



**JOHN WATERS**

**in Conversation with Paul Holdengräber**

**in BRYANT PARK**

**June 7, 2010**

**LIVE from the New York Public Library**

**[www.nypl.org/live](http://www.nypl.org/live)**

**ETHAN LERCHER:** That was Ethan on the piano. Thank you all for coming. My name is Ethan Lercher, I'm the Director of Events for Bryant Park. We're the hosts, but we're not the producer. The producer is your favorite LIVE from the NYPL. It is my pleasure

that you're all here. This is a great program. We've been trying to work with Paul and Meg for years. Paul came about 1,500 days ago, and now he is here in the park with John Waters. **(applause)**

I wanted to tell you a little bit about what's going in the Park. We just had the fourth of five really great classical music concerts on the other side of the park on Mondays. Please join us next week at six p.m. We'll have a flautist, and a harpist, and a violinist. They're actually all world-famous, and the host is Bill McGlaughlin, who you can see on and hear on the radio every night at eleven p.m. on WQXR. He's a syndicated program master, and if you haven't heard him, you will learn a lot about music if you listen to his music program. And we're starting our movies in a few weeks. We have lots and lots of things. If you want to you can pick up our guide of six or seven hundred things that are going on this summer, over on the tables over there where you can also get the book by John Waters, but I think that's not why you're here. So I want to introduce my friend and one of the best conversationalists I've ever met, Paul Holdengräber.

**(applause)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Good evening. And thank you, Ethan, for your words of introduction, it took about 1,500 days indeed. And thank you, Bryant Park, for cohosting this very first LIVE from the New York Public Library evening. The library and the garden—a perfect match made in Paradise, or what sent Adam and Eve wandering, as we know their story. The park—let me not yet digress—is contiguous, as you know, to the

New York Public Library. So fitting that we work together finally. Add to this that the president of the New York Public Library, Paul LeClerc, is a Voltaire scholar and particularly a *Candide* scholar. You will remember I think that *Candide* ends with an invitation, an exhortation to cultivate one's garden, so thank you Ethan, thank you, Nell, and all the wonderful people at Bryant Park who have made this happen and those at the New York Public Library who allowed us to make this dream come true. I would also like to thank my producer, Meg Stemmler, without whom I wouldn't be able to do this, ever, and especially tonight. She had the idea of Bryant Park, not I, for this evening in particular. And Meg made it work with all of our volunteers, whole cohort of interns, who must all be warmly thanked, so thank you, Meg, thank you, a big round of applause. **(applause)** And thank you very much to Ethan, who will from time to time punctuate our conversation when it needs punctuations—semicolons, yeah, I see you're preparing yourself.

My name indeed is Paul Holdengräber, and I'm the Director of Public Programs at the New York Public Library, known as LIVE from the New York Public Library. As most of you know who go inside the building, my goal is simply to make on the other side of the building, the lions roar, to make this great institution levitate. To help us achieve this goal, we have tonight the one and only John Waters. **(applause)**

But first, a few words about our program. Briefly, one more program coming up tomorrow evening, with the photographer Lena Herzog, she will discuss *Lost Souls*, her haunting photographs. And I encourage you all to see the exhibition of *Lost Souls* on

view now at the International Center of Photography, our neighbors in mid-Manhattan. Come discover the fall season, which will include conversations I will have with Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer, Edwidge Danticat, Antonia Fraser, Zadie Smith, and other conversations between Nicole Krauss and David Grossman, Angela Davis and Toni Morrison. Perhaps, weather permitting, we might have one or another in Bryant Park. I would particularly like to have Toni Morrison and Angela Davis here in October, wouldn't you? **(applause)**

Libraries, as John Waters knows well, matter greatly to our democracy. Did you know that Keith Richards, one of the founding members of the Rolling Stones, is writing his memoir, due in October? In it he confesses his secret longing to be, you all guessed it right, a librarian. "When you're growing up," Keith Richards writes, "there are two institutions that matter, that affect you most powerfully—the church, that belongs to God, and the public library that belongs to you. The public library," he says, "is a great equalizer." I plan to invite Keith Richards, indeed I already have, to be onstage in October to discuss among other things, but not only, the role of libraries, the role that libraries play in our democracy. I imagine one could talk about other things with him as well. And I think it would be wonderful to do it in Bryant Park.

I urge you now to become a supporter of the New York Public Library, be it a Young Lion if you feel young enough, or a Conservator, or consider becoming part of the President's Council. The New York Public Library is in the middle of a campaign Don't Close the Books on Libraries. The New York Public Library is facing the harshest cut in

its history, a proposed city budget reduction of thirty-seven million dollars that could shut down ten branches and slash service to just four days a week. You can immediately support the library and its mission with a simple text message. Now, listen to me carefully. Take out your phones now. Text NYPL—I don't see anybody doing that—to the number 27722 to give ten dollars. When prompted, reply “yes” to complete your ten-dollar donation. Again that is NYPL 27722, a onetime ten-dollar donation which is tax-deductible, and there are flyers that have been distributed to you in case you would want to do that many times tonight. Our wonderful independent bookseller, 192 Books, will have *Role Models* available for purchase. John Waters has graciously agreed to sign his new book after our conversation right there.

When recently asked if he had met Pope Benedict XVI, my patient—he's my patient tonight, John Waters, responded by saying, “No, I've been called the Pope of Trash. I know that's different, but I've been milking that title for years, and maybe that's why I feel infallible.” And now, ladies und gentlemen, the infallible quality of my patient shall be put to the test. I will question the writer and film director of *Eat Your Makeup*, *Pink Flamingos*, *Polyester*, *Hairspray*, *Cecil B. DeMented*, and the author of *Shock Value*, *Crackpot*, and, just out, the subject of our session, *Role Models*. Our session will last as long as a psychoanalytical session when your shrink is generous. Today we have a lot of work to go through, so Mr. Waters will get about seventy-seven minutes of my time. Shall we start now with some musical free associations? I think it's a good idea, so ladies und gentlemen, please welcome to Bryant Park, and to the New York Public Library, and to Mid-Manhattan today, from Baltimore directly, the Pope of Trash, Mr. John Waters.

**(applause)**

**JOHN WATERS:** Thank you very much. Well, I'm supposed to relax here at my shrink's office, you know. I believe in psychiatry, though, you know, Freud said it's "turning hysterical misery into common unhappiness." That's a pretty good line.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** So what's on your mind today?

**JOHN WATERS:** What's on my mind? I've had a long day, you know, I haven't had a mind all day. I did a radio junket starting at eight a.m., where you do thirty interviews every ten minutes, so it's like going to a psychiatrist, because they ask the same questions over and over and you try to give a different answer—it's like free association.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Well, I'm quite sure that nobody today in your various interviews addressed you the way I feel like addressing you as Prince Summerfall Winterspring.

**JOHN WATERS:** That's my favorite name. When I was a child, there was Prince—Princess Summerfall Winterspring on the Howdy-Doody Show and I loved her name, and it's my favorite name. There's another great name, but I can't call myself that because they were Nazis, but Lord and Lady Haw-Haw that's such a great name, I think.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It really is.

**JOHN WATERS:** It's really a great name. I wish I was Lord Haw-Haw, but his politics were really not mine, so I have to be Prince Summerfall Winterspring.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** So Prince Summerfall Winterspring, you do know that psychotherapy, my dear prince, is as you know, as the good Dr. Freud wrote, "transforming hysterical misery into common unhappiness."

**JOHN WATERS:** Yes, I know, and I believe in it.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You do. What does that mean?

**JOHN WATERS:** It means that all you can hope for is to modestly to be a happy neurotic, which I am. Which is that nobody changes. The great Dr. Money, a sexologist in Baltimore who was sadly discredited by Oprah on her show, **(laughter)** he said that everyone has a love map, and your love map is who you can attract and you can never change it but you can see them coming, but if they cause you misery and the sex is good enough and you choose it, hey that's okay, at least you chose it, so I just saved you a lot of psychiatric bills right there. When you're in trouble is if the same person comes toward you, the same type, and you keep picking them for good sex, and it causes you misery, then you're a neurotic. If you pick it, and it causes you happiness, you're a happy neurotic.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And you feel that through our work together, you've become a happy neurotic? You feel that in fact going into the basement and looking at the old furniture, as we've doing for some time now, is—or in the attic, you feel that you're getting better?

