Interview with Jessa Crispin

Marek Sullivan

3 April 2021

Transcript of sound recording. Access the sound recording here: https://soundcloud.com/jerwood-arts/jerwood-writer-in-residence-interview-with-jessa-crispin-by-marek-sullivan

Marek Sullivan: Hello and welcome to this interview with Jessa Crispin. The interview is part of a project on art and class for the arts organization Jerwood Arts. It's going to be framed as a kind of response to this essay I wrote called ‘Class Criticism’ which is up on the Jerwood Arts website and it's the first piece of writing I've done for Jerwood Arts as part of my writer's residency there. So, we're going to be talking about art and class and the essay. We've got Jessa Crispin on the line, so I'm going to call on her amazing eloquence to introduce herself [laughter]. So, hi Jessa, do you want to just say a few words?

Jessa Crispin: Sure, my name is Jessa Crispin. I am a writer, I've written books like *The Dead Ladies Project* and *Why I Am Not a Feminist: A Feminist Manifesto*, and I am from rural Kansas from birth and now I live in Baltimore, Maryland. So I guess that's enough information.

MS: Beautiful, thanks. Okay, so I talked a bit about this interview with Jessa beforehand and we agreed that it might be good to just summarize the essay briefly, so I'm going to do that. I apologize if anyone listening has already read the essay, but anyway I've written this thing so hopefully it should be like really concise and well thought through. Yeah also I do this thing where like I write out everything I'm going to say, including all my little idioms [laughter], but, so, just to say, this is a very unnatural natural little speech I'm gonna do. Okay, so 'Class Criticism' the essay. So it begins from this sense that contemporary art while sensitive to progressive struggles to a degree that is arguably unprecedented in art history still feels exclusive of certain demographics particularly the working class, in a way that's difficult to account for through existing theories of cultural discrimination. So the essay essentially makes the point that a certain type of language that's become pervasive in the art world, the language of high theory, which includes but is not restricted to jargon, inherently discriminates against the working class by generating an impenetrable linguistic barrier that can only be overcome by going to university, in other words by becoming less working class. So, I try to argue that two facets of this problem, namely the encroachment of language generally and the impenetrability of this language are keeping the working class out of meaningful participation in contemporary art. Part of the argument – this is maybe a bit controversial – relies on emphasizing the relative embodiedness of working class knowledge and experience against the more language- and concept- oriented tendencies of the intellectual classes. So this is why I talk a bit about what it has felt like personally to be a joiner (a joiner in the UK is a type of carpenter, I don't know if it's used in America I get the feeling it isn't). A joiner who's gone to university and ended up doing a PhD at Oxford before going back to joinery. So what this experience suggested to me – and I really kind of want to emphasize the 'me' here, like, I'm not trying to say the story has universal relevance or anything, although I do make some kind of speculative, general... sort of formulate some general thoughts – is that the manual work tends to shift the center of experience away from language and towards a more corporeal form of knowledge or cultural capital that is not actually expressible or is at least difficult to express in words. So this way of thinking of course has a

strong precedent in feminist theory. I'm not suggesting that I'm saying anything radically new and indeed the essay draws quite a bit on bell hooks's essay 'Theory as a Liberatory Practice' to make some more subtle points about the distinction between different kinds of theory. But I think it's striking how little this angle seems to have been taken up in concrete times within the art world and it's especially striking to me, how hypocritical the art world can seem and so much of its output is geared around topics like embodiment, affect, materiality or biopolitics, etc. Like, contemporary art really loves, and loves to fetishize, artists like Basquiat and Keith Haring, for example, but it's hard to imagine either of them gaining any footing in a scene where, in order to hold an exhibition at a blue-chip gallery, you need at the very least an MFA and a significant body of discourse around your work, not to say a shit-ton of industry contacts. So anyway, that's the basic gist of the essay, so now if it's okay with you Jessa I just want to talk a bit about your work, and especially an essay that I read and really got a lot from last year called 'The Topeka Fools'. I'm sorry you've already told me how to say that but I've forgotten already, is it the Topeka, Topeka?

JC: Topeka.

MS: Topeka – 'The Topeka Fools', which focused on Ben Lerner as a kind of emblem of class exclusion in American literature and art. So in the article you point out that the imagined reader of Lerner's novel *The Topeka School* is never the red-state Kansas working-class person that Lerner writes about and holds at a distance but a kind of geographically-determined cultural elite gathered along American coasts. So you cite Natalie Olah's's book *Steal as Much as You Can*, which I also really enjoyed and you explain that quote "the new culture war is not the traditional right-wing attack upon the avant-garde but the tension between an art and cultural world that has become dominated by the upper classes and the working class it leaves behind struggling to gain entry and participate in the culture as anything other than consumers". So I would say that also, in many contexts, they struggle to enter as consumers, too, but anyway... So you continue, "The only entry point for a Middle American [into the art and culture world] is through the university system, which so dominates the cultural landscape that all five recipients of 2019's National Book Foundation 5 Under 35 prize for "emerging writers" have MFAs, and more than half of the National Book Award for Fiction winners attended elite schools; eight of those winners attended Yale, Harvard, or Dartmouth." So yeah, I had a bit more on that, but instead of me just kind of going on, maybe I'll just hand over to you. I just wonder, do you have any further thoughts on that, on the close relationship between universities and modern culture between universities and galleries, that kind of thing, and then maybe we can go on to talk about some of the more finer points?

