote more about other LA artists, notably Edward Kienholz, from the seminal scene that had once coalesced around the Ferus Gallery. He wrote about David Hockney, who had famously moved to LA. He found, in "a small nondescript storefront operation located along the main commercial drag of downtown Culver City," the Museum of Jurassic Technology, a mysterious only-

in-LA establishment that became the main topic and takeoff point for *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, possibly Ren's best-known book. It's a dizzying, nimble tour de force—a narrative meditation, if that's possible, on art, science, authenticity, and the imagination.

Then, in 1998, Ren wrote a piece about the unusual quality of the light in Los Angeles that made my scalp prickle repeatedly. He consulted Hockney, Irwin, astronomers, cinematographers, poets, architects. Their eloquence and quasi-theological debates about shadows and shadowlessness were enchanting and, to this long-displaced child of the San Fernando Valley, not at all arcane. Ren found a scientist of smog who broke down the visual effects of different-sized particles in the air, including a particle with the same diameter as the natural wavelength of sunlight, which causes even nearby mountain ranges to vanish on a sunny day. He described his grandfather, the Austrian émigré composer Ernst Toch, and his relationship to the gorgeousness of his patch of Southern California. He even called Vin Scully, the legendary radio announcer for the LA Dodgers, and got a long, phenomenal quote about the evening light in Chavez Ravine.

Now this was my LA, my hometown, but it was also a wholly new place, brought into being, brought into focus, by a playful, determined, passionate native son with a panoply of unusual gifts. It may seem trifling, a sidebar, to zero in exclusively on Ren's writing about LA. He has, after all, written widely about major world issues and history as it was being made, in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, South America, South Africa. He has organized and curated so many shows and conferences, brought together so many talented people, and encouraged so many struggling artists and writers, very much including myself. In fact, thinking of his teaching, his editing, his long and distinguished directing stints at the Chicago Humanities Festival and the New York Institute for the Humanities at NYU, it seems that his personal and intellectual generosity have probably had more impact on our cultural life than can ever be properly measured. But for me his patient, tender, inventive, multifaceted take on LA is the prototype for the delight he takes in the people and ideas he finds everywhere.

—William Finnegan

"Prepare to have your mind blown," Ren Weschler might tell you on your way over to his office. You will not be disappointed. He might have new magic dice or a film about outer space. There could be a poet visiting from a sparsely populated island in the Pacific or a physicist who has designed heart stents based on origami folding techniques. Last time I went to see Ren, the art historian Benjamin Binstock was there, presenting his theory that many paintings credited to Vermeer were in fact painted by Vermeer's daughter. A number of the drawings reproduced here, on pages 216 to 219, were done that day.

—Lauren Redniss

I joined the staff of the *New Yorker* in 1982, when I graduated from college. I was by quite a good stretch the youngest staff writer, and even though I had no experience of any other professional workplace, it was immediately apparent that it was both a grand and a slightly odd place to be at work. Grand because: turn a corner and you'd run into Pauline Kael or Jonathan Schell or Calvin Trillin or Ian Frazier or Jamaica Kincaid or John McPhee or George Trow or any one of the greatest essayists and reporters that ever there were. Odd because: well, where to begin. Mr. Shawn was the finest magazine editor America has ever produced, but he had his quirks, which over time seemed to have transmitted themselves to much of the rest of the staff.

One was that no one was ever to ask another writer what they were working on. This was held, somehow, to stifle the creative muse; that it might, like the groundhog seeing its shadow, scuttle back into the mental hole from which it had begun tentatively to emerge. And given the time scale on which *New Yorker* writers in those days tended to work, never mind six weeks: it might be six years, or maybe sixty, before the piece ever saw the light of day.

Having come straight from a college newspaper, and being the sort of person who had more than enough ideas and liked to try them out, this seemed to me insane. So I was very glad to find at least a few people who liked to talk. One, in fact, liked to talk at least as much as I did. That would be Ren. And what's more, he liked to talk about cool things other people were doing. He had an ego, I suppose, but what he really loved

was to describe what great artists or writers or scientists he had come across were up to. He hadn't yet become the cultural impresario charged with organizing great festivals of ideas, but he was already a finder, an enthusiast, a backer, a booster. He had—and I have never observed this in quite so literal a way before or since—a gleam in his eye when he described something that, say, Robert Irwin had done or said. He was a buttonholer—he clearly enjoyed the work that seemed a kind of painful ordeal to a lot of recluses along those halls.

I've known a great many writers who deeply enjoyed talking about their own work. But I've known very few who liked to talk about their subjects quite so much—who thought of other artists as their natural companions. Musicians, I think, are often capable of noncompetitive listening, but I've never known a writer as generous as Ren—he was born to write profiles, and then to bring his subjects together to meet each other, and learn from each other, and to go on to do more work. He is a one-man Chautauqua, and I can think of very little higher praise than that.

—Bill McKibben

Weschler's text commentaries on the visual works of Hockney and Ryman transform them into a species of comic-strip. These works can now be experienced as a series of discrete dramatic chapters with a generous human voice punctuating their otherwise mute presence. For me, Weschler's words elevate these works out of the art world into this world.

—Ben Katchor

Lawrence Weschler has been a consulting editor to my magazine, *The Threepenny Review*, for the vast majority of its thirty-three years, and in that capacity he has brought us a range of exciting new writers, running the gamut from Rachel Cohen to William T. Vollmann. (If these two, in particular, sound like familiar names to longtime *McSweeney's* readers, that may be because Ren has been a consulting editor there, as well. In fact, I think he can fairly claim to be the only person who embodies that exact position of intellectual overlap between the old Berkeley and the new San Francisco: you might think

of him, in this respect, as Ren the Venn.)

But at least as important to us as Ren's long-term consulting has been his own writing for the magazine. He has, in effect, been our Current Events man. As a quarterly, *Threepenny* often finds itself out of step with the teeming world of up-to-date information, but Ren, with his finger always eerily on the pulse of history, has repeatedly counteracted that tendency. Without sacrificing one iota of our literary standards, we have been able to print the words of a keen-eyed world reporter monitoring important events as they happen. In 1990, for instance, he wrote for us about the astonishing developments in Eastern Europe and the then-still-alive Soviet Union, making an analogy between the reawakening of those slumbering populations and Oliver Sacks's book *Awakenings*. (I wonder now if the German director of *Goodbye Lenin!*, a 2003 film premised on a very similar analogy, had actually read Ren's essay.) By the summer of 1991 he was already commenting dourly on the Gulf War: he was among the first to notice the connection between alienated technology and emotionally distanced warfare. And in 1994 we got his eyewitness report on the recent Los Angeles earthquake, rendered in his inimitably ironic style.

Even when Ren was writing for us about something else—the art of Ann Hamilton or Sharon Lockhart, the nature of scientific photography, his grandfather's musical career—a certain topicality gracefully emerged. For instance, his piece on his grandfather, Ernst Toch, a prominent Austrian-Jewish composer who wrote many serious pieces and also a funny song called "Popocatepetl," came to us upon the occasion of that volcano's latest eruption. Even when Ren looks firmly into the past, as he did in his contribution to our recent symposium about Breugel, he does so with a visceral, present-tense sense of what it means to stand in a museum *now*, looking at one or more of those ever-timely canvases.

For those of you who have never published Ren, let me say that a lot of blood gets spilled over his perfectionism. Sometimes it is Ren's blood; more often it is the editor's. I recall a pitched battle we had over a featured section on Helen Levitt, when Ren—unsatisfied with the selection of Levitt photos we had obtained, and wishing instead

to write about another—wanted me to go out and get that additional picture from her, complete with complicated rights and permissions. I balked, but in the end I gave in. (One usually does, with Ren.) And now, looking back through that old issue of the magazine, I am very glad he won, because the photograph he insisted on is the best of the lot. That's usually the way it is, with Ren. It just takes the rest of us a few decades to catch up.