**JOHN WATERS:** I didn't look in any attic or my basement, because I don't hide anything. I'd be pretty hard to blackmail, really. **(laughter)** How could you blackmail me, say that I like sports or something?

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I do feel you've been opening up more recently.

**JOHN WATERS:** Well, I've tried to, yes, and I think in my book I do tell a little more than usual, but I'm suspicious of celebrities that go on the air and tell reporters the most innermost secrets. That means they have no friends. Because if you have friends, when you just—somebody broke up with you or you're going through some horrible thing, you call them, you don't call *People* magazine. At least *People* magazine tells what you said, they'll report it fairly. But I always feel bad for celebrities that tell everything, you have to save some personal life for your own, for your own, or you don't have a life at all.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And this is what you in part find troubling with Ecstasy is it makes you—

**JOHN WATERS:** Ecstasy, you mean the drug? Oh, no, I just do poppers really.

**(laughter)** I hate Ecstasy, it makes you love everybody. Oh, I can't think of the most horrible feeling that would be.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I feel that we've been developing limits.

**JOHN WATERS:** Limits.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Limits are important.

**JOHN WATERS:** Limits, yes, the limits of sanity. Everybody has to keep. You know, I'm a Swiss person trapped in an American's body. So I have limits and I'm very organized, and I think you should never have a spontaneous moment in your life. My hangovers are planned four months in advance on my calendar.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Fridays are important days for you.

**JOHN WATERS:** Yes.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** What do you do for Shabbat?

**JOHN WATERS:** On Friday drink, really, you know, what every person should do on Friday night. I don't drink during the week, you know, because it's a school night, I write every morning at eight o'clock, and so I can't go out and drink. But I love to drink on Friday night, and my favorite is to go to bars in Baltimore that I write a lot about in my new book. Bars that, believe me, we have more edge than you do here, I promise you. I'd take you to some places where you'd be trembling.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I'd like to start our session today with something we've done before, but I think it will be interesting to do it again, is some free musical association. If we could play just a little bit of the first. I see some running going on there.

**JOHN WATERS:** Well, why don't we try a word while they're running for the musical cue? **(music plays—"The Monster Mash")** Louder. My favorite song. See, I wish I was Bobby "Boris" Pickett, because he had one hit and he sang it his whole life. What

freedom. Every day I have to think of something new. He didn't. **(laughter)** He just sang that same song over and over. I do the Monster Mash sometimes.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** By yourself?

**JOHN WATERS:** Yes, but I've learned, something to really make you happy is that if you're really depressed, get out "The Monster Mash," but then a secret I used from Howard Hughes reading the biography is he when he was alone, liked to wear industrial Kleenex boxes as shoes, well, put them on and do the Monster Mash, and I promise you you won't be depressed.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** What do the Kleenex boxes afford you that normal shoes wouldn't?

**JOHN WATERS:** I don't know, surrounding—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** A certain security.

**JOHN WATERS:** A certain radical style, and you're closer to being a monster yourself, which is important, and then if you're really, really feeling low, you can go out and find another monster in a bar and bring them home and ask them to do the Mash.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** So you have many, many Kleenex boxes available.

**JOHN WATERS:** No, I just have one pair. Somebody did give me a pair for Christmas once that had fur trim. They were a bit much for me. **(laughter)** I'm more conservative, really.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Whatever did happen to the Transylvanian twist? Do you know?

**JOHN WATERS:** I don't know, he's been asking it for his whole life and no one can answer it and at the end I felt bad, it said that Bobby "Boris" Pickett, I know about his death, and I write about it in the book, he continued to play "The Monster Mash" at the end to smaller and smaller venues, only working on Halloween, and I think, "Is that going to be my life?" That would be okay, actually. I wouldn't mind it.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** do you find it maybe. I know you envy someone who has had but one blockbuster—

**JOHN WATERS:** With him. Because he doesn't have to think of anything, where everybody else has to think of something.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But what about the repetition?

**JOHN WATERS:** But he might like it. You know, if he does it over and over. Also in my book it starts out about how much I want to be Johnny Mathis.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Yeah, why don't you read that first passage?

**JOHN WATERS:** I don't want to read it now.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It's so beautiful and—

**JOHN WATERS:** I'm not going to read the whole first chapter, I promise you.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** No, no, no, no, no.

**JOHN WATERS:** I just read the whole book in the audio which came out, talk about—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** No, I'm just going to ask you to read from there to there and then from there to there.

**JOHN WATERS:** Okay, okay, okay. All right. I wish I were Johnny Mathis. So mainstream, so popular, so unironic yet perfect. Effortlessly boyish at over seventy years old, with a voice that still makes all of America want to make out. Heavenly, warm, yes, I'll say it out loud, wonderful, wonderful. I saw Johnny Mathis in real life once, but

he didn't say me, the best way to glimpse a role model. Is it because Johnny Mathis is the polar opposite of me? A man whose greatest hits album was on the *Billboard* charts for 490 consecutive weeks, versus me, a cult filmmaker whose core audience, no matter how much I've crossed over, consists of minorities who can't even fit in with their own minorities?

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** That's good.

**JOHN WATERS:** Johnny Mathis to me—he doesn't have to do anything to be famous, he's beyond fame. He's still—have you ever seen Johnny Mathis at a red carpet? Have you ever seen him in a social column or party? No. He's beyond fame. He doesn't have to do anything, but yet I went to see his show with no pre-publicity, it was completely sold out. It's always sold out. He still can sing really great. They don't even say “Ladies and gentlemen, Johnny Mathis.” The band's playing and then he just kind of moseys out and starts singing, so he's really perfect, and he's beyond everything. My mother said to me, “Johnny Mathis is black?” **(laughter)** and I thought, “God, he's even beyond race, he's beyond everything. So I really wish I were Johnny Mathis. He's a good man.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** If we could play number three please.

**(music plays: “Chances Are”)**

**JOHN WATERS:** See, everything—doesn't that you want to make out? Really.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Yes, it really does.

**JOHN WATERS:** Johnny Mathis makes everybody want to make out, so maybe they should have him at the convention and Republicans and Democrats would make out, everybody would make out, and then everybody would stop fighting, and it wouldn't matter about politics, because everybody would just be French-kissing for hours and have chapped lips, and it would be really exciting.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** In that first page, those first two pages that I asked you to read excerpts from, you try to articulate for the reader why this book is called *Role Models* and perhaps what you see to be a role model and why you chose in some form or fashion to tell the story of who John Waters is through others.

**JOHN WATERS:** Well, in my book, it's really about people that have had extreme lives, they've had much more extreme life than I've had to. Something horrible is happening to them they've had to live with, something amazing, like great success, even though Johnny Mathis told me he just wanted to be a jazz star and never became one or like people that were insane like Saint Catherine of Siena who drank pus and offered it up to God, she was a bottom for God. **(laughter)** And all people that have had really extreme lives, so I have tried to celebrate them because they have had to be braver than I

have, they've had to go through much more extreme circumstances than I have, so I've learned from every one of them.

Even though I might not agree with them all, I might not quite identify with what they've done, but I still am interested in the behavior of people, especially people that think they're normal, as everybody does in Baltimore, but are completely out of their mind when you talk to them. Where in New York everybody kinda thinks they're insane but they're maybe more normal than they realize.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But it also would be fair to say that you precisely take to these models, these role models as it were, because they are different from you.

