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Art

Look around, see the pattern

Lawrence Weschler discovers connections in unexpected places, tying Neutra, say, to Godard. The writer says there's even a thread that links all his subjects: 'I insist upon enthusiasm.'

March 05, 2006 | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp | Special to The Times

LAWRENCE WESCHLER hustles across Wilshire Boulevard then strolls behind the Avco cinema in Westwood to a tiny cemetery where actors Natalie Wood and Robert Crane are buried alongside his relatively less famous relatives. He now lives in Pelham, N.Y., but comes here occasionally to pay respects to the genetic sources of his style as a writer.

He speaks admiringly of the many talented musicians in his background, including his maternal grandfather, Ernst Toch, a modern composer; his paternal grandmother, Angela Weschler, head of the Vienna Conservatory of Music's piano department before World War II; and his father, Irving Weschler, a talented amateur jazz pianist. Then, with a self-deprecating smile, Weschler confesses that he has a "tin ear."

"Music is about imaginative relationships that by definition take place across time," he explains while walking away from the cemetery. "My genetic intuition disposes me to think in musical ways. But I cannot tell one tone from another. I can understand music intellectually but not through sound. The odd thing is that the musical compositional ability I'm drawn to, well, I use it visually. I perceive visual harmony, I see melodies, I see themes."

Weschler's musical inclinations found an outlet in the structure and pace of his uniquely digressive writing, which often takes on the visual arts. These inclinations are writ large in his latest book, "Everything That Rises," a collection of paintings and photographs, diagrams and charts that inspired far-reaching speculations that he calls "convergences." For years, Weschler sent his convergences to editors at national magazines but most were rejected for their inability to fit into categories of art, politics or opinion. Wunderkind author Dave Eggers accepted them for what they are, a graphic reflection of Weschler's wildly nonlinear observations. After printing many of them in his magazine *McSweeney's*, Eggers' publishing house of the same name will release them as a book this month. *McSweeney's* also offers a contest inviting the submissions of readers' convergences to be posted on its website, www.mcsweeneys.net.

"I'm drawn to visual stuff because I'm bad at the aural," Weschler continues. "I'm always listening for what I want to see. I've got good ears in my eyes."

Weschler is especially well respected here for his books and articles on artists who have lived in L.A., such as Robert Irwin, Ed Kienholz and David Hockney. His book about David Wilson, founder of the credibility-challenging Museum of Jurassic Technology in Culver City, "Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder," was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. John Walsh, former director of the J. Paul Getty Museum, says that Weschler "thinks more like an artist than most writers. He makes big jumps, and it is dazzling to watch him leap and usually land on his feet. As a writer, he grabs you by the arm and talks in your ear like your brilliant

older brother. He has a freewheeling and familiar way of writing that I find irresistible."

This most recent book, however, literally exemplifies the way he thinks about what he sees, what his daughter Sara terms his "loose-synapsed moments."

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'Seeing what sparks'

"I'M interested in everything," Weschler says. His book includes observations about international and national politics, neuroscience and astronomy yet equally addresses varied aspects of the visual arts. The airy architecture of the Getty Museum is traced to the indirect influence of L.A.'s emigre architect Richard Neutra, which leads Weschler to recall the emigre filmmakers who brought German Expressionist style to Hollywood, which influenced American film noir, which in turn was adopted by such French directors as Jean-Luc Godard, who made the original "Breathless" that inspired a remake by the same name in 1983, the setting for which can be seen from the Getty. Such musings on architecture and film histories result in a "convergence."

"To the degree that I write about visual stuff, it is often about putting two images side by side and seeing what sparks between them," Weschler explains. A single photograph can spark a series of seemingly random but ultimately connected observations. What about Velazquez's rear view of the reclining nude "Rokeby Venus" as replicated in the mounds of the Chilean mountains, in Man Ray's painting of red lips hovering in the sky, in Marc Chagall's female nude, again from the rear, floating over Paris and in a pink lozenge of a cloud floating over L.A.? Weschler weaves a matrix of connection from what others would surely see as unrelated images. Once connected by him, however, there is the indisputable moment of "aha!"

"I have long been deeply free-associative, continually making odd connections," he admits, settling down for tea at a table in a Westwood restaurant. Bearded and bespectacled, he is dressed in a brown sport jacket, shirt and tie as befits his status as director of New York University's Institute for the Humanities. Weschler, 54, worked as staff writer for the New Yorker for 20 years before taking this academic position in 2001, where he tries to "break down the walls between the disciplines." He plans to bring that outlook to his new part-time position as artistic director of the Chicago Humanities Festival, which takes place in November. He hopes to fight the trend toward specialization in universities. "Einstein maintained the sense of wonder of being alive," he says. "Everything in our educational system, especially higher education, is designed to filter that out of you."