—Wendy Lesser

Ren! That's how I think of him and what I call him now. It's how I heard other people refer to him in the years before I knew him—and it always bugged me. It also bugged or bugs me when I heard or hear people talk about Max (W. G.) Sebald, Sasha (Aleksandar) Hemon, and Caz (Caryl) Phillips. Even if you know the books well, the author's nickname (or diminutive or whatever it is) makes you feel excluded from some quietly advertised but widespread intimacy. People probably felt similarly irritated, in the early twentieth century, when mention was made of Tom (Eliot) and Morgan (Forster). Needless to say, I never miss a chance of referring to Hemon as Sasha and Ren as Ren now that I've met them.

I'd first read Weschler before I had any idea that he was Ren. It was in 1987 or 1988, I was working part-time for a publisher in London and was asked to consider a submission called *Shapinsky's Karma, Boggs's Bill, and Other True-Life Tales*. It was such an obviously brilliant book that I recommended we publish it. This advice was not acted on, but, looking back, I struggle to think of a single recommendation of mine that did make its way into print. I think lobbying from me became an easily decoded warning of impending commercial failure. Still, this exercise in powerlessness had the useful effect of lodging the name and work of Lawrence Weschler in my mind. And so, years later, when the collection *Vermeer in Bosnia* was in the works, I jumped at the chance to blurb it as a way of making good that earlier impotent enthusiasm. What struck me was the character and energy of the author's intelligence. Reading certain writers one gets the impression that their brains only come to life when they're behind their typewriters (and sometimes not

even then). With Weschler I got the distinct sense of a brain that never turned off, that was fizzing, buzzing, and joining dots—"only connect," as Morgan famously put it—noticing stuff and making the world seem a more interesting place even when he was fast asleep.

This impression of crackling intellectual energy turned out to hold true of the man too when I finally met him—when he went from Lawrence to Ren—in 2006, at a conference he'd organized in New York called "Comedies of Fair U$e." It was about copyright and sounded like a total bore but because I am a serious professional writer in the sense that I will do pretty much anything to get out of the house I went anyway. I'm glad I did, because the tacit subject turned out to be nothing less than the nature of creativity in the twenty-first century, an investigation of the ways in which something assumed to protect the rights of artists—intellectual copyright—can end up serving the interests of corporate capital, thereby hobbling the inventiveness it is supposed to encourage. It was one of the most intellectually stimulating weekends of my life—and tremendous fun, too. Ren wasn't just a writer, he was an impresario, curator, performer, and connector—not only of ideas but people. His writing, I realized, was a sort of side effect, offshoot, or aspect of this larger phenomenon of Ren-ness.

He is also, I see now, his own worst enemy, a victim of his prodigious talents and enthusiasms. His standing would be more assured if he had confined himself more narrowly, if he'd only done the art stuff, if he'd only done *this* rather than doing *that* and a multitude of others as well. The abundance and diversity of the many segments of his work—that ongoing cabinet of wonders—perversely and unfairly diminish the value of the whole. Needless to say, this abundance, recklessness, and multiplicity are exactly the things his admirers value so highly. They're all compressed into—that's what we mean by—that monosyllable Ren.

—Geoff Dyer

Ren sat at my kitchen table, eating a bowl of black bean soup. He was talking about a recent convergence—where two seemingly unrelated events come to rhyme with one another. This one dealt with two trees, on two different continents, that had both been victims of homophobia,

or homophobia-phobia. He gestured emphatically as the winter sunlight lit his hands like two birds unable to settle on a branch together.

—Bill Morrison

The portrait on the following pages places Ren in a kind of camera obscura, standing in the beam of a pinhole lens. The projected picture is the interior of the Earth as imagined by the seventeenth-century Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher. Kircher was one of the preeminent intellectuals of his time; music, biology, geology, geography, Egyptology, history, philosophy, and physics were only a few areas of his accomplishment. It is no surprise that Weschler's personal stationery bears images from Kircher's work.

The cat's cradle in Weschler's hands is made out of collaged strips of longhand notes taken while conducting the reporting for *Vermeer in Bosnia*, his account of the events in 1979 that led to the Solidarity movement. The cradle mimics the pattern of light rays as they pass through a pinhole camera, (as discovered by Ibn al-Haytham in the eleventh century). The Arabic symbols in red denote the action of the beams. Ren holds the cradle in such a way that it connects the light of the exterior world (through the pinhole/lens) with the chamber of the interior (underground/brain). The paper "rays" and the fragments of Earth projected onto his body cause him to serve as a bridge between inner and outer realities. Ren's tie is decorated with the Tree of Life (*Etz HaChayim*) from the *Kabbalah*, which maps the connection between mind, body, and spirit.

—Riva Lehrer

FOLLOWING PAGES: *"Totems and Familiars: Lawrence Weschler, P.T. Barnum of the Mind," by Riva Lehrer, page 210; posters from four of Lawrence Weschler's events at the New York Institute for the Humanities, page 212; "Two Trees" (portrait of Ren Weschler) by Bill Morrison, page 214; drawings by Lauren Redniss, page 216; Ben Katchor's cover drawing for Weschler's* A Wanderer in a Perfect City*, page 220; "Lawrence Weschler," 1989, oil on canvas, 16½" × 10½", © David Hockney, page 222.*

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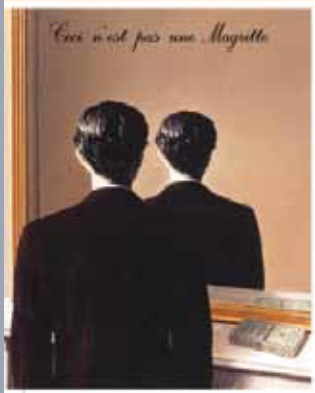

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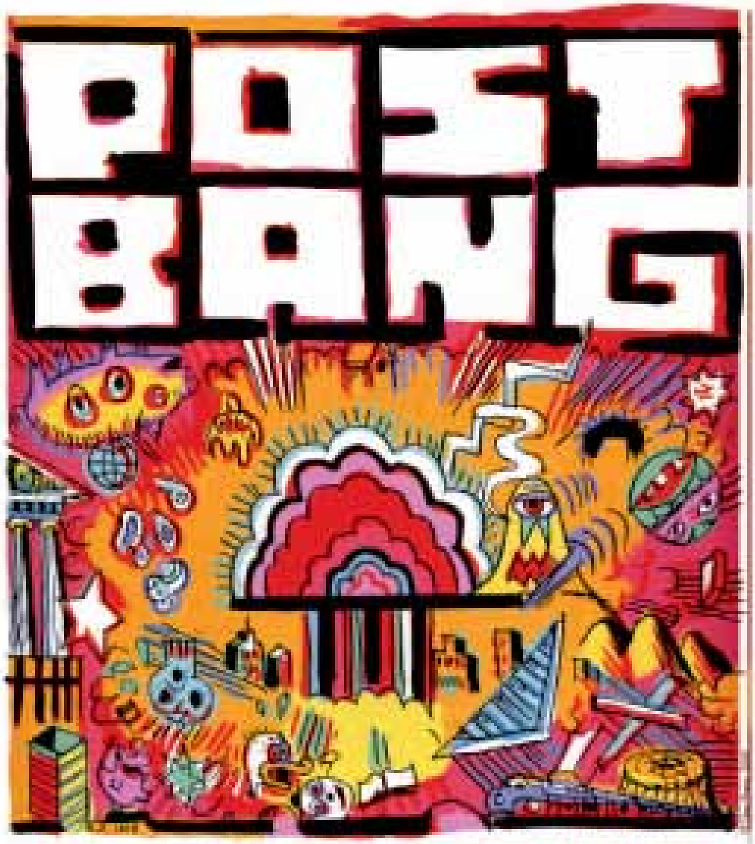