**JOHN WATERS:** Not all are different from me and some are, it doesn't matter. I think opposites attract. Certainly Johnny Mathis is the exact opposite of me. He has mainstream success everywhere, he doesn't have to do anything to keep it, he's had it for fifty years. I think he's probably a Republican. Nancy Reagan comes over and sings Christmas carols with him, well, Patty Hearst comes over to my house and we plotted her hair color for a trial, so it's the same thing, **(laughter)** it's just different sides.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And in a sense, you do similar things. You both have Christmas shows.

**JOHN WATERS:** We do.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Could we have excerpt number four? **(Music plays: “Oh Holy Night”)** How is that different from your Christmas show?

**JOHN WATERS:** Well, I would like to switch acts, and I talk about it in the book, that if one night I came out to my Christmas show and sang “Oh Holy Night” to my fans, and Johnny Mathis came out and talked about how Santa could be so erotic to a chubby chaser, which is from my act. **(laughter)** And imagine the horrified audience in both when they had gotten the wrong place, they have gone to the wrong Christmas show, and I think it would be great, it would be nice if everybody just switched lives every once in a while. I think it would be very important. That’s why Republican and Democrat—right now, they hate Obama as much as we hated Bush, it’s exactly the same. And when they were rioting last week, the Republicans, I thought, well, you know, I wish we had done that, why didn’t we do that when Bush was in power, so I was just amazed that they were rioting because poor people could get, you know, free operations—that’s what made them riot? **(laughter)** But, still, I liked rioting when I was young. It was important to me. How kids go on raves today? We went to riots, it was fun. Especially in New Haven. They seemed to be very welcoming.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Now, I’d like to know if you took to heart the advice that a former psychiatrist of yours gave you when he said, “Stop trying to make me like you.”

**JOHN WATERS:** Yes, it was really sobering.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** What struck you there, because you—though maybe you're not mainstream, you're—in some sense maybe I don't know that you would *love* to be mainstream, but you would love to always be loved by *everyone*, John.

**JOHN WATERS:** In show business, that's the point. You know, it's all insecure people that basically worry and go into a business that depends on strangers telling them they're good for the rest of their lives. All people in show business are very insecure, so when the shrink said that to me, I thought what a great thing to say when you start therapy, so I would go every week and think of the things I was the most uptight to talk about, which is the whole point of going, otherwise you're just paying somebody to do a comedy club act.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Now, you're very interested in the notion of failure.

**JOHN WATERS:** Well, I think failure can be some kind of happiness for certain people. I like failure in art very much, art that celebrates failure. I think people that have failed, it's very interesting to see a comeback and how they can get beyond something like that. And I've certainly written about people like that. I have a chapter called "Baltimore Heroes" that's about Lady Zorro. And Lady Zorro was a stripper that we used to see when we were young, and she was really butch, she looked like Johnny Cash, but she had

the body of Jayne Mansfield, which is a tough problem, you know. **(laughter)** And she used to come out naked and say, “What the fuck are you looking at?” **(laughter)** and I adored her, and that’s why I always say I’m up here today without makeup, like her, like Tilda Swinton at the Oscars, because of her bravery.

But, you know, I finally when she died, the Baltimore papers had an obituary of Lady Zorro and I read and it said she had a daughter, and I said, “She had a daughter?” So I found the grown daughter who lived in Oregon, and she said, “Oh, my mother loved you.” I said “Zorro knew who I was?” And she said, “yeah,” so I went to Oregon, and she told me the story about what it was like to grow up with Zorro the lesbian stripper as her mother and it was harrowing, you know, I learned that really, lesbians have the right to be bad mothers, too. **(laughter)**

In this, the little girl was happy—she led a double life, she went to Catholic school, she was the president of her class, but she made a thousand dollars a night dealing poker at her mother’s bennie parties that lasted three days. She had to go pick up her mother in bars she said, she beat the shit out of men and women, but she used to have to drive her mother’s Lincoln Continental when she was eleven to the bars to pick her up. **(laughter)** This girl had an amazing childhood, but she turned out great. You know, the authorities would have taken her away, really. But it just goes to show, if you have a parent, no matter how crazy they are, and you know you love them, they can turn out all right.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Your mother left you in front of bars before you could get into them.

**JOHN WATERS:** My mother didn't leave me there, my mother took me down when she didn't know what else to do when she thought I'd go to prison, and she'd say, maybe here you can find people you can get along with, **(laughter)** and she would take me to like bohemian bars, Beatnik bars, which I look back on it, that was really sweet and supportive of her, really sweet.

But I tell all parents, you should be glad if your kids are in trouble in high school, they're going to be in the arts, because if you have a kid that's the football captain and the prom queen in high school, their life is downhill the day after they graduate, let me tell you. **(applause)** I never go to my high school reunion, because there's no point in going to your reunion except to see people what they look like that you wanted to have sex with then, really, **(laughter)** and I've already done that and stalked their house months ago, **(laughter)** so my thing is—aren't you jumping the psychiatric fourth wall here?

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It was the music. The Johnny Mathis put me in the mood.

**(laughter)**

**JOHN WATERS:** So I'm telling parents.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You're on my, please don't do that.

**JOHN WATERS:** I looked through the yearbook I went recently, and looked up the star the all-American boy that was the star and he said, forty years later, it said, what are your interests? And he filled in, "Doin' things around the house." **(laughter)** Is there anything more depressing than that? **(laughter)** So you've got to ask the question. Wouldn't you rather your kid be a drug dealer than a drug addict? That's a terrible social question, but it's a Sophie's Choice question.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I didn't think that I would make a connection between Zorro and Tennessee Williams.

**JOHN WATERS:** Well, I sort of knew them around the same time. Tennessee Williams earlier than her.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Tennessee Williams. I think the two most I mean to me the most grounding, extraordinary chapters in your book, which has ten chapters, but these two chapters in particular strike me as extremely powerful.

**JOHN WATERS:** Thank you very much.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You're very welcome, and our work together has helped you. **(laughter)** So some of the credit is due to me. **(laughter)** But the Tennessee

Williams chapter seems to me particularly powerful. He you say in some way he freed you. The other is the chapter on Leslie Van Houten, which we'll come to.

**JOHN WATERS:** That's a whole different ball game.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** We'll come to it, but tell us about Tennessee Williams, what did he do for you? I feel like I'm too close to you.

**JOHN WATERS:** But everybody is saying that they like the library. Well, most of you had your first sexual experience at the library, that's why you like it. **(laughter)** When I was young, glory holes and book reports went together, I'll tell you. **(laughter)** I guess it's different these days.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Give them a flavor.

**JOHN WATERS:** Let me talk about Tennessee Williams first, though. I used to go to the library, and I wanted to get Tennessee Williams books, and they wouldn't give it to a kid then. They'd say, we can't give it to you, you have to see a librarian, so I had to steal the books, something I'm very against—stealing from librarians. But it's really important, and I think today it's a lot easier to give a kid a book he wants. I think that if in this library an eight-year-old kid comes in and says he wants to read Dennis Cooper. If he's heard of Dennis Cooper, give him the goddamn book.

**(laughter/applause)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I just want you to read that very first—because I think the beginning of each chapter as we read with the Johnny Mathis, the first line here is just as powerful.

**JOHN WATERS:** I sort of just told this story, though. I just told it.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It's okay.

**JOHN WATERS:** Tennessee Williams saved my life. As a twelve-year-old boy in suburban Baltimore I would look up his name in the card catalog at the library and it would say see librarian. I wanted these see librarian books and I wanted them now. This is the story I just told.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Okay, don't tell it.

**JOHN WATERS:** But certainly, Tennessee Williams later when I read, I liked bad Tennessee Williams as much as good Tennessee Williams and you know some of his failed plays, I like just as much. *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*. When I was young, it played in Baltimore and it starred Tab Hunter and Tallulah Bankhead, imagine that. **(laughter)** And my parents didn't take me. And I hold that against them, Doctor.

I've never gotten over that trauma of missing that. So Tennessee Williams to me I don't know, when I first—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Did they know what they were holding you back from, no—

**JOHN WATERS:** No, they didn't know about it.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I think that in a way you have to be a little bit more forgiving with them there.

