

FUSE

A BOMB PODCAST

AUTHOR & FILMMAKER

Olivia Laing & Matt Wolf

SEASON 2 | EPISODE #2

Olivia Laing is the author of To the River, The Trip to Echo Spring, The Lonely City, and Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency. She was awarded a Windham-Campbell Prize for nonfiction in 2018. Her latest book, Everybody: A Book About Freedom, is an investigation into the body and its discontents.

Matt Wolf is a filmmaker whose critically acclaimed and award-winning documentaries include Wild Combination, Teenage and Recorder. His newest film, Spaceship Earth, premiered at Sundance and is now streaming on Hulu. Wolf has also made many short films about artists and queer history, including The Face of AIDS and HBO's It's Me, Hilary. Wolf is a Guggenheim Fellowship recipient.

Chantal McStay Welcome to FUSE: A BOMB Podcast. Forty years ago, BOMB began as conversation between artists around a kitchen table in downtown New York. Today, FUSE brings you into the room to listen in on candid, unfiltered conversations about creative practice. Here's how it works. BOMB invites a distinguished artist to choose a guest from any creative discipline: an art crush, a close collaborator, or even a stranger they've admired from afar. And we bring them together. No host, no moderator, no interruptions, just two artists in conversation. For this episode, we asked writer Olivia Laing who she'd most like to speak with. She immediately selected filmmaker and longtime friend Matt Wolf.

Olivia Laing When BOMB asked me if there was an artist I wanted to talk to, I immediately thought of the filmmaker Matt Wolf. I'm such an admirer of Matt's work. I find it fascinating. And there's lots of common ground in terms of how we work with archives, how we use foreign material, so I was very excited to have a formal conversation.

Matt Wolf Same.

OL Snap!

CM Matt Wolf is a filmmaker whose critically acclaimed and award-winning documentaries include *Wild Combination*, *Teenage*, and *Recorder*. His newest film, *Spaceship Earth*, premiered at Sundance and is now streaming on Hulu. Wolf has also made many short films about artists and queer history, including *The Face of AIDS* and HBO's *Its Me, Hilary*. Wolf is a Guggenheim Fellowship recipient and a member of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences. Olivia Laing is the author of *To the River*, *The Trip to Eco Spring*, *The Lonely City*, and *Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency*. She was awarded a Windham Campbell prize for nonfiction in 2018. Her latest book, *Everybody: a Book about Freedom* is an investigation into the body and its discontents. Olivia and Matt discuss the interweaving of biography and portraiture and cultural history, subverting narrative structures, and why Olivia spent some time living in a tree.

MW We have creative conversations all the time, so this is kind of an extension of that, maybe a little more formal. But yeah, I felt when I met you, I was like, we're into the same thing, and that has carried on for many years.

OL Yeah, so I just want to reminisce: we met ten years ago, almost exactly ten years ago, on a residency. And I was so struck by you immediately, because you responded to everybody's—you know, people did their show-and-tell in the evening, and you responded to everybody's work with so much generosity, you gave enormously detailed but enormously knowledgeable notes. Almost anybody could present anything, and you knew something about it. And I just thought that level of generosity was incredible. And it's really stayed in our friendship for the last, for the last decade. You're one of the first people I always give new work to, to read, and you introduced me

to David Wojnarowicz. He's one of the main characters in *The Lonely City*.

MW Well, and I remember your first reading. I'd liked you, I thought you were really nice at the dinner table, but you don't really know what people do until these show-and-tell presentations after dinner. And this is before your first book, *To the River*, came out. And for those that don't know, *To the River* is this kind of sprawling biography or portrait of Virginia Woolf by way of the journey that you took around the river where she drowned. And immediately as you were reading, I thought, Wow, this is what I care about, biographies as vectors to tell cultural histories, and you've continued to really make that the focus largely of your work. And I think I recognized in you someone who loves portraiture and loves portraits, and that's something that I obviously feel really connected to, as well.

OL Yeah, it always feels like there's a real kinship between our work, that we're both very interested in these sort of outlier figures that can tell a much larger story about a moment in time or an emotional landscape. I think your first film that I saw—well, I suppose I saw bits of *Teenage*, but the first film I saw all the way through was *Wild Combination*, the Arthur Russell documentary, which is just really one of the most extraordinarily beautiful documentaries I've ever seen. It's ravishing and it gets in so deep and it feels like it tells somebody's story in a sort of wholehearted but also kind of sidelong way. You use a lot of archival material, you remake material, and I just, I felt very excited about the ways that you made work.

MW Yeah. And I felt that way when I finally had the opportunity to read *To the River* and I feel that way every time I read something that you write. You said something that kind of resonates, is kind of emotional: the vivification of work through an emotional sensibility. And I see that in your work. I think sometimes it's kind of, not looked down upon, but people are kind of contemptuous of emotions in the telling of cultural histories or biographies. I think people might think that sentimental or nostalgic or idealizing, but that to me, I want people in my work to have an emotional relationship to ideas. I want ideas to make you feel something. And when I read your work, I feel stuff around ideas, not just themes or characters, but in a sense, I feel like

the interweaving of these biographies or cultural histories is a kind of montage, like what I do in film, and that it produces an emotional effect, and that you really veer away from idealizing your subjects, but that you create, you know, complex, emotional portraits of times and places and people and it, it really resonates with me.

OL You must have been one of the early people who read *The Lonely City* and your first notes were like, “This has a big, strong emotional impact. Are you allowed to do that?” I was like, Oh, shit, I don’t know! But I think you are, I think you are allowed to do that. And I think maybe people are doing that more, but the idea that you can be a serious critic, that you can be writing intellectual histories and at the same time, allow room for your subjects to be emotional people seems totally vital to me. And it’s really what I respond to in your films, as well. And I feel like it’s there in different ways in all of your films, sometimes at a higher level and sometimes at a lower level. But definitely present.