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11:00–12:15 **COMICS AND CANON FORMATION**
Rob Storr (moderator), John Carlin and Dan Nadel

1:30 – 2:45 **COMICS AND KID'S LIT**
Françoise Mouly (moderator), Lisa von Drasek, Leonard Marcus, Mo Willems and Sara Varon

3:00 – 4:15 **COMICS AND THE LITERARY ESTABLISHMENT**
Jeet Heer (moderator), Hillary Chute, David Hajdu, and Douglas Wolk

5:30 – 6:45 **COMICS AND THE INTERNET**
Kent Worcester (moderator), Sarah Boxer, Shannon Gerrity, Hope Larson, and Siva Vaidhyanathan

7:00 – 8:00 **ART SPIEGELMAN** and **GARY PANTER** in conversation

8:15 – 9:30 Hillary Chute interviews **LYNDA BARRY**

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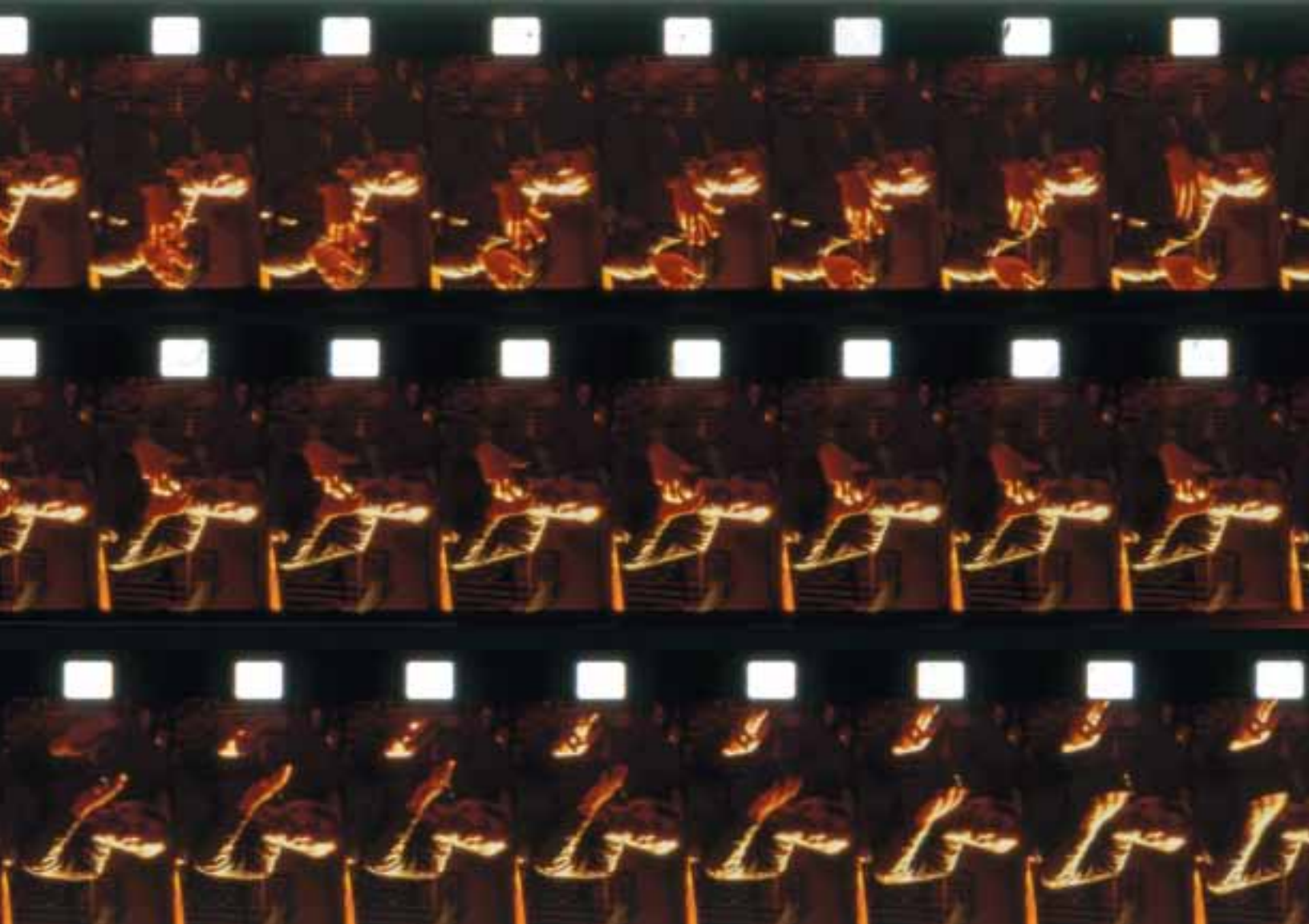


EASTONIA


1950
PENGUIN
FICTION
ALBATROSS
SALE

IMPOSSIBLE THINGS BEFORE BREAKFAST

OR, THE MAN WHO WAS THIRSTY

by JONATHAN LETHEM

THE FIRST INKLING, the first jot of the connect-the-dot contour indicating the presence of a clandestine Megamind lurking a step or possibly ten thousand steps ahead of yours, is announced in the fact that when you stumble upon the storefront art-installation-museum, that alchemical gnomic curational dream-zone devised for your secret enjoyment, which is outposted in a Los Angeles backwater where none of the natives even seem to know what you're talking about when you say you're going to visit, some other guy has *already written a book about it*. You could almost resent him for that.

Impartiality is a pompous name for indifference, which is an elegant name for ignorance. The way to love anything is to realize that it may be lost. The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love

our enemies; probably because generally they are the same people. I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought; and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.

You drop what you really ought to be doing because he told you not to miss today's thing that he can't quite name. After the scheduled presentation in which he unveils the requisite fifteen or twenty brilliancies, and everyone's sated and exhausted except him, he pulls you and a couple of other idlers into his office because you've got to see this, it's really cool, never mind all that other stuff, look at this YouTube video. The clouds at high altitude, crashing against the mountaintop, when accelerated at just the right rate, turn out to be a kind of gaseous surf, waves crashing on a rocky coast. Everything is everything.

No time for transitions, we're on to the next. No time for introductions or small talk, so let's pretend we've already met and we already know what we're talking about and we're actually deep in the middle of this inquiry, not pausing to nibble around its edges—okeedoke?

You're doing things you never did before: debating copyright with a federal judge live onstage in a crowded auditorium, then reading a Donald Barthelme story aloud on the same stage to a scattering of dedicated stragglers an hour later. Megamind's grabbed hold of you again, and you like it, you like it.

The secret's in the corrosion on these copper canisters. The fuzz on the dice. The words said that weren't yours to say but mean more coming from you than from the guy who thought them up. The sample, the glitch, the edge of the coin. The scribble and scrawl revealed when you blow the cross-hatching up to a suitable resolution. The space between the pictures, not the pictures themselves. God is in the gutter. You see

more from the valley than the peak. Seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees. You Seymour, Me Julian Jaynes. I hear somebody talking, bicameral don't see anybody here? You talkin' to me?

The idea of being reasonable, to me that's the real jewel in the human crown. And part of being reasonable is being responsible. To think something through without the compromises of personal ambition or personal bias. Ideas are very potent elements that can radically change your life. Nothing is the same once you accept an idea, and you can never return to the place you left.

"Alice laughed. 'There's no use trying,' she said: 'one can't believe impossible things.'

'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour each day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'"

PASSION PIECES

by PETER VERMEERSCH

ONE DAY BACK in the early 1980s I was marveling at a sticker on our corkboard in the kitchen. Pinned down between random notes and shopping lists was a shiny slip of white paper with one word written on it, hastily so it seemed, in red letters. Curiously, one of those letters carried a flag. The word was *Solidarność*.