**JOHN WATERS:** I know, I know. But bohemia is what Tennessee Williams told me about. I didn't know about that. I'm a kid, living in Lutherville, Maryland, and I thought, "something's wrong here. I don't want to be like these other kids, I don't want this life they're telling me I have to live," and I read Tennessee Williams and I realized there was bohemia, there was a completely different life and so he freed me, he made me not depressed as a kid.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And there was sexual indeterminacy.

**JOHN WATERS:** Well, that was different. When I went to the first gay bar I ever went to, was in Washington and it was the Chicken Hut, **(laughter)** and in it—it really was called that. And in it you just sat at tables and there were telephones on it and it would

ring, “Hi, Table Three. Want a date?” **(laughter)** And they all had fluffy sweaters. It was really—I first saw it and I thought, “I might be queer but I ain’t this.” **(laughter)** And later I went to Provincetown where Tennessee Williams wrote the line “depending on the kindness of strangers,” he met two of his best boyfriends at the little bar at the A-House, and I thought, I may be queer, and I am this. So it was very, very different. It was two different worlds and still minorities, there’s kinds I get along with and kinds I don’t. There’s just as many rules in minorities and Tennessee Williams did not follow them, either. So he set a very good example for me.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** If we could listen to clip number two.

Tennessee Williams: Life Story

After you've been to bed together for the first time,  
without the advantage or disadvantage of any prior acquaintance,  
the other party very often says to you,  
Tell me about yourself, I want to know all about you,  
what's your story? And you think maybe they really and truly do

sincerely want to know your life story, and so you light up  
a cigarette and begin to tell it to them, the two of you  
lying together in completely relaxed positions  
like a pair of rag dolls a bored child dropped on a bed.

You tell them your story, or as much of your story  
as time or a fair degree of prudence allows, and they say,

Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh,  
each time a little more faintly, until the oh  
is just an audible breath, and then of course

there's some interruption. Slow room service comes up  
with a bowl of melting ice cubes, or one of you rises to pee  
and gaze at himself with mild astonishment in the bathroom mirror.  
And then, the first thing you know, before you've had time  
to pick up where you left off with your enthralling life story,  
they're telling you *their* life story, exactly as they'd intended to all along,

and you're saying, Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh,  
each time a little more faintly, the vowel at last becoming  
no more than an audible sigh,  
as the elevator, halfway down the corridor and a turn to the left,  
draws one last, long, deep breath of exhaustion  
and stops breathing forever. Then?

Well, one of you falls asleep  
and the other one does likewise with a lighted cigarette in his mouth,  
and that's how people burn to death in hotel rooms.

**(laughter)**

**JOHN WATERS:** That's great. To hear his voice is so great, so great.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Isn't it fantastic? But this is something you do. I mean, the reason I chose that particular poem is you have for some reason people tell you their stories, they just open up to you, I mean, and they don't even know what they're risking.

**JOHN WATERS:** I'll be sitting on a train purposely reading, and a woman will look at me and say, "My entire family fucked me in the Easter basket on Easter morning."

**(laughter)** I'm sorry to hear that.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Do they continue after that?

**JOHN WATERS:** But I do understand. I do want to hear her story, and people do tell me anything, and I think it's because they think that I will try to understand. And I will. I'm very against people that just people instantly, no matter how terrible their behavior, because you wonder what caused this? You know, I grew up Catholic, where the worst thing they ever told me was original sin, that a baby was born guilty. What a mean, vile thing to say. You know, a baby is born totally innocent, and what happens to that baby is *everything*, you know, society, everything, but you know I don't believe in the real bad seed, I don't believe that happens.

To me Tennessee Williams celebrated failure in a great way, and people that never could get along in society. At the very end Tennessee hung around with Candy Darling. There's a great new biography about Candy Darling that's very, very touching, with Tennessee with Candy at the end when he gave her great happiness by putting her in the play that Tennessee was in himself and everything. It's a very, very touching story. So I think Tennessee was very, very kind. I mean, his biography. What other biography has the word "loneliness" in the index?

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You mentioned *The Bad Seed*, which was something very new to me.

**JOHN WATERS:** The Bad Seed?

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Yeah, I didn't know this movie at all, but you seemed to identify with one of the protagonists.

**JOHN WATERS:** I think in America if you're a certain age you remember it. It was a hit play on Broadway for many years about a little child with pigtails and a little party dress who murdered people and was played by Patty McCormack. When I was a child, I wanted to be her. I walked around saying over and over in my mind, "The Bad Seed is the Big Shocker," **(laughter)** that was the ad campaign, and the janitor said to her she was going to "burn in that little pink electric chair they got for little girls," and I wanted

to sit in there with her as a child.

So finally, I was doing, I was at a horror convention, the speaker once, and a woman in the audience asked me to talk about *The Bad Seed*, and I did, and she said, “Because I’m Patty McCormack,” and the audience went crazy, and she came up, and I’ve grown to know her a little, and I talked to her a lot about for the book and she’s beautiful, she’s sixty-eight, unfacelifted, she looks great, and to continue in her horror roles, she played Pat Nixon in *Nixon/Frost*. **(laughter)** But I always sort of secretly liked Pat Nixon, too, the Lonely Lady of San Clemente, a book I loved where she had to put her feet up and smoke all the time in the men’s room. I felt bad for Pat Nixon, and whenever I stay in hotels and they say it’s the presidential suite, when I’m sleeping that night I think, “Pat Nixon didn’t get laid in this bed.” **(laughter)** So I like her. I feel sorry for her.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** One sentence you uttered here, which I think is compelling and also true and one of the chapters in your book I think illustrates it more than any other chapter, I think, is “I want to understand.” You say “I want to understand,” and in some way I think your autobiography, veiled autobiography in some form, memoir, whatever this book may be is an attempt at stretching to the maximum the role and possibility and elasticity of empathy.

**JOHN WATERS:** Well, I guess that’s true. Certainly I think the chapter that is hardest to discuss anyway is because it’s a very serious chapter.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** That's the one we will discuss.

**JOHN WATERS:** Okay, so you're not talking about that.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I am talking about that. I am talking about your chapter about Leslie Van Houten, who you manage—then you'll say who she is. But who you manage—you manage to make I wouldn't say you manage to redeem her, but you manage to make her deeply likeable.

**JOHN WATERS:** Well, I think if you met her you would like her, and she is the only one who can redeem herself, and she has been spending forty years trying to do that.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Talk about her.

**JOHN WATERS:** I understand that it's a really hard subject. I understand that people would be against me for this. But she was one of the original Manson women. She met Charlie Manson when she was seventeen years old. She met a madman. She participated in the LaBianca murders. She went in the house, Charles Manson tied them up, she went in with Tex Watson, who stabbed them, and he said to her, "do something." She did stab Mrs. LaBianca. She has been in jail for forty years. If you're lucky your kids never met Charlie Manson. She takes full responsibility. She takes the fact that "I took drugs, I shouldn't have. I made him the leader; a cult leader cannot be a leader without followers."

I also went through thirty years of testimony and picked out the most devastating things all the victims' relatives said against her release. I had to do that to be fair, and I never would criticize what they say. People ask me how should they think, "I would never say that. That's a terrible tragedy that happened." They said "our family name is now notorious"—everything. They have to go to those hearings and buy clothes they're going to be photographed in. They have to pay for parking, you know, the terrible details of it.

But yet Leslie did meet a madman and I believe that you can change, and she's been in jail for forty years, longer than many Nazi defendants, twice as long as the Baader-Meinhof gang, longer than Lieutenant William Calley, longer than war criminals. She was seventeen, she didn't think it up, but she thinks she could have gone to jail, she doesn't, as she says, "I'm not trying to get away with everything," and she said to them, "I'm begging for the mercy that I didn't show." So it's a terrible situation, but you know, every year they ask friends to write a letter to the parole board. So I did, it just happens to be fourteen thousand words long.