JC: Yeah, I mean so the reason why I wrote that essay was it was the first time that I saw – reading Ben Lerner's book of *The Topeka School*, which was a really big hit in the United States and, I think, I don't know how exactly it did in the UK but it definitely got, like, a nice publisher, you know, and publicity and press and so on, and the way that he was just sort of elevated as the Trump voter whisperer, like he's going to tell us the secret of the red states – that book was the first time that I recognized in American literature, ever, like, places that I had been to.

MS: Right.

JC: It was the first time that I saw, I mean, you know, specific locations like the mall that I went to throughout childhood [laughter] or whatever but also just rural Kansas, you know, in a general way in any sort of contemporary literature, because it's just not a place – it's not a setting for art. And then I realized as I was reading it, I was like, "Oh I'm the bad guy" like, "I'm the uneducated,

unwashed horde that he's terrified of" [laughter] and it was really funny reading it because it became clear that it had nothing to say to the people that were in the books, the people that it was supposedly about... and he refers to himself as an anthropologist several times. You know, an anthropologist of...

MS: So telling.

JC: Yeah... of the red states or whatever. So yeah, it was funny, and it was also not funny, and you know, I've been working in literature for about 20 years now, I started a literary magazine, books that you know, like in 2003, or 2002, I have no idea, it was a long time ago [laughter]. But you know, since then, it was kind of a slow process of, you know, the rise of MFA culture, the rise of the sort of university writer and clearly, there's always been that part of literature of the, sort of, professorial author and the campus novel and, you know, so on and so forth. But the way that it became dominated and then exclusive was kind of shocking. Like, working class writers, writers outside of these systems, just start – stopped being able to get book deals, like, you can't be a bartender and, you know, and a writer, or a taxi driver and a writer, or a nurse and a writer. You have to sort of professionalize yourself from the beginning or there are no entry points. And to me it's just books like this, it's books of, like, working-class tourism, a sort of elitist looking down upon or just a total absence of, which is actually more accurate. Like, within the main production of American fiction these days you just don't see anybody who's not a creative, a writer in New York, etc.

MS: Very interesting, yeah a very similar situation in Britain too. So to what extent do you think that this, kind of, new insistence on MFAs and a kind of university pedigree is maybe -- because I'm just anticipating what someone else might say – but that is really linked to a kind of crisis in the publishing industry and, kind of, publishers kind of retrenching and taking less risks, essentially, and I wonder if there's a similar kind of problem with like galleries and, you know, other, kind of, art institutions that may feel a bit kind of embattled and investors might be more, kind of, nervous about investing in art and things like that, so they need this, kind of, stamp of an MFA. Do you think that that's a valid explanation? Does it help explain any of it?

JC: Yeah, I mean I do think that is a component of all of this. The situation with the publishing industry and the rise of the MFA really did sort of crystallize around the time of the bankruptcy of one of the major distributors in America. And suddenly you saw... Well, like, a lot of publishers lost an entire quarter of income and it meant the closure of a ton of small independent presses, and that's often where working class writers get their start, right? They don't have the avenues and the connections into the larger publishers in New York or London, so they have to go through these routes, through small publishers to sort of establish a name for themselves, and a lot of them disappeared, and a lot of them were replaced by new publishers, new small publishers, run by people with MFAs [laughter] who then wanted to publish people like themselves, right? So it's sort of... The solution to the problem just made, kind of, the problem worse in a lot of ways. But at the same time, it's like, I feel like you are enforcing your own marginalization? You know we're talking about the art world saying, "Well we don't...", you know, "We're just not as relevant anymore". We're talking about the publishing industry saying these things about, "Well people don't read." It's like, well, you're also only talking to, like, five percent of people.

MS: Exactly, yeah, that makes complete sense. So just kind of moving on to the essay itself, were there any broad thoughts you had about that or do you want to, kind of, just jump in and start throwing up some of the harder questions?

JC: Yeah, I mean one thing I wanted to talk to you about, with the essay – and I think that this is something... this is some feedback that I've gotten from things that I've tried to write about, the sort of exclusivity of the university system and the language of it – is the implication that I'm saying, or that we are saying, that the working class are stupid, that they can't understand, right [laughter]. Yeah, I think that might be a good place to start.

