

LAURA KLEGER AND JOHN PILSON

The following phone interview took place on February 23, 2006. Laura was in Los Angeles, and John was in New York doing final preparations for his upcoming show at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery.

LAURA: I wanted to start out talking about the idea of character and particularly the way that architecture and place function as characters in your work. Most notably, in some of the earlier work, I'm thinking of the character of New York City. You were born in New York—did you grow up there as well?

JOHN: I grew up here until I was about ten, and then we moved to the suburbs, which at this point everyone in the family agrees was a bad idea. A terrible idea. Nothing good came of it. And it left me with a funny situation, because I came in to the city plenty, but at the same time things were so rosy here when I was growing up, and things were so miserable in the suburbs, so that New York was someplace I just desperately wanted to get back to. A lot of people grow up all over the place and desperately want to come here, and I just wanted to get back here and maintain this kind of idyllic, mythological place.

LAURA: Well, I love that you use the word "idyllic," because I've noticed, looking through some of the things that people have written about your work, that frequently they talk about New York as standing in as a kind of metaphor—perhaps for global capitalism or power structures or that kind of thing.

JOHN: Sure.

LAURA: But I actually was born and grew up in New York and feel very romantic about it, and I thought a lot about romanticism toward the city in your work. Do you feel that kind of nostalgia comes into play for you?

JOHN: Yeah, it's a huge topic for me, and maybe you can relate to this. It's kind of like having a famous person in the family. You admire their public persona, but at the same time you know all these intimate details about them. For any artist or filmmaker, I think it's hugely difficult to incorporate New York into your work.

LAURA: Since it's so mythological.

JOHN: Yeah, New York has such a place in art and film, and so it's daunting, I think, for a lot of people.

LAURA: I love that you take that challenge head-on. Am I correct that a number of those pieces were made during your residency in the World Trade Center?

JOHN: Yeah, I did a lot of work in the World Trade Center, and the one piece that really came out of it was *Above the Grid*.

LAURA: And what about *À la claire fontaine*?

JOHN: That's kind of funny. I was still in the residency at the World Trade Center, but I ran over and filmed that at another investment bank in Midtown.

LAURA: Can you touch on how you felt after September 11, both in relation to the Trade Center but also in how the skyscraper in general—that form of architecture—was changed in our consciousness?

JOHN: Well, it was such a multilayered reaction. I still continue to have changing thoughts about it. But superficially, I felt among a relatively small group of people who actually had an intimate knowledge of the world inside of that building. It was such an edifice, and, probably, out of all the buildings in New York, I think it was the most mysterious in terms of what its internal life was. That's why it was such a symbol. The immediate effect was that... Well, it's funny, my friend Nancy Davenport and I had a show that opened on September 6, 2001, and definitely addressed the whole subject of offices, New York office space, paranoia. Her work was these kind of digitally conjured pictures of attacks.

LAURA: Yeah, there was quite a bit of controversy surrounding that show.

JOHN: I'll tell you one thing, I regret everything I said to anyone who asked. It rendered me a babbling idiot to a lot of people. I think maybe it made me start to think a little bit more historically. Until then, I was very interested

in the kind of up-to-the-moment interior life, I was very interested in the corporate moment. A lot of the ideas that influenced that work were generated during the dotcom explosion and by just the hum of the economy at that time. After that, I think I really craved doing a kind of work that was a little bit about the past, in a way. And so the next building I got involved with was very old.

LAURA: And that was the St. Denis.

JOHN: Yeah.

LAURA: What you're saying about wanting to move back in time is interesting, because the St. Denis as a building has such a history, one that encompasses present time and also an expansive and rich past. Along those lines, I'm wondering how you think about site? I'm using "site" to mean either a particular place or an architecture, because there's a little bit of both in your work. Some of the scenes of the suburban houses are more place-sites, and then some of the urban scenes are more architecture-sites, so I'm using "site" sort of interchangeably. So to what extent does site function for you as a representative element—or maybe, as you mentioned before, a mythic or metaphoric element—and to what extent are you interested in the very particular idiosyncrasies of the places with which you work?

JOHN: On the one hand, on a very intuitive level, I simply get ideas from spaces. Certain spaces are just very provocative. And I don't think that has very much to do with being an artist, I think that a lot of people respond to architecture in that way—it gives them ideas or it creates different kinds of barometric changes. Maybe I'm particularly sensitive to it. Simply put, I do just respond very intuitively, and the spaces I get involved with I just find incredibly provocative. Beyond that, the subject of architecture interests me only so much as a kind of experience. I'm trying to see how to put this...It's like people are always the problem when it comes to architecture. I saw this incredible documentary that I think was squashed, because it showed at Film Forum and then it disappeared—and I can imagine a lot of people would like to see it disappear—about the construction of the Getty Center.

LAURA: Oh, wow.