And I look back, in really in guilt myself, because I used the Manson murders in my early movies and *Pink Flamingos* was dedicated to the Manson girls, in a very flip, punk rock, smartass way but I had just been to the trial and later I taught in prison, I realized not only were the victims' families put through hell, but the Manson kids' families were put through hell. Leslie said her parents, when they finally—she was even on death row in the beginning—her parents said it was better, because at least they knew where she was,

and she had them back from Manson. So it's a terrible story for forty years.

But it's something that is incredibly interesting to me because what can you do? She has done everything. The parole board says that. Everybody knows it. Even one of the judges overruled the parole board saying, "She has life, not life without parole, and she has done everything you've told her, but you keep saying 'because of the crime,' the only thing she can't change." So all I'm saying is understand both views on it. I'm always very much attracted to debates, that there really is no fair answer to something like this, except that I do believe in redemption and I do believe in the living. And so that is why I hope one day she is given a parole date.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You believe in the deepest tenets of existentialism, that existence in some way precedes essence—we first are, and then we're defined, and in some way what you believe is people can and do, in fact, change.

**JOHN WATERS:** Yes, but what is enough? What is enough punishment for something that terrible, and you know, it is so notorious. The case is even in the original book of *Helter Skelter*, of Bugliosi, who I believe is the fairest of all the Manson prosecutors said that he thought she would serve twenty years. It's been forty. It's because the case won't go away, it's a Halloween costume now, it's a horror movie. And every time they make another movie I've seen Leslie's just pain even in the visiting room when somebody so misguided will ask her for her autograph. I mean, she almost breaks into tears, what a terrible thing that is. Why would you want my—for what I did is the last thing I want to

be recognized for. So she's a very smart—she's a friend of mine, that's all I can say, that's all you can do for your friend that's in prison, that's gone for a long time, is stick up for them, and that's all I'm trying to do on a personal level.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** So the chapter, the fourteen-thousand-word chapter is an attempt through the power of writing to change a verdict.

**JOHN WATERS:** No, it's a character reference, because as a defense lawyer I would never bring up all the negative things against her. Which I do. I bring up the hardest possible questions and bring them up to her that a defense lawyer would never do, the prosecution would do.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** would you enjoy being a defense lawyer?

**JOHN WATERS:** Yes, I would, if I wasn't a filmmaker, yes, I would be a pretty good one, I think. But I would pick the cases of Jesse Jackson once called his followers the damned, the despised, and the depraved. I'm interested in the people that no one will stick up for, yes.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** How is she a role model, though?

**JOHN WATERS:** She's a role model because I am the most impatient person in the world, and to have patience to be in jail for forty years and to continue to try to get better,

to deal with this terrible thing. She says, “it’s harder as I get older, not easier. I’m eating a sandwich and I feel guilty that I’m eating it.” So to try and live with that and try to become a person that could possibly be a better person than she was if this hadn’t had happened. That’s all you can do when you’re in that situation.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Impatient and also a list maker.

**JOHN WATERS:** Oh, I’m a list maker.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You are a list maker like no other. You’re a list maker and you also—

**JOHN WATERS:** I have a file card every day of my life.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You mentioned that to me and you have also eight thousand, four hundred and how many books?

**JOHN WATERS:** Oh, I don’t count them, but I believe that all you need is a file card every single day, and you write down what you have to do and you cross it off when you do it, you don’t need all these computers and everything—and I have all that stuff, I have a computer, and I make fun of people that used to have twelve BlackBerries, and I make fun of those people, and I’m one of those people now, but without my file card, this is my order, this is what keeps me—Well, I mean, every day I start with it’s day two thousand,

seven hundred and eight since I had a cigarette, I write it down every day, because I used to smoke five packs a day of King Kools, mmmm, **(laughter)** just see that color green and I want to shove a carton up my ass. **(laughter)** Sorry, you're supposed to tell personal things at the doctor's office.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Please, please, do, continue.

**JOHN WATERS:** So I just write down stuff everyday I have to do. I mean, it's really boring. Everybody has a to-do list. To send a book to my oldest friend that I saw at my signing in Baltimore that we had the other night, that he told me we met fifty years ago. I have a lot of friends I've known for forty and fifty years, they're not in show business. They have nothing to do with maybe the life I'm here with tonight. But those people are really important to me, and I think that's the anchor on my life is Baltimore, certainly.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** What else is on your list? I want to know a little bit more.

**JOHN WATERS:** Let me think, here.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Just read it in the boring kind of way, just one damn thing after another.

**JOHN WATERS:** Well, Lynne Tillman I have down here because I just saw this incredibly beautiful review of my book in *Artforum*, and I don't know Lynne Tillman, but I have all her books, and I'm a huge fan, and so I just want to somehow get word to her—I guess I'm doing that right now—how much I really thought it was a beautiful piece. I have *Dogtooth*, that's a movie I saw recently that I really loved that's opening here, and they want me to give a quote for the ad campaign, which I will, I have to think up on the plane tomorrow. But it's a great new Greek movie about the most insane family and the parents that raise their children to be completely outside all human experience. It's really a good movie, it's coming.

So it's just banal things, just things that you write down every day. Everybody has to do this, you know, *Treme*, I'm sort of watching all that show and they sent it to me, and it's by David Simon a show I like very much, who did *The Wire*, which I think is I think everybody, the best TV show ever on television ever.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Everybody may have a list, but not everybody looks at their list.

**JOHN WATERS:** I do. At the end of the day every day, I cross what isn't in, and I start the next one for the next day.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I remember when I called you, you told me, that's what struck my mind, you said, "Yes, you are on the list."

**JOHN WATERS:** You were, yeah, for that day.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You crossed me out.

**(laughter)**

**JOHN WATERS:** Yeah, that day, I did. I talked to you. It's not a lifetime thing here, Doctor, it's you know, it's one act at a time, it's not "have love affair," you don't write down.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You have a chapter here which I very much like also, called "Bookworm," and you say "I've jitterbugged with Richard Serra, eaten Thanksgiving dinner with Lana Turner, had tea with Princess Yasmin Aga Khan, gone out drinking with Clint Eastwood, and spent several New Year's Eve's parties in Valentino's chalet in Gstaad. But what I like best is staying home and reading."

**JOHN WATERS:** True. That sentence is the only namedropping in the book, and I think. I can tell you, I'd rather tell you about each one of those experiences.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Do.

**JOHN WATERS:** I jitterbugged with Richard Serra at SqueezeBox! one night, which

was my favorite mixed great club, which is long gone, and he made me do it, which was really funny, and people looked over and said, “am I really seeing John Waters and Richard Serra jitterbugging together?” I had Thanksgiving dinner with Lana Turner because I’m friends with Cheryl Crane, her daughter, and Cheryl’s girlfriend Josh, and it was just the four of us, and I had to call my mother and say, “I’m not coming home this year for Thanksgiving because I’m having Thanksgiving dinner with Lana Turner,” and she said, “I get it. Okay, I get it.” And Lana was great. She was very dramatic, instead of just saying, “Would you pass the wine?” She would say, “Cheryl, isn’t there one drop left to drink in this house for your poor dear mother?” **(laughter)** She was great, she was really great. And she told us all about Douglas Sirk and everything. And my favorite she told us about she made this movie *The Big Cube*, where she’s supposed to be on a bad LSD trip in it, and she said, “I didn’t know what LSD was,” and they kept saying, “you’re having a bad trip,” and she just said, “okay,” but she didn’t even know what it was, LSD when she was doing it. She was lovely, you know. Princess Aga Khan, I met her with my friend Matisse Brunner who’s a great, great friend, and a movie person in Europe, and he knew her, and we had tea with her because her kids were movie buffs and wanted to meet me. What’s the other one, the other namedropping?

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Clint Eastwood.

**JOHN WATERS:** Clint Eastwood. All his papers are going to Wesleyan Film Archives, where mine are, too, and Scorsese, and we had this benefit at Wesleyan and we were there and Clint Eastwood, when I went out drinking a little bit afterwards and it was in

Variety the next day, “The Odd Couple.” So those were my namedropping in the book.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But talk a little bit about the reading, just because there’s this building behind us.

