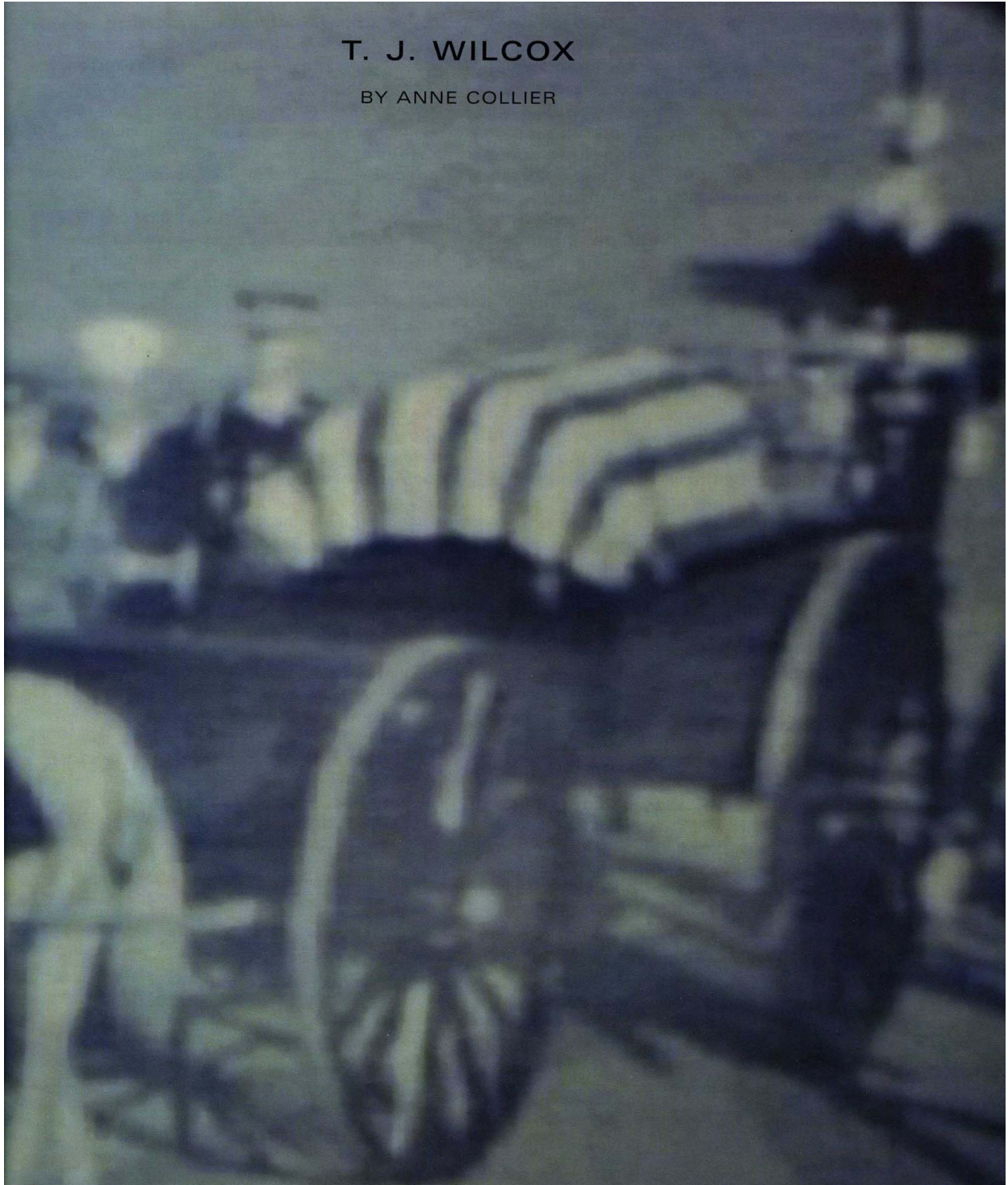


GLADSTONE GALLERY

# ***BOMB***

T. J. WILCOX

BY ANNE COLLIER



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I met T. J. Wilcox in Los Angeles in the early '90s when we were introduced by our mutual friend, the artist Sharon Lockhart. At the time, I was an undergraduate student at CalArts and T. J. and Sharon were graduate students at Art Center College in Pasadena. There were strong social connections between the two schools, and it was an exciting time to be in Los Angeles. Lots of interesting artists were just starting out or going to school there and new galleries were opening. There was a real sense of community—and a real sense of adventure. I actually didn't get to know T. J. very well when we were both students, but I do remember thinking that he was extremely handsome!