JOHN: At the very end of this enormously difficult process of constructing the Getty Center, there's this incredible scene where the architect, Richard Meier, is walking around. It's after the curators and the staff have

moved in, and he's walking through the offices and stuff, and people have put little fuzzy bears on their computer monitors, and he's like: "What is this? You've gotta have some ground rules." [They laugh.] And all the chairs are out of place in the cafeteria, and he's going around putting them all back.

LAURA: He's just really distressed over a lived-in quality?

JOHN: Yeah, it's great. Something about New York that I find endlessly provocative and inspiring are the moment-to-moment transitions: from subway to nineteenth-century building to twentieth-century building to lobby to elevator to rooftop. Just the experience of going to work in the morning is cinematic, not only because New York is a cinematic city but also because there are so many cuts, you know? There are so many transitions. Life in the suburbs is like a series of slow dissolves [both laugh], and being in New York is like a series of...

LAURA: Jump cuts. [They laugh.] That's a nice analogy.

I wanted to ask you about *Conference and Morning, Noon, and Night*, of which I only had the opportunity to see excerpts of on DVD, so clarify for me if I have the specifics wrong or if you want to elaborate on what I saw. Watching those, it seemed to me that they're extremely similar in the sense that we have three screens; we have three characters; each piece has one character indoors, one outdoors, and one at a desk; and they're discussing these sports moments. And I assumed the one piece was set in Great Britain and the other piece was in America. As I was watching, I was wondering how does place—and maybe we can even say place as nation—influence each piece? That is, if you were experimenting with distilling a work into these very specific variables that you could tinker with, and in this one you were tinkering with place or nation?

JOHN: I'm looking at the DVD right now, and it's funny, because I have to say you're seeing both of those in very crippled, or not-finished, states. But still, they're representative. *Conference* is now called *Sunday Scenario*. It is also a three-channel piece. The version you saw on the DVD gives you a pretty good idea of what happens, but it's a little bit longer now and, if you can imagine this, it's with all three screens playing simultaneously. *Morning, Noon, and Night* I kind of assembled like this for the DVD, but it's also now shown as a three-channel piece.

LAURA: So *Morning, Noon, and Night* is three-channel. That's how *Sunday Scenario* seemed like it should have been too.

JOHN: Yeah, it should have been. I had to spend a lot of time figuring that out, there was a lot of trial and error involved. I showed it once in Germany as four channels, with the images on a fourth screen, and I found that was way too disconnected, so I started laying the pictures in, and then it became a problem of laying them in directly. But anyway, now it's a three-channel piece with the images incorporated into the frame, so it's got this kind of Warholian stasis.

LAURA: OK. It's funny, I just assumed that the three conversations were three channels.

JOHN: That's good to hear, that's absolutely the way it should be. And that's how it will be when the show opens next week.

LAURA: Good. So am I totally off base with this idea of them being similar pieces with tinkering?

JOHN: Oh no, not at all, they're basically the same piece.

LAURA: Which one came first?

JOHN: The American, the New York version came first. Almost everything in my work that could be considered performance, or just about anything that happens, is usually based on observation. Things can get strange, but almost everything I include when it comes to people—whether they're singing or jumping or whatever—is based on something that I've observed, although I might play around a little bit with the context in which those things are seen. I really wanted to do a piece about the kind of everyday surrealism of the conference call. Just how strange it is. And also I wanted to do a piece about the ways in which technology creates and allows for intimacy but also this other aspect, which is the way you kind of disappear into a telephone call and what happens to the space when you do disappear. I like the way the piece works, because you're basically seeing people almost disembodied. They're as disconnected from the world around them as they can possibly be. And yet the world goes on, and the spaces go on. I think of them as portraits of the people but also of the spaces. I think it's a very interesting phenomenon, what happens to a person's environment when they get on the phone.

LAURA: And the way in which they're not aware of their bodies, but then as viewers we're kind of spying on them.

JOHN: Yeah, their bodies really seem to be beside the point, and space somehow comes forward. It's almost like

Vermeer portraits. The way they seem so interior, so lost in something that really doesn't have anything to do with the room. For a second, at least.

LAURA: So thinking about how human characters—as opposed to spatial or architectural characters—function in your work, would you say that you're more interested in the individual or the archetype?

JOHN: Well, what I'm trying to do almost involves both, because in these cases, this wouldn't just work for me with any old conversation. What's exciting to me is the fact that both of these groups are more or less fanatics, you know? [*They laugh.*] They're fanatics about sports, and they're constantly comparing memories and listing names of players and all this stuff, and they're very good at what they're talking about. It is an art, I think. And what interested me when I did the second one, *Morning, Noon, and Night*, is how similar the experience was. Both pieces are completely unscripted and, basically, I just set them in motion. Both take place at particular times in the sports year, which did provoke certain types of conversation. Both of them took place immediately before the beginning of a particular season. So they're speculating about the future and talking about the past, which I thought was kind of nice. But, it turns out, based on my own experiences, that these types of sports fans are capable of talking about sports for exactly forty-five minutes before they run out of things to say.

