



ANDREI CODRESCU, HENRY ALFORD, and MARK TWAIN

Interview Each Other!

HOW TO LIVE DADA

Flash Rosenberg and Max rada dada perform!

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South Court Auditorium

LIVE from the New York Public Library

www.nypl.org/live

(applause)

FLASH ROSENBERG: Hi there. My name is Flash Rosenberg and I'm Artist in Residence here for LIVE from the New York Public Library, **(applause)**. Thank you, and what you just saw is really a portrait of all of us when we're listening to an event. Like, instead of drawing the events as they happen and kind of like doing caricatures or court portraits of the celebrities, I'm trying to make a picture of what it's like when the ideas are mingling in your brain and you don't remember who said what, but it all sits there as a sensation, and I have to tell you how grateful I was to hear people laughing at the economy. **(laughter)** That was really a wonderful sound to hear backstage.

And now what I'm going to be doing tonight, I'll need some help, because beside drawing the thing, and you'll be able to see it live as it's happening, although I won't quite be doing it that manically quickly, because obviously I have to wait till I hear what they say before I draw it, and my wonderful video editor, Sara Lohman, who's in the back, helps me get it more up to speed, but I figured while I was drawing I would also let my dress draw itself, and so Jade and Elodie are here trying to get the colors to go down. Is it working? Oh, boy, so all these pens have to do this. This gives me much more time to talk about what else is on deck for you tonight.

We have to admit that we love the Library, that it's trying to bring new energy into performance, from Sharpies and dresses to all the different events that are happening, and so we would like for you to join. It's only forty dollars, and for that you get two free tickets to any program you want in May and June, and since tickets are twenty-five each,

you've already—it's, you know, it's a bargain—you don't even need to see a video on the economy to know that's a pretty good deal.

And oh, yes, a basket is being passed around. And you can put money in it, to help support the video work, but what they really would like you to do is give answers, you want your answers in there and then Andrei and Henry will be looking for their questions. Right? Is that what you're going to do? Either/or, questions or answers, well, then write something, and if it's a question or an answer it might be subverted into the other thing when they perform.

Okay, there also will be a book signing after the event. You can sign books you wrote yourself, books you plan to write, or even more productively, buy the books of the speakers tonight. That's the logical thing, but this isn't a logical night, it's Dada.

(laughter) Let's see. This sort of reminds me of the government. Lots of things happen to you and you can't quite see what it is, but you *think* you voted for it. **(laughter)**

Now, I would like to introduce Mark Twain, oh, let me see, before I do that, you can see this. I think all artwork now should come with a gigantic URL in the middle of it. This is what I have tried to launch here by having this drawing of Adam Gopnik and Paul Holdengräber be illustrated, and this lets you know where you can look for programs at the Library. And now, I would like to introduce Mark Twain, who is now witty about being dead, so he can most eloquently explain what's going to be happening here at LIVE tonight. Thank you.

(applause)

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Good evening. My name, as you know, is Mark Twain and I am dead. If I had had more time, I would have made it shorter. It is a statement, and yet it is my statement, and I am regretful to say that, over and over again, people attribute it to Blaise Pascal, but this is really ridiculous, because it is mine.

Anyway, however, here we are, with Dada. I promise you I was Dada first. Just read my “Conversations with Satan,” read “The Privilege of the Grave,” or the “Happy Memories of the Dental Chair.” It’s all included in the book I am signing perhaps tonight, who is Mark Twain, by Mark Twain himself, which is most surprising, and it’s never been before published.

But really I don’t want to say that I’ve been Dada before anybody else, because I really don’t want to get into a fight with Andrei Codrescu, who has written a book, *The Posthuman*. The posthuman, what is that, I really wonder, I had enough trouble when I was alive with the humans, but anyway I thought I would be done with them and now there is this book, it’s a good book and you should buy it, because it will teach you nothing except how to live. His book is entitled *The Posthuman Dada Guide: Tzara and Lenin Play Chess*. I really wonder if they really ever did play chess, those two, come on, anyway. It’s just been published by a very famous university, where I lectured when I was around as a bad boy talking my head off to pay off my debts, Princeton University. After I died, the philosopher Bertrand Russell famously said that Princeton was as good

an imitation of Oxford as monkeys could have made. **(laughter)** Well, perhaps that's funny, I'm not sure.