MW I’m really like a reluctant storyteller. I definitely didn’t go into filmmaking thinking God, I, I just love telling stories. It’s just not my—but at the same time, it’s kind of all that I do, is I craft stories and make narratives because you know, I make largely feature length films that have to engage the viewer for an hour and a half to two hours and the kind of template in which you do that is storytelling. But I tried to do other things within the container of that. But, I think we associate a kind of emotional craft or point of view through storytelling, but that’s never really been my entry point. I don’t know if you think of yourself as a storyteller or not, but inevitably, we’re both doing it.

OL I’m making little cat sick noises. Yeah, I hate the idea of storytelling. What I’m reading for is never plot. It’s much more about style and subject matter, sure. Ideas, definitely, but not the idea of a sort of narrative with a narrative arc. I hate that. And I try and subvert that. So this opens nicely into my first proper question, which is, how are you drawn to your subjects? What are you looking for when you’re out scouting for a new project? What tells you that somebody is going to work as a film by you?

MW It's interesting, because the more I make films, the more intuitive that becomes. It's all research-based. I'm researching, I come upon something that's of interest to me, I identify if there's archival material. Sometimes I find the archive itself first. I trust my gut—when my gut says, “Go, go there, dig deeper, develop a relationship, generate access,” I'm just driven by that process, not necessarily knowing why me. And I'm always saying why me, and then I find that part of the filmmaking process in a sense for me is to find myself in the material. I have to trust in a sense that I gravitate to it for a reason. But it's a process for me to find myself in the material. Increasingly, I'm less precious about it. I just kind of think that I know. But I have to say whenever I'm making a film—I don't know if you feel this way when you're writing a book—it's kind of like, Am I ever gonna find something again? Is this like the last, last time that I'm going to have an idea for a film? I've been feeling that way since I was making films in college. I always feel like...not this is my last opportunity, but will I ever have an idea that I feel this way about, because when you make a film, the level of intensity and conflict and just labor it requires, you have to become obsessed with the material. You have to watch a film one hundred times and for me, to retain an emotional relationship to the subject matter. And that creates a kind of obsession, in a way, but you have to measure that obsession as to not idealize or romanticize your subjects. You know, I find that to be a really challenging process, but by knowing where I live in the material, I have more insight and perspective on how to tell a story. I mean, I think it's this question of personal work is always really interesting, because for me, I don't put myself in my films. I never use my voice. And you're very different, in the sense that you certainly do. You become this vivid and resonant thread through your journey or your experience that ties together all these seemingly, disparate figures or in *Crudo*, in a sense, you embody and internalize history in real time. I'm wondering like, how did you come to using yourself as raw material? And do you think at some point, you'll stop doing that, and maybe, in a sense, disappear into your work?

OL I think the idea is that I'm supposed to disappear into the work in each book, that it's a way of sort of taking the reader by the hand, introducing them to me, introducing them to the subject, and then

we go out into the world. So I kind of ghost out, my presence sort of vanishes and all of these other figures come up. So you know, in *The Lonely City*, we're getting Edward Hopper, Wojnarowicz, Warhol, and every once in a while I kind of reappear to say, "This is where I am when I'm looking at this material, let's have some really physical stuff," because as long as I'm there as a first person narrator, I can create that sort of sensual detail that just gets lost otherwise. I think with film you're doing that anyway, but with writing, it can get very abstract. And then the other thing is, I'm there as a sort of emotional guide, that can pull back and just say, "Wow, as I was going through this diary, I found myself crying," or, "I felt myself overwhelmed by rage." It's just a way to sort of pull back and shift to an emotional thread and then go back into the world that I've sort of built. So I kind of need that technically. I would never write a memoir. I'd never write something that was about myself 100 percent, but to have that sort of ability to use the first person just means that I can have this sort of present tense, alive world constantly to draw on. And it's just, it's too valuable to let go of. But the funny thing with *Crudo* is that that book, apart from the first page, is all in the third person. And yet, it's probably my most intimate, grotesquely real, exposing book, but it doesn't actually have "I" except in the first three sentences.

MW I mean, it's fascinating what you're saying, because you're talking about being embodied, embodying your relationship to the archive or to the research. I never think about it that way, but I think that is what creates a visceral effect, as you handle archival material or research is that it's embodied and your approach to reading about it and not ironic is that your next book is about bodies and freedom. Yeah, I don't necessarily have a question, but I think we can have not only emotional, but somatic relationships to the material we grapple with. And I've never contemplated that in my own work, but I think it does come across in your writing in a way that becomes very vivid.

OL I kind of feel like it is there in your work. I mean, if you're working on, let's think about the Marion Stokes film, for example, you were surely having reactions to the sort of material you're being presented with or the way that the material is being presented or the interviews that you're doing. And that kind of comes across, even though you're not actually present, speaking as an interviewer in that sort of Adam

Curtis way.

MW Wow, we're talking about our feelings and emotions and bodies a lot today, and I kind of mentioned this, it's really critical for me to remain emotionally available through the interview process and the editing process.

OL This is actually another question that I wanted to ask you about specifically, was your interview process.