"What does that mean?" I asked my mother.

"We have to support the people of Poland," she said solemnly.

I was nine. The only thing I knew about Poland was that it was far away, somewhere in the shadow of the Soviet Union.

But I would soon know more: Poland had started to emerge from the anonymity of the Eastern bloc. All over Europe, as in my home in Belgium, people were following the events in Poland with growing fascination and concern. International news headlines carried word of one of the most efficient military coups of the postwar period. On

December 13, 1981, General Jaruzelski had proclaimed martial law, thereby effectively crushing the revolution of Solidarność, a trade union with ten million members, and turning its leaders—ironically, because some of their activism had relied on Catholic imagery—into martyrs. The entire leadership of the movement, including former electrician Lech Wałęsa, was now in jail or under house arrest. The regime had demonstrated how encompassing its power still was. Poland was a gripping black-and-white story of good against evil, where, for the moment at least, evil prevailed.

Or did it? The military government's repression may in fact have been a sign of its weakness. As it happens, it was also in Poland that, through the introduction of partly free elections in June 1989 and the ensuing meltdown of the Communist power structures, a situation arose that would foreshadow the demise of the entire Eastern Bloc. In 1990, Wałęsa won the Polish presidency, and the story of Solidarity could now be told as a biblical tale of Passion: Christ-like suffering leading to ultimate victory. Clearly, Poland was a country to watch. This was a place where things changed overnight, where white turned into black, strength into weakness, electricians into martyrs, and martyrs into presidents. Where history happened.

This past July, I visited Warsaw. My first trip to Poland had been in 1990—as a first-year student of Eastern European Studies, I had wanted to see some of the political developments firsthand—and I lived in the Polish capital in 1996 and 1997. But now, I was in Poland with another purpose: to read a book. Or to be precise: to re-read it. I've always loved Susan Sontag's dictum: "Literature is what you should re-read." In my bag I carried Lawrence Weschler's *The Passion of Poland: From Solidarity Through the State of War*.

I remembered from reading it the first time, some ten years ago, that the book functions as a brilliant lens through which one can clearly see all the ways Poland was affected by the experience of having lived through the extraordinary Solidarity movement and Jaruzelski's coup. *The Passion of Poland* consists of the essays Weschler had written for the *New Yorker* while in Poland between May 1981 and September 1983, and it's still one of the most detailed accounts of that period available.

I often recommend it to students of political science at the university where I teach now, not only because it's about Eastern Europe in those crucial years of change, but also because it's a skillful study of democracy in the making.

Weschler's method is that of an anthropologist of everyday political life: he sticks around and listens, and from seemingly random bits of conversation with a highly diverse group of people he is able to draw a detailed portrait of the mechanics of popular resistance. After a few days of wandering around at the First National Congress of Solidarity Delegates in September 1981, for example, he provides the following description of the double bind that Solidarity is facing. "Ten million people belong to Solidarity," Weschler writes, "because it is democratic and participatory—but if ten million people were really to start behaving democratically, if differences over fundamental issues were allowed to lead to the formation of hardened factions, then the union's very existence could come into jeopardy." This was the sort of dilemma that other democracy movements would grapple with around the world in the years to come.

In Poland, there was already a lot of uncertainty associated with democratic change at these early stages. Weschler observes it in detail, although he could not have known where things were going. "It feels like I've been writing on quicksand," he admits about halfway through the book, at the moment when martial law is about to be imposed. In order to make sense of what was happening around him, he records meticulously what he sees, and to interpret what he sees he relies on what should perhaps be called his visual intuition. On the final pages of the book, for example, Weschler zooms in on a poignant bit of graffiti in the streets of Warsaw, the logo CDN, which stands for Ciąg Dalszy Nastąpi and means, "to be continued." Weschler writes: "These are the initials one finds, for example, at the ends of installments of serialized writing. The Western press has a tendency to focus on news stories during climactic developments and to fade out during the interim—the long, slow periods when revolutions gestate—so that we may expect Poland to be receding, further and further, into the back pages of our news journals during the months ahead. We should not, however, be

misled. The saga of Poland is definitely CDN." His intuition was right.

I've always admired Weschler's book for its precise observations, but that's not the only reason why every once in a while I feel compelled to take it from the shelves and read it again. What makes this book, in Susan Sontag's definition of the word, *Literature*, is its meandering narrative, its elegant flow, its eagerness to tell, and, above all, its ability to let its reader, this reader, see the world around him differently, each and every time he looks up from the pages.

Early July in Warsaw was calm. European Championship soccer had just ended, summer holidays were beginning, and many shops were closed—but luckily not The Gentle Barbarian. A small bookstore and café in the neighborhood of Mariensztat, it is a nice place to sit and read, and it always carries a decent collection of Polish art books and graphic novels. Poland has a rich tradition of animated film, and I remember that a few years ago the store hosted an evening with Piotr Dumała, the most impressive Polish animator around, known for his film adaptations of Kafka's diaries and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. His technique is as unusual as it is effective: he draws by scratching white lines into surfaces of blackened plaster. I quickly browsed through The Gentle Barbarian's current collection, sat down with a cup of coffee and a notebook, and thumbed through Weschler's book, which, it occurred to me now, had brought to life the black-and-white world of Cold War Poland in much the same way as Dumała's animations had brought movement to images etched into that black plaster.

The first words I wrote down in my notebook were *visual arts*. From the very first pages of *The Passion of Poland*, it's striking how much importance Weschler attaches to the role of visual arts: films, drawings, street art, animation, posters. Take his meditation on the logo of the Solidarity trade union and how that was, he felt, the perfect expression of the movement's political predicament. The logo was designed by two graphic artists during the August 1980 strike at the Gdańsk shipyards, and immediately it was recognizable to everyone everywhere. But what did it stand for? The word *Solidarność* was unquestionably a reference

to the country's history of labor activism. But if you looked carefully, so Weschler tells us, you could also see that the letters were drawn in such a way that they looked like a crowd, so there was the suggestion of mass protest. The red and the white surely referred to Polish national identity. But perhaps the red was also blood. In 1968, 1970, and 1976, previous attempts at organizing mass protests against the authorities had ended in deadly violence. Weschler writes: "Everyone agreed the letters formed a crowd, but part of the time people saw the crowd as surging forward, led by the *S* and the *C*; while much of the time, people saw the letters standing around, milling, the *A* and the *R* leaning into each other, waiting to see what was going to happen."

Such details are important; for Weschler the visual aspect of a political movement is not some sort of accidental byproduct; it must stand at the center of our attention, along with political stories and the vignettes of everyday life. This book brings across, perhaps for the first time, that important Weschlerian insight that colors all of his later work: that many things that are primarily thought of in terms of aesthetics—be it a logo, a picture, a poem, or any other work of artistic representation—have strong ethical and political implications.

The aesthetics of Poland's opposition movement helped to form some of the country's history. In particular, as Weschler learned from reading Halina Bortnowska's essay on Solidarity, the signs and logos of Solidarity expressed the "subjectivity" of Polish society, by which was meant the capacity of ordinary Polish people to act as the subjects of their own history and not passively remain the *object* of the history of the official rulers of the country. Poland in the 1980s was a place where certain historical questions were suddenly and forcefully opened up for re-examination. What did it mean, for example, to belong to the Polish nation? The Communist leaders, even though they had secured their power in various ways, were incessantly concerned with seeking legitimacy from the population, and did so through the use of national symbols: the state, they argued, is the people. But with the arrival of Solidarity they found themselves trapped in a competition with the opposition, who also, perhaps even better, understood the strategic value of articulating national belonging and did so through all sorts

of newly designed symbols of their own. The nation is Solidarity, they claimed. Hence the red and white of the logo.

