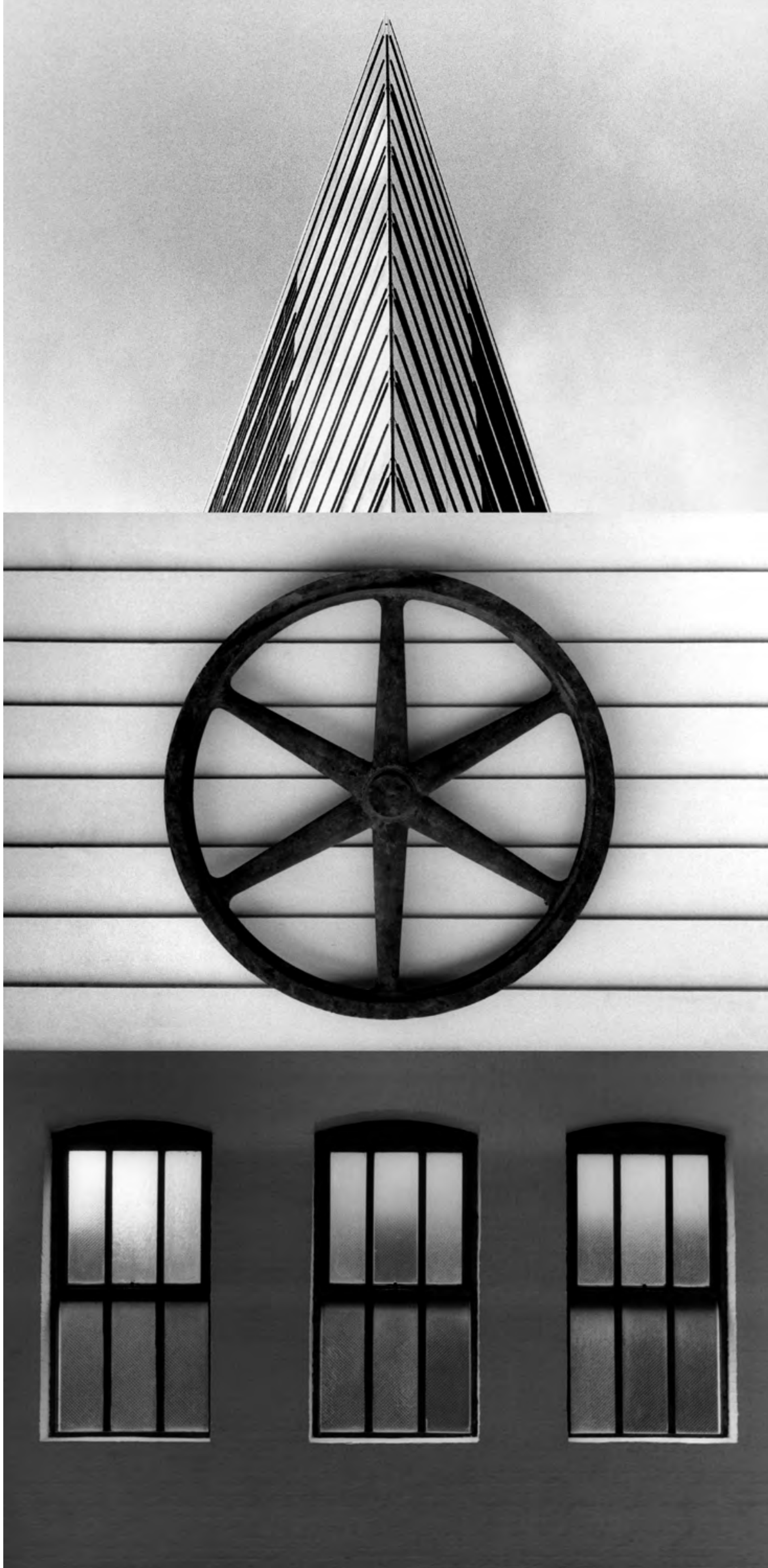

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Photographic Collage, 27 x 14 in.

