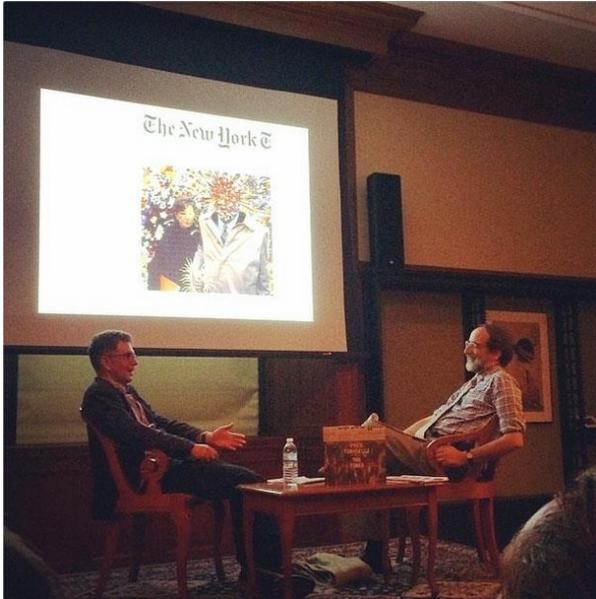


### Fred Tomaselli Talks Pot, Gardening, and the New York Times



Fred Tomaselli and Lawrence Weschler in conversation at the New York Public Library (© the artist, courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York and Shanghai)

“Wasn’t pot your gateway drug to gardening?” Lawrence Weschler asked Fred Tomaselli teasingly during their recent conversation for the New York Public Library’s Art and Literature Series. The audience laughed as Tomaselli recounted how he’d discovered his love of gardening through the tomatoes he started growing to hide his marijuana crop. The artist and the writer were gathered to discuss Tomaselli’s current James Cohan Gallery exhibition, *Current Events*, and the accompanying publication, *The Times*, for which Weschler authored the introductory essay. Whether the crowd was eager to hear about Tomaselli’s new group of gouache collages made on front pages of the *New York Times* or was simply drawn in by the prospect of a free event (the value of which shouldn’t be underestimated), it was the playful dynamic between him and Weschler that kept them engaged.

While some artists struggle to discuss their work, sticking to notes or preferring to let audiences and critics do the explaining, Tomaselli was a natural, moving easily from discussions of some of his specific paintings to the plants in his garden and his newly purchased, high-tech mosquito catcher. Most interesting was the way in which he seamlessly related everything to the development of his work. Leading the first portion of the dialogue, he explained that he was interested in “the dislocated nature of reality,” joking about his early use of various psychedelic drugs and his tomato-hidden marijuana crop. But his comedic tone didn’t prevent him from shedding light on his methods and influences. Tomaselli recounted the moment when he

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realized that “the rhetoric around paintings was very similar to that around psychedelic drugs,” recalling age-old art historical phrases such as *window onto the world*. Weschler interjected only with occasional notes, such as the fact that Tomaselli “grew up in the shadow of Disneyland,” which perhaps subconsciously influenced his visual vocabulary.

Tomaselli explained how random encounters in his daily life — leaves from his garden or pages from a Lands’ End catalogue — become elements in his art; rather than resist his visual interest in these forms, he embraces them. While making paintings in his shed, bugs from his garden were constantly flying into the layers of wet resin. This brought to mind the “use-value” of objects in artwork. “So I set up a painting and put all the lights on,” he said, drawing in the bugs and incorporating them into the piece.



Fred Tomaselli, “Guilty” (2005), print, 13 x 13 in (33 x 33 cm) (© the artist, courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York and Shanghai)

Much like the bugs that inadvertently entered Tomaselli’s life and then rather intentionally entered his paintings, so too did the *New York Times*. As the artist told it, he simply couldn’t get a front-page image of corrupt CEO Bernard Ebbers and his wife, particularly their interlocking hands, out of his mind; so he turned it into the artwork “Guilty” (2005). With this transition to a discussion of *The Times*, Weschler took the lead, inquiring about the process of intervening into these images. “There are rules,” Tomaselli clarified: one element from each original photograph he works with must remain intact in its original location. He approaches each page by first asking, “What does the photograph want from me?” Consequently, each intervention is

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different from the next, some almost completely covering the original picture while others are much more subtle. Beyond the shared background of the front page, it was difficult for Tomaselli to point out a common denominators among the works. In response, Weschler reminded Tomaselli of the categories he'd developed in his catalogue essay — such as “the perp-walk,” to which “Guilty” belongs — and told the artist not to worry about it too much. “It’s my job to order them,” he said.

*The Times* | Fred Tomaselli, Lawrence Weschler | Art and Literature Series Event took place at the New York Public Library’s Stephen A. Schwarzman Building (Fifth Avenue at 42nd Street, Midtown, Manhattan) on May 28, 5:30pm.

Fred Tomaselli: Current Events *continues* at James Cohan Gallery (533 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 14.