[*They laugh.*]

LAURA: What happens after forty-five minutes?

JOHN: They just run out of things to talk about. But that may be true of any phone call. Maybe, even when you're on the phone with a friend, after forty-five minutes...

LAURA: Hmm, like we have some internal clock. Well, we'll see where we get to in our phone call. It's fascinating that those are both unscripted pieces.

JOHN: Oh, absolutely.

LAURA: Can you describe the directorial choices, anything from choosing the people to be in them to what kind of information they're given?

JOHN: Sure. *Sunday Scenario* is generated from observation in the sense that the man in the office is my father, and his best friend Arnold is in the bedroom, and Marty,

who is in the woods, is kind of peripheral. But my father and Arnold basically call each other at the end of every day and do this sort of day-in-sports thing. I grew up in the back of a car with sports radio on, and although I actually have very little interest and don't really know what they're talking about, I love the rhythm and the cadences and stepping on each others' words and the musicality of it. And it's very dramatic.

But to answer your earlier question about whether I'm interested in individuals or archetypes, the thing that I like about the pieces is that it's clearly a very personal and unique conversation among three people, but at the same time its form, especially on video, is identical to what you might hear on sports radio or see on TV. The form is native to a sports bar. The three-channel format is very native to certain types of news programs where you have these three people in different parts of the world stitched together for a conversation. And I thought that that was kind of nice too.

LAURA: I'm actually glad to hear you say that it's kind of both individual and type, because I wanted to pin you down to one or the other, and I couldn't. *[Laughs.]* It just wasn't working. I thought it was interesting that you made a piece called *Portraits (Manhattan)*. Now, am I correct that *Hic et Ubique* was first an independent piece and then was later combined with two other sections under the umbrella of *Portraits (Manhattan) Vol. 1*?

JOHN: Yes, that's right. I started making these short portraits—straight-ahead portraits. Well, what I thought of as portraits. And then I started to think of them as maybe a group, and so it's just something I'm going to keep on doing. I can't remember when I grouped them together, but it's an ongoing thing, and I'd like to do it in other cities as well. For now it's just in New York. Actually maybe I'll never do it in other cities.

[They laugh.]

LAURA: It was interesting to me that if you think of maybe someone who works with portraiture—be it Vermeer or a photographer or whoever—there is usually a continuity of technique or approach. And in each of these three vignettes you basically took a completely different approach to the idea of a portrait. Everything from the form to what we're seeing is different: The first section shows the single person, and we're only seeing one side of the call; the second is a conversation as a kind of portrait; and in the third perhaps environment plays as much a role as the person. So when you think about the idea of portrai-

ture in a really broad way, are you consciously trying to go down all these different avenues that it opens, or is it just approached on a piece-by-piece basis?

JOHN: Well, it's really kind of speculative, in that I'm still not entirely convinced that you can make a video that really functions as a portrait, but the prospect is kind of exciting. All my education and all my baggage is in photography. I studied photography, and I still make photographs, and I came to video later. But portraiture was always—especially with the photographers I admired—the thing that interested me the most. Ultimately, again concerning the friction between people and space, I'm really interested in the ways in which people don't quite settle into portraits, particularly, say, in the work of August Sander. I just love the moments—there are so many moments in that work—for example, where everything just coalesces into the dictionary definition of, say, the cook. The cook is perfect. It's just perfect. He becomes the cook.

LAURA: But then maybe some of the other people don't suit their supposed types.

[Talking over each other.]

JOHN: My favorite is the famous one—the secretary in the radio station, and she's dressed in this Chinese dress with these incredible German expressionist eyebrows—she looks like an Otto Dix. You know that there's a lot more going on there than a secretary at a radio station.

LAURA: So you feel in some sense that the idea of video portraiture is—I like what you said—"speculative."

JOHN: Yeah, people are in, they're out, for a moment they become this kind of—like you said—archetype, and at other times they're just Mike or whatever. But also, something that I think is really amazing about video as it is now—in terms of its palette and in terms of its gestures, the way it looks, the fact that it is getting so much closer to something that would be called traditionally cinematic—is that, from moment to moment, it can be very cinematic, and in other moments, very kind of raw.

LAURA: More digital-y?

JOHN: More, almost like surveillance.

LAURA: So you like that kind of indeterminate position video is in right now between surveillance and cinema?

JOHN: Yeah, absolutely. It seems to function kind of like the imagination. Or it just seems to *be* like that: It can be the cold, hard facts, and it can also be the daydream. It works very well.