**JOHN WATERS:** I know, it’s got a couple books in it.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Fifty-two million items.

**JOHN WATERS:** I always said, “wealth is walking into any bookshop and buying any book you want without looking at the price tag.” To me that’s being rich. I can’t stand not to have a book I’m reading. If I run out of something to read on an airplane that’s when they have to call the medics because I get so nervous. I don’t understand people who say, “I fall asleep reading.” If it’s a good book I stay up all night in reading. Reading does the opposite to me. I like hard books, I don’t like books that are easy to read. I mean, “beach books,” I think my book’s a beach book if the water’s polluted and this year you have a big chance of this happening. **(laughter)** I’m going to Provincetown and I think, “Oh, great, I used to worry about jellyfish, now a dead pelican’s going to wash up on my head when I’m swimming covered in oil. I saw those pictures.”

So I do like to read. I used to work in a bookshop. It’s the only time I had a real job in my life. I worked for Gallup’s Surveys for a while. But I looked so freakish no one would let me in the house so I made them all up, so it was an exercise in writing. So don’t believe

polls that much. **(laughter)** And then I worked in bookshops. And for many years I worked at the Provincetown Bookshop and the great Elloyd Hansen, who was a great mentor to me, and would give me, you know, you were allowed to have any book you wanted for free if you would read and talk about it, and so I would sell them to other customers and stuff, it's a great thing to have your clerks in a bookshop do. But he told me about Jane Bowles, who I wrote about in here. "Two Serious Ladies."

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You give some recommendations.

**JOHN WATERS:** I did the five books, which was *The Men Who Loved Children*, which I couldn't believe also this week was in the *New York Review of Books*, and so that's two people are really recognizing that book, which is the best feel-bad book ever. I love feel-bad books. I want to have a Hate Book Club where we all come over and just talk about hateful characters.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** How long have you had this problem?

**JOHN WATERS:** That's not a problem, that's like a bookclub, that's good. So I have two serious ladies, I have Denton Welch, who's one of my all time favorite writers, who writes really about what it's like for the first stirrings of perversity in a child and how happy that is and how liberating it is and how much you've got to give your children time to be creatively insane when they're young, and let them play, let them be neurotic, let them do every weird thing that they want to play, and then they grow up to not do it in

real life. If you don't let them do it, then they're doing it when they're forty, it's much more of a problem.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You actually mentioned that in regards to the Manson family—you were able to find an outlet for your madness.

**JOHN WATERS:** That was different. I was a teenager. Then I was making movies, so that was different. We were making films.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But the movies were an outlet for the insanity.

**JOHN WATERS:** But I don't know if I would have done that, but still the outlet of making movies. But I'm talking about as a child much younger than that certainly. I talk about Ivy Compton-Burnett, who is great.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** A very surprising choice for you.

**JOHN WATERS:** But not really. First of all, she looked like the Old Maid card, she never had sex. She wrote twenty or thirty novels, I forget which, that are exactly the same. I love every one of them. She furiously debates every word of the English language. Even when she died at the end, there's a great biography of her called *Ivy*. And a friend came and said, "Oh, you must be tired." And she said, "I'm not tired, I'm sleepy. There is a big difference. Tired is not sleepy. I'm not sleepy, I'm tired. One would think

an educated person would know that.” So she endlessly debated the meaning of words, which I find incredibly fascinating.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You’re quite interested in that last moment of your own life.

**JOHN WATERS:** Well, certainly. I think—everybody dies alone. I believe that. I live alone. I’m not lonely. I love living alone. I’ll probably drop dead somewhere, I hope in an airport, because I’m always in airports, and that will cause a little trouble, **(laughter)** and, you know, you just have to remember to have your ID with you. That’s important.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But you’re also interested in how you will be buried, where you will be buried, and you’ve actually made some quite definite plans.

**JOHN WATERS:** Oh, yeah, where Divine is buried, we’re all going to be buried there. I’m going to be there, my friend Dennis Dermody, Mink Stole, Pat Moran, her husband, we’ve all bought plots there, so it’s going to be like the People’s Temple graveyard, you know, like, cult graveyard. And it’s just much easier for friends to come visit. And I like graveyards. We used to go drinking in graveyards. Divine used to steal flowers the day after Mother’s Day, a great day to steal flowers if you have a party. Because no one knows, it’s over with, **(laughter)** and I hope kids come in and have sex on my grave,

really.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** They might.

**JOHN WATERS:** I know. But I don't want—if you're really famous, like Chaplin, they steal your body and keep it ransomed. I would even like that. I mean, think of the publicity from that. You know, even after you're dead some lurid publicity. If they give it back, not if they're necrophiliacs, that's what I fear, **(laughter)** because I write about this a little, I believe that if you are a necrophiliac, you get a job in a funeral parlor, and I think the bidding starts out. "Anna Nicole's here, you got thirty-six hours, and the bidding starts at a hundred thousand dollars."

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But you're also quite interested in the way in which you will be buried and the fact that you should be buried in a closed coffin.

**JOHN WATERS:** I want a closed coffin, oh my God.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But why closed?

**JOHN WATERS:** Because they'll get my moustache on wrong. **(laughter)** I can't have that. People like looking over at when you're dead. It's hard enough now to get your picture taken in your sixties, much less in a coffin. So I think looking at people in the coffin, "don't they look good?" "No, they look horrible," you feel like saying, I don't

even recognize them, please don't make me look at them, I think it's a terrible thing, open coffins. But I know that other people like them, and they take pictures of them and oh, to me it's insane. But I like funerals.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You do.

**JOHN WATERS:** Yes, I want mine to be kind of like the one in *Imitation of Life* at the end.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Do you enjoy obituaries?

**JOHN WATERS:** I read obituaries very much, yeah, but I always think, how old were they and what did they die of? It gets nerve-wracking. But you know you're getting old if you read the obituaries all the time. But I love the *New York Times* you can get a mean obituary. I've read them. Truman Capote got a mean one. And that's really amazing that they're waiting for you to die to read one last mean review.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** One day we did a program called LIVE from the New York Public Library presents Dead from the New York Public Library. I invited an obituary writer, and in the audience we had quite a few of the *New York Times* obituary writers—

**JOHN WATERS:** Well, they're good. Some of them are amazing.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Incredible undertakers.

**JOHN WATERS:** When Van Smith, who I dedicated this book to did all the costumes and all the makeup for my early movies and certainly did the Divine image completely—when he died, the *New York Times*, the *L.A. Times*, *Women's Wear Daily*, they did the most beautiful, incredible obituaries. But you just have to catch the right writer. It has to be the right thing.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Actually the living who are aware of their last moments very often try to have lunch or dinner with their future obituary writers.

**JOHN WATERS:** Oh, that's different. Oh, that's like scouting for a good writer. Or pitching, "I'm going to die next week, come on over."

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I've heard from some of the obituary writers of the *New York Times* that they invite some of their future, you know, profiles for lunch and feel that these profiles are performing for them.

**JOHN WATERS:** And of course if you're really famous, and you're older, the obituary's written before you die, they just fill it in. That's fame—too, that's if you're

really—if you’re young and they’ve already written your obituary.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** As I said, one of the things that I’m particularly interested in is your own library, which you discuss in terms of numbers but also in term of order. You say that nothing is more impotent than an unread library. “I have as of today, as of now, 8,425 books, all catalogued but no longer in complete order on my shelves,” but one thing I must say. When I read that, because you know your book is an attempt to be someone else, to put yourself in somebody else’s shoes, but—

**JOHN WATERS:** Well, I’m trying to be myself by talking about others.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But also you’d love to be Johnny Mathis—

**JOHN WATERS:** No, I’d like to understand what it was like to be him. That doesn’t mean I want to be him. You know some people think, “Oh my God, think if you woke up every day and you were that person.” That’s why to me reincarnation is meaner than hell, to me, because it’s never over. **(laughter)** You could just come off the rest of your life and it could get worse and worse and worse, and life is a long time to live if you’re in misery.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But as your doctor what I felt so much is that when I read that sentence about your books being in slight disorder but still nevertheless in some order, my reaction to that passage was that I would so much like to be one of those books,

I mean, just, you know, just classified in some very nice way where you could find me.