Convergences, Chance Discoveries, and Going Back to Kindergarten

Dan White in conversation with Lawrence Weschler

Lawrence Weschler has long been fascinated by Wunderkammers*—Renaissance-style miniature museums housing collections of wildly disparate materials. Imagine a set of drawers stuffed with mud wasp nests, jewels of uncertain provenance, doll parts, charts, maps, styluses, stuffed birds, glass eyes, potions, and rusty old sextants.*

A classic Wunderkammer, *or "cabinet of curiosities," is not strictly scientific. Some groupings are more intuitive than taxonomic. Part of the charm, and the mystery, comes from the power of objects in juxtaposition. Place two things from different categories next to one another. Chances are, these objects will find something to talk about. Just for a moment, take a look around the room where you are now. Find the two objects that have the least in common: a camera tripod and a container of raw clover honey, a container of Advil and a Sharpie permanent marker, a blank CD and a battered Walkman. Place them next to each other. You may be surprised by the overlaps that emerge as you ponder them.*

The Wunderkammer *figures repeatedly in Weschler's work, as a subject, a context, or a metaphor. A contemporary version of a* Wunderkammer*—the puckish, semi-veracious Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles—is the subject of one of Weschler's best-known works,* Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder *(1995), while a recent book,* Everything That Rises: A Book of Convergences *(2006), is in effect its own cabinet of curiosities, complete with exhibits in juxtaposition and Weschler's thoughts about them. A similar attitude underlies his collections* Vermeer in Bosnia *(2004) and* Uncanny Valley *(2011), companion volumes that Weschler describes as "wildly disparate [but] thematically braided." In fact, Weschler's body of work—starting with the book that launched his career as a lauded creative nonfiction writer,* Seeing Is Forgetting The Name of the Thing One Sees *(1982), a study of Robert Irwin, the Los Angeles artist "who one day got hooked on his own curiosity and decided to live it"—can be seen as a* Wunderkammer *in its own right.*

While his subjects range widely, his books can be arranged in pairs. For instance, it is impossible to really get where he's going with the Mr. Wilson *book, and its assertions about truth, fiction, process, product, and static performance art, unless you also read* Boggs: A Comedy of Values *(1999). By the same token, you'll get the maximum benefit from reading* Calamities of Exile *(1998) in conjunction with* A Miracle, A Universe: Settling Accounts With Torturers *(1998). Nor will you enjoy the full benefit of a mighty debate about figuration and post-cubist art without reading his collections of interviews and writings about Robert Irwin in juxtaposition with* True to Life: Twenty-five Years of Conversations with David Hockney *(2008).*

Weschler's mind is famously associative, and if you happen to have a chance to speak with him—as I did for a Catamaran *interview in early May—you must allow his mind to wander, taking confidence that, like a spiraling gyre, it will return to the starting point, at once familiar and, now, totally new.*

Before my talk with Weschler, I read just about everything that I could get my hands on and prepared several drafts of the questions I would ask, all the while imagining my list of questions as a spool of string through a maze. I'm glad I read up on Weschler, but the prepared questions were a folly. Usually he was two or three questions ahead of me. Our conversation would loop and double back and turn so quickly that I found myself flipping through pages of questions, cutting and pasting and rearranging my queries—an unnerving thing to do when you're right in the middle of a

conversation. If you listen to the podcast version, you can hear a great deal of paper shuffling in the background.

In less than one hour, we covered a lot of ground: his "modest proposal" to model higher education on the principles of nineteenth-century-style kindergarten, the shameful legacy of human rights abuses, the artful forgeries of Boggs, the Solidarity movement in Poland, the artful suffering of the Cameroonian stink ant, and the near-impossibility of rendering a plausible digitally animated human face. The conversation felt like a highly directive and instructive ramble. As that old bumper sticker used to say on all those wheezy VW buses, "Not all who wander are lost," and Weschler, even if he loves tangents and sudden digressions, has a profound sense of direction. He is moving through a wundercabinet of the mind, a world of odd pairings, sudden discoveries, activations and obsessions. And if he occasionally gets turned around, so be it. Sometimes, the wandering is more important than the destination.

Dan White: As a jumping-off point, I would like to talk about the recent essay of yours in which you urge Americans to go back to kindergarten—not literally asking them to re-enroll in elementary school but to create and attend and foster universities inspired by this original nineteenth-century version of kindergarten. I was hoping you could share a few words about your modest proposal.