Anyway, Andrei Codrescu is an NPR commentator and the author of many books of poetry and essays, including *The Disappearance of the Outside*. That's odd, really, I think. Last I checked it was right there. And then there's Henry Alford who has written a book about how to live. I personally thought that's something you just did, but no, he has written a book entitled *How to Live: A Search for Wisdom from Old People While They are Still on the Earth*. He quotes me, Mark Twain. Mark Twain, he says, I said, Mark Twain, he says, I said, "Wisdom is a reward you get for a lifetime of listening when you would rather have talked." Well, thanks very much, Henry.

Henry of course is the writer, one of the writers for the *New Yorker* and for *Vanity Fair*. He's funny. He has won a Thurber Prize because, I think, he's funny, for *Big Kiss*. He's the author of a humor collection, *Municipal Bondage*. Henry can be reached, I don't understand these letters, but www.henryalford.com. His book will also be on sale and signed so please get Dada and get *How to Live* and you will be all set.

And then there is my book, it is a new book by a dead author, Mark Twain, entitled *Who is Mark Twain by Mark Twain Himself*, never before published as I said, the cover says, I am pleased, and I thank my publisher for publishing me at this late date, in this late stage in my life or nonlife, in truth I always the idea of publishing a preposthumous work, or a

preposterous book, but this one is special and close to my heart. I might be signing it after, after this event, where we might go gaga with Dada.

Oh, and I nearly forgot tonight we also have Max rada dada, whose slideshows include The Largest Dust Bunnies in the World over Two and a Half Pounds. Rada dada will be performing unexceptional tricks, he's already done a few, around the isle of Manhattan. For instance, tomorrow at eleven a.m. he will be mending and repairing with money on Wall Street, because everything is better with money.

There is a method to our madness tonight. Alford and Codrescu are going to cross-question each text using the oracular method of bibliomancy, which is the use of books in divination. Some Christian and Jewish groups forbid divination. Some permit it as a whisper, so they might just whisper. Bibliomancy is sometimes referred to as stichomancy, the divination, as you will have guessed, from lines. Alford and Codrescu and I, Twain, to some extent, will use the oracular method to show just how oracular we are. We will open our books at random. All answers are there and we will question and answer each other using our words. I won't do too much of that myself, but I just might.

Rada dada will read your questions at the end, though we would prefer, to some extent, that you submit answers and Andrei and Henry will divine them. What the question was will be up to them. Just like the bumper sticker I saw the first time I came to America, which stated, I will never forget this, that God is the answer. I still wonder, and from the

grave, what the question was. After that you will go and buy the book and after that you will go and get drunk with us.

Now, here to get us started. Welcome Andrei Codrescu and Henry Alford!

(applause)

ANDREI CODRESCU: Mark Twain, you're cool.

HENRY ALFORD: Thanks, Mark. I'm slightly terrified by the images behind us. Whenever I go into a shopping mall, I'm amazed that people will pay money to go to those caricaturists, and it's sort of, you know, "will you take my worst feature and exaggerate it grotesquely?"

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): What is that worst feature of yours?

HENRY ALFORD: Well, we will soon find out.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): What's with those shoes?

HENRY ALFORD: These are actually something I got in Morocco. They're pantoufles. And I realized—

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Can you say that one more time?

HENRY ALFORD: One more time. Yes, I can butcher French as well as English. It occurs to me that most of my favorite words in French begin with the letter P. Like there's that *le pellicule*, which I think means film, if someone asks, how was your evening, you can say *pellicule*.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): You can?

HENRY ALFORD: You can if you want to. *Pamplemousse* of course is a fabulous P-starting French word, and then *la pantoufle*.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): And *Pamplemousse* means what?

HENRY ALFORD: Grapefruit.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Grapefruit, yeah.

HENRY ALFORD: *La pantoufle* is the slippers, I don't know if it's correct French, but I like to say *je suis pantoufle*.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): It isn't correct.

HENRY ALFORD: I'll put it away, I'll throw it away.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Is there a story to these pantoufles?

Maybe not.

HENRY ALFORD: I think this very evening might be their big moment.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): You should know that you can see what is happening behind you on that screen in front of you.

HENRY ALFORD: So we're living our worst features.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Yes, exactly.

HENRY ALFORD: Great.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Well, I'm going to use my cheat sheet on this, because I have no shoe expertise.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): But do you have a shoe fetish?