I wrote down the word *subject* in my notebook, looked up at the posters in the bookstore (film posters, no political ones), and was struck by something else. By devoting so much attention to logos, graffiti, stamps, films, and other visual expressions of political subjectivity, Weschler had not only found a useful way of analyzing Poland in the 1980s, he had also discovered an approach that would inform much of his work to come. *The Passion of Poland*, which is of course on every page a work of political reportage, is at the same time a broad and ambitious literary project that studies people's capacity to act in unexpected, courageous, and creative ways. A few months earlier, I had interviewed Weschler about his writing in his office in New York City. He said, "I used to distinguish between the things that I did as either political tragedies or cultural comedies, but in fact they were all what I called 'passion pieces': they were about people or places that caught fire." In *The Passion of Poland*, he had begun to realize he was "reporting on what it is that comes alive when a place—any place—comes alive, and then what it is that gets repressed when a place, any place, gets repressed." That kind of reporting finds its continuation in his essays about Vermeer, Polanski, and Spiegelman, or in his reflections on human rights activism, politics, and poetry (Weschler wrote terrific pieces about the poets Wisława Szymborska, Czesław Miłosz, and Zbigniew Herbert). Underlying a broad range of specific concerns is a universal story of people finding their subjectivity. And of course, Weschler himself, too, is a protagonist of that story. *The Passion of Poland* is not only about a population catching fire, but also about an American reporter catching fire while writing about them.

Later that afternoon, I felt it was time to look up from the book and compare two Polands: the one described by Weschler and the country around me. I decided to follow Weschler's method of study, by which I mean: I took a walk. I left The Gentle Barbarian and wandered through the center of Warsaw. It was a humid day; it felt like the rain would come soon. I passed by the neatly renovated buildings in a street

called New World (the buildings really look new), by that strange and out-of-place artificial palm tree in the middle of Aleje Jerozolimskie (a contemporary artwork by Joanna Rajkowska), and by the old House of the Party (not an art piece but a Communist building from the early 1950s, which for a while in the 1990s was home to the Warsaw Stock Exchange). To me such architectural rhymes and accidental ironies are the poetry of Warsaw. "The country is its own best poet, it is always singing itself," Weschler wrote in 1981; it was still true now. I walked farther to the other side of the Palace of Culture and Science, that gray Stalinist wedding cake at the very heart of the city, only to wander off—was I now actively searching for another one of those accidental ironies?—into the prewar Jewish quarter of town. I say irony because, after all: in my bag was a book whose title invoked the overwhelming presence of the Catholic tradition in Poland, written by someone whose Jewish grandparents had fled Central Europe in the 1930s.

Along the way I kept thinking about how different Warsaw must have looked in the past. Even in the early 1980s it must have been another world. I looked at some of the graffiti and logos on the walls and found a chaotic mosaic of tags and slogans and frivolous colorings, all in all not unusual for a contemporary European capital. While the Solidarity logos of the 1980s were small and sober, a lot of the current graffiti seems to have spiraled out of control; it covers large surfaces, shouts out its messages loud and clear, but somehow does not have the same sense of urgency, or the same power, as it did thirty years ago. But then, how could it? It's hard to recall the extremity of the political climate of that time. Weschler manages to convey it with an anecdote:

> One afternoon, I was talking with a village priest, a fairly radical, longtime activist. When our conversation came to its end, like all the others, I asked, "So what do you think is going to happen?" He leaned forward and quietly said, "A miracle," rolling his eyes toward Heaven and smiling. I wrote the word down in my notebook and then leaned forward and asked, "Like what?" He leaned even closer, his face now a mixture of anticipation and serenity, and whispered, confidentially, "The Third World War."

Weschler tells this almost as if it's a joke. Almost. It's not a joke, of course, and he knows it. He takes it seriously. That's the only way to get to the reality of a place. The outrageous remarks, the chats in the streets, the jokes, the irrational statements—all that is just as important a source of information as films, music, and graffiti. Everything is a potential source. Everything matters.

As I walked I saw a few graffiti symbols that referred to the times of Solidarity, but their meaning has blurred. The Solidarity logo, and other signs associated with the opposition movement of the 1980s, now frequently figure in electoral campaigns, in particular in those of conservative groups like the Law and Justice Party. The images had perhaps always been somewhat nationalistic—always red and white, always bearing references to Poland's history—but now they're often used to buttress a political agenda that is far removed from both the historical context in which they were first used and from the aims of the original struggle of the Solidarity trade union. That these symbols are still capable of mobilizing a public is to some extent related to the images themselves, which still look powerful, but also to the clever ways in which contemporary politicians try to simplify the political landscape of the present. They try to suggest that the dichotomy between "us" (the people) and "them" (the state), well known from anti-Communist protests, is still valid. Some sections of the conservative electorate may still be persuaded to cast a vote for politicians who claim to be "against the state." For the foreign visitor, the effect is disorienting. The old symbols have become overburdened with too much history, and one can easily be confused about which political views exactly they represent.

By now I was entering what used to be the walled-in Jewish ghetto, though there was nothing left to suggest that the ghetto had once been there. I saw the same new buildings as elsewhere in town, the same busy roads. No doubt still affected by the Weschlerian tendency toward free association, I was now thinking about how different the Warsaw of the 1980s must have looked from the Warsaw of the 1930s. But then I entered Ulica Próżna, and there, suddenly, I had a glimpse

into how it must have been. Próżna is the only street of the former Jewish ghetto where the original prewar brownstone blocks have been preserved. *Preserved* is not quite the right word: the houses had been empty for years and had fallen into disrepair—with facades crumbling to pieces, with broken windows, with pigeons flying out and bricks falling. I had walked down this street before, and I had never been sure what to make of its decay. Letting a street fall to pieces was perhaps not such a bad way to commemorate the disappearance of a population, to deplore the loss of an essential part of Polish national history, of a whole world destroyed. Would it have been better to build a monument in remembrance of the Jewish inhabitants of this street, and for the rest simply restore the houses to contemporary standards and go on with life? Others had answered the question for me: as I walked farther I noticed that such decisions had already been made. One side of the street was behind scaffolding. There was also a small new coffee bar, a lonely spot still, a single clear patch on a dark and dirty window, but also a glimpse of things to come. The young woman in the light, flowery dress behind the counter smiled when I entered. "They are going to renovate the entire street," she said.

I sat down in that coffee bar to read some more pages of *The Passion of Poland*. Outside a thunderstorm began. What was it Weschler had written about Jewish Warsaw? Like me now, Weschler had walked around with a book in his bag, in his case *Shosha*, a novel by Isaac Bashevis Singer, who had lived on these very streets before the Second World War. Like me, Weschler compared two Polands: one described in a book and the other the country around him. "I sat reading Singer," he writes, "and wondered in what sense one could even construe this to be the place he had been writing about. Virtually nothing of the Jews remains; all that persists—strangely unaltered by their disappearance—is the surrounding anti-Semitism."

Poland had once been a place of many cultures, but, by 1981, it wasn't anymore. And today the streets around Próżna, Chłodna, Leszno, and Krochmalna still shock for what's not there. Weschler described the neighborhood in 1981: a playground for kids and streets lined with gray concrete blocks. Now one could walk by those same blocks and

see the children of those children playing on the same playground. One could try to do as Weschler did then: sit on a bench, observe the otherness in the familiar, be the gentle barbarian asking seemingly naïve questions.

Could diversity ever be restored in this place, as the buildings in Ulica Próżna were now being restored? Could history be rebuilt?

Re-reading those pages in the café, the rain outside coming down heavily, I felt that Weschler's book gives an experience not only of the overpowering quality of people's creativity and courage, but also of melancholy. And maybe melancholy is something that echoes throughout his other work, too. I should check the next time I take another volume from the shelves and re-read it. In the case of *The Passion of Poland* I see it like this: the book reads like an elegy for two Polands. They're both places one can pine for. One is a country of resistance against totalitarianism, a place that was once there, and isn't there anymore, and in some strange, contradictory way, one can feel sad about that. ("One can get homesick for things mattering," Weschler writes.) The other is the multicultural, democratic, tolerant, and open Poland that once could have existed, perhaps never really existed, but one day, just maybe, will exist.