Lawrence Weschler: Well, maybe not *all* Americans but Americans of a certain age and certain spirit. The interesting thing about kindergarten is that it didn't always exist and basically was invented in the nineteenth century because up until then, they hadn't really started educating kids until they were about seven years old because why bother—they were probably going to die anyway? In the middle of the nineteenth century, a man named Friedrich Fröbel noticed that if they made it to four, they were going to make it to seven, and we might as well start earlier. He lived in the German part of Switzerland and was a crystallographer, fascinated by both crystal growth and also seedpods, patterns in nature. He had the idea for kindergarten, which spread all over the world. The idea was there would be a kindergartener, the gardener of children—the teacher. There would be no reading, writing, arithmetic, no testing, but there would be gifts—boxes with things inside them—to be given sequentially by the teacher as the children became ready for them. The first was a little crocheted wool ball, and you would swing it around your finger to learn about centrifugal force. The next one, for example, would be three wooden blocks: One would be a sphere, one would be a cylinder, and one would be a cube, and you would figure out the cylinder was kind of like a sphere and kind of like a cube. You could stack them up on each other, and you would figure out that the sphere could only be on the top. You couldn't put it on the bottom. That kind of thing. Then gradually, the gifts started taking the form of blocks, and tiling games, and then eventually there'd be dried peas and toothpicks.

DW: It sounds so simple, but those early kindergarten "gifts" had profound impact on the art and culture …

LW: Norman Brosterman, who wrote a wonderful book called *Inventing Kindergarten*, noticed that if you looked at these things that these four- and five- and six-year-olds were doing in 1860, 1870, 1880, they were completely anticipating the avant-garde of the early twentieth century, that they were anticipating Kandinsky and Mondrian and Albers and Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright. If you looked at Frank Lloyd Wright buildings, they have exactly the same shapes as the blocks that those kids had been given as gifts in kindergarten. And what's more: it turns out that if you read Le Corbusier's memoirs, if you read Mondrian's memoirs, they all had either parents or uncles or aunts who were kindergarten teachers. Buckminster Fuller says he got the idea for the geodesic dome playing with toothpicks and dried peas in kindergarten.

DW: How would you set up this "kindergarten" form of college?

LW: It seems to me that nowadays, anybody who survives the tenth, eleventh, twelfth grade in American high school, what with the horrors of testing and applications and so forth, arrives as a freshman in college kind of a burnt-out case and needs to be reinvigorated. The idea is that you would have a first-year core course that would take up at least half of every freshman's time. You would hire a faculty on the basis of their willingness to teach in the core course because if there were, let's say, forty, fifty members of the faculty, twelve would be peeled off for every freshman class. They would offer the course on a pass/no-pass basis, sequentially three weeks each of the coolest stuff going on in their discipline. The course would be taught that year, for example, by a meteorologist, a Plato scholar, a marine biologist, a Dickens scholar, a sociologist. They would each give a "gift" in order. It would be three weeks each of the coolest thing going on in math, the coolest thing going on in philosophy, whatever it was. The genius of the idea is that all of those faculty members would lead seminars. Let's say there would be ten, twelve students per seminar. They would have the meteorologist with them for the whole semester. When the meteorologist would attend the lectures that the philosopher was giving or that the marine biologist was giving or the mathematician was giving, they would be as at sea potentially as the students, but they would all study together. You would have an exposure to a whole set of things without that kind of pressure and in the kind of state of marvel and delight, which is the ideal state for learning, it seems to me. Who knows? The fantasy is that twenty years from now, somebody, when asked why they became a physicist, might say, "Well, you know what, I showed up at school and there was this guy who taught this three-week course or there was this lady who taught this climate change stuff, whatever, and I decided that's what I wanted to do with my life."

DW: That was very much the kind of system you had as an undergraduate, wasn't it?

LW: Yeah, I think so. I mean the nice thing then, and this was the prehistory of UC Santa Cruz, is that in the earliest days, faculty were assigned to colleges. I was there as an undergraduate in the late sixties, early seventies, at Cowell College. And in those days, a faculty member might be an English professor at Cowell College, or a physics professor at Crown, wherever it would be. I believe when it started, two-fifths of the salary was paid by the college

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and three-fifths by the Board of Studies (thereby assuring that kind of division of allegiance). While I was there, it went down to one-fifth and four-fifths. By the time I left, it was five-fifths in the board of study and none in the college. I was sad about that. We'd had something special. UCSC shouldn't try to be like other places. It should try to emphasize the colleges. It further occurs to me that Santa Cruz may one day revert to form. Architecture might be destiny. Somebody in one of the colleges might say, "Hey, we got these dorms here. We have these colleges with different architecture. Why don't we just take over one of the colleges and start an experiment? Invite any faculty who want to be a part of it to join us over here. Let's see if we can make something cool."