I met T. J. again in 2003 when he visited San Francisco, where I had been living since 2001. We went barhopping and ended up at a favorite bar of mine, Ginger's Trois, where we got quite drunk and had a brilliant time. I had always been and continue to be mesmerized by T. J.'s work. It is intelligent and romantic, and his use of film is always beautiful and poetic. He approaches history and historical subjects like Marie Antoinette or Adele Astaire's Irish castle by collapsing the distinctions between fact and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity, biography and autobiography, creating concise narratives that tend to be quite short but *feel* timeless.

—Anne Collier

T. J. WILCOX: I've wanted to tell you a crazy story. When I graduated from SVA in the late '80s, I needed a studio and a way to stay in New York, so I searched the *New York Times* want ads under A—for art—and found an ad that read, "Are you interested in art? Do you speak French? Please send a handwritten letter to this address."

ANNE COLLIER: Did you speak French?

TJW: Yeah, I was an exchange student in France, so I sent a letter and in reply I got my first and only Western Union telegram, requesting me to interview with Wildenstein & Company. Now they're famous—a lot of people have seen paparazzi photos of one of the family members whom the tabloids call "the Bride of Wildenstein," but they were more discreet in those days.

AC: The cat lady?

TJW: Yes. She was the wife of the man who was looking for an assistant. The gallery was run in a very old-fashioned, almost 19th-century manner. And like many old French companies, they put all confidence in handwriting analysis.

AC: What did your handwriting say about you?

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TJW: Apparently that I was hireable. I spent two years working for the Wildensteins and got a great firsthand art education by working with their vast collection. I remember on my first day, while I was standing around not knowing what to do, someone said, "There's a picture on the floor there that's not in its frame. Go put it in the vault." So I picked it up and realized I was carrying one of the Lute Player paintings by Caravaggio. It was incredible to see it in such an intimate way. It was a very serious suit-and-tie sort of place though, and after two years I decided to buy my life and free time back by going to grad school at Art Center College in Pasadena.

AC: Is that where you started making films?

TJW: Well, I made a stop-action animated Super-8 film in my 5th-grade art class. But I think the sense of being surrounded by the film industry affected me when I moved to Los Angeles. As a new arrival, I felt the city had a kind of company-town quality—I didn't work for the company.

AC: But there's access to real movie stuff.

TJW: It was so *doable* to make a movie in LA. The town is set up to make movies. I felt emboldened by my new scholastic backdrop to take on something technically complicated like film. I had been a painter and I approached my films from that perspective—I was interested in the palette of colors film offered, composing the frame, creating layers of information. Anyway, I wondered whether I could reconsider what would typically be thought of as disadvantages for a moviemaker—no budget, no crew, tourist-grade materials—as an interesting condition, rather than as a hindrance. As a kid I loved Hollywood films, but just as great to me were my grandfather's 16-mm family films which we would watch on the back porch on summer nights. My favorite days at school were when I'd arrive to drawn shades and a film projector standing in the classroom. It was like, Today is the day that we're gonna leave this hellhole; we're gonna escape. (*laughter*) Remember those science films?

AC: Sex-ed films?

TJW: They would relegate all the difficult topics to film because no one wanted to actually give voice to them.

AC: That's what they do in driving-drunk class, too. Was your earliest film the Marie Antoinette one?

TJW: I had a few trial runs but yes, the first film I exhibited was *The Escape (of Marie Antoinette)*.