LAURA: Let's discuss that tension that you're talking about, what you just set up as the cold, hard facts versus the daydream. You once said, in an interview with Gregory Williams, that you are interested in a tension between productivity and possibility, which I think is a great way of understanding your framework. And now, you're again setting up a tension dynamic, between fact versus dream. And I think that there is also another tension, between a kind of social commentary or social angle on things and a more strictly poetic kind of investigation. I'm hoping you can explore that last tension for me a little bit.

JOHN: In terms of the idea of portraiture, character, social types, circumstance versus individuality, all these things... I just love these topics. I wouldn't say that I'm very conversant in anything concrete, particularly, other than what I observe, but these things are so stark in day-to-day life. In terms of art, this is why I am so interested in what the Weimar artists were up to. The idea of a kind of German expressionism, and George Grosz, and that moment in time where artists were using the frayed social fabric as subject in work that was frayed. It seemed very clear-eyed but at the same time incredibly expressive. Those are artists I admire, but I don't necessarily think that would jump to mind for anybody looking at my work. One of my anxieties right now—while I'm getting ready for this show—is the people are very real or they're very not, I don't know. I feel like I'm walking this weird line between... I don't feel I necessarily brought any of my subjects into a world.

LAURA: A world that they didn't already exist in?

JOHN: A world of my design. It's like, people kind of crack up, and none of them are in that kind of "video art" mode. *[They laugh.]*

This subject comes up a lot when I talk about video with students and other people, but I think it's an interesting moment for using this medium and being interested in social commentary and the social fabric. In a weird way it's similar to that moment in time when you have photographers like Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander really discovering themselves and using the same cameras and basically, almost the same idiom as workaday newspaper photographers. At that moment in time, an artist could have access to a type of image, and that type of image had

a very solid place in the popular imagination, and they were kind of close to each other. It's interesting that what came after that period was, technologically, radically different, and that's when people started using view cameras and color film and really trying to make an image that was the work of an artist as opposed to a journeyman.

LAURA: As far as the visual grammars that you're interested in—the way you were talking about the sports-talk structure of having commentators around the globe all collapse into one TV—you're really being conscious of popular visual grammars that you might see on TV or somewhere like that?

JOHN: Yeah, I think more what I'm trying to say is that it's interesting that the image in my videos, in terms of its quality and its expressive quality, is the same image that is native to the reality TV show, or the same image that's native to a low-budget shot-for-TV feature. Video used to be a very specific category of image. Video art looked like video art. Either that or it looked like public access TV.

LAURA: *[Laughs.]* Right. *[Talking over each other.]* It is interesting to hear you say that you like the palette that video offers right now. I was wondering, as you moved from making photographs to making videos, if you felt any disappointment in how it looked?

JOHN: The reason I started doing videos was that, really, the image was beautiful, and also you could do it by yourself. That was an amazing development. Anytime I inquired about it before that, it was like, "Yeah, well, you can rent a studio for fifty dollars an hour and do some editing." When you could start doing it yourself, there was a huge shift in video. But I think if there's any tradition that I relate to in video, it is someone with a lot of baggage *[chuckles]* in one medium who picks up a video camera and just makes something. It provides them with an outlet for all these ideas that they might have been having. It's either an extension or a great kind of liberating thing.

LAURA: I think that your earliest piece I have seen is the *King Pleasure* video, which I just loved. Is that you in it?

JOHN: That's me.

LAURA: You kind of look a little like Ian MacKaye.

JOHN: I know.

[Talking over each other, and chuckling.]

LAURA: I totally loved him growing up, too. I was just like, “Oh my God, I can’t believe this, John looks like Ian MacKaye!” But there was definitely a kind of punk rock aesthetic to your work early on. I would say you shift away from that maybe with *St. Denis*, which is so refined, and then even more so moving into *Sidewalk*, which has those beautiful tracking shots. But they’re so beautiful, they’re so elegant and so refined— I wondered if you feel that the more you work with video, is it becoming something fixed? Do you still have that sense of freeness? Or do you feel like the more you know, the more you know?

JOHN: Again, it’s just an amazing palette, and it seems to be good at both things. I came up with a generation of photographers who were wrestling with how fictive a photograph could be. And the answer is that it’s very, very difficult to make a photograph that conjures up something based on the imagination. It’s very difficult to do that. And video seems to be so good at both instincts. It’s a medium that can be of the imagination, that can be completely hallucinatory and dreamy, and you can apply all of these imaginary things, and yet it also is incredibly forensic at the same time.

LAURA: Getting back to what you were saying earlier about reality TV, what I think reality TV has done for video is something that’s always been at play in photography. It’s heightened the idea that there is some sort of essential truth that lies within an image caught from life. That tension between truth and fiction is something that photographers have played with really successfully, and I think reality TV amplified that same kind of possibility in video. So, on the one hand, people know that reality TV is very controlled and programmed and edited, but on the other hand, there’s this feeling, this belief that you’re seeing something real.