MS: Yeah, brilliant. This is good because actually I think it'd be nice to talk about some of the responses you've had to that piece 'The Topeka Fools' and maybe I can talk a bit about some of the responses I've had, even in the short space since my essay's been published, and maybe build up from that?

JC: Yeah, I mean, so I heard from a lot of Kansans, I have to say, from that piece, 'The Topeka Fools', and people who also felt like, yeah, that contemporary literature just doesn't talk to them, because it only, sort of, portrays this one, sort of, character, this one, sort of, urban setting and so on. And the accusation that I was saying that the working classes were dumb often came from people from the university system and not anybody else [laughter]. Yeah, I don't know if you had a similar issue with yours?

MS: So the bit of negative feedback I got kind of early on in this process was definitely from people who were either in the university system or had been through it already. I think that possibly the most egregious kind of reading of the essay I had was somebody thinking that it argued that reading was classist [laughter]. I mean I think it's quite a narrow reading of the essay, I mean, I'm not going to say it's wrong. I mean, obviously people make whatever they want of it, but it's definitely not what I was trying to argue... And, you know, I guess by extension if reading is classist then, I mean, working class people are too stupid to understand that. That's definitely not what I'm saying. And I think I try to make the point clearly enough that I see working class forms of knowledge as equally if not more complex and interesting than others – and when I say working class I'm generalizing. But yeah, more kind of labour-based – as in bodily based – types of work tend to generate ways of being in the world that are less language oriented. I think that's... Like, to me that's fairly uncontroversial... It's not, either, suggesting that working class people don't know how to speak or to write. They obviously do but their idiom, or their primary way of writing, will not necessarily overlap with the ways of writing and the idioms of mainstream culture. It does in other areas – like, in music, for example, I think there's a lot of crossover. Certain types of art... But when we speak generally about fine art and about literature I think there's still an enormous chasm between the two. I mean, I don't think it's solved just by, kind of, shoving this argument to the side and saying, "Oh you're saying working class people are stupid." I mean it's just so much more complicated than that...

JC: Right.

MS: ...and I think people are being genuinely disingenuous when they suggest that there isn't really a difference and that working class, kind of, like, contributions to culture are, kind of, on a par and that we can talk about everything as part of the same, kind of, cultural block. Like, I just don't think that's true.

JC: Yeah, so I think that part of this when we're talking about theory is the understanding of the way academic language has changed in the last couple of decades, right? You can read academic texts from 30 years ago that read absolutely nothing like they do today. The tangled way and the way that it sort of, like, refers back to very specific arguments or texts that you also have to have knowledge of, and that you get knowledge of through the university system and so

on... Yeah, I mean, that's kind of the issue. It's not that if you make less than $30,000 a year you can't possibly understand Adorno. Actually you know Adorno is easier to understand than most of the garbage that comes out from university presses these days [laughter]. I think also this part of it is that honestly some of the people that I grew up with, and some of the people that I hung out with in Chicago, are some of the best read people that I know, as far as the scope of what they're, sort of, interested in and the art that they take in. But the way that has been sort of closing down for them in all of these various forms, whether that be, you know – it's extraordinarily expensive to go to an art museum in the United States. And just the sense of, "These books are not for you because they have nothing to do with your life, and they...", you know, "they don't even want to pretend like you exist in the same world as them". I mean, it is like this sort of (I don't know I feel like I'm rambling a little bit at this point). But the way that I've seen sort of avenues shut down for people that haven't had access to the university system and so on, is really alarming. And it is I think, if you're within it, difficult to see, but if you're outside of it, I feel like it's extremely obvious.

MS: Yeah definitely. I definitely agree with what you say about the kind of shift in the nature of theory or the way theory feels when you read it. I mean, I say, "feel" – I kind of mean that. I think theory – I was speaking about this to somebody else the other day – like, modern theory, he was saying, has this very specific kind of rhythm and, like, tonality, and if you're not used to it, it is really alienating. And I think a lot of undergrads often just try to, kind of, imitate this style and they kind of fail a bit – this is what he was arguing anyway. His metaphor was great – it was like, it's almost like, someone, like, trying to dance and kind of, like, failing it... Like, putting their foot wrong but eventually they get to grips with it and then they become kind of musical, you know, in this language. So that's one aspect, but another one is that, like, modern theory has this very... is very irony laden isn't it?

JC: Um...

MS: And like the references that people make are often unspoken. I mean, you know, you wouldn't necessarily find them in a footnote or anything like that. And that, I think, is one of the hardest things to get your head around when you, when you begin, you know. Like, phrases that might seem almost simple and kind of naive are referencing, you know, a mountain of other stuff, and it is just assumed that you will *get* that. And you know I've been in lots of conversations with other people and you can tell that they assume that you've understood that. You know, there's this, kind of, slightly dismissive way of talking about, you know, theory that's gone before or theory that exists around what we might be talking about, but it's there, you know, and you have to know it... Anyway...