MW You have to move between critical thinking and critical feeling when you're making films. You know, as I'm editing, periodically you set up opportunities for screening, and I'm really protective over that space. I do it in the morning, at the end of the week. And it has to be a really kind of pure experience of watching the film as if I'm seeing it for the first time. And I'm often crying and laughing during those screenings, not with affect, but just because I'm really really concentrating on having an authentic emotional reaction to the material and being as available as I can be to the material. And when I'm interviewing people, it's the same thing. I'm obviously thinking critically and really strategizing how to structure an interview. But I'm, without a doubt, emotionally present. I think the signature aspect of a long form interview is to maintain concentrated eye contact with your subject. And when someone tells me an emotionally intense story, I react to that in an emotional way. I cry during interviews.

OL Oh, really?

MW Yeah. And you know, these interviews that I do sometimes are five to seven hours long. It depends on the stamina of the subject, but you know, I've made a lot of films that recount the death of subjects, too, and that's just an inevitable outpouring of emotion. And I want the interview subjects to have a cathartic experience. And it's not inauthentic when I express emotions, but I allow myself to be emotionally available to react in an authentic and real time way to what people are telling me, because I'm oscillating between a form of critical thinking and critical feeling that comes across in the work. How can I expect people to feel something watching a film if I don't feel something while making it? And I think that's really critical to me.

MW But one thing I wanted to talk about, you're talking about how you kind of hold someone's hand and bring them into the world of the book. I think what I relate to and appreciate about your writing is the structural complexity. There is an interweaving, almost a braiding, and I said earlier a kind of montage of narratives, and you're very deft and talented at making connections but also creating structural transitions that have a cumulative effect. And for me, editorially, I'm just constantly problem-solving through structural change, and I wonder what your process is for structuring your books. Because while it reads seamlessly, I can tell as a reader that it requires an incredible amount of craft to structure those books.

OL That's really the most important thing to me, is the sort of the building of the tapestry. And so there's a long research phase where I'm gathering material, maybe for a couple of years, trying to work out how I can put those pieces together, probably like you say, in order to create emotional effects, but also to elucidate. And I'm trying to make very complicated ideas, increasingly complicated ideas, as absolutely crystal clear to the ordinary reader as I possibly can. So there's a long, long process of trying to understand things myself, and then present them in the most, sort of simple, powerful ways without losing the complexity of them, making each piece quite simple and clean to understand. And then part of this tapestry-making is being able to pull back and have a landscape. I did this so much in *The Trip to Eco Spring*, once you're dealing with all of this dark material about somebody's alcoholic frenzies, to have a train journey where you can look out to the landscape and almost give emotional cues by this very soothing place. Or we're now moving through this sort of dark, destroyed place just to allow the feelings that have been stirred up to land into something almost like a cut-away shot in a film. It's got that sort of feeling of moving to a crescendo and then calming down and then moving up to the next level of complexity again, and that feels like that sort of orchestration process takes, again, another couple of years to just really refine and really make sure that each layer of the tapestry is right, that the characters reappear at the right point so that you're still getting something of their plotline. But at the same time, you can move off into the realm of ideas and then back again.

MW Oh my god, it's really similar to the way I work. My friend, the filmmaker Sam Green, who learned this from the amazing avant garde filmmaker, Nathaniel Dorsky, who consults on documentaries, said you always need a dance number here or there.

OL Yeah, absolutely. And you feel that instinctively. You know instinctively that you've got to change the tempo at this point.

MW Well, you know it as the reader or the viewer. You become overcome or overwhelmed with the density of information, and you need a dance break. And I never thought about that with reading because, you know, I'm so overstimulated as a person in general. I think that while you're reading, it has to be built into the book that your mind is allowed to wander. I mean, that is so much why I love music and film, as it really is a kind of container for me to think, and a fantastic film structures and shapes my thinking that gives me the room to have my own experience and my own associations. And your work definitely does that. I think the loneliness thing, I can only imagine all the readers really tapping into experiences of profound loneliness in their life, all the while tracking all of the characters and your own personal journey through that book. And it takes craft to structure in those dance sequences where people can think about themselves. They can make the personal and emotional interpretation of the material.

OL And I think sometimes that's where you need a bit of first person. That's where somebody can come back and go, "Hah, okay, now we're in a room with a person, and I'm allowed to become me again." It's almost like, as I switch to the first person, they can switch to the first person for a moment and then we both enter into other people's lives. It's this sort of very sinuous movement, I think, back and forth. And readers, watchers, are very skilled at doing that. If you're taking them along, they'll go with you.

MW Yeah, but I think also, the structure of the work has to be invisible. No matter the level of structural complexity to a book or a film, whether or not it's completely nonlinear and jumping through time and space, or if it's seemingly chronological, even if things are organized kind of achronological or ahistorically, I never want any-

body thinking about the structure or being impressed by the the structural complexity of a work.

OL Oh, God, no.

MW That needs to be invisible. It's good if it's invisible.

OL Yeah, maybe somebody else who's an artist is going to recognize it, but no, you don't. That shouldn't be the thing that's being pointed up all the time. Absolutely.

MW Yeah. When I read other people's work, I'm always thinking about structural adjustments for problem-solving to enhance the clarity of ideas when I watch cuts of my own or other people's work, but I think the whole goal is to not be taken out of the world of the book or the movie, to not be jarred by the actual making of the work. I find that really distracting when the virtuosity of the writer or filmmaker is evident to me because that seems more about them than about the material or the story. And God, I really am talking about storytelling, it's kind of all that I do. I've had to come to terms with the fact that it's all that I do, and when I have to define what I'm interested in, it's certainly not a great story—sorry, bad British accent. It's more a hidden history. A hidden history is what gets me going, is finding something that's kind of faded from collective memory or that's been overlooked for all sorts of political, personal reasons, whether it's the self-sabotaging nature of the artist or forces of racism, sexism and homophobia and ableism or whatever, I want to find the thing that is hidden in plain sight, whether it's a pop culture phenomena or whether it's a marginalized artist who died of AIDS, that comes before storytelling. I know that you gravitate towards queer subjects, for sure, that is a kind of fundamental of queer subjects, is that they often are hidden from plain sight.