**JOHN WATERS:** Well, I have whole sections, like Extreme Weather. In one room I have Fashion, Nazism, Extreme Catholicism, Sexual Disorders. They're all in my guest rooms so people don't stay too long, **(laughter)** when they like look through the books and they think, "What's this by the bed?" *Surgery of the Anus and Colon*. **(laughter)** That really works for guests, when they're unpacking and "oh, God." It has pictures, too.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** How did you go about ordering this book?

**JOHN WATERS:** Oh, it was a gift, it was a Christmas gift. **(laughter)** People give me great books. People give me great books.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** No, I was misunderstood. Let me repeat my question to you. How did you go about ordering *Role Models*, the chapters and—

**JOHN WATERS:** Oh, organizing.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Organizing.

**JOHN WATERS:** I—I, you know in the beginning, when I wrote the Tennessee

Williams thing for the introduction of the memoirs, and Thomas Keith, an editor, asked me to do it, so it sort of started with that and then I just—I had been clipping things from magazines and collecting for—really, for thirty years. I had clippings about Leslie and everything, really—from that case for forty years, a more extensive collection than I think anybody has. So I had files on all these people, so I made a big list, and then I thought, well, I went through all my other books and thought, “did I talk about them in this book, did I talk about them in *This Filthy World*, have I talked about them before?” And I tried to make sure I didn’t repeat myself. And then I did a big net, and I wrote like, when I got the deal certainly I went in and pitched it will Bill Clegg and FSG and Jonathan Galassi and it was the first person we pitched it to, and it went great and it was done in a second, and it went really, really nicely. And then I did all the research, which took really a long time. It took about three and a half years to write the book.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Easy to write?

**JOHN WATERS:** Easy to write? It’s never easy to write. But every morning Monday to Friday, I have to think up something every day from eight o’clock, I have to think up a weird idea everyday, and in the afternoon I sell it. So everyday I wrote. At 7:59 I hated it, at 8:01 I’m doing it, so that’s what—nobody thinks it’s *fun* to write, Fun is going out drinking on Friday night. **(laughter)** Not writing. Writing’s work, but it’s satisfying, and I like doing it, but fun . . . **(phony laughter by John Waters)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** When I asked about organization, you go from Leslie Van

Houten from Rei Kawakubo. Quite. I mean, if you read these chapters in order, which they don't need to be.

**JOHN WATERS:** Well, I think they are in order. You don't have to but they certainly are in order.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** They do, okay, in which case my question, why should I read, why should I go—let's just take that little journey between Leslie Van Houten and Comme des Garçons.

**JOHN WATERS:** Well, Comme des Garçons to me is I think she's a great artist—I think she's completely done—my look is Disaster at the Dry Cleaner. When I bring my clothes into a dry cleaner, their first reaction is “We didn't do it. We didn't do it.”

**(laughter)** And then you have to train them, because in the beginning in Baltimore, they would fix the clothes, they would sew them, they would try to even the hems and everything. To me, I delight in her clothes, I mean, I have one coat that looks like a dirty bathmat. The thing is I can wear it in Baltimore to all the redneck bars, and they don't think I spent money, they don't think I'm bragging, they think it's really pitiful. They say to me, “That's a shame about that coat.” **(laughter)**

And I have a coat that has—I have a shirt from **Comme des Garçons** that has fake oil stains all over it. People say, “Christ, can't you wash your shirt?” You know, but they don't know. It's wearing fashion in disguise, it's like a sneak wearing, where you're not

bragging to anybody, because they think that you found it in the gutter, but you've paid twice as much for that privilege, which I think when you're forty years old, you need all the help you can get. When you're twenty, you should go to thrift shops and buy the things that people three years older than you hate and that's how you start a trend, not your parents, and find things that—just make up stuff, just wear Halloween costumes all year, or just wear Band-Aids on your face. **(laughter)** Or—You can do it really cheaply and I think that kids today should mock our fearing of getting older. I think that kids should draw on bags, shave male pattern baldness, do everything that we fear—get reverse facelifts.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** This leads me quite naturally to roommates. It leads me quite naturally to roommates because in some way what you prescribe there is precisely to perhaps at some point buy things that nobody's paying attention to. And also you truly deeply believe in the value of difficulty and the value of anger and the value of things that irritate you, that are nearly like eczema on your skin.

**JOHN WATERS:** Well, especially contemporary art. You know, I think that the contemporary art that I love and buy at first makes me angry, always.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** That's why you love it.

**JOHN WATERS:** And then I love it. I love it. And the general public has contempt against the kind of art I especially love, and they're right. Contemporary art hates you, it does. **(laughter)** And it should hate you, because you're stupid.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Don't look at me like that.

**JOHN WATERS:** I'm not looking at you. And you can't see. They refuse to see, because once you join the club of contemporary art you learn to see something different. I went to this show in New York that's up now that I really love. It's Mike Kelley's pieces called Arena. And all it is—and it's uptown, a very fancy gallery. It's just filthy, dirty angry blankets from thrift shops with three stuffed animals sitting there that he didn't do anything to, and they're 1.3 million dollars and I think, "Isn't this great? This is magic. This is what art should be. And it looks especially pitiful uptown. **(laughter)** It just moved me so much I was speechless when I went it. You should really see this show, it's up now.

And to me that is what art should do—it should make speechless. Ileana Sonnabend said, they asked her, "how did you build this great collection?" She said, "I just bought what I didn't like." And think of it, all art that has caused trouble wrecked something, and people hated it at first.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I loved this line, “Nobody can overwhelm me like Cy Twombly. He puts me in a rapture of defiance and anger that immediately turns to tranquility. Even though he lives with me in my Baltimore house only in the form of prints, he once in a while deigns to look at me when I pass his work on my walls. And I’m grateful for the attention. Cy Twombly never disappoints me or makes excuses. He will always be my favorite roommate.”

**JOHN WATERS:** He is. He is eighty years old and I still think the best contemporary artist. He’s the one that makes people the maddest. He’s the freest. He’s the—it’s like the freezing of an aggressive thought. I think he’s the very best, and I never get tired of looking at his work.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** So the roommates here are objects.

**JOHN WATERS:** To me, I don’t want to live with anybody. I couldn’t stand anyone. I’m a control freak, and all control freaks are looking for the people that you can’t control, and I found those people, and that ends in misery. I wouldn’t want anyone who could live in my house. It’s so decorated by me. Anyone that would say, “Okay, I’d live here,” would not be somebody that I would want to be with. So I like to think of it as—the artwork I buy—as my roommates. They’re the people I see every day. I pass, and they put me in a good mood. And my house—Brenda Richardson told once something that she’s a great art maven, a great art writer, that you should just have art in your house that looks like it’s in your house, not lit like a museum, you know. So people have said to

me, “You have the worst lighting for your art collection.” “Well, it’s just in my house, I didn’t invite you in my museum.” And I think I talk about in my book, Brice and Helen Marden, you go to their house, they’ve just got stuff sitting out, priceless things leaning up on a sofa, that to me is really elegance, really elegance.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And these objects are in every single house you have.

**JOHN WATERS:** Yes, but I have also beside artwork just odd little things that people give me. I collect uncollectible paperbacks. I have novelizations of movies, ones that no one would ever get really. I found *Mr. Sardonicus* this week as a novel, you know, no one wants these books but me, and special porn books, too, but old ones you know that have titles like, I collect anything with the title “Chicken” in it **(laughter)**—*Marine Chicken*. I even have *Viet Cong Chicken*. And I like some of the porn titles.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Chickens are an old obsession of yours.