JC: Yeah. And it's the way that it references (I mean this is just sort of like my own like aesthetic pet peeve) but I've been doing this research for a new book and reading a lot of books about film and it seems, like, I think it's illegal to actually write a book about film that does not reference Adorno [laughter] or Foucault, right?

MS: Yeah.

JC: And it's just like... It is this sort of, like, dragging the corpses of these, like, handful of thinkers and smearing their bodies around on your page so that... to like... lend you some sort of legitimacy or to add weight to your own thought, but really what you're doing is you're, you know, propping up your inability to communicate or to think properly outside of these references and just communicate clearly what you're thinking. And I can see it as a as a sort of, like, weakness or a tick but I think that, you know, as somebody like myself who did not attend university, it took

me a long time to not feel intimidated, which I think is actually the point of a lot of this is to create an atmosphere of intimidation, if you don't sort of immediately get it.

MS: For sure yeah. You're so right about the Adorno thing but one, kind of, extra irony that I think is – you know, what you're saying about Adorno actually being kind of relatively readable – I think that's true. And same with Foucault. I mean, Foucault when he's writing well is very very clear, you know, and crisp and all the rest… And talking about Frankfurt School… like, Habermas as well. There was a point when I was doing my PhD where I was like it was a nice break to, kind of, read through this stuff because, you know, some of the other… I mean some stuff on affect… It was just so crazy and over stylized and you know just stupid. Like it's slightly full of slightly cringy, kind of, alliterations and… But anyway… So yeah, good, we've already covered the Frankfurt School, that's great [laughter]. So another criticism that has been has been aimed at… actually this same person who made that analogy about dancing… is that when they've questioned the use of kind of high theory or just theory in the academy and how exclusive it can be, somebody said to them well you've just erased queer and trans lives. I mean, do you have any thoughts on that? Or, like… I mean, it's a big question.

JC: Yeah, well… that's an interesting accusation to make, that a person's lived experience is not somehow permitted outside of a theoretical understanding of it, right? Like that they might as well not have existed if somebody didn't write a book about it. I mean there has been a lot of pushback about feminist theory and queer theory and, sort of, this encapsulation of what are essentially marginalized existences into the academy, right? Where we are posited and theorized over rather than talked *to*, and I think that is definitely a legitimate criticism. I don't think that, you know, as somebody who came to some sort of understanding about my life and my politics partially through feminist theory and queer theory… I understand, and I liked how you wrote about this with the bell hooks essay 'Theory as Liberatory Practice' because my experience was kind of similar. I needed that sort of intellectual interruption to truly see what was, sort of, going on and the pressures that I was under and etc. And I think that's kind of the difference – like, the theory is supposed to *augment* life, right? It's not supposed to replace it or it's not supposed to come *first*. Like you have to live something before you can theorize it. I just find that such a, like, actually offensive statement to make. You know, who gets to… Who gets to do the theorizing, right? It's the person in the academy, it's not the kids who are living sort of vulnerable existences.

MS: Yeah, I mean, my response is sort of along those lines, I guess. I'd just say, well, you know, if the only way we can discuss queer and trans lives is through impenetrable theory then there's probably a problem with that… I mean, not… You know… not with the essay or not with the critique or whatever.

JC: Yeah, and I think that there's, like, this kind of other segment of that. It's like, I don't know if anybody's been noticing the rise of terfdom, but feminist theory has played a significant part in anti-trans sentiment within the feminist community, so it's not like theory cures all. It can obviously be twisted and used for nefarious purposes as much as anything else, so yeah.

MS: For sure. That's good, it leads on to the next point I have on my list. So just talking about some, kind of, personal ambivalences I have myself about the essay – because I'm still, kind of, thinking through a lot of the ideas in there and, like, I get the feeling you are too, right? I mean it's a complicated subject and, like you said the other day, it's sometimes difficult to know where to enter it and, kind of, what to focus on exactly, so inevitably an essay is going to leave something out. But one ambivalence I have is about the difficulties and potential hypocrisy, I guess, inherent in drawing from feminist and anti-racist, anti-capitalist theory in order to critique certain versions

of that theory so I don't know if you would agree with this, but I would say that, like, the theory of, you know, Franz Fanon or, like, Susan Sontag has had a pretty unambiguously positive effect on art criticism, like, it's enriched it in ways we can't measure. But at what point does theory that's been effective within mass movements become the theory that is predominant today, that's to say, theory that exists mainly in the academy as a quasi-autonomous industry focused around funding streams and token progressive research groups? So would you agree that there's been a shift there? And can we parse out the useful stuff from the not so useful stuff?