JOHN: Yeah, which in a way you are, at least compared to scripted dramas.

LAURA: So you believe in the truth side.

JOHN: Well, I don’t really watch a lot. The one thing I like about it is that it is in a way a producer’s medium, even more than a director’s or anybody else’s. It’s all about context. All about putting people in a certain context and seeing what they do. That is a skill, and I do think that that’s an interesting thing to do. And I guess that’s not too far from some of the things I like to do.

LAURA: I was curious about how preplanned a lot of what you do is. You said you work from observation, which is

such a photographer’s way of seeing. It’s so interesting that you haven’t lost that. Maybe you could take one piece that we haven’t talked about yet and just sketch out for me how it goes, from the seed of the idea to how you find the location, how you find the character, whether you storyboard anything, or write any kind of script. That sort of step by step would be interesting to hear.

JOHN: I’m trying to think which one would be good to talk about. Well, when I say I work from observation, it’s another way of saying that I don’t think anything I wrote would be any good. Or meaning that basically, there’s people I want to show you, and aspects of their personality I want to enhance and make very acute in a video, and so I guess it’s not too far from a reality.

The other thing about video is the idea of duration, and what constitutes an event. I feel really close to and love the early Lumière films, just because what you see there is the invention of the event. The fifty-four seconds that they had and how that started to influence what they considered to be a “good” subject. Video seems to go on forever, so it’s a little dangerous in that way. For instance, I have a new piece that I’m showing at Nicole’s, which I’m calling *Wisdom and Charisma*, which is five fortyish-year old guys sitting playing Dungeons and Dragons in a kind of after-hours conference room. The idea began when I met a bunch of friends at a friend’s wedding, these guys who I found out had played Dungeons and Dragons fanatically when they were in their twenties, and now they’re in their forties, and the Dungeon Master was kind of spectacular. I was introduced to the Dungeon Master like: “By the way, he was the *Dungeon Master*.” This guy was just great. They’re all from Queens, and this guy was so great looking, and the idea of him as the Dungeon Master just sounded amazing. And I thought about what forty represents. They were kind of me, and they were kind of not. And it turns out that the Dungeon Master works at a venture capital outfit.

LAURA: [Laughs.]

JOHN: Then the idea was, well, what would be the most interesting way to see this happen? For me, that would somehow foreground a game that is a game of pure imagination, and the idea of a space that would maybe provide a little bit of fiction, that would be a little bit hard. That’s the whole thing about the corporate world that interests me, that somehow in its streamlined corridors there’s this lack of friction. It’s not exactly a world conducive to the imaginary; it kind of streamlines your thoughts as well as your actions. And so, I went and visited the former Dungeon Master in his office and he showed me the con-

ference room as a possible location to do this video. And it had this incredible George Nakashima table, which is made out of this solid piece of gnarled wood.

LAURA: Wow.

JOHN: And the table opened up like a big wooden Rorschach blot. It was really like a kind of *Lord of the Rings* table, in the middle of this fluorescent room. And I thought, “Yeah, this is perfect.” So, in terms of scripting, what I wanted it to look like, visually, was that a bunch of guys stayed after work to play this game. And I think that’s kind of what it looks like. All I asked them to do was just wear business casual, like button-down shirts, which they did, and one of the guys couldn’t resist putting on these strange medieval wristbands, which is really sweet. No one else has anything like that on. Every now and then he puts his hand to his temple, and he’s got this incredible wristband on. [Chuckles.] But the rest of it just unfolded. I got exactly what I was interested in, in the sense that I wanted to do something about the imagination, and that’s what it is. I filmed it with five cameras. Each player was filmed on a separate camera. The interesting thing about video is that you can set up a context like that, and then wait. You know that this is what you want, but you don’t want to direct. You know that something in the organic unfolding of this event is going to contain what you’re looking for. But there’s no way you can script it. So I shot for seven hours. They played for ten, I think. And afterwards, seven hours times five camera angles...

LAURA: Wow.

JOHN: And I poured through all that footage. That piece is now seven-and-a-half minutes long. There was a moment midway through the game where they take a break, and then they all file back into the room and take their seats. And the Dungeon Master recaps the action so far. And what’s beautiful about it is that it’s a very bureaucratic game. As imaginary as it is, it’s incredibly bureaucratic. There are all these points of tension and debated issues and things like that. So it really kind of looks like a business meeting, and it kind of sounds like a business meeting. But at the same time I’m hoping that it’s not ironic.

LAURA: Well, from what I’ve seen, you don’t take that kind of ironic distance from your subjects.

JOHN: I guess I’m interested in having whatever my ideas are at the outset thwarted. I don’t want to feel like I’m putting people in a fishbowl. Even though I am.

LAURA: With this piece, did you make accompanying photographs?