AC: James Benning was teaching at CalArts when I was there. James had a big impact on the way we were approaching film and video; people started experimenting with both narrative and documentary forms, using subtitles and voice-overs. At that time, I was making photographs and video and film projects. William E. Jones, who was also a student there, made a great film called *Massillon* that seemed influenced by

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Still from *The Little Elephant*, 2000, 16-mm film. Total running time: 4 minutes, 38 seconds.



Still from *Garland Two*, 2003, 16-mm film. Total running time: 5 minutes, 47 seconds.

James Benning, but, at the same time, it was clearly its own thing. All the cool girls at CalArts were making videos and that's probably what got me interested in making my own.

TJW: (*laughter*) We had cool kids making videos in my school, too. It was a little antimodern or something to shoot on Super-8 film and then transfer to video. But I really loved the look, the color and clarity, of Super 8 much more than the video stock that was available in those days. Of course this was pre-Final Cut Pro and when I was ready to edit, I would have to have a complete film assembled in my head before beginning. I would beg for Avid time at a TV studio because I wanted effects that couldn't be done on our machines at school. I would slip the station tech guy 100 bucks and he would edit my films in one pass, usually in the middle of the night.

AC: You said before that you were painting. What were you painting?

TJW: Interiors, in a way. I wanted to find evidence of fantasy manifesting itself in the physical

world. I wondered what the traces were when something as intangible and ephemeral as fantasy projected or erupted in the world. But I felt the paintings I was making in my attempt to explore these ideas were getting cumbersome and clunky. I was immediately attracted to film's ability to contain and reveal so much information simultaneously. It can be rich with content while the experience of it remains light and ephemeral and not overburdened by a buildup of information.

AC: That's a great description of how you use film. One of the earliest things I made at CalArts was a Super-8 film about my father. At that time I was making work that operated somewhere in the space between fact and fiction, between fantasy and my reality. The last thing I made at CalArts was a short film about the rumors surrounding the death of Catherine the Great, juxtaposed with an autobiographical narrative from my teenage years and a story that I came across in a magazine about a baby falling from a train. It somehow combined myth, diary entries, and exploitative journalism! How did you arrive at the subject of Marie Antoinette? You're clearly drawn to tragic subjects. There's also Marlene Dietrich, the subject of your film *The Funeral of Marlene Dietrich*. A lot of gay men seem to be interested in her.

TJW: Well, that's a lot of questions.

AC: That's everything I really want to know!

TJW: I love the story about your Catherine the Great film. That's what I'm talking about when I say that film or video can have all these different layers; you can approach a story from its official history, or from its history in a popular magazine, and then from a rumored, passed-on history. Your piece takes a historical subject and revels in its details but ultimately makes that historical subject seem totally unfixed and unstable. This makes you realize that all histories are fabricated and used by every living person to tell their own stories. Growing up in Seattle, in the faraway Northwest, I always felt removed from the action. In fact, the big complaint about me as a young student was that I was always lost in my dreams. (*laughter*)

AC: So funny. I was *not*.

TJW: I was always a Francophile. I made a film called *The Little Elephant* which was in part dedicated to my memories of the children's books about Babar. In them, my sense of esteem for the seductive charm of "La France" originated. Those books stood out as superior objects in my nursery; so beautifully drawn, so smartly packaged, such a tantalizing model of the transformative power of Francocentric enculturation. Later, I loved reading histories of the 18th and 19th centuries. I was easily seduced by the charms of France as an intellectual center, arts center, cultural center, and center of beauty and romance. I totally fell for the whole thing. So, for example, I knew the story of Marie Antoinette backward and forward. One anecdote

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about her that particularly captured me was a scheme she concocted to escape from her revolutionary captors. During the time, she, Louis XVI, and their children were being held prisoner. She managed to secretly commission the construction of a carriage to serve as an escape vehicle for the royal family. Her plan was that they would disguise themselves, sneak away from their captors in the middle of the night, and board this carriage bound for the border, where they would find safety. It was sort of a good idea, if a little crazy and convoluted. It was awfully bold to attempt a costumed jailbreak in the dead of night with two young children and her husband, all of whom were considered to be the chief criminals in France at the time, with the revolution simmering toward the boiling point.