JC: Yeah, I mean, I think that part of this is – and you wrote about this in your essay, I think, particularly well, is that there are all sorts of different kinds of knowledge and all sorts of kinds of ways of transmitting information and it doesn't have to just be intellectual, right? So yes, these theorists and writers who I love and have been very important to me I can also understand as being not the thing that's gonna do it for somebody else. And I think that, you know, with the protests in America last year and how everybody was, like, okay, but you have to read this book before you go to the protest and you have to read, you know, Marx and then you have to read Gramsci and then you have to, you know... And I was like, yeah, but you can also just go out on the *street*. Like, it's okay to allow people to be radicalized, to be included in a group, to be sort of moved by something other than the thing that moved you or radicalized you. And I think that one of the difficulties of having an art world that is so dominated by the university system is that it overemphasizes the intellectual and it becomes suspicious of other forms, of other kinds of knowledge, and I liked that you spent so much time on craft and what you've learned from that because these are the kinds of things that I don't see in a lot in modern writing about art.

MS: Sure, yeah. I suppose this thing about the, kind of, modern art world being slightly fearful of this argument that conceptualism or language is exclusive – there's this fear that it's kind of quietist, isn't there? That it's going to, kind of, suppress struggle in some way, and therefore I think a lot of people just kind of avoid it or don't want to engage with it. But it is a very... You can't just make the problem go away. It's a complex problem, and I think if we're going to get anywhere we have to, kind of, we have to tread that line, like, very carefully and try and work out what works and what doesn't. What is good for working class people and what is not. And I think if people were being honest, they would have to admit that a lot of these gateways, like you say, whether it's a theory book or whatever, are inherently exclusive. I mean, not everyone has the surplus time to read Gramsci before going to a march, right? They're just finishing their shift and they have to rush over there and, you know, hold their placard and, kind of, do it. But yeah... this is never going to be settled is it, really?

JC: No... [Laughter]

MS: But it would be nice if it just, kind of, got off the ground at least. I think that was the point of the essay – that I feel like nobody, or very few people, are actually willing to even begin talking about it. Is that something that you found as well?

JC: Yeah, it's really... I think that there's a lot of anxiety in this particular moment, and for good reason, as far as, you know, resources being limited. And by “resources”, I mean not just like money and publicity and these sorts of things but also, just, like, attention, right? Like, who do we pay attention to and who deserves that money, care, attention and so on?

MS: Yep.

JC: ...And I think that we've decided as a culture, for some reason, that *credentials* are what we really need to prove that we deserve these things. “So I have the right credentials, so I deserve my place.” And also, a lot of this also goes back to this, sort of, big question that has taken over the last couple decades about, like, “What is art for? What art is important?” You know, for a long time we had a sort of solid idea about the canon and who deserves to be an artist, and so on... Now that that's all in doubt and question, which is tremendous – great job everybody – but now there's a lot of anxiety about jockeying for position... Like, now that it's wide open, it feels like a job interview, right? Like “I'm putting myself forth as the next great genius here's my dignified series of degrees...” [laughter].

MS: Yeah, “And this is the kind of ethical position that I'm going to take up”, or, “This is the kind of identity that I'm going to fulfil to meet your inclusivity criteria” or whatever.

JC: Yeah exactly, it feels very corporate to me. And it feels like what we're doing is not creating a more... on the surface, yes, maybe we have a, sort of, more inclusive idea, but actually we're just changing the terms of exclusion, I think, in a lot of different ways.

MS: For sure, yeah. And I think another kind of detrimental effect that this has – I mean this may sound a bit frivolous given the conversation but – I just think it, in some ways, can reduce the quality of the art itself. When the whole, kind of, industry is geared around, kind of, shoehorning people into, or... not shoehorning but categorizing people into different, kind of, ethical boxes then whatever's produced out of that box that tends to be already framed *by that*, if you see what I mean? So you wrote that really good, interesting review about *The Queen's Gambit* and a couple of other films (I didn't agree with your thing on *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* by the way, which I really liked [laughter], but definitely, like, *Queen's Gambit*). But there's something about the ethical message that's so *in your face* that it actually removes any capacity to enjoy what it is that you're watching – like, you can't suspend disbelief beyond a certain point because you just feel like you're being told this, kind of, moralistic message and that's all you can see.. Or I have that anyway... Do you get that, do you know what I mean?

JC: Oh yeah absolutely... I will just say, about *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* – to me that seemed completely like feminist theory in a film, like, as a storyline. It felt like it was just, yeah, like somebody's thesis and I'd read it before and I was just, like, please get me out of this [laughter].

MS: Oh no.