OL That's so much the case with the new book, *Everybody*, which takes as its central character the renegade psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, and he is so much a hidden person who—and I think this is the kind of subject that draws you as well—that you can tell a story about right now with. He's somebody who reappears in all sorts of strange situations. He's in Berlin just before the war in the Weimar Republic excitements of the sexual liberation movement, and then he

reappears and he's in America during the McCarthy era witch hunts. This idea that you can use a person's life to tell a really much larger story about a period of history—almost a century of history in that case—and yet somehow they've dropped out of view.

MW Yeah, I'm certainly drawn towards performing the reappraisal. In a lot of ways—I was talking to the editor of *Spaceship Earth*, my film, David Teague, and early on in our process, I said, "A lot of the work I do is translation." I'm drawn to these subjects who have done complex things that don't all fit together, don't really make sense on the outside, or were produced by people who aren't the best representatives of their work, or the best kind of narrators of their life story, and I work with them pretty collaboratively to make what they did accessible. To make its contemporary resonances known, to show a continuity and line of thinking that can potentially be visionary, or unprecedented, but also to be clear about the limitations or problems that these people created that were obstacles toward people understanding them. And so I am really drawn to the kind of problematic visionary character and I don't know if that's necessarily . . . I mean, Reich is kind of like that, for sure.

OL Reich is definitely in that box. Though I don't think everyone—I mean, you wouldn't put Virginia Woolf in that box—but I think it's definitely been a draw in the last few years. I want to ask a really direct question: which has been your hardest project?

MW Oh, my God, *Teenage*. I was so tortured by *Teenage*.

OL Yeah, I thought it was *Teenage*.

MW I'm still torn. I'm still tortured by *Teenage*.

OL And why? Is it because it's such a enormous story?

MW I mean, it's also my second thing. I don't know how you feel about *Trip to Eco Spring*. But I know most people feel like their second album, their second book, their second film, most people have a tortured relationship to that. I don't really know many people who are like, "I really hit my stride on the second thing." Because you put so much pressure on yourself to figure out, Who am I, what is my signature, style or approach? And you put so much into the first

one, as well, that the first project is the one that holds so much of the things that you've been wanting to say forever. And by the time you come to the end of it, it's like, Oh, well, now I've done all of that. Or it's like the film I made about Arthur Russell, which was my first film which I was making when I was 24 years old. It's just such a pure reflection of my values and my worldview. It's very direct and simple and pure. I made the film with a lot of naivete, and no expectations, really, as a kid, and it resonated. I could continue to be a biographer of artists who died of AIDS forever, but it wasn't what I wanted to do. And when I made *Teenage*, I've always wanted to do a sprawling kind of overflowing cultural history and to use archival footage in a collage approach that is connected to my teenage obsession with punk. I found those ideas in the work of John Savage, a cultural critic and kind of chronicler of punk rock in England. And it was the most challenging thing I've ever done, is really tried to reimagine what a historical documentary is by completely collaging primary source material.

[CLIP FROM *TEENAGE* TRAILER]

"We're teenagers, but we didn't always exist. First, we were just children. And then all of a sudden, we were supposed to be adults. We went from rat-faced slum kids to fit and healthy soldiers primed for war. News of war was intoxicating. The old had sent us to die. And we hated them. American culture started to spread. They brought new music, dances and films, whether they called us hooligans, flappers, jitterbugs, or subtags. We knew who we were. Time had come to declare it. Of all the world's youth, none are more fortunate by birth-right and inheritance than the 21 million boys and girls between the ages of 16 and 24, who constitute one vast and glamorous society. It would become the model for youth that still exists today. A lot of people try to shape the future. But it's the young ones, we live in it. And we are the ones who will fight for it."

OL But do you think it was hard because it was already somebody else's book and somebody else's vision and you had that aspect of translating a vision that had been pre-created, whereas your other books, and your other films were very much your own?

MW No, it just was hard. Everything about it felt hard. I haven't watched the film in a long time, but I know that it was really important to me and it was really meaningful to make that film and that there are things that I just love about that film. I love the score of that film. Bradford Cox made it, and he's one of my favorite musicians. His band is Deer Hunter and his solo project is Atlas Sound. And we corresponded as teenagers, actually, on the internet and reconnected as adults. And I was just a huge fan of his music. And we had such an intense kind of creative dynamic and to wake up in the morning, and to get music cues made by one of your favorite musicians sent to you that's in response to the work you're making, it was just energizing and exciting to me. And I felt so much creative possibility. And at the same time, I never could keep that naivete that I had as a first-time filmmaker. But more and more, I think, you know, there's always this pressure for filmmakers who make documentaries to make fiction features. It's just like, expected that that's your aspiration. And increasingly, that's just so not my aspiration. I think at some point recently, like in my mid-thirties, I was kind of like, I really like what I do, and I want to keep doing it. And I don't really care if I do something else. I'm not repeating myself, I'm challenging myself in new and different ways within a process that I love. I love film-making in this way. And there's something so satisfying about arriving at that. And when I was making my second film, I wasn't there yet. I didn't know what I love about filmmaking, and what aspects of it need to be constant for me to do what I do in my own unique way. And so I guess I'm gonna flip it now: Do you feel that way? Do you feel pressure to completely break out of the format of what you do? I mean, *Crudo* was that but it was, as I know as being your friend, it was a completely spontaneous creative outburst, basically. Do you feel pressure or a desire to break out of the kind of form that you've created in your work?