AC: Where did they get costumes?

TJW: I don't know, but she fell in love with this idea. So much so that she became preoccupied by all the details. Her plans for the escape carriage became more and more elaborate and luxurious. It had toilets that would rise from the floor, specially made; porcelain services for dining; elaborate silver toilette sets; heavy damask upholstery and brocades. At the time, some of the nobility managed to flee the revolution by mounting the swiftest horses and making a run for the border. But she was so invested in escaping in this grand way that by the time the vehicle had been constructed, it was so heavy it could barely move.

AC: Someone actually made it for her?

TJW: Oh yeah, surreptitiously. She was getting notes out of the palace. She was ordering sets of luggage, traveling clothes, costumes. The carriage was made from scratch. So they slowly started rumbling away from Paris. She almost got away, but the carriage was so overloaded with her fantasies they had to get out and walk alongside it if they encountered a hill.

AC: Is this *really* true?

TJW: (*laughter*) It's all true.

AC: Was she deluded?

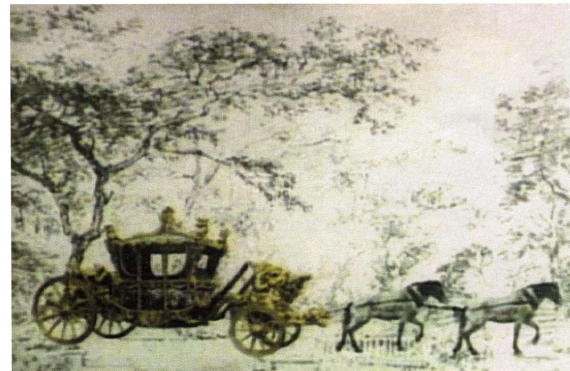
TJW: She was just deeply invested in a very grand sense of herself. She'd been raised to be a queen. She was the ultimate flower, the consummation of the 18th-century idea of living beautifully. She was raised to be a dreamer, an instigator, a patron of the arts. She was free to imagine life at its most beautiful and the resources of the state and the minds and hands of all of its artists were at her disposal to bring her vision into the world.

Anyway, it was noticed the next morning that they were not in their rooms, and they were quickly caught and returned to Paris and the revolution's guillotines. This incident is usually invoked as a symbol of bloated, decadent aristocracy, but I also viewed it as her escape into her fantasies. Running for the border might have been the practical course, but in the end she was a martyr to her fantasies and conception of beauty.

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Still from an untitled 16-mm film in progress, 2010.



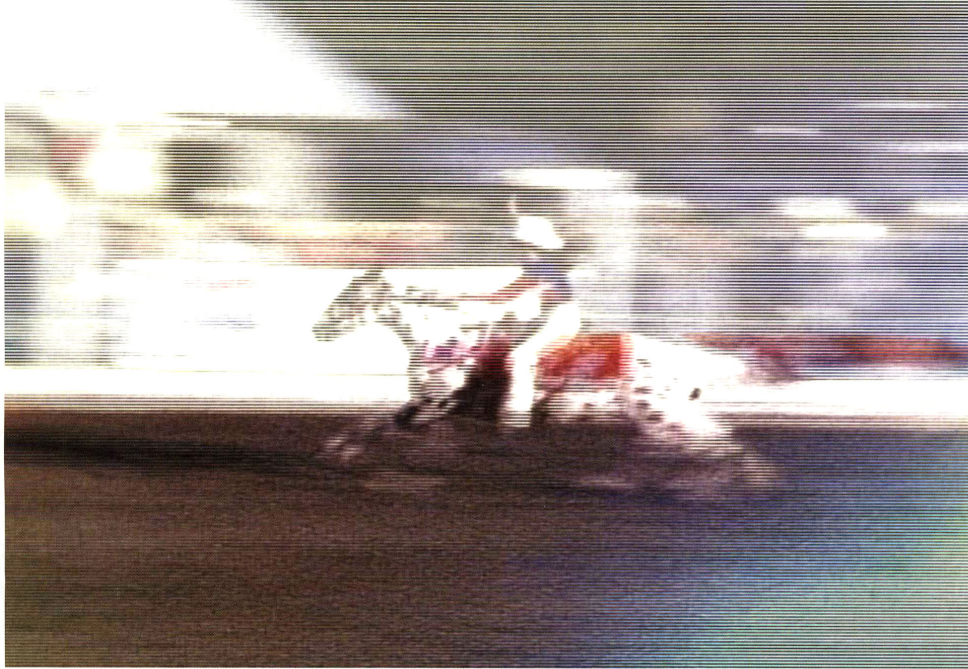
Still from *The Escape (of Marie Antoinette)*, 1996, 16-mm film. Total running time: 12 minutes.