MIDRASHIM ON SOME OF REB REN'S WRITINGS

by ANDREI CODRESCU

> We long to lose ourselves in stories—that's who we are. Well-crafted stories transport us, allow us to soar. One day perhaps, things being close enough for all practical purposes, to soar right over the Uncanny Valley, to traverse the Cusan Divide? I don't know, could be.
>
> —from Lawrence Weschler's "Uncanny Valley: On the Digital Animation of the Face" (2002)

REN DOESN'T REALLY believe this: he serves up the conventional ending of an assignment-essay, then hedges with a wise, "I don't know, could be." This colloquial and rabbinical gesture of ending a lesson by combing a skeptical beard with four fingers of one hand grows more pronounced as we leave the computer-generated anxieties of the fin-de-siècle behind. Already in the last

essay in *Uncanny Valley: And Other Adventures in the Narrative* (2011), he has revised his view of stories: he's still asking "who knows?" but from within an opposing contention:

> …maybe it was the jokes that are the true living entities on this third planet from the sun, and we, the humans, maybe merely the endless flowing medium in which they abide.

Contained in this passage, in addition to a novel theory of language, is a brief history of the fall of the Iron Curtain and the revelation by Kundera and others that jokes were the true common culture of all the countries of the ex-Soviet fiefdom, because they were the tolerated form of dissent. After the fall of the Curtain, jokes continued to travel spore-like, but with a more pronounced Yiddish flavor that connected them to Hassidic mysticism. "The Belgian Army Joke Come to Life" that Adam Michnik whispers into Ren's ear in Cape Town, South Africa, is the Joke restored to its roots in theology, but grounded in the political context that is another of Ren's constant themes.

This is the offhand remark that concludes the book:

> God invented Man, the wise man says, because he loved stories. And maybe the other way around: Man invented God for the same reason. Or maybe Narrative invented both of us: couldn't do without us. Hallelujah. Amen.

Here once again is Reb Ren's abrupt way of finishing a lecture (or essay), without the satisfaction of having said (or discovered) what he *really* thought about the matter.

The twentieth century ended with this equation: God = Logos, therefore humans are circuit breakers in the endless flow of Logos. Or, as Bucky Fuller put it, we are "information-gathering" devices in an "eternally generative universe." Ren doesn't subscribe to this proposition either, but like the good debater he is, he feels obliged to synthesize the century's commonplace wisdom. Only his "Hallelujah" and "Amen" hint at his frustration with this (still) unshakeable assumption.

Ren's questions about the "uncanny valley" that divides our reality from computer-generated worlds, are slight feints—they contain real anxiety. Is what we call reality only an older virtuality? Is the unknown and maybe unknowable author of our world a better storyteller than the animators of new cyber worlds? Is the difference between humans and robots only a matter of technical complexity, or is there a soul somewhere, impossible to replicate? What is language? Though worded with seemingly the same intentions, and in the same literary-critical idiom, these are not the same questions asked by Borges and other literary postmodernists; Ren's questions are premodern. He would like to know why making the Golem was wrong. It's an ethical inquiry. In pure Borgesian terms, making golems is what we have to do, an absurd *imitatio dei* that resolves in aesthetic pleasure. Ren's politically engaged Jewish G-d is not so much into "narrative." He's into justice. Ren pays his respects to narrative, but he suspects the "uncanny valley" to be ethically dreadful.

In his earlier *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder* (1996), Ren foresaw the incoming virtualities of the next decade in a more benign light. He admired David Wilson, the creator of Los Angeles's Museum of Jurassic Technology, both for his ability to create intricate and almost-believable fantastic objects, and for doing so deadpan, without dispelling the illusion for people who believe or half-believe his inventions. Ren admired David's lack of irony, and made sure, in his own story about MJT's Wilson, to keep the suspense going. Is it real or is it not? It was a comfortable question for Ren, an intelligent writer conversant with pop art and great cities' constant play with shifting identities and intricate hustles. In New York, the city that saw the transition of the drag queen (is it or isn't it a woman?) into pop art, and Warhol's deadpan translate into big money (is it or isn't it art?), the grounds for the question had been laid by the wartime European avant-garde-in-exile; in Los Angeles, the same (or almost) refugee mix had an even greater reach through the movies. It was a big delight for Ren to discover Wilson's mechanistic could-be-true wonders in the city of movies. Movies told stories that were simpler and more accessible to the down-to-earth garage-tinkering practices of middle America than the intellectually anguished abstractions of New York. Here, in Wilson's

museum, were horned humans, for chrissakes (to coin a geegosh), who were more purely Jewish, pre-Freud devils, Golems without shame. The storytelling of movies or of kitsch (no matter how clever) was good to enjoy, like folk tales, marketplace magic, the circus. Ren discovered (or rediscovered) America. The suspension of disbelief was understood: it was the obvious basis for enjoying the show.

Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder is Ren's most enjoyable book; his pleasure in the physical mechanics of creating a fabulous illusion found the perfect storytelling style. The reflexive combing of the doubting beard was unnecessary in the agora, though doubts persisted. Soon enough, *Shrek*, *The Truman Show*, Alvy Ray Smith, and *Avatar* would show up. The innocence of the "why not?" world, which had always been understood by irreverent spectators to be "entertainment," farcical, crude, and liberating, would make room for the pretentions of another kind of virtuality, a "competitor" to "reality."

(I'm quoting here an early founder of VR, whom I interviewed around the same time, 1995–1996, pursuing more or less the same line of inquiry as Ren's. I also discovered the Museum of Jurassic Technology around the same time Ren did, and was thrilled by it, but I think that I was a lot more spooked. I'd been anxiously watching the computer revolution, too, and I knew that MJT wasn't just pop surrealism, but also a foreshadowing of things to come. The apocalyptic always had a seat at the table in California, but until VR became technically possible, no one was sure who exactly was sitting there.)

"It can get downright weird." (That's the first sentence of "Mr. Wilson in Belgrade" from *Uncanny Valley*.) *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder* was translated into Serbian for a Belgrade publisher that was also publishing a translation of a book by Fabrizio Rondolini, an Italian who'd written a biography of Madelena Delani, who was (or was she?) an invention of David Wilson's. Perfectly postmodern, right, but just as the book came out, a planned in-the-flesh meeting of the three people who fictionalized each other (Wilson, Weschler, and Rondolini) was canceled because NATO started bombing Belgrade. So much for the delightful part of the postmodern game: reality had the last word. It's only Ren's humble genius that makes this story more than exhibitionist

hubris; he turned it instead into a morality tale about the dangers of mistaking one's mind-blowing coincidences for universal truths. Maybe. (My turn with the beard.) The way Ren tells it, the anecdote is actually a story about memory and forgetting. The memory of all that postwar existential European, Jewish anguish was just about to vanish in the pastel-colored forgetting of postmodern Los Angeles, when… Here, another question rears its freaky dragon head (No. 1 redux):

> And indeed, now there it came looming into view: an austere blockwide low-slung hive of graphite-gray monoliths, monoface rectangular plinths arrayed in a regular perpendicular grid over gently undulating terrain—over three thousand of them spread over nearly five acres, some (near the perimeter) as low as a foot and a half, some further into the hive, where the terrain fell into some of its deeper undulations, as high as ten feet, the entire expanse crisscrossed by narrow paths between the parallel rows of vaguely pitched concrete plinths, paths that veritably beckoned those passing by on the busy city sidewalks above into this uncanny maze of vaguely determinate remembrance.
>
> —from "A Berlin Epiphany" (2006), in *Uncanny Valley*

It's a freakishly factual sentence that lineates with chilling exactness Peter Eisenman's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin. It's a sentence that describes a monument, but could also be a scale rendition of the Nazi mind, and a self-critique of Ren's own surrender to fantasy. It's a merciless sentence that the rest of the essay tries its best to mitigate, ameliorate, soften. The living city of Berlin goes about its noisy joyous present all around and, as it turns out, when playful schoolchildren invade it, inside the monument to the unimaginable, as well. It's a sentence that divides, like a ghost Berlin Wall, artistic intention (and the use of it by the innocent) from historical reality. That history has never been forgotten, by Ren or any thoughtful person, but this artistic expression of it makes it at least partially possible to replace the anxieties history has left behind. And that's as it should be; life must continue. Ren makes a powerful argument for this in "Life Against

Death" (1997), a reflection on Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, a painting seen in a number of grim historical contexts that is, in the end,"about living." He goes on to explain that "it's not, as we are sometimes given to recalling, a morbid dwelling upon death but rather a celebration, a defiant affirmation of life and liveliness and vitality generated, as it happens, at a moment when the world was choked with death and dying."