OL Yeah, definitely. I mean, I think each of my books feels like it's very different from the previous one, but also by the end of the first three—so *To the River*, *Eco Spring*, and *Lonely City*, I felt like maybe there's a sense that, you know, what you're going to get from one of my books, that I'm going to be walking around, probably, I'm going to be feeling a bit sad, then we're going to get some dead people. You

know? You can feel what that book would be—investigation into some difficult areas of human experience. And I just felt like, Fuck this. I was about to write *Everybody*, and I just didn't want to do it in the same way. I didn't want to have me walking and thinking. It felt like such a sort of . . . It was very genuine in the first few books, but then it started feeling like a gimmick that I did. It's a way to sort of piece together bits of material and I just didn't like it. So *Crudo* really came out of that feeling of intense frustration, that I just wanted to make something with a totally different form. And because I write in such an incredibly edited, scrupulous, long—it's a long range project, like I write every sentence until it's perfect. And then I write the next sentence, and I go on like that till the book's over and it's just horrible. It's brutal, and it's not particularly enjoyable. So, writing a book, *Crudo*, that was totally unedited, that I had to write, I'd made these two rules: I had to write every day, and I wasn't allowed to re-read. And then when it became published, I gave the publishers rules, which were that they weren't allowed to edit it at all. I mean, they did a little bit of legal edit. I wanted it to be this rule thing, because it was the antithesis of everything that I'd done before. I wanted it to be angry and funny because those were tones that I tend to not to write in, and it felt like I just was smashing the mold of what my books might look like. And after that, I kind of went, Okay, great. Now I can think, What do I want to make now? What would be interesting to do now? And now I've got a much wider range of tools, techniques, styles that I can slip in and out of. So I sort of made the flooring which I was working twice as big. It was like I knocked the walls back, and I had a much larger space to maneuver in. And I think *Everybody* is better because of that. It doesn't feel like it's part of that nonfiction type that I built. It's larger, and it's more ambitious and it's got more range. And the idea of what I might do now—I mean, I know what I'm going to do next, but the idea of what I might do next feels much more open to me than it did whenever that was, five years ago, where I just felt like, Oh, God, I've made myself this sort of . . . I was doing what I loved, and I've made myself an enclosure that is way too tight of doing what I love. So you've got to have room for yourself to keep changing. And I don't know about filmmaking, but in publishing, there's so much pressure that you just keep writing the same book. I think my publishers have been very generous about me not doing

that, but you feel that basically what people want you to do—in fact, that’s not true. They weren’t generous. At the end of giving in *Everybody*, they were like, Could you make this more like *The Lonely City*? And could you walk around a bit more and maybe some sad people?

MW Could you talk about your body? I mean, that I just think that’s 100 percent true of all artists. There’s incredible pressure to do exactly what you did before if people liked it. And that the best artists don’t do that. You know, Arthur Russell, for instance, or David Wojnarowicz, these are artists who worked in so many different mediums. Arthur Russell even had monikers so nobody knew that the same person created this body of work. And I think that we have to resist that. It’s not just commodification. I think it’s the . . . I don’t know what the right word is, but we have to resist the pressure.

OL It’s sort of homogenization, it feels like there’s something about . . . you’re liked because you’re an artist, but then could you keep making the same vaguely radical but actually quite safe work. And you’ve got to say no to that. But this ties nicely into a question I was going to ask you, which is—

MW Wait, can I talk about another thing before I forget? Well, something I’m really into in my filmmaking and into in life right now is being two things at once. I’ve started to think about in regards to storytelling that I don’t want to embrace the conventional idea of conflict. But that I want to lean into ambivalence, and that the kind of problematic visionary subjects that I gravitate towards I have an ambivalent relationship to, because they’re both two things at once, that are problematic and visionary. And I think the most interesting subjects are people who hold two qualities at once, because within us are multitudes. We are so many people inside of ourselves, but few people allow those various dimensions and facets to be on the surface. And I am most certainly drawn to subjects who are a potent mix of multiple things that are seemingly in conflict. And I think as artists, we are so pressured to be one person, and that to be an artist who is multiple people at once and that has multiple sides and interests is really actively discouraged, but that it takes a certain level of competence, experience, and bravery to be multiple people at once.

OL Okay, I sort of resonate with that, because I think one of the things that I've been so happy about writing about Reich—a very, very difficult character who is at once a visionary but also sort of pretty awful person, pseudo-scientist, lots of dodgy facets to his character—and what I like about writing about somebody like that right now is that there's this incredible cultural drive towards purity, the whole sort of cancel culture, people have to be perfect, if people make one mistake then they're out forever. And the idea that there are these sort of figures who might have the most liberating utopian ideas, and at the same time be appalling human beings in other ways, is really interesting to me. That people are that complicated and that we have to increase our tolerance of people's complexity, this idea that people can only be one thing is incredibly claustrophobic. For all of us, it's very, very limiting.

MW Or that the critical lens is to problematize people and things, when in fact, to me, the problematic is the most interesting, and it's not a matter of problematizing or, you know, rectifying the problems. It's really about leaning into it with the full complexity of our ambivalence.

OL Yeah, I mean, maybe that's one of the commonalities between our work is that we're comfortable with ambivalence. We're excited by ambivalence. I don't think either of us is looking for cut and dried stories. And I feel like with characters like, particularly Marian Stokes, but in *Spaceship Earth* as well, there's a sense that these are very, very complicated stories, and you're not being asked to say, "Do you approve or do not approve, or what's your judgment?"