ANDREI CODRESCU: No.

HENRY ALFORD: It's a Chelsea boot.

ANDREI CODRESCU: No, it's just a hundred-dollar you know, basic airport shoe that you can move quickly out in and back up and my cheat sheet says, it's fitting that George W. Bush's reign ended with shoes thrown at him in Iraq after he made everybody in the world take off their shoes at U.S. airports. **(laughter/applause)** Shoes are the twentieth century's most potent metaphor. There was a shoe bomber. Remember him?

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Yes, intimately.

ANDREI CODRESCU: There were riots in Pakistan, riots because of Islamic script written on the bottom of Nike sneakers. In Egypt and even in New York, guests must take off their shoes at the door, I mean, I haven't been in a whole lot of houses in New York where you have to do, but you do in some places. Worshipers, of course, must leave their shoes before entering a mosque and, of course, you know that at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. and at Yad Vashem in Israel, there are mounds of shoes that belonged to Jews murdered by Nazis. So to walk in shoes is sort of an essential act of civilized humans, but, you know, we walk barefoot in my place, because I live in the country. I live on the Arkansas/Missouri border, where we don't know a French word from—from any word actually, if you speak the way we do.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): So I'm quite amazed, I bring up a subject of shoes and you have something to say about it. You have something to say about everything.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Well, they're fundamental, I mean, what is between your shoes and your hat? **(laughter)** Maybe your eyeglasses, but I just have those—

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Maybe a few other things.

ANDREI CODRESCU: A few other things like a heart that beats faintly, maybe a penis that stands correctly.

(laughter)

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Sometimes. With some hope.

ANDREI CODRESCU: With some definitely hope. This is what we have in America, is hope. We have God, money, and penis.

(laughter)

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Right. You know the Kafka line, I've always loved, "there's hope but not for us."

ANDREI CODRESCU: Indeed. So the oracular part of this business, I think, is that we're going to ask questions of our books, but, you know, I did write a little introduction that Paul kindly FedExed me Mark Twain's new book from New York to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, so that I could get it overnight, and I did.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): I FedEx quite a few things.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Mark Twain himself didn't use FedEx; he didn't even care if his book was published in his lifetime, as you pointed out, because according to him a dead man "has one privilege which is not exercised by any living person—free speech." It sounds right, but the rights of dead men to free speech are still being debated. You know, to this day actually the FCC won't allow Allen Ginsberg's great poem "Howl" to be broadcast publicly because of the word "fuck."

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Careful, this is a library.

(laughter)

ANDREI CODRESCU: Maybe 'cause Allen's only been dead a few years now, maybe you have to be dead for at least ten years before you get full freedom of speech. I'm not sure, what is it, ten, twelve years?

HENRY ALFORD: That sounds right.

ANDREI CODRESCU: So the book Twain waited one hundred years to be published got to me in one night over a distance it might have taken him about twenty days to get to in 1905, that's in the case he wanted to deliver it to me personally which he might have if he'd known that I had to urgently be present here at the New York Public Library in order to witness the use of his book as an oracle about the future. The future, back when Twain wrote these pieces, was not quite so urgent. Though he would have loved FedEx, I'm sure of it. In fact, I think he invented it.

The same year that Twain wrote some of these pieces, 1905, in February, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, the daddy of Communism, wrote, "The uprising has begun. The rivers of blood are flowing. The civil war for freedom is blazing up." The first revolution failed. Rivers of blood did flow, but Lenin had spoken too soon. I Googled that one, it took me about ten seconds, actually. Mark Twain would have definitely loved Google. It would have increased his productivity, you know, he wouldn't have had to go to the library so often.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): But you're writing a book, you say, you claim, that sort of escapes the very notion of Googling. You want to deliver something to us that is un-Googleable.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Yes, and it was, until it was published. **(laughter)**

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Right.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Four years later, in February 1909, F.T. Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto was published in La Figaro, and it proclaimed, and this is a quote, "we want to demolish museums and libraries, fight morality, feminism, and all opportunist and utilitarian cowardice. Museums, cemeteries: truly identical in their sinister juxtaposition of bodies that do not know each other. Public dormitories where you sleep side by side forever with beings you hate. Let the arsonists with charred fingers come. Here they are! Heap up the fire to the shelves of the libraries. Divert the canals to flood the cellars of the museums. Let the glorious canvases swim ashore. Take the picks and hammers. Undermine the foundation of venerable towns. The oldest among us are not yet thirty years old. We have therefore at least ten years to accomplish our tasks. When we are forty, let younger and stronger men than us throw us in the wastepaper basket like useless manuscripts." F. T. Marinetti and the Italian Futurists had no patience at all. They wanted something even faster than FedEx and Google. They wanted *fire*.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): This is very uplifting.