Reb Ren's pendulum swings back and forth between the facts of history and the necessities of forgetting and fabulation. At its core it's an old quandary, but Ren has always insisted on finding new ways to look at the blackbird. Some of the old fables, he notes, have become real. The Golem is barely a metaphor anymore: it's about as close as my laptop. The moral attached to it is not the same, however. In sixteenth-century Prague, the Golem was supposed to defend the Jews against the anti-Semites. In 2012, I don't know… it's supposed to shine your shoes in the morning and be a first responder, or maybe its job is to make more golems. And the job of those golems may be to bomb the shit out of people without golems who hate you.

By 2006's *Everything That Rises: A Book of Convergences*, "to soar right over the Uncanny Valley" has become more suspect, while "I don't know, maybe," has, possibly, become the subject. (Note that my "possibly" also harbors a tiny doubt as to whether one—anyone—can conduct the most focused investigation in the midst of essayistic commerce. My sense of Ren's integrity and genuine (re)search is total, but I do wonder at times if the *New Yorker*'s fact-checkers and grammar orderlies haven't removed some of the accumulated disorder that would naturally occur; I mean, you don't tramp in your boots through the bloody mud of Bosnia and come up with perfectly perfect sentences… Okay, that's just the downtown me having a little problem with the uptown Ren.)

Can there be an ethical probe into virtuality? Ren's writing about art and artists answers that question with a resounding: "Yes. Maybe." If Ren's ethical inquiry was prompted solely by history, there would be no "Maybe." A secular ethics is sufficient for any reader of the past, but Ren keeps a channel open to G-d. Paraphrasing his beloved Nicholas de Cusa, he writes:

> One could never achieve knowledge of God, or, for that matter, of the wholeness of existence, through the systematic accretion of more and more factual knowledge.
>
> —from "We Join Spokes Together in a Wheel," in *Everything That Rises*

Ren is still trying to understand, if not reconcile, the divine (symbolized by the circle) and the proliferation of historical horrors (symbolized by increasingly complex polygons within the circle). This is the Cusan paradox: the circle becomes more distant the more multifaceted polygons one tries to fill the circle with. Virtual worlds may be the perfect objects that try to imitate Creation (the circle) but do no more than increase the distance to it.

At the start of internet virtuality, "making a world" seemed close to the original act of Creation. Why not? If Wilson or Alvy Ray Smith could make a new animal or a humanlike animation, weren't they close to the great mystery? Weren't they telling the same kind of story? Any narrative needs the requisite act of faith, the quasi-religious reflex that doesn't correspond with anything historical or scientific except, maybe… the brain. From suspension of disbelief to neurology there are bridges: Irony (Ren is a master ironist) and the Ideal (Justice). Neither Irony nor its nonironic opposite, Justice, is a straightforward link from Belief to the Brain, but some artists provide a workable simulacrum that resides easily in all possible realities. The Fringe events caused by Art, and the unexpected juxtapositions that only Irony can deal with, are what Ren targets over and over. Of course, his writing experience makes some images more apropos than others. Ren's search for angel flesh in art (the in extremis position of the captive human), finds and nails many traces of it. When he does find a live paradox, he knows that he is close to the divine, but he either argues it in aesthetic terms or throws it back to… the brain.

Oy, Reb! I made a typo. (Hit *b* instead of *n*, fixed it, and then decided to keep both—hence, "Reb Ren.") You can take the Reb out of Prague but you can't take the Golem from Ren. Ren takes the Golem from Reb. Ren flirts with the Reb but doesn't consummate. This is

useful and interesting and good, but is it real? I mean, is it real Now? Does the zeitgeist that is making such a cozy virtual prison for everyone possess the organ for the older virtuality (of G-d) that Ren often speaks for? And what about History? And what is Justice in a virtual world? Is Irony an escape from History? An escape to what? In addition to the irreconcilables of divinity and virtuality, justice and irony, Ren offers (and critiques) another possible solution to the endless dialectic: Wonder. The blessing of innocence. Alas. In Wilson's Museum one returns to childhood despite the certainties of one's education or skepticism. "Wonder" is good when you don't know what all those "marvels" in the *wunderkammer* are. But when you find out? Can you still wonder even if you know? Reb Ren Jacob-wrestles this question, too, in almost every essay. He flirts with metaphysics in a world that won't hear of it: his best study samples are artists like Magritte, poets like Szymborska, or forgers like Wilson, all of whom make nonexistent-but-they-do-exist things. Even when writing about Richard Diebenkorn, for example, abstraction becomes a soon-to-be-fact, but never (and this is high praise) a *fait divers*.

> Abstraction: to be lost in thought, lost to thought, transported out of oneself. But out of oneself toward what?
>
> —from "Gazing Out Toward," in *Everything That Rises*

HOPELESS MARVEL

THE PHILOSOPHICAL REPORTING OF LAWRENCE WESCHLER

by BAYNARD WOODS

THERE IS A certain frumpish devilry to the bearded, bright-tied Lawrence Weschler as he spins a multi-sided top on a glass mirror. The mirror reflects one of Weschler's eyes as he stares at the spinning toy, which now seems to be a circle. "Is that cool or is that cool?" he says, grinning, his eyes lit up behind his glasses.

Before that he showed me: a series of miniature books about Napoleon, a painting made by an elephant (abstract), a shape he invented, and countless sets of blocks that he uses to think through the structure of his stories. He likes telling how his daughter used to insist that her friends weren't allowed to play with her father's blocks.

He darts around from wonder to wonder in the living room of the suburban Pelham home he shares with his wife, a human-rights monitor, who calls it all "Ren's crap." But for Weschler, the room is a machine designed to encourage what his daughter Sara calls his

"loose-synapsed moments," when perceptions converge to create a kind of narrative philosophy that borders on theology or mysticism.

Every object in the room triggers a story which leads to another object, until they all intersect, just like the books that weigh down the shelves lining every wall, arranged alphabetically by author, whether fiction or nonfiction.

That's always a sore point for a writer like Weschler, who calls what he does writerly nonfiction, conceives of it as literature, and yet finds his work, if he finds it at all, scattered throughout bookstores based on the ostensible subject. And yet, Weschler himself is always at the center of his stories—there is always an "I" observing. "It is so stupid when someone writes *he said to a reporter*. Is that you, or is there a third person in the room?" he asks with rhetorical incredulity. "You use the 'I' not because of the ego, but to avoid it. It is more modest, it is not claiming to be the voice of god."

Weschler began writing for the *New Yorker* in the 1980s, in part because it was the only way to continue the kind of ruminative philosophical thinking he was interested in. He quit under Tina Brown to run the New York Institute for the Humanities at NYU—where he has long taught a class called The Fiction of Nonfiction—because it seemed the only way to keep writing the way he likes.