JOHN: I did. It’s funny, the effect that videos have had on my photography is kind of wild. Because the minute I started doing video—and I’ve had this conversation with other photographers who’ve picked up video too—you realize that you’ve been spending all this time trying to cram all this content, narrative content, into your photographs. And the minute I found this other outlet for those ideas, my attitude toward photography really started to change, and I started to become more interested in the more formal, more compositional aspects, the ways in which space is activated and the way in which a photograph can dramatically transform space. Depopulate space. I almost see it as parallel to the way action and dialogue and people can change space. It’s a reading of a space, the way in which photography creates drama through composition. It was very liberating for the photographs.

LAURA: Because you felt that they needed to carry less.

JOHN: Yeah, I started to become much more interested in photography’s descriptions as opposed to its narrative abilities. In a way, after making videos, I think my photographs started to look more like stage sets.

LAURA: And do you always make the photographs in black-and-white?

JOHN: I do. I think it’s a big topic, the black-and-white, as a contemporary image. But I think it’s *great*. I’m really interested in what black-and-white photography allows for in trying to parse the modern.

LAURA: Go down that road a little more.

JOHN: It’s a big topic. And maybe it’s changing now, because with digital, anybody who makes a color picture can just flip it to black-and-white. I know people who’ve said if you’re a black-and-white photographer, you’ll always just be a photographer, as opposed to an artist.

LAURA: Right, yeah, all those silly pronouncements that people like to make.

JOHN: Yeah. But at the same time black-and-white makes an amazing image, it does something really complex. I discovered this when I was trying to photograph in the

office where I was working, and I was photographing in color, and the pictures seemed really kind of crass and ironic and about dissonance and about a kind of default ugliness. Not that black-and-white equals beauty, but it is a dissonant world in terms of color—the light coming in through the window versus the light coming off of the computer screen, the light on the little LED—and in black-and-white all of these light sources and all these forms, I wouldn't say necessarily harmonize, but they start to talk to each other in really interesting ways. And it also allows you to look at certain kind of content without the seductions of color. Pretty much the most color you see in the city, or in any landscape really, is in advertising or in chain stores or in a McDonald's-type place. Color—really saturated color—is almost always either in advertising or fashion or something similar. Black-and-white allows you to look at really disparate elements and things made at different times, and it allows you to kind of...

LAURA: Compress things a little bit, maybe?

JOHN: Yeah, I'm not going to be able to... It's such a huge...

LAURA: *[Laughs.]* All right, I'll let you off the hook.

JOHN: But I do think it's a very interesting subject; the idea of the contemporary black-and-white image would make a great show. For me, ultimately the reason why I like making black-and-white photography while I'm making videos, and what the relationship between the two seems to be, is that I like to think of the video as all about the transformation of space through movement and speech and all this stuff and the black-and-white photo as being the transformation of space by reducing it to sort of formal drama.

LAURA: So sort of two very different approaches.

JOHN: Two different types of abstraction, two different types of drama.

LAURA: How do you feel about the relationship between the videos and the photographs? Is there any sort of a hierarchy in your creation?

JOHN: I think that some artists seem to be very smart about it. I don't think I'm smart about it. I do both of them, and I continue to do both of them, and they seem to me to be about similar things. I've got to say, though, this show that I'm working on now is going to be all video.

LAURA: Was that difficult for you?

JOHN: It was. But I think it's the right thing to do. And then, maybe, I can have a show—well, I'm actually publishing a book of just my photographs. The book is of a body of work I did in 1999 and 2001, when I was working on Wall Street.

LAURA: When you were working on your upcoming show of videos and putting together that book of photographs, were those happening at the same time? Or was the book already underway?

[Talking over each other.]

JOHN: Simultaneously.

LAURA: I wonder if maybe you section the two mediums off from each other.

JOHN: You might be right. I have no idea. I can be very neurotic about that stuff. *[Chuckles.]* I'm around a lot of hostile photographers. Really, it's great. I teach at Yale, and I do the photo critiques on Monday nights, which are taught by a panel of artists. So, for me it's like the whole attitude is epitomized by Philip-Lorca diCorcia, who is a friend. But we're sitting up there and we've looked at two videos by photographers in the course of the evening, and finally he, says, "You know, I fucking hate video. You photographers, you hit a little hitch in your work, and you want to make a video... Why don't you try working on your photographs?"

LAURA: *[Chuckles.]* Did you feel any of that when you first started making video? Were you kind of embarrassed?

JOHN: Well, yeah, I think it was a big deal for me. I think that every photographer, no matter how accepting the world is of photography, has this moment where they have to re-experience the trauma of their education. Photographers are very neurotic about that, because it's just not a given. I don't think it will ever be a given. I've actually heard some beautifully articulated positions stating that photography, even after everything that's happened, is still not art. That it's something else. It's the something else that I think is actually really provocative. And I like to remind people when they come down on video that some of the pictures that we really accept as being masterpieces of photography were made during the time in which there was *incredible* hostility toward the idea of that medium as fine art. Incredible hostility. I don't know if there's that much hostility toward video, maybe it's a different type.