JC: But I can sort of understand these things, you know, at least with the feminist part of it, as this kind of mourning process of wishing for matriarchs, wishing for a lineage to work through and looking for something in the historical record and then when you don't find it, just sort of like putting it there yourself. So a lot of these very nostalgic TV programmes, movies, books and so on about, you know, starting from a couple hundred years ago to now, of just, you know, fucking putting women there and being, like, “Look at how brave they are and how beautiful they are and how capable they are”. And I was just, like, “Please just give me a *mess*. Can I just see somebody who's just, like, a disaster of a human being or just a jerk or something? Like, why are all these women so well behaved?” But yeah, that to me is part of the job interview part of this, of the, “Look at how well behaved I'll be if you give me some public attention, if you let me occupy space”. I think that comes with the good intentions of the work but also, you know, the so-called – does it exist, does it not exist? – cancel culture. But yeah, it's just like, if you give me, you know, health insurance and 50,000 a year, at least I will entertain you without offending your sensibilities. And to me, this just creates incredibly boring, repetitive art.

MS: Yeah definitely. I guess sort of related to that, and I can sort of feel it kind of threading through what we're talking about already, but there's this risk, isn't it, that even what we're talking about now can be, kind of, taken and used by political groups or other groups that we probably don't like very much and wouldn't really want to be associated with, right? And so how do you, kind of, negotiate that personally? I mean, I'm sure lots of points could be taken from what we've just said and used by, you know, somebody, an alt-righter on Twitter or whatever, taken out of context or whatever, reinterpreted and used in an argument. But what's your experience of that? How do you think we avoid that?

JC: Yeah, I mean, so I wrote a book criticizing feminism and I got a lot of incredibly creepy and disturbing emails from misogynists supporting it, right? [laughter] And being like finally, you know, somebody's telling the truth about women and what terrible people they all are. And I was like, "I don't like you either, so I wouldn't get too excited" [laughter]. But I think that actually what is more, sort of, politically harmful is lying. Is pretending to be, because you are from a marginalized group of some kind, that you are incapable of causing harm. That everything that you got in this world you absolutely deserve, and it comes with no sort of entitlement or nepotism or anything else. So I think that these sorts of lies that dominate art and literature are doing much more harm than us pointing out that they're lies. Can it be politically useful? Yes. But the sort of alt-right people that are already criticizing the art world are already saying – they already know; they're already saying these things, so I don't know that, you know, I'm legitimizing by saying it, but also pointing out that that doesn't mean that we should all embrace fascism or whatever [laughter].

MS: Yeah, you wrote in your piece 'The Topeka Fools' – just in case someone listening hasn't read it – that you were – what was it? – watching alt-right YouTube videos and –

JC: Mhm

MS: ...and they were talking about the kind of – how the coastal elites hated them and all the rest, and you were saying that you didn't actually disagree with them.

JC: Right yeah, no there really is like – and I feel like a lot of people in the art world don't know this –there are a ton of far-right-wing people making YouTube videos and writing things against the art world of basically saying – you know, I think that there's some conception that they like classical art, they're confused by contemporary art. And I think that people in the art world use that to say basically that these people are stupid. And I don't think that they're – I don't think that they're stupid, I think that they're misinterpreting what is happening, but just because you look at, you know, a room full of dirt as a sort of installation project and you're like "this is a fucking room full of dirt", and somebody's like "well actually it represents...", you know, "...symbolically whatever the fuck" and then they give you a thesis about it and the guy is still like "I still feel like this is a room full of dirt", I don't think that that makes that person stupid. And I feel like when we shut out avenues for inclusion of either the production or appreciation of art, I think when we look down on people, I think when we assume that certain segments of our population have nothing to contribute, then yeah, then we breed resentment and these sorts of things, and I don't know that, you know, giving one of these YouTubers like an art show is the way to go about it, but I do think that we have to stop assuming that anybody who doesn't agree with our point of view is automatically sort of dumb.

MS: Yeah, I mean, those types of installation where it's like dirt on the floor or whatever... I mean I kind of like a lot of them, you know. I'm fairly into, like, conceptual art and in some ways I also,

you know – disclaimer – I quite like writing in a theoretical way, but I just also don't have any illusions that any of it is accessible to working class people, and I think that's maybe one of the things that most, kind of, gets to me about the current situation – that there seems to be this self-understanding in the art world that it is radically inclusive and that it has brought in the working class along with other minority demographics and that they're all kind of on this journey together, when that's just not the case at all. Like you say, you know, working class people will look at that room and they'll say it's dirt, and that will not change. So what do we do?

JC: I mean, I've been on kind of both sides of this, right? Like, so I grew up in a farming community, my parents essentially think that art is a waste of time, that it's like an indulgence, right? They think that it's something for the rich, which, again, they're not necessarily wrong. So, I just – we didn't do anything, like I didn't go to an art gallery or a museum until I was like 19 years old. But then I've also been on the other side of it, which is I've essentially made, you know, the art and literature world my life and I recognize that some of the work that I do also seems exclusive and sort of gatekeeping-y. And you know, I've also forced my father to go to the Art Institute with me and talk to me about this art, because I do want to know his perspective on it but then also, like, what I'm missing and what the gap is between our two views of these things. Like, I took him to Cy Twombly because I thought that that was a good halfway point, right?