But without a popular venue like the *New Yorker*, one only discovers Weschler by accident—or as he would have it, grace.

For me, it was in a big chain bookstore one Sunday when I was studying Classics in graduate school and trying to write fiction. I picked up *A Wanderer in the Perfect City*; flânerie was my favorite pretension and pastime back then. I opened it at random and found this sentence: "Nicolas Slonimsky is continually driving his daughter crazy, and it's not just because he named her Electra, although that certainly didn't help."

This seemed to me a perfectly uncanny sentence for the opening of a nonfiction story—I had been translating Euripides and listening to Coltrane, whom I knew made his bands learn the Slonimsky method, though I didn't know what that was. A couple sentences later, when I learned that Slonimsky only talked to his daughter in Latin, I bought the book and loved it. I never saw anything else Weschler did until a

grad school roommate left *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder* on the toilet.

After I finished a PhD in ancient philosophy, I decided to become a reporter because it seemed like the only life for a modern Socratic. And of reporters, Weschler struck me as the *most* Socratic. Later, when I asked his friend, the film editor Walter Murch, about him, Murch called Weschler a "cosmic gadfly," and it was precisely that quality that compelled me to write him an email. I explained the kind of writing I wanted to do and told him I was not enrolled in NYU and had no money. "But I will take the bus to New York from DC every week for the class," I assured him.

It was rather insane—for both of us. From his perspective, I was certainly a weirdo and a freeloader and from mine, well, I was a weirdo and a freeloader. But I thought he might have something to say, so each Friday for sixteen weeks I left home at six a.m. and returned at two the next morning.

After I finally gained entrance to the university on the first day—the guards wouldn't let me in without an ID—I found that Weschler did indeed possess a decidedly Socratic demeanor. His speech is not exactly elegant—his voice is nasal and high-pitched and punctuated by frequent humming pauses—but it is uniquely captivating and authoritative.

"Let us pray," he said beneath hunched shoulders at the front of the room, before reading a poem at the beginning of every class. Gary Snyder, Szymborska, Herbert. He read the poems like a theologian.

When the class finally reached *Joe Gould's Secret*, Joseph Mitchell's last masterpiece about Gould's nonexistent epic *An Oral History of Our Times*, Weschler said: "This is the holy of holies. This is no longer literature. This is theology. It is hard to imagine that it was written by a human."

He is talking about a mystical theology that leads, curiously enough, to reporting as the sacred action: every aspect of the world must somehow be reflected and glorified.

Once you notice the theological bent in Weschler's work, it is everywhere. In an early "Talk of the Town" piece in the *New Yorker* (August 26, 1985), he explained why he could not write fiction: "For me the world is already filled to bursting with interconnections,

interrelationships, consequences, and consequences of consequences. The world as it is is overdetermined: the web of those interconnections is dense to the point of saturation." His reporting, he wrote, is about taking "any single knot and worrying out the threads, tracing the interconnections, following the mesh into the wider outlying mesh."

The mesh he is after is essentially the web of being itself—to the extent Weschler is a reporter, his beat is existential, his peg the ever-present mystery.

This vision has remained constant over the last quarter century. In *Uncanny Valley* (2011), he once again elevates narrative to a theological level—using "the late-medieval number-mystic Nicholas of Cusa," as his touchtone. "Faced with the ever more positivist claims of the Scholastics of his own time, Cusa likened true knowledge of God and the infinite to a circle, within which was slotted a regular compounding n-sided polygon." Cusa argues that you can keep adding sides so that it seems you are getting closer to the circle "whereas a circle has no angles and only one 'side.'" It is pure grace that brings us from the million-sided figure to the circle—grace that allows a representation, a story, to open the world to us.

Watching the top spin on the mirror in his living room, Weschler says, "See, when it's spinning, it appears to be a circle. That motion is like narrative. It makes the polygon seem like a circle."

The movement that drives his narrative, Weschler calls it passion; it's the way a person either affects or is affected by the world and manifests itself either as political tragedy or cultural comedy.

"The dark makes you marvel all the more," he says as the top comes to a rest against the mirrors with a series of clicking sounds. "I do find that a very odd feeling: to see the world as very dark and to marvel at what remains as long as you can. Wonder without hope—to marvel hopelessly."

Weschler walks away from the top, now lying flat on the mirror, to a set of Swedish blocks. "Now these are cool," he says, picking them up off the shelf.

LAWRENCE WESCHLER'S CABINET OF WONDER

by WALTER MURCH

OUR PATHS FIRST crossed back in 1989, when Ren and I independently discovered David Wilson's newly opened Museum of Jurassic Technology in Culver City. Unfortunately, it was only our paths that did the crossing—it seemed as if we were in and out of the museum on alternating weeks, never actually meeting in person. The place always left me weak-kneed and speechless with perplexed admiration, but in 1996 Ren distilled his delight into *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*.

It is a marvelous book, but the title is particularly apt, since *Cabinet of Wonder* would be a good description of Ren's take on life itself, with some grisly bits jostling alongside the more enchanting slices of human enterprise and achievement.

My wife Aggie actually met Ren before I did, interviewing him in 1998 on KPFA Berkeley for his book *Calamities of Exile*; five years later

we finally connected when I was in New York previewing the film *Cold Mountain*, and Ren was jockeying his literary/visual journal *Omnivore* through its first printing. One of my translations of Curzio Malaparte's short stories had made it across Ren's threshold, and it appeared in the journal's premiere (and regrettably, so far, only) issue.

That was almost ten years ago, and if Ren and I don't meet somewhere, or at least correspond every few months, we both think that something might be amiss. His curiosity about the world is indeed omnivorous and inspirational: the subjects of his fifteen books over the last thirty years vary widely from politics in Poland, to the aesthetics of David Hockney and Robert Irwin, from torture in Brazil, to the work of counterfeiter/artist J. S. G. Boggs, to the hidden resonances that lurk in the visual blizzard that envelops us these days.

The last item, taken up in *Everything That Rises: A Book of Convergences*, is a comprehensive gathering of visual rhymes profound, upsetting, witty, and mysterious, and anyone leafing through it can immediately grasp the appeal of Ren's sensibility to someone like me, an editor whose work is similarly the mining of whatever film I am working on for these same kinds of visual reflections.

As director of the New York Institute for the Humanities and artistic director of the Chicago Humanities Festival, Ren also combines his curiosity with the most engaging and irresistible way of making you understand that this next thing—whatever wonder he happens to be writing about or organizing—is going to be the most interesting and important yet. And then over and over again you find out he is right: a recent day-long event last November was an exploration of solitary confinement—with testimony from Breyten Breytenbach and others who had been there—and the reasons why this form of torture has become routine in American prisons.

Personally, I am multiply indebted to Ren: first, for often including me in his annual Wonder Cabinet events, often with my theories about planetary orbits and the music of the spheres. In fact, I feel sometimes like one of the exhibits at the Museum of Jurassic Technology, displaying my "mice-on-toast" peculiarities to the mystified gaze of the patrons. But perseverance furthers, as the *I Ching* reminds us, and

recently Ren linked me up with a professor of astronomy who seems to take me seriously, and things are moving to the next level, whatever that might be.

And then I am also indebted to Ren for encouraging my translations of Curzio Malaparte over the last ten years, and for recently putting me in touch with Jack Shoemaker and Charlie Winton of Counterpoint Press in Berkeley, who have just published *The Bird That Swallowed Its Cage*, a collection of Malaparte's short stories, translated into English for the first time.

But I am mainly indebted to Ren for simply existing and being part of the larger discussion. I am certain my case is typical of anyone who is lucky enough to mesh gears with Ren: he is a catalyst and *encourageur* for all that is best (and frequently most off-beat) in the humanities—in the deepest, most all-embracing and wonder-full sense of that word.