I think one hostility toward video is that it's just kind of ruining people's gallery- or museum-going experience.

LAURA: [Laughs.]

JOHN: There's just that kind of hostility. [Sarcastically] It's fucking it up.

LAURA: That brings me around to the question of audience. It was interesting to hear you say that you tried out *Sunday Scenario* in a couple of different installation forms before you hit on what felt right. Sometimes you work in single channel and sometimes multichannel, and I was wondering to what extent you're thinking about the viewer and the audience while making those decisions?

JOHN: I don't think of what I do as installation, but I do think that there's a right way to present the work. And I guess that all my ideas about presenting video really come out of my ideas about photography in the sense that multiple screens—like a series of photographs—can inform each other. But that's not always possible to show. I guess I'm just more interested in simultaneity, and also in the simple pleasures that a gallery provides in terms of creating types of experiences that are really alternative to the kinds of experiences you have in the theater or at home watching TV.

LAURA: In what way?

JOHN: My feeling is that installation is just more informed, in the way that video is more woven into the ambient world. Video is everywhere.

LAURA: Do you ever find it frustrating to know that a viewer might just come in and then leave and not see the whole arc of a piece?

JOHN: No. But I address it. Coming in during the middle of things is both a wild proposition and also a very familiar one. I mean, we're always coming into the middle of things. You know, we're flipping channels or passing by a Virgin Megastore—[they chuckle]—or whatever. My grandfather would tell me about how he worked as an usher at a movie theater, and just the idea of being there at the beginning is pretty recent. You used to go to the movies whenever...

LAURA: Just come in and out, and they would play all day.

JOHN: Yeah, if you liked it you'd stick around and watch the beginning. But that discontinuous mode really was the way Hollywood movies were seen for many years.

LAURA: So we have this idea that in our modern time everything is so much more fragmented, but maybe that's not really the case.

JOHN: What I feel as a viewer—as an audience for other people's art—is that great work just pins me in my seat. I've given over a lot of time to Tacita Dean's work and Steve McQueen's work, Paul Pfeiffer's work. I guess the idea of interrupted viewing really does shape the way I think. For instance, in editing the *Dungeons and Dragons* piece, I wanted this piece to be restating its theme, what is really the most acute and interesting aspect of this event at any moment that it is encountered. This led me to become very interested in the segment where the *Dungeon Master* is recounting events. He comes in, he sits down, he says: "OK, just to recap, you passed through the planes pandemonium, entered Gordef's spire, in which a portal of colored light appeared, through which you passed into hell, and..." He's leading you through this thing, and it has a beginning, middle, and end, but at the same time there's a kind of review of the experience. I would like to believe that in encountering the video you're not really sure what you're looking at, and you're not really sure what they're talking about, and then you become aware that it's a game as well as a meeting, as well as a conference room, as well as a game, no matter how much or little time you give over to it.

LAURA: That entering or exiting at any point kind of brings me to the *London Cast* piece, which it says on the DVD I have is in progress, so I'm not really sure how finished it is. So is it David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*?

JOHN: Making that piece was very spontaneous. I'd been telling my friends for such a long time that I'd love to see *Glengarry Glen Ross* performed by women, or I'd love to see *Glengarry Glen Ross* performed by fourteen-year-old girls. It really is this hugely important American play, and it really is such a big deal, but at the same time, it's... When I was in London shooting *Morning, Noon, and Night*, I had an opportunity to make something else, because a person who worked at the gallery noticed that I was going to be around for a little bit longer than the work scheduled. So I asked her if she could dig up eight to ten actresses and a bunch of copies of *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and she did. And a more interesting idea emerged. I think it's six British actresses and a Canadian, and none of them really knew each other, and they all showed up. We had a nice place to shoot it in. And I got a lot of booze. And I explained to them that I like to film people at work or at play or whatever, and

that the idea was that I wasn't putting myself in the role of the director, the only conceit was that they were doing it at all. But the idea would be that for whatever reason, seven women decided to do a sight reading of *Glengarry Glen Ross*. My anxiety about the piece is that it looks a little too arty, but at the same time they're not really performing in that way.

LAURA: I don't know if I would say it looks arty. I mean, I know what you're saying...

JOHN: I could have shot it differently, where they're all sitting around the kitchen table.

LAURA: No, I like the proscenium feeling.

JOHN: Yeah, I just wanted them to be comfortable on the couch. What I love about the play is that it's about competition at its most brutal, within the setting of a workplace, and it's about men and all of that. But what I thought was interesting about what we did is that I had each of them do a sight reading of the opening monologue—the Alec Baldwin monologue—which actually was not part of the play, it was written for the film, and they each just kind of gave it a shot.