AC: Do you think of her as an artist?

TJW: I think artists are like her. I think interesting art is tangible evidence of people who have a great commitment to their own sense of the world. They're trying to make sense of their own fantasies, drives, desires. I think artmaking can be an attempt to get closer to one's motivating drives and I think Marie Antoinette can be seen as a hero, or patron saint, of that pursuit.

AC: In my own work I often incorporate very identifiable, iconic imagery, and part of the struggle is trying to somehow negotiate its iconic status, so that it can be more than just a cliché. Can we talk about your Marlene Dietrich film, *The Funeral of Marlene Dietrich*, and her status as a gay icon? How do you avoid clichés in making a film about Marlene Dietrich? Is this the 900th time you've been asked this question?

TJW: Kind of, but that's okay. I think it's a great challenge. When I met the artist Joe Mama Nitzberg at Art Center he was making work that used Judy Garland as a subject. We were interested in something we came



Still from *Garland Four*, 2005, 16-mm film.  
Total running time: 8 minutes, 33 seconds.

to call the cringe factor. By which we meant how can one work with a subject like Judy or Marilyn Monroe, for example, that might seem exhausted as an icon or an image?

I thought it was interesting to deal with something both living and dead in that way. Things drag in their wake a lot of other histories beyond the marquee ones they most commonly represent. I thought I could approach history like squeezing more out of a lemon that had been through the press two or three times; working with an old chestnut, an old war horse, the too-familiar song at the bar. One more time! (*laughter*)

As for Dietrich or Marie Antoinette, they were symbols, or clichés, of a gay lifestyle. When I got to New York, I had this palpable sense that gay culture was literally dying. I was aware as a young person that I was bereft of part of a generation that preceded me in the city. I should have had the good fortune to sit around with amazing old queens who could have told me about life, loves, and the history of gay New York. But because of AIDS, many were absent.

AC: I guess I never really thought of Marie Antoinette as a gay icon.

TJW: Well, in New York, the gay bar Marie's Crisis is still around. The idea of a tragic queen has always had resonance in the gay community. But it felt like that set of references was something from another time. Maybe I'm paying homage to a lost era of gay

history as much as to Marie's sense of fantasy.

AC: I was recently watching your films on my computer, after having previously seen them projected in galleries. It was a really different experience from seeing a number of your films being shown simultaneously in a gallery installation. There's such a tension between the subtitles—the texts are so precise—and the way the films' imagery remains somehow unresolved. And then the films just *end*, and you're left hanging by these brilliantly timed wrap-ups that make complete sense. It's not an abruptness like being hit in the face, but more like if someone had turned the lights on.

TJW: I always considered my films as something you would see in an art gallery, which is very different than experiencing a film in a plush movie theater seat. I like to imagine that art galleries are spaces for criticality, or critical *thinking*. That's such a rare thing in our world, and it's so different from movie theaters. It's *possible* for that to happen in a movie theater, but movie theaters are really places where most people go to relax. It's more about...