(laughter)

HENRY ALFORD: It's upbeat, yeah.

ANDREI CODRESCU: The fire did come, when fascism embraced Futurist ideas and nearly burned Europe down, so, and then came Tristan Tzara, daddy of Dada, who seven years later in 1916 proclaimed Dada is against the future. And from where he stood in the middle of a world war, the future looked pretty bleak. The Dadaists cared nothing for posterity and didn't want to own the future, the speed of thought seemed quite sufficient, thank you, so tonight, you know, we have three oracular books standing by to answer your questions, people of the future. I mean, I'm sure some of you are people of the future. Some of you are postmortem, actually, just hanging out, you know. **(laughter)** The dead do like to hang out and pretend they're alive. I've seen that in myself.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): I have no future.

ANDREI CODRESCU: People of the future is to be—to be I ask of people of the future to be mindful of what Ted Berrigan in this wonderful poem called “People of the Future.” “People of the future, while you are reading these poems, remember, you didn't write them, I did.”

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): And the line of Paul Valéry that I so much like. He said the future isn't what it used to be.

(laughter)

ANDREI CODRESCU: Exactly. Which in this case means, people of the future, while you are hearing these answers to your questions, remember their authors didn't answer, their *books* did. So whatever their authors may have thought about time, we're making them speak to you about a future. Which is a reason to buy them.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): What does your book, Henry, *How to Live*, tell us about the future?

HENRY ALFORD: Well . . .

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): What did you try to do in—

HENRY ALFORD: It's a very rosy future, it's much more—it's flowery and delightful, whereas Andrei's might be slightly darker, I would say. For Google is an interesting question because I think Google has been a total elder killer in terms of elder wisdom, the fact that people can now Google information has—it's really helping to erode old folks' status in society as the keepers of institutional wisdom.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): You mean Google has done that.

HENRY ALFORD: Google has, indeed.

ANDREI CODRESCU: I am Google! Well, Google is the empire, you know. The empire strikes back. It is the empire. We put all our memories in it. You know, Aristotle had this down, actually, when he wrote about Thoth, the god who, the Egyptian god who invented the alphabet, and I have him quoted here in my cheat sheet. Aristotle quoting a god chastising Thoth, the discoverer of the alphabet. Says, “This discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls. Because they will not use their memories. They will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory but to reminiscence. And you give your disciples not truth but only the semblance of truth. They will not be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing. They will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing. They will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality. It’s a few years ago, but—

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): In my time, we experienced things fully. We roughed it.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Well, we finessed the Google.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): And Google takes us away from the wisdom of old people, from their stories, is that what you’re in part saying, their ability to recount what has happened to them.

HENRY ALFORD: Sure, if you're a little kid you're not going to go and ask your—you may not go ask your grandparents about such and such a thing if you can bang it out on Google that much faster. So remember that, remember granny, the next time you Google.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): I actually plan on never Googling again.

(laughter)

ANDREI CODRESCU: Do you have a granny, Paul?

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): No, but I mean I feel that I killed her by Googling.

ANDREI CODRESCU: You have. We've killed our ancestors by Googling them.

HENRY ALFORD: Andrei's book makes an interesting distinction between when you're thinking about avatars, how this idea that now that in future we will have these icons which will—which can sort of make us immortal if you have an icon online and in talking about this he makes a distinction between your avatar and what he calls your meat body. Which is a phrase I really—because I have a lot of meat going on.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): So it's a difference between your face and MySpace.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Definitely. I mean, meatspace is where it's at, you know.

(laughter) It is! You can be bidimensional and even, you know, tridimensional or virtual. As virtual as you can get, you will never quite get to meatspace in this particular lifetime if you put your trust in virtual reality.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Is that the meaning of the word "posthuman"?