MS: I love Cy Twombly.

JC: I love Cy Twombly! And like I was crying and he was like, "Can you explain to me why you're crying?" So yeah, so we've had a lot of arguments on these particular subjects but yeah, but then something else will move him in a way that I just, I don't – I mean he likes Agnes Martin and I'm like – [laughter]. So yeah, so it's not that I think if you take a working class person to a room full of dirt, there's no way that they could possibly understand it. But also like if you take, like, a farmer to a room full of dirt he's going to have thoughts and feelings that had never occurred to you and that doesn't mean that, you know, his are less important just because he's not quoting Foucault.

MS: That kind of opens up a bigger question about interpretation and whether it matters. Yeah, like does it matter that they read it the right way? I mean in a way it doesn't, right?

JC: Right, no.

MS: Like, I mean, we can go back to the death of the author thing. But on the other hand, if you're talking about access to the industry, that's where it does matter right? Because you can't become an art critic if, as a farmer, you look at that and say, "Well it looks like my ploughed field", or whatever. Or, you know, "I wonder what kind of organisms are living in that dirt?" Like it's nice as an ideal but you just won't make it. Like people are just not going to accept your pitches, you know? So I guess that's kind of a bit what I mean about the disingenuity of the art world, that it might kind of pretend to be open in this kind of free interpretative way where it's kind of, anything goes and everyone is free to interpret things as they want, but that's not the case if you want to actually access it in a meaningful way.

JC: Yeah. And I think, you know, part of this conversation has to be what a university education does basically. Because I don't know that a university education, at least anymore, actually makes you smarter. But it does sort of – well in the United States, and I don't know this might be true in the UK or not – but in the United States if you do not have a college degree your life will be shorter, you will experience more pain in the course of your lifetime and you're more prone to

addiction issues throughout your life. So not getting into a university is not just a thing of like "Well I guess I'm not working on Wall Street", it's like your life is statistically going to be shorter and worse.

MS: Yeah, yeah. Pretty sure that's the same here.

JC: Yeah, and then to be like, you know, stereotyped or kept out of certain other forms, particularly when the arts, for such a long time, were the place where essentially the people who couldn't live normal lives went to create a life for themselves – I think that is also incredibly tragic. But also you know one of the things that the university system does is it changes you. It takes you away from the community in which you were born and raised, and sort of alienates you from it in these certain ways, that I think that we don't spend enough time talking and thinking about. And I would like somebody to write a book about that.

MS: I absolutely agree with you about the alienating effects of university, I mean I definitely experienced that.

JC: Well can you talk more about that?

MS: I mean, I suppose a bit like everyone, I mean, it's in some ways a necessary alienation right? In that you're often at a stage of life where it's quite healthy to move away from home and to kind of build yourself anew and all that sort of thing. That's the positive side of it. I mean, the more negative side, you know, I discuss a bit in the essay, but it's like that loss of touch with the, kind of, in my case, more material conditions of existence, you know, production histories of things and that sort of thing. But yeah, I mean for me university – I have very mixed feelings about it, I think especially the humanities in universities. I mean, I just take it as a given that science and maths are like a different kind of thing. But in the humanities, the more I kind of went up the ladder, like, you know doing this PhD and then I guess thinking about postdocs and teaching and the rest, like the more it felt like a game that you kind of had to master, like you had to establish like moves on a board and just have all the right parameters and the right language, the right vocabulary, and there was just nothing in it for me at the end, you know. But I could see, you know, people getting ahead because they were good at playing the game and that was it. But you know it's difficult to say that as well without sounding bitter. I mean I'm not bitter – I don't care, I don't give a shit about university now, I'm very happy where I am, but it's a strange world.

JC: Yeah no, and I think that's what I meant by university doesn't necessarily make you smarter because in a lot of ways it does just sort of reward figuring out that scheme, right? Yeah so that's really interesting.

MS: Yeah, it definitely didn't make me smarter. It made me smarter within a particular game, which is the university game and which is linked to language generally, I guess, and to certain kinds of conceptualism... So maybe just to kind of wrap up, I wanted to just try to anticipate slightly one criticism of the essay and I guess this whole discussion in a way, which is that we might not be being Marxist enough [laughter], which is to say – is our argument misplaced, should we be talking about you know the economy instead and funding for the arts and all of that, rather than just talking about culture, language or whatever? So just to kind of get started on this last point, I just wanted to bring in this Art Monthly essay by Morgan Quaintance, a two-part essay – I've only read the second part, but in this second part of the essay he does a kind of Quaintance thing, which is to attack what he calls the structural basis of contemporary art, or the art world, by running through the kind of gamut of dodgy funding behind some big institutions

and events in art. So he's done it with Frieze I think before and now he does it with a bunch of other organizations. So I have my own reservations about some aspects of the argument, specifically over whether it's actually a structural argument or not, but I wondered whether you have any thoughts on the importance of this kind of critique, like why it's being made now, you know that kind of thing?