AC: Entertainment?

TJW: Yeah, snacking, holding hands, being entertained, or whatever. But when you see something in a gallery, you're trying to take images apart and think about them; you're thinking about the sound and the text and how it all fits together. For me, there was a real problem. When I started making video, so much of it was

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just so *ugly*; it looked like *Cops*. Everything looked like banal reportage because of video's poor visual quality. It was being touted as the most contemporary medium, but it was so clunky. The "old-fashioned" medium that was being eclipsed at the time was Super 8, which had all of the richness and visual profundity of film. Though it's simple and tends to look blue, it retains film's visual lushness. Even though it was tourist-grade media, it had this depth of color that I super responded to. That's a digression, but I wanted to make a movie that would hold its own in an art-gallery context—where you had to stand up and watch the thing.

AC: There's also a lot of durational film and video work being made for gallery settings, work that really makes physical and psychological demands of the viewer, where the act of watching is literally exhausting, almost a form of cruelty.

TJW: Duration *can* be used in a compelling way in an art installation, but I think some art presumes a stoic viewer. I wanted to make something more generous. I've always aspired to beauty and accommodated the physical reality of being in an art gallery. I was also interested in the fact that in an art context it is presumed a moving-image work will be viewed serially. I've always wanted there to be a variety of paths one might take through my work. You can watch my films from beginning to end and get a sense of the narrative structure. But there are other paths, linear and non-linear, one might navigate. For example, on a formal level I'm invested in the color palette of my films and the potential for storytelling via conventions of narrative ascribed to color associations. I think it is an interesting challenge to make a film for a gallery audience that might see only a frame or short passage of one of my films as they move through the exhibition space. I hope that experience of the work can be as fruitful as the experience of watching the films from their opening titles to their final credits.

AC: Do you specifically think about this as you edit the films? Do you ever think about the subtitles themselves as still images?

TJW: Absolutely. I really do. That's the joy in writing those subtitles.

AC: The subtitles are often strangely paced.

TJW: The pace is very syncopated. The frame size sets strict limits on the length of the narration, which I hope seems distilled. At its best, it aspires to my kind of poetry. I simply can't get very much text onto the screen at one time, so my challenge is, once again, to make something interesting from that limitation. Ideally, each phrase, superimposed over an image or short scene, functions as a movie unto itself.

AC: You've made works that explicitly address your personal family history. Is your work operating in the space between biography and autobiography? I always think about my work in terms of the singular and

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the plural, or the personal in relation to the universal.

TJW: That's one of the things I love about your work. I think I can go out on a limb and speak for both of us and say that you can talk about mortality in art, but it's only interesting as an artwork because death is universal. That's where you get into "singular and plural" to me. I made a film about having lost my mother, but everybody loses a mother or someone significant at some point in their lives. My films provide me the opportunity to have a dialogue that is at once private and universal.

AC: Let's talk about researching. In my work I'm always trying to address personal concerns in a way that's more open, or plural—I prefer the word "plural," because "universal" seems like such an impossible ideal. My practice evolves through subsequent layers of research, getting inspired by individual images and thinking how I can adapt or expand things to embrace or stimulate other thoughts. You could call it a form of collage. I know that my photographs are often very reductive, but there's a whole research process that's not necessarily evident in the photo, that remains outside of the frame. I guess everyone who makes films is a researcher of sorts, but the research process seems especially pronounced in your films.

TJW: For me, to move through life is to be a researcher, or a collector of information. I have so many crazy tangents I'm constantly pursuing—collections, ideas, novels, histories, artists, whatever. The films often employ a single subject as an organizing lasso, but in fact the various parts or chapters or clips that make a complete film are only tenuously held together. The subject acts as a container for experiences lived, read,

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listened to, or heard. Artmaking gives me an excuse to make something from the ongoing research project that is living life.

AC: How has technology impacted upon your research process?