[CLIP FROM *SPACESHIP EARTH* TRAILER]

"As I look at Biosphere Two, and I'm ready to enter. I take my last breath out of this atmosphere and for two years, we were pioneers. We were the first biospherians. How can you prepare yourself for journey into the unknown? A biosphere is a closed system with plants and animals. And the atmosphere is all inside. We called it Biosphere Two, because Biosphere One is the earth. If we're going to go to Mars or the moon, we better know how to make a biosphere. Climate change is a threat. We were trying to counteract that threat. We put

in rain forests, a desert, and an ocean with a living coral reef. It was a global curiosity, fake human beings separated from life. I don't know any innovative human organization that doesn't have cult-like aspects. We called ourselves synergists. John Allen was a very good leader. He was a mind musician. Here is your brainwashing cult leader. The eight biospherians are now quarantined together. The negativity started. Fighting is taking away from us accomplishing our objectives. That set off alarms to me. I don't want to talk about it. Members took part in strange costumed rituals."

MW I think simple-minded people or some film critics who, you know, film critics read about documentaries in really basic boring ways. I would say generally. Sorry it's true. It's true. Because they see it as a newspaper article or, you know, like, I think people can sometimes mistake—

OL Well, that's true of nonfiction as well, I think that . . .

MW Oh, my God, totally.

OL . . . that you're talking about fact as pure fact, rather than that you're doing something more complicated.

MW Yeah, or some sort of interpretation. But I think when you don't make a decision and assessment of what to think about a subject, people sometimes mistake that as lacking a point of view, when in fact, it is much more complex to organize and to provide information in layered ways that allow people to not know what they think about a subject or a character or a figure. To not know, I think, is the best way to be. Do you really need to know how you feel about everything, because I just don't know how I feel about so many things. But I'd rather people have feelings than a sense of certitude. I want people not to know how they feel. That sense of confusion I think is what sticks. And it's what makes you continue to mull over things and to think about them. And yeah, it's such a satisfying thing to not really know what you think and to have to continue thinking about it.

OL Yeah, I completely agree.

MW I think some people know that you were feral and lived in a tree. I was personally surprised. I didn't take you as someone who lived

in a tree. It's just really interesting to me. It was unexpected. I mean, you had a whole career as an herbalist with extensive training. You're obviously a prolific gardener, as many people know, and is becoming the subject of your work, but you were also just a feral person. And you know, you are drawn towards queer subjects. I'm gay and was a gay teen activist. You have lesbian moms. Going to pride parades was a feature of your childhood. Riot Grrl was an element of being a young adult. But do you think being feral has anything to do with your interest in kind of queer subjects? Or is that a stretch.

OL I love your ongoing fascination with this area of my life. So just in case anyone doesn't know, I was an environmental activist, and that involved living in the woods in the sight of roads that were going to be built to try and protect the roads. And after that, I was living outside anyway. And I kind of dropped out and I lived in a field in a dwelling that I built myself on my own for a while, which Matt finds perennially fascinating. Yeah, I think there's something about falling out of the world, falling out of the conventional world, being completely—I mean, in that case, literally in the margins—that does feel to me like it's a kind of queer sensibility. And I think that's where I've always situated my work. I've always situated myself as an artist. I never feel like I'm mainstream or kind of in the, I don't know, where you're supposed to be. I feel like my location is always from a different perspective. And that must be fundamentally queer. My own sense of my gender, the kind of upbringing that I had that was a gay family in an intensely homophobic period in British history, I think all of those things kind of run together. And my whole desire to sort of escape and live wild was very much to do with the way that I grew up and the oppressiveness of British culture at the time.

MW When I met you, you were kind of an itinerant person who was always moving between different places, some by function of you had to do research here or there. I sense that you didn't want to be tied to one place. But now, in a sense, it's almost like the garden has become the kind of magnet that has rooted you. I mean, obviously, COVID. But let's not talk about that. There's been a real shift in which you're not an itinerant person, but in a sense, have been brought back to nature as a source of belonging. I mean, is that wrong or right?

OL No, I think that's right. But it always makes me feel uneasy, and I think my itinerant years will maybe start up again, at some point. I feel that that part of me, like it's asleep right now, but it feels like a fairly uneasy sleep, because I am most comfortable sort of roaming and being just slightly outside things. Coming and going, being foreign, feels very comfortable to me and feels very tied to how I make art. That sense of when I was always sort of in New York, but you know, living in sublets, on my way back, on my way in, I've always kind of got a bag packed, it felt intensely creative to me. Maybe not particularly easy to live like that long term, but I don't like the idea that I'm always going to be stable and I'm always going to be sort of rooted in a house. But at the same time, the idea of the garden—the garden is queer space as well, is really powerful to me. That sort of Derek Jarman vision of being able to make a kind of sanctuary of wildness. And you can only do that when you stop. So there's definitely something about my life in my forties that is more to do with stability, but I don't feel comfortable with it. How about you? Do you work out stability?

MW Yeah, I don't like anything to change. I'm completely adverse to change. I, you know, I'm a systems guy. I like to organize stuff. A whole part of what I do is I organize archival footage obsessively. I organize information in a way that's soothing for me. And it's part of my creative process, through screening hundreds of hours of archival footage, and organizing it and creating systems to manage that volume of material. I find it soothing, just on a personal level, but it's how I think, and so I have my systems. I am not interested in upgrading them. I have a businessman schedule. I work from ten to six, and I really don't like to work on weekends, unless someone forces me to.

OL This is one of the first things you ever told me and I was like, Can this be true? But yeah, I've learned that it is true.