ANDREI CODRESCU: Yes, and it is a meaning, actually, that takes it out of the series of postmodern, postfeminist, postcolonial, and all those Post-it notes.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Post Raisin Bran.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Because—Those are quite specific.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Post office.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Postmodern is about a style. Postfeminism is about a reaction to the feminism of the sixties. Postcolonial is about what people do when they've escaped the empires. Posthuman is something more serious, because it's about what happens

when you give up the idea of what you think is human. Not that human was ever that great. I mean, what's so great about being a human? How great was it being a Jewish human in 1942? How great was it being a human when you were a peasant in Romania in the nineteenth century, you know? It was not so great. So, you know, the idea of removing that particular word from all its contexts, you know, especially in the humanities, which is something we insist on making a specialty. It's a good idea, you know. All of that is a good idea, but—you know. All of that is a good idea, but, there's this posthuman thing, you know, which is this thing, you know, I have this like braces on my head, it's like these wires, we are wired completely. I have it in my pocket, I have it on my head, you know. I live, you know, I walk around in a city that is completely ordered by mechanisms and electronics.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): And so Dadaism is an antidote to excessive mediation.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Yes.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): The fact that we no longer look at each other, touch each other. As I often say, you can't—I mean, you *can*—please don't misunderstand me—you can't *really* tickle yourself. I mean, you can, of course, but—

ANDREI CODRESCU: It's the kind of word that makes you miss George Bush if George Bush was an intelligent human being, **(laughter)** because he never finished a sentence.

HENRY ALFORD: Right. But so how is Dadaism—how does that work for us posthumans? That by bursting out into little Dadaist acts that that's bringing us back to our humanity?

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Read a passage randomly—Randomly read a passage that will somehow help us.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Okay, okay, well this is all cheat sheet. Because it's—you know, the book is the book and it does what it does but I wrote another book that I stuck inside. **(laughter)** Dada.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): So you were really cheating.

ANDREI CODRESCU: I was definitely cheating, but it's only taped on one side, so I can lift it and read what's underneath. Dada: the attempt to make memorable things that cannot be memorized. A technology of aesthetic warfare. Indolent young punks keeping awake older revolutionaries. Dada is eccentric because there is no center. Dada is not eccentric because the center is where Dada is. Mark Twain is the King of Dada. And that's because he's singular, and Dada was plural, actually, it was a movement. America

is de facto Dada. Mark Twain is one of America's daddies. He lives in New Orleans, when he lives. So when you decide to live again, do come. That's just a passage.

HENRY ALFORD: I'm interested in what were some of the personal lives of the Dadaists? Because it strikes me that—that you invite Dada to the party, but you don't marry Dada, right? **(laughter)** That it's a very exciting, vivid—whhooooo!—approach to life, but wow, what kind of a personal life does one have when one is lining urinals with fur or bursting into poems simultanéés or any of these rather exciting forms of communication?

ANDREI CODRESCU: Well, you know, that's a matter of choice and how long do you plan to keep your body—

HENRY ALFORD: My meat body—

ANDREI CODRESCU: Yes, and how far are you going to go to expand it, you know? Now, a true Dadaist would probably consume his or her flesh body by the age of thirty, in full—in full blossoming joy of consumption of self.

HENRY ALFORD: At which point—at which point—

ANDREI CODRESCU: However, some people ration their bodies, you know, they keep them into their sixties and eighties, as some people do in your book and they do well,

because they keep these moments of joy, of, you know, endless going to preserve them, and it works—it works. But I mean if you're a dedicated Dadaist, which is a kind of contradiction **(laughter)** in terms, you would just spend it quickly, and you would not make it past your twenty-ninth birthday. I mean, there's no reason to.

HENRY ALFORD: Right.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): So perfection and duration don't go together then.

ANDREI CODRESCU: No, they don't, actually. Perfection is brief, duration is long. **(laughter)** It lasts.

HENRY ALFORD: I have to say my weirdest experience with reading your book was that you refer repeatedly to a poetess, I believe, named Mina Loy and of course every time I saw Mina Loy, I kept going, "Why is Myrna Loy in a book about Dada?" And it reminded me of there's a party game where you take a famous person's name and you remove one letter from it and then explain who that person is and a friend did Myrna Oy and he said, "She's the star of 'I Gave Them the Best Years of Their Lives.'"

(laughter)

ANDREI CODRESCU: Well, you know, that is quite funny, but there is something however truly essential about Mina Loy the poet, who was British-born Jewish who was the young lover of Marinetti