**JOHN WATERS:** Well, I’m not a chicken queen. They call it twink now anyway, but I think chickens is a better word. Twinks is more modern for chicken, yeah.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I feel like I’m learning a lot. I feel like I’m learning more today than you are.

**JOHN WATERS:** Good, maybe you'll give me half the money back.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Maybe, and then you can go off and buy some art with it. When you come to New York you go to many galleries and for the moment you have a show up.

**JOHN WATERS:** I do have a show up. I have a chapter in my book called Outsider Porno and it's two photographers that I think are great artists. One of them is Bobby Garcia, who only photographs naked heterosexual Marines in homosexual positions, and he has thousands of them doing it. How did he talk this into them? At one point he is so successful, there is traffic jams of horny Marines outside of his apartment with other pornographers trying to lure them away. This is amazing to me, so I found him, but he lived in a squat with pigs and actually rats, and underneath the papers on the floor there were like critters moving, it was quite moving.

And the other one is David Hurles who goes a little further than Bobby and only photographs psycho prisoners naked. And I'm having a show of his that's up right now at Marianne Boesky Gallery and it's up and I think it looks great, you know, it's a beautiful show. These people are really not pornographers, they're outsider pornographers, they have to do this. It's like some outsider artists no one's ever seen their work and they die and they go in they find all of this hidden twenty thousand drawings of the same thing. They only can watch their own pornography sexually, which is the opposite of all film

directors, you never hear any film director say, oh, I watch my movies all the time.

Maybe Barbra Streisand. **(laughter)**

But Bobby only watches his own movies and David Hurls only looks at his own work for sexual reasons, which is kind of beautiful to me and kind of obsessive in a way. These are kind people and I believe that artists always have to be friendly with pornographers because their lawyers break the laws, like to make Lenny Bruce possible, the fact and we have to put up with the worst of pornographers, because once the laws weaken, we can use nudity and we can use sexual matter in a new way, in a way for art, and movies, and underground and all that stuff, and we never have the money for lawyers, so I've always said that pornographers are our friends.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Johnny Mathis is one of the very important figures in the book, but you have another very important figure. If we could listen to clip number 9.

**(Music plays—"Lucille")**

**JOHN WATERS:** Little Richard to me when I was a kid, and I first saw him, I mean, he scared all white people **(laughter)** and then black people. He scared *everybody*, because Little Richard was not from this earth, when you first saw him, he was even more bizarre than Elvis Presley in a way, he was like a Martian, and he wore makeup and jewels and that hairdo way before James Brown or anybody and his moustache, which I stole, and I'm still wearing proudly today. I met Little Richard.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** He scared your grandmother.

**JOHN WATERS:** He scared my grandmother when I played that record, and for that record “Lucille,” that I did steal. But I don’t feel bad about the records I stole, because I put them in my movies and paid twenty-five thousand dollars each for them years later, but my grandmother certainly heard that, and it was every fear that she could possibly have in 1958. So I respect Little Richard, and I interviewed him in this book because he was a role model and it went not so well, sometimes maybe you shouldn’t meet your role models. This was a while ago, I interviewed him for *Playboy* magazine, and he had just put out a book, an amazing autobiography where he says things in it like he would mail gift-wrapped bowel movements to his enemies and I said, “We did that, too,” **(laughter)** but he didn’t like that, he didn’t feel a camaraderie when I said that, and he talked about threesomes with Buddy Holly and being a watch queen and everything, so I thought it was great and I asked him the questions, but then he started getting nervous about it and so we didn’t get along so well, but I like him, and I’d really like to try again with Little Richard, because think—he’s alive still, I mean, think what he has seen in all the years, and he still is out there, he’s still working, and you just think, these kind of legends, it’s amazing the life they’ve had and what they’ve had to go through.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Because you say, I mean, he’s an example in counterdistinction in a way to Johnny Mathis, who you enjoyed meeting, you say—

**JOHN WATERS:** Johnny Mathis, I think, has probably had much more secure success than Little Richard, who lived in a hotel room when I interviewed him.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You interviewed, yeah, this is true, but you say in the chapter on Johnny Mathis one should meet one's idols and in the chapter about Little Richard, you say, maybe one should *not* meet one's idols.

**JOHN WATERS:** It depends, sometimes it works.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I sometimes wonder in the profession I hold, you know, you read these wonderful writers and then you meet them, and sometimes it can be very disappointing.

**JOHN WATERS:** Or, you know, some artists can be really arrogant, can be really terrible. So what? That doesn't have anything to do with their art and certainly some musicians, most of the musicians that act terrible are the ones that have had sudden success. If they've lasted that long, they usually are pretty much gentlemen or ladies, they've turned out well because they've had a career that's lasted forty years. The ones that are the worst are the ones that just had it in five minutes, made a huge amount of money, and think it's going to last forever, and they have a rude awakening coming.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Now, in closing. Ten chapters on role models, we've examined quite a few of them. *Role Models* itself, the title is quite interesting. On the one

hand, it's a role we play, on the other hand, a model, we live up to somebody. Most of your role models are people who are extremely flawed.

**JOHN WATERS:** Yeah, some.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You're attracted by the cranks.

**JOHN WATERS:** Yes, certainly, I'm attracted to people that have not had easy lives, yes, even though Johnny Mathis may have had from all outsider viewpoint, he had success from the moment he started singing in bars when he was sixteen.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But he wanted to be a jazz—

**JOHN WATERS:** He wanted to be a jazz singer, yeah.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Now, let's imagine that thousands of people tonight will purchase your book and read it and devour it—I highly recommend it to everybody, it's extraordinary. Two chapters I mentioned, Tennessee Williams and Leslie Van Houten, on their own are really powerful. I think the Leslie Van Houten, which we've only discussed a little bit, is truly amazing.

**JOHN WATERS:** Thank you.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I mean, the fact that you can manage to make us feel such empathy for somebody who has been so cruel is tremendous, I truly believe that. But let us assume that all these people here purchase your book, go home, don't sleep, because why would they sleep if they're reading something good, right?

**JOHN WATERS:** Yeah, that's true.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Then and maybe they just will have a night of utter pleasure and insomnia, but let's assume now that they would like to play at being John Waters. What would it take? What would it take to have you as a role model?

**JOHN WATERS:** Well, you don't need me as a role model. Certainly I've always wanted to be a filth elder to young people, basically, a bad negative example for the artist, you know, **(applause)** but every person in this audience can write *Role Models*. Pick ten people that have been flawed in your life that you've learned something from, that you've cared for, that you know everybody else maybe isn't going to like. They don't have to be famous, they don't have to be smart, they don't have to be kind, but they have to have something in it that you've learned from. Every single person could write that book. You write down ten names, and you think about those people, and you make those people in your life, let them know how much you mean to them, and it's really helpful for their neuroses, your neuroses, and once again we will all be happy neurotics together, and thank you.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** So you don't want to be cured of neurosis.

**JOHN WATERS:** Oh, no, I don't. I can't be cured, nobody gets cured. But cured of what? I have a very nice life.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Do you think you're a moralist?

**JOHN WATERS:** Yes. I think I'm a moral person, but I believe in the basic goodness of people, so that's about as spiritual as I get.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** What do you owe most to your mother and father?

**JOHN WATERS:** That they made me feel safe, and that is the hardest thing you need to ever have your parents make you feel, and no matter how crazy I was, and I was really crazy when I was young, I knew they were there for me, and that's why I am a healthy neurotic, and that's why I'm very, very lucky. Because most people can't say they felt safe when they were a kid, and that's very, very important.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** What are those shoes?

**JOHN WATERS:** Those shoes are shitkickers. They're Paul Smith.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Very nice. And the socks?

**JOHN WATERS:** Paul Smith.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And the pants?

**JOHN WATERS:** Comme des Garçons.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** The jacket.

**JOHN WATERS:** Issey Miyake. Gap boxer shorts.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Thank you very much.

**JOHN WATERS:** Thank you.

**(applause)**