DW: You embody that kind of fantasy in a lot of your work. I'm thinking in particular about *Everything That Rises: A Book of Convergences*, in which you explore your fascination with unlikely relationships. You have these photographs and reproductions of artworks. Alongside these essays about them, you have juxtapositions of photographs of, say, workers at Ground Zero with a Velázquez painting, a Rodin sculpture, Jasper Johns painting. I'm wondering if that book is a by-product of your way of navigating between so many various things.

LW: I'll tell you a funny thing that happened when I

graduated from Santa Cruz. I had a family friend who was a shrink. He said, "Why don't you come over? We'll give you some tests and we'll figure out what you should do with your life." I said, "OK," and I went. He gave me eight hundred questions, a personality index. Would you rather be a tree or a fireman? An arsonist or a fireman? A fireman or a plumber? All these absurd alternatives. And then also a Rorschach test, and so forth. And he had me come back a few weeks later, and the hilarious thing was that he said, "Well, I've been calling my colleagues. See, we always grade Rorschach tests on these different indices like aggression and erotic fantasy and whatever. And one of things we grade them on is just general free-associative tendencies, and I've got to tell you, your score on that is so far off the charts that nobody I've talked to has ever seen a score like this." I guess I just have a free-ranging, loose-synapsed sort of sensibility. But he predicted, "This is not going to be good for you. You're going to have a very hard time in your life staying put on anything." [Laughs]

The interesting question is to what extent UC Santa Cruz fostered that in me. I think there was a certain willingness, certainly at Cowell to allow your mind to wander and to grow between different disciplines. Say, for example—and I'm using an example from *Everything That Rises*—that you have a 1952 Jackson Pollock side-by-side with a 1952 Time-Life book's image of colliding galaxies, and they look exactly the same. You could wonder, and you'd be encouraged to wonder, "What is that all about?" Or, to give another example, using my analysis of that 1969 Rothko—it's very stark, black at the top and white on the bottom, and everybody since has said, "Well, it's because he's about to commit suicide." And there's no question that he was very depressed and that is part of it, but it's also the case that in 1969, we'd just had the moon landing. That image was on TV all the time. Now, you don't want to be reductive. You don't want to say that one of the greatest painters of the twentieth century got his ideas from what was on TV that week. On the other hand, it might be interesting to think about what the moon landing would have felt like to somebody like Rothko—this incredible human achievement, a man on the moon! Only, you get there and there's nothing there. To the extent that somebody starts protesting, "Well, You can't talk about art that way," I can always say, "OK, fine. Never mind. Take it or leave it."

I did that sort of thing all the time at UC Santa Cruz. I think allowing yourself, giving yourself permission to do that, is apparently something that is ground out of you in graduate school, which is why I'm very lucky I never went to graduate school. That way of thinking does have the potential to lead to something, but it needs to be done in the mode of play. In fact, the core course that I fantasized about, I would call it "Play/Ground": playground, grounding yourself in a spirit of play, which is so contrary to the spirit of graduate school, where you've got to be completely armored, footnoted, and belligerently defend your position against all the monstrous opponents who would attack it.… Play can be a deeply intellectual activity—and, in fact, the best kind of intellectual activity.

DW: Play allows you to be OK with what happens, to surprise yourself …

LW: To *entertain* a thought.

DW: Aside from your search for convergences, you're drawn to moments of activation or awakening. The neurologist and writer Oliver Sacks once said—when asked to describe your work—that you have "an extraordinary power to catch the crucial moment of passion or conviction, which suddenly alters the course of a life. Such convergence may be absurd or tragic or delightful or sublime." What draws you to those moments?