LAURA: So there was no rehearsal, you just filmed.

JOHN: No, absolutely no rehearsal. I don't think any of them had performed his work. He's written women's roles, but certainly none of them had been asked to do this play. I've got to tell you, I have an incredible admiration for actors, almost to the point of complete intimidation whenever I actually work with them, because it's too much. I can't believe they can do what they do. And this was amazing. I kind of learned this about musicians when I started to meet classical musicians. I had always thought they had to practice to hit the notes, but they could hit the notes right out of the box. I was amazed by what these actors were able to do with this text, the first time out. I wanted it to be shaky. And ultimately, with the cutting together, the idea was that I was trying to create a sense of actors in a kind of competition with each other, or a playful competition within a narrative about competition. There are different styles and different interpretations that are kind of pitted against each other.

LAURA: So that piece was the first time you had worked with real actors.

JOHN: Yeah, absolutely.

LAURA: And what did you think? That's just a huge difference.

JOHN: It was thrilling.

LAURA: Would you want to do it again?

JOHN: I would *love* to. But like I said I'm also very intimidated, because it's just so thrilling that I'd be worried that I'd just be blinded by people's abilities. I'd be completely uncritical. I mean, by the end of it, it was just this one night, and I wanted to say, "Alright, I'll see you all tomorrow at rehearsal, and we'll refine these things."

LAURA: [Laughs.]

JOHN: I think I'd like to work with actors again in a similar way, where it's some kind of intersection between theater and observation. I've always been more interested in rehearsals than performances. I love watching string quartets rehearse in their jeans as opposed to tuxedos.

LAURA: You're a man who loves juxtapositions, clearly. So I noticed that the title of your upcoming show is "Coliseum." What's behind that name?

JOHN: It might be a little abstract, but I thought it tied together the idea of all of the work. It's a word that has contemporary usage and is also very old. It's the site of games and theater. It's a kind of a city word. And I think it just conjures up a lot of the ideas that are going on in the show. I'm going to show four pieces together under that title: the *Sunday Scenario* video, the *Dungeons and Dragons* one, *Wisdom and Charisma*, and I'm pretty sure I'm going to show *London Cast* on a small monitor, with headphones, which I'm kind of dreading. But I think it's the only way to show it, which could be not so bad. And then a large piece, which is probably the most different for me, which is a three-channel panorama of six women who are black belts in aikido doing this particular exercise that involves one person fending off multiple attacks. And they're dressed in these skirts called *hakama*, which you see in all those Kurosawa films. In *The Seven Samurai* they wear these skirts, and that's what aikido black belts wear. And it's playful, it's violent, and I think their faces—who these women are—are very striking and surprising. Most of them are over forty. It's a lot of things at once. I really like the idea of doing this in the context of a show with a bunch of men sitting on their asses. And a bunch of women just sweating and flipping around. It's a very particular kind of athleticism. It's not competitive; it's not quite sparring. It's

very fluid, and it's a lot of thumping: they get thrown, and they hit the mat. It's very percussive. It really is straight, except for what I've done with extending the space and a kind of doubling up—sometimes they double up in the triptych form. I think it's a good piece. I think that it will also work well with all the others.

LAURA: Just based on your description, it brings to mind—I'm forgetting which of your videos it's in—the man dressed in black getting pegged by the little balls.

JOHN: Yeah, getting pegged by the balls, and maybe also the whole competition that goes on between the two men and the woman in *Above the Grid*. But in this new piece, I love how these women look like the Seven Samurai. I mean they *look* like them. The frame is almost cinema-scope, and it somehow seems like a fantasy and something very everyday at the same time. And they're very good at what they do. But it's not about kind of empty virtuosity, either. Again, it's a portrait, and I think it'll be read that way. It's also a nice companion to *London Cast*.

LAURA: Well, it's interesting to hear you talk about *The Seven Samurai*. I saw it not too long ago, on the film screen.

JOHN: Oh really, projected?

LAURA: Yeah.

JOHN: The ultimate question in that film is, does Toshiro Mifune overact? Some people think he does.

LAURA: Where do you weigh in?

JOHN: I don't think he does.

LAURA: You like the drama.

JOHN: Well, I also think that the Japanese acting has different kind of meaning. His character is definitely exaggerated, but I think it adds to the stoicism. That's the point, that he's this loose cannon. It's amazing.

LAURA: It is amazing. And it's amazing too—just bringing us back around to where we started—the way that place in that film is so strong, how place has that kind of what you called barometric sensitivity.

JOHN: And also it's circumstance and roles and the whole idea of the samurai kind of slipping in and out of being

flawed, being heroic, you know, doing justice to the sword and the uniform that they wear but constantly failing or succeeding at different times.

LAURA: Well, I could talk forever, but I know we should probably wrap it up. That was great. Thank you very, very much. 🙏