"I'm not a member of the priesthood [of scholars] when writing about art. I do it in my own way," he says. "I'm not an expert, I'm a cross-fertilizer. When I go out reporting, half of the interview is me talking. I'm not a supplicant. We are having a conversation. I'm bringing a set of ideas my subject has never heard about and that turns out to be useful."

He eschews "art speak," the overly complex language used in writing about contemporary art. Yet even art critics approve. Phyllis Tuchman, former president of the International Assn. of Art Critics, says, "When he writes about art and artists, Weschler is so insightful, we learn about both the person and what he or she has made."

"In my writing, I address the person of average intelligence and abiding curiosity, not the expert, not the high priest exporting enguarded verbiage," Weschler says. "If you cannot write clearly, you cannot see clearly. If you see clearly, you should write clearly, but that is looked down upon by the priesthood."

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A philosophical bent

A native of Van Nuys and graduate of Birmingham High School, Weschler attended UC Santa Cruz during the experimental "classes held in the hot tub" years between 1969 and 1974. The school had relaxed the boundaries between departments, and he was allowed to change majors every semester, already developing "convergences" by finding common ground in seemingly unconnected areas of study. Freud, Kafka and Jewish mysticism, for instance. "I was allowed to think that way," he recalls. "I was foolish enough to go to a school that did not encourage me to specialize to get a degree."

After graduating, he turned down a four-year scholarship at the University of Toronto and decided to "stay intellectually alive outside the academy."

His Austrian grandfather Ernst Toch's archive is at UCLA, and after returning to L.A., Weschler took a job conducting oral histories with other European emigres who had come to L.A. between the world wars. Along the way, he was asked to transcribe the interview that Robert Irwin had done with the art department's Frederick Wight. Reading Irwin's observations on the nature of seeing led Weschler to send Irwin a note asking if he had read Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "The Primacy of Perception." The artist came to see Weschler, who wound up tutoring him in philosophy. Their conversations became the basis for a 25,000-word article that he sent around unsolicited to numerous magazines. In 1981, it was published by the New Yorker, whose then-editor, William Shawn, also hired him as a staff writer. "Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees" was published by University of California Press as Weschler's first book in 1982.

Irwin says: "He is interested in the impact of these eccentrics, including artists, and how they interact with social situations. He is able to take truly complex ideas and make them transparent. We never planned to do that book, but it has been in print consistently for 25 years. Every time I give a talk, someone comes up with a dog-eared copy and talks about its impact."

Throughout his prolific career, Weschler has written a dozen books and many lengthy articles. His initial writing for the New Yorker concerned the Solidarity movement in Poland, whereby he met his Polish wife, Joanna. For the past 10 years, she has worked as Human Rights Watch's first representative to the United Nations and she recently founded an organization to monitor the Security Council. They live in the New York City suburb where they raised their daughter, Sara. Now 18, she is traveling and working for a year before entering Brown University.

Weschler's books concern daunting issues of torture, ethnic cleansing and people forced into exile as well as the sublime artists Vermeer and Hockney. He finds it frustrating that his books on such diverse subjects are shelved in different areas of a bookstore because he sees them as pursuant of similar themes.

"There is a deep continuity between them. Mr. Wilson has everything to do with my book on torture and the one on Bosnia," he insists. "They are all about people in the everydayness of their lives who suddenly come alive. People by themselves who are objects and who become subjects. It is all about passion.

"I insist upon enthusiasm," Weschler says. "Enthusiasm comes from *entheos*, meaning 'the God introjected in you.' [Art historian and critic] John Berger was my inspiration. Reading him gave me permission to do what I was doing anyway, to think that way without someone saying, 'Where's your proof?'

"I want to believe that [making convergences] is something everybody does and it gets trained out of them. Children do it. But people get bogged down in the quotidian. They stop seeing because they are told, 'Stop it, it's silly.' "

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Lawrence Weschler

What: Film editor and writer Walter Murch will interview Lawrence Weschler in the "Aloud" series at the L.A. Central Library, Mark Taper Auditorium, 630 W. 5th St., downtown Los Angeles

When: 7 p.m. March 16

Price: Free but reservations required; standby only available

Contact: www.lfla.org/aloud