TJW: It was already a lot for me to acquire knowledge from the used bookshop or record store, from a boyfriend or grandparent, or at the movies. I forget very little; some friends of mine joke that they're glad I'm around to remember their lives for them so they don't have to bother. Now we have this vast luxury/burden of online knowledge. It's like a treasure hunt to move through that world and find things.

AC: Despite this abundance, barely anything resonates.

TJW: Barely anything. But it's interesting to see what stays in the drain, what nuggets remain in your gold-panner's tray. If the means of accumulating knowledge and information is now exaggerated, at the end of the day there are still only a few things that stay with us. They become an important reminder of our sense of self and place.

AC: And our relationship with images. I think that's what I'm trying to make: specific images that resonate. Whereas I think you're trying to put images *together* that unfold in real time to create a new, accumulative meaning.

TJW: Out of chaos.

AC: Let's talk about the Dowager Duchess of Devonshire and your new film. Why her?

TJW: The film is really about Adele Astaire, who became Lady Charles Cavendish and is now remembered primarily as Fred's sister. It includes a recent interview I made with the Dowager Duchess of Devonshire who was related to Adele by marriage. In one sense the interview was a tangent, vaguely related to the "actual" subject of the film because, although they were related, Her Grace didn't know Adele well. But for me, speaking with her was a great privilege and a perfect addition to the project. Adele was a huge star in her day. She and her brother were theater stars before she gave up her career to marry Cavendish, the second son of the Duke of Devonshire. This forced Fred to rethink his career and move to Hollywood, with pretty memorable results. While her fame lasted, she was a celebrated archetype of modernity for woman of her generation, and yet now she is nearly forgotten. The present Duchess is 90 and the last of the famous Mitford sisters. She knew the world my film recalls as well as many of the personalities who shaped the 20th century; her portrait was painted by Lucian Freud, she knew Kennedy and attended his funeral, and she infamously took tea with Hitler. Filming her seemed to me an opportunity to record a signal voice of the 20th century.

The Duchess and I spoke about her family's Irish

home, an ancient castle in the small village of Lismore. I was invited to Lismore by her grandson, William Burlington, who with his wife, Laura, oversees an arts program that takes place on the estate. While walking through the gardens which surround the property we came upon what I took to be a minimalist earthwork set in the lawn. It turned out to be the remains of a swimming pool that had been installed in the 1930s by Adele Astaire, who lived in the castle with her husband, Lord Charles Cavendish. The pool has long since been filled in and planted over with grass so that now only its concrete rim is visible. Adele Astaire was a real pop star, the Madonna of her age. She and Lord Charles seem to have tried to recast their castle for a new jazz age. A modern hybrid home that I thought only existed in movies of the period, complete with heraldic shields, suits of armor, afternoons by the pool with martinis made by the Irish butler; a kind of Irish Hollywood with a mid-Atlantic accent. It only lasted a few years and the remains of the pool I found in the garden are the only trace of the period that survived at Lismore Castle.

AC: Wow, it turned out to be quite a story.

TJW: One that I just fell into. Why do you fall in love? Why do you do anything? There is some kind of spark. It happened to me that day. It was the history of the early 20th century and English aristocracy and early American pop culture converging and falling in love with each other, and there was this trace of it in the Irish countryside.

AC: What's the Duchess' first name?

TJW: Deborah. She very graciously asked me to call her Debo.

AC: How did she meet Hitler?

TJW: When war was declared between Germany and England, her sister Unity, who was a great fan of Hitler, was so completely devastated that she tried to commit suicide in the English Garden in Munich by shooting herself in the head.

AC: It didn't work?

TJW: She sort of *half* killed herself. Debo was the youngest daughter and agreed to accompany her mother to retrieve Unity from the hospital. While they were there visiting Unity, Hitler invited them to tea.

AC: What did she say about it?

TJW: She said she would rather have met Elvis. After our interview and a very nice lunch I asked to use the Duchess's bathroom. I was startled to discover its walls covered in silver paper, very much like Warhol's Factory, on top of which were hung dozens of photographs of Elvis. Everyone's got their thing.