MW I certainly don't want a normal life, but I need boundaries. I'm an obsessive person. I think about all my work all the time, and I need to create—why do I keep saying the word container? I guess it's this thing I've been thinking about, putting things in containers and trying to work within the limits of them is really constructive and productive for me. And I thrive in creating a system that sticks and that system

shifts between each film and that process changes. But I like to define the process. You were talking about creating rules for *Crudo*. And, you know, of course, it's a cliché, but rules are meant to be broken. But I find creating formal rules for each film or a system in which the film-making occurs and a process to do it to be really a huge part of the creative process. It's like, How do you flow the information? How do you organize it? What are some kind of structural tenants that allow this material to exist? I mean, with the Marion Stokes film, *Recorder*, it's just you know, that was a film that grappled with 700 hours of raw footage from television broadcasts. There had to be so many rules as a way to make that coherent and to make it a viable thread through a film that was also a portrait and biography. And so I like creating these parameters and working within the container. Ironically a garden is like that. It's this kind of wildness that has a perimeter to it, as well.

MW I imagine that's something you'll be meditating on in your new book, right?

OL Yeah, it is absolutely, that it's a contained space that it has walls around it. But I just want to know, this isn't something that I've written down, but it's just occurring to me as we're talking: What is it about the archive that we're both so compelled by? What are we doing that we're spending so much time going through the papers or the objects of dead people?

MW Well, anecdotally, this is the thing that I think really cemented our creative bond was David Wojnarowicz. My experience with archives begins with David Wojnarowicz. I have a friend, another great British thinker, curator, artist, who passed away, Ian White, who I met when I was really young, I think eighteen, nineteen, and he was in New York doing research at Fales library at the David Wojnarowicz Papers because he was curating a program of Wojnarowicz films and he told me about the mask of Arthur Rambo that was staged on a model in David Wojnarowicz's famous late 1970s photograph series *Rambo in New York*. I love the photographs because the mask is photocopied in a DIY punk fanzine kind of aesthetic. It's these black-and-white photographs that kind of take place with a queer guy with that mask in front of his face in these dilapidated apocalyptic settings

around New York, whether it's the Chelsea Piers or Dumbo or, you know, the checkered floor of a tenement apartment in East Village and they're romantic images in which David Wojnarowicz telescopes through history by embodying the figure, the kind of outsider, queer, rebellious figure of Arthur Rambo. And so at Fales library, they have that mask and so I went in the library, made an appointment, and they brought the Rambo mask out on a foam archive display. You wear white gloves, and you hold it and I felt this surge as a nineteen year old, creating a line between me and David Wojnarowicz and a line that existed between David Wojnarowicz and Rambo, and it was a telescoping effect that was transformative. I just, I realized that an archive is not just a bunch of pieces of paper, it's a series of objects and artworks and ephemera that is loaded with information and meaning and that if you really want to trace the footsteps of people from the past, to make sense of the present, to handle the objects and material that was part of their life, is the most visceral way to form that connection. It was a life changing moment for me.

OL Yeah. And I think the time that I spent there—I mean, I've done huge amounts of archival work since, but I knew at the time that nothing was ever going to come close to the intimacy of that archive. The sort of day after day of sitting there, with my headphones on, listening to Wojnarowicz speaking into my ear was so intimate, so moving, and I think that's what you want to then take that experience and give it to the reader, as well, and say, "I want you to know what I've had, I want you to feel this as intensely and as painfully and as sort of beautifully as it happened to me," and almost dissolve yourself away so that they can have that connection, too.

MW And I never really thought about it, but you really do in a sense—I'm not gonna say dramatize, but you really do depict that experience of forming the bodily connection to the archive. And it's an experience that not many people get to have unless they do the work that we have. But by putting your body in relationship to the raw material of histories that are deeply resonant is a very vivid and visceral experience. And for me, I think about these archives captured the texture of another time. I'm obviously at this point, I just made this film *Spaceship Earth*, which has all this '90s archival footage. I made *Recorder* about Marion Stokes that contains all this

raw VHS footage from the late '70s until 2012. And I'm in a space of being very much into the kind of late '80s, '90s, VHS texture but have also been completely fetishistic about 60mm and 8mm film from the '30s, '40s, '50s, '60s. And to me, there is something bodily about the texture and raw material of these dead formats that capture history. And, you know, I want to bring them to life. I want people to experience them. It's like this incredible knowledge that exists in canisters of 16mm films or pneumatic three-quarter inch tapes, it's meaningless until somebody kind of recovers it from the trashcan of history. And I love playing that role. I love sharing the knowledge that's embedded in these tapes, or in these reels that honestly will be thrown out or will disintegrate.

OL I think this is really similar to something that I tried to do especially in the earlier books, but I still pry and away is to allow people to speak in their own voices so that when people come from a different era, 100 years into the past, fifty years into the past, those textures of speech are preserved. So particularly in *To the River*, which had stuff from centuries and centuries ago, letting each person directly speak and letting there be lots of their own language in their own voice was a way of trying to kind of preserve those histories and let that feeling—it doesn't happen all the time, but sometimes when you're working with something old, it's almost as if the time and space between you drops away and you're suddenly somewhere else, and I sort of cherish those encounters. I'm out there looking for them. That's something I want to be able to share with readers and trying to find ways for that to happen, for those sorts of time slips to happen, feels really important to me.

OL You know, I'm really into tracing footsteps, and not so much recently, but more in the past I did recreations of my films that were in the patina and the formats of archival footage. In *Wild Combination*, I shot a lot of VHS material of an actor on the Staten Island Ferry where the Russell would listen to mixes of his own cassettes, and I shot that in VHS and I think some people might believe that that was authentic archival, but there's always a documentary integrity to it because he was wearing Arthur's actual jacket and actual headphones. You know, I recreated the apartment where Marion Stokes had five VHS tapes recording simultaneously on all the different net-

works.