JC: Yeah, I guess one thing that I will say is that of course these issues of funding for the arts and especially the way that creepy dark money gets into the art market and so on, these are extremely important conversations to have, but I feel that those conversations are happening on a much wider scale and at a higher volume than these questions that we're sort of talking about, which always sort of get hushed up. And I think part of that is just that it is good to talk about the sort of material reality of the art world as it exists and the distribution of funds and "Is it fair?" and all of these things, but essentially you're talking about, you know, how a small circle of people are doing in the corner of a much larger room. And we're talking about who gets to be in that corner, and I think that that's as important if not more so simply because this is a conversation that makes people uncomfortable and tends to always be delayed – you know, we'll talk about it later, like, when everybody has a working wage and so on, then we'll talk about, you know, these sorts of things. But I think it's important to talk about them at the same time.

MS: Yeah, yeah. I mean Marx himself wasn't this kind of hardcore economic determinist that people kind of make him out to be, right? I mean, there's this letter that Engels wrote to Bloch – Joseph Bloch – after Marx died and I've copied and pasted the quote and I'll just read it out, I guess that's the easiest thing – it says "according to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Neither Marx nor I have ever asserted more than this. Therefore if somebody twists this into saying that the economic factor is the *only* determining one, he is transforming that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, absurd phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various components of the superstructure…also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases determine their *form*." So I mean I read that and I take it as, you know, kind of slightly encouraging. I think this discussion does have some relevance, and I would also say that if we're talking about language, specifically the form of language and the way it's embedded in institutions, that is not like a super super structural kind of thing. I mean language is already kind of semi-structural as far as I'm concerned. I mean it's very rigid, like the hierarchies are rigid. It's malleable but only to an extent, you know, and slowly. I don't know, would you agree with that?

JC: Yeah absolutely. I think we also have to look at, like, why this language is seen as being so useful in this realm right? And why it's also so new. But I absolutely agree with what you're saying, that these sort of economic concerns and material concerns are really only a small part of it and we have overemphasized it in a way that I think is self-serving as a way to avoid having larger, more difficult and abstract conversations.

MS: I mean I'd like for us to be able to have both, you know? Again, like I was saying, it's like, just tread this line. It's a difficult one, but it's like we have to do it… Just one thing about this Quaintance piece – for me the point at which the argument kind of fritters away is towards the end when he lists what he sees are some kind of positive alternative developments that are kind of pushed back against all this kind of corruption. But – I don't know if you remember when you read it – but a lot of those examples are like temporary one-off or like speculative events and cooperatives, so like the group exhibition 'Nope to Hope' which was staged in response to the Design Museum's quote patronizing complicit and downbeat 'Hope to Nope' exhibition. I mean

that was a one-off, you know, kind of flashpoint thing. And then he talks about this DIY space that is currently searching for new premises. Well you know, it'll be great when it gets its premises but also I think the argument loses a bit of its power because it's really easy to point to these kinds of events and initiatives and say, "Look this is what art could be like", but the thing is that they're like that because they exist, like, to use a really theoretical word, they exist, like, liminally or interstitially, within a system that's always threatening to subsume them, you know? So Quaintance kind of wants to talk about structure and I think it's really brilliant, but it seems to me that truly structural arguments should be able to envisage an alternative that actually works in the long term, otherwise I don't really understand, like, what's actually structural about it.

JC: Right, yeah. Yeah. I mean it reminds me of like when people started pointing out how few women were being published in certain publications and then Granta decided, "Oh we'll just publish an issue with all women" and then went back to only publishing men like immediately. But we got one issue. Hooray! [laughter].

MS: Yeah, well I mean I think Quaintance wants that, you know. He makes that quite clear. But it's just not clear to me, like, how the examples he gives kind of address that. But anyway, I would like to be able to have this conversation with him and with other people too, but maybe that's kind of all we've got time for now?

JC: Yeah.

MS: It's been such a pleasure.

JC: Yeah. Yes

MS: To have you on the Marek Sullivan Show.

JC: Oh, thank you [laughter].

MS: I'm trying to copy your style for your podcast, which is brilliant [laughter.] I'm going to do a plug here – people should listen to Jessa Crispin's podcast Public Intellectual. Really, really good.

JC: Ah thank you, thank you.

MS: Cool, well, thank you.

JC: Of course, thank you for having me!