LW: I am drawn to those sorts of people. I describe a whole body of my work as "Passions and Wonders." As for the passion part of that: I love people or places that are just kind of going along in the dailyness of their own lives and suddenly they catch fire. They just … they take off and they end up somewhere altogether different than they thought they were going to be. I mean, you see it happen with David Wilson, the subject of my "Wonder Cabinet" book. It happened with the artist Robert Irwin. It happens with all these people who've had this moment of just becoming vivified. My Irwin book is called *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees.* But what happens when you actually, suddenly *see* for the first time in your life? When that sort of thing happens to an individual, it can be pretty funny. It can also be pretty amazing. And when it happens to a body politic—because half of my work is political work—it can be absolutely enthralling. It occurred to me long after I started doing this that I called my book about Poland *The Passion of Poland*. That comes from the way in which the people in Solidarity—I was covering Solidarity for the *New Yorker* in those days, so this is 1980, '81—they spoke of Solidarity as an expression of the subjectivity of the Polish nation, by which they meant its capacity to act as the subject of history rather than the object of all that history. Suddenly, these people who had been content to be the objects of other people's plans for them became the subjects of their own. And to become a subject is an absolutely revolutionary thing. It turns the world upside down.

DW: I notice these kin groupings of your books. For instance, the Poland book can be grouped alongside *Calamaties of Exile* and your other books that deal with politics and human rights, while the *Boggs* book and the *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder* both are about these elaborate fakes that have elements of truth to them.

LW: Well, it's true that *Boggs* and *Mr. Wilson* elucidate each other. I think that Mr. Wilson does for museums what Boggs does for money. In both cases, it's to make the whole thing very strange and mysterious. Boggs or Wilson are both these kind of Socratic figures who force you to wonder, "What is going on here?" Indeed, in the case of Boggs, he is an artist who draws money and "spends" his drawings. He won't sell his drawings, but he will sell the receipts from his successful transactions, which in turn launches a madcap chase whereby the drawing of a $20 bill can suddenly, once you put all the pieces of the transaction together, be worth $50,000 at auction. And what the hell is going on there? How is it that different from sub-prime loans or the South Sea Bubble, or for that matter the very nature of money? Why do we believe in any of it at all? All the words that we use—trusts and securities and credits—I mean, all that is the language of belief and unfounded belief. I always loved that moment when the coyote would go racing, racing, racing, following Road Runner and then fly off the cliff and keep racing for a while until he looked down, at which point he went plunging to the ground. I love that moment of vertigo

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when you suddenly look down and go, "How is this thing staying up at all?"

DW: You're drawn to these process situations, that principle of striving for its own sake. It repeatedly comes across in your *Uncanny Valley* collection, especially the title story about the computer animators trying so hard to render plausible human faces with digital technology. I was wondering if the absence of practicality was part of the appeal.

LW: Well, as you say, about ten years ago, computer animators had gotten to the point where they could animate quite believable crowds, they could animate hands, They could animate bodies and the gait of somebody's walking. They could do pretty much everything except faces, which always looked kind of icky. And the issue there was that they had apparently fallen into "the Uncanny Valley," which was a term that was invented by—and here comes a great phrase, you don't get to say this every day—a Japanese, Buddhist roboticist named Masahiro Mori. His basic idea, which is fascinating, was that if you make

David Hockney […] called me out of the blue and said, "I've been reading this book and I disagree with everything in it but I can't stop reading it. Why don't you come over? We'll talk about it."

a robot that's ninety percent lifelike, that's great. Ninety-two percent, fantastic. Ninety-five percent, amazing. But ninety-seven percent and it's a disaster.

DW: It just looks creepy.

LW: It creeps people out. The reason is that at ninety-two or ninety-five percent, it is this incredibly lifelike robot but at ninety-seven percent, it's *a human being with something wrong with it*. Faces are tough: they exhibit the widest possible range of movement in the body, with forty-two muscles, many not even attached to bones. It's incredibly hard to animate what's actually happening in a real face. Beyond that, the face is the part of the body that we are most attuned to. If you make an animation of a stomach that looks kind of like a stomach, most people will believe it because most people don't spend much time looking at stomachs. But with faces: You can look across the street and see from the whites of a person's eyes what they are looking at. That is how attuned we are. It had to be that way because you had to know where the panthers were and where the mammoths were and so forth. Being able to figure out that level of detail in faces is veritably hardwired in us. Even if you animate a face that's 99.999 percent accurate, it's still not accurate enough. And the more perfect it is without being completely perfect, the more icky it is.

At one point, I asked the animators, precisely as you suggest, "Why do you even bother doing this? Why don't you just hire an actor?" They laughingly replied, "Quiet! We don't understand why our bosses keep letting us do this either." The whole idea of trying to make a face that is perfect is a kind of mad adventure in itself. Having said that, they're having a great time. I don't feel sorry for them.

DW: It's the thrill of the chase, I guess. Now, we were talking about kin groupings and books where you can't really read one without reading the other, and that holds true with the Robert Irwin book and the David Hockney book. From what I've read, those books staged a conversation between the two artists. My understanding is that they've never met, but that they've each done a deep reading of your texts about the other, so they've effectively engaged in an exchange of ideas with you as the conduit.

LW: Right. What happened was that I wrote the Irwin book first. Then I got a call from David Hockney. That was the first thing of mine that had been published in the *New Yorker* and he'd gotten the book. He called me out of the blue and said, "I've been reading this book, and I disagree with everything in it but I can't stop reading it. Why don't you come over? We'll talk about it," and so I did. He, at that point, was just beginning to do his Polaroid camera work, those Polaroid collages, and presently he said, "Well, why don't you write the text for the coffee table book that we're going to be doing for this?" So I said, "Fine." And that text became quite consciously on his part a refutation of the Irwin book. He just tried to explain what he did, and in so doing explain why he thought Irwin was wrong. Irwin, in turn, read that and called me up and said, "Bullshit, not true." Sometime later I happened to be writing a catalog essay for an upcoming Irwin show, which in turn was very consciously on Irwin's part a refutation of Hockney. And the two of them have been going at it like that for the last thirty-five years. I write about one and the other one calls me and tells me, "Not true." I write about the other one, same thing. This goes on and on and, yes, as you say, they have never met. The thing that's fun about it is that it's not a stupid argument they're having. They're having a very deep and interesting argument. Having said that, they're each so egomaniacal that neither can really hear what the other one is saying. If they would just shut up and listen they might realize they have a lot more in common than they think. At the same time, they do have a fundamental disagreement. It's basically about figuration. At the end of the day, Hockney believes that there is a human urge towards figuring the world or making a figure of the world that goes back to early cave art, and that sort of thing doesn't disappear in a generation. Irwin, for his part, feels that figuration is a historically valid art form but that nowadays, art needs to be getting more and more and more abstract until you get to the point where the real subject of art reveals itself to be simply perceiving the world, or rather perceiving yourself perceiving the world.

DW: Which is what Irwin is doing because he's been following a constant process of subtraction …

LW: Yeah, yeah. I mean at the end of the day, what Irwin is most interested in is doing something that's not *about* anything, that is simply, manifestly, itself. Both of them are convinced that they are the true heirs of cubism. Hockney says that he's sure that one day … in 1909, Braque and Picasso were having a conversation about one way they could take these developments in their art, and yes, more and more in the direction of subtraction, all the way down till you ended up in an empty room. They didn't have to do it, Hockney contends, to realize that it was a dead end. And that remark is definitely aimed at Irwin. Hockney argues that the *key* thing about cubism is it stayed on the side of figuration. There was still the guitar. There was still the pipe and the bottles. Whereas Irwin says that if you take cubism seriously, which is to say the marriage of figure and ground, it's not that figure disappears into the ground but that the ground comes up and becomes just as important as the figure. But if that's so, he continues, you have to take the shadow on the edge of the painting as seriously as the painting in itself. You have to take the crack in the wall three feet away from it as seriously, and eventually, you get rid of the painting and you just attend to the wall. Eventually, you get rid of the room and you come to attend to the world outside with all the intensity that you would ordinarily have used to attend to a painting. It's a funny little disagreement they have, but having said that, they're both very, very interested in perception and they're both self-taught and they're both very smart. When you read the two books, they read side-by-side as a kind of argument. It's a lot of fun to read it that way. But at the end of the day, in the end, they're both all about how to look, and in looking, how to see.

A graduate of Cowell College at the University of California, Santa Cruz (1974), **Lawrence Weschler** was for over twenty years (1981–2002) a staff writer at the New Yorker, where his work shuttled between political tragedies and cultural comedies. He is a two-time winner of the George Polk Awards—for Cultural Reporting in 1988 and Magazine Reporting in 1992—and was also a recipient of a Lannan Literary Award (1998). Beginning in 1999, his "Convergences" essays appeared regularly in *McSweeney's Quarterly;* a collection of these essays, *Everything That Rises: A Book of Convergences,* was published in 2006 and received the National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism. With *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder,* Weschler was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction and a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction. His latest is *Uncanny Valley: Adventures in the Narrative.* This summer he is wrapping up twelve years directing the New York Institute for the Humanities at NYU.