[CLIP FROM *RECORDER: THE MARION STOKES PROJECT* TRAILER]

The US Embassy in Tehran . . . supporters sort of come out of the closet; America several tons of . . . 100 years old . . . My mother started taping at the birth of the 24 hour news cycle. She was saying, “Well, we got to get this, nobody else is gonna keep this.” She hit record and she never stopped. She was very mysterious and very private. She lived in the richest part of the city. She had nine homes packed to the gills. She was a hoarder, you know, she hoarded everything. Who decides what’s normal? I think maybe a reexamination of what is normal is in order at this point. My mother was enormously controlling. It was a long point of contention between her and me about my boringly conventional intellect compared to her. Now, she was definitely spied on by the FBI. You don’t want me in there. Now you make it work! You have kept me out of your institution. You want to stop faking democratic process. Make it work! I don’t think a lot of people knew the real Marian. Taping these programs for my mother was a form of activism. She wanted people to be able to seek the real truth. You need to deal with people who are living a different reality than yours. She was obsessed with how media reflects a society back to itself. And those in power, are able to write their own history. A lot of craziness produces a lot of brilliance, and I think there’s something kind of brilliant about what Marian Stokes did.

MW But, you know, I recreated a painting.

OL Oh, I didn’t realize that was a recreation. I’m a naive reader! You’re sophisticated visually, though, in ways that not everybody is.

MW Well, actual artwork from her home or recreation of a painting of her that was in her old home or her actual old vintage Macintosh computers are in that space. Or in *Teenage*, I did really intensive recreations in formats that were kind of germane to the ‘20s, ‘30s, and ‘40s and degraded them and gave them the look of archive through all organic means, you know, stomping on film prints.

OL And was that because there wasn’t the archival footage that you needed, but you needed to have something, so recreation was the

way to go?

MW Yeah, and it's the same thing you did in *To the River*. It was like bringing to life these subjects in which they were marginalized and so there was absolutely no footage of them. But part of how I grounded the broad cultural history of the invention of teenagers was by telescoping into four different portraits of kind of hidden histories of young people. But for me, the documentary integrity was not only recreating things that we found in archival footage, but to really take on the exact format that was used in these times. And to emulate the look of that so that it provided a seamless experience for viewers and didn't have that kind of showiness of a kind of docudrama but that retained the same texture of another time. I was really obsessed with doing photochemical processes to retain the texture of the past. So that visceral, physical element of a texture of archival footage can apply to recreations, but also the actual production design and clothing and objects within recreations to me also needs to have a certain documentary integrity, and that's a priority for me.

MW Besides living in trees, and being a professional herbalist and prolific gardener, you have these connections to the natural world, and your first book really dove into the meaning of that. And you know, I do not want to talk about COVID, but why don't we talk about climate change? I feel like you have written in depth about emergency. And you're in a sense an expert about making art in emergencies. How is climate change shifting the way you think? And is it even tangibly shifting the way that you work?

OL You know, I've been thinking about climate change since the '90s. I dropped out of university to become an activist and the sense of the oncoming apocalypse of climate change was so present to me then that in some ways I almost feel more hopeful now, because much more of the world has copped to its reality, has accepted that that's something that's happening and something we have to do something about and the sort of despairing sense of not being able to get through to anybody in the '90s was very bleak and very dark and I think I went to a very dark place in my twenties because of it. So I feel like it's there in all of my books. It's certainly there in *Crudo*, it's there in *To the River*, the sense that time is running out, and I think it's very

much what I want to write about with the new book, which is about the dream of paradise and the impossibility, or maybe the possibility, the difficulty of a common paradise, paradise that is shared, the way that paradises always end up being exclusive. And that's so much a story about climate change, that's so much about how are we going to handle the situation that we're going into? How are we going to make it possible that we can survive, but also the world and the natural world that we inhabit can also survive? How can that sort of justice and fairness be managed? I feel like in the same way as COVID right now, it's not a question that any artist is going to be able to evade for much longer. It's going to become more and more of our—I mean, COVID is part of that story, anyway, it's going to become more and more of a reality. And it's not that I think everybody needs to be making sort of eco-justice works, but those questions about who gets a stake in the world? Who has the voice in the world? And who's going to survive? We've all got to be thinking about those. On some level, there's so much there in your film *Spaceship Earth*, as well. It feels like climate change runs right through that, don't you think?

MW Oh, absolutely. And I think maybe as a closing note, something I think that we both really share and think about and are concerned about is how can the past inform our knowledge about a very uncertain future? Is there any way that we can deal with the future by really looking at the past, and I think that's just something that's really important to us. And that is a resource and a tool for us to deal with the crisis that we inevitably face as we move forward in the world.

OL And I think something I find sustaining about your work and sustaining to my work is that there is a faith that really making sense of the past can be helpful, that it's a way towards the utopia of the future. So that's something I really appreciate about your work.

MW Likewise. I don't think we're very idealistic, inspiring people, necessarily, but I think that we have it in us. We have that strain of idealism and hopefulness in us, and it may not be just on the surface, but fundamentally it's there. I think we both have a hopeful look at the world and that we're trying to make sense of it and trying to understand where we're going.

OL Pessimistic utopians.

MW Realists.

OL Realists. Matt, it is such a pleasure as always to talk to you.

MW I know, I miss you.

OL I miss you.

MW And I'm going to come over to your garden one of these days.

OL Yeah, we'll hang out in a beautiful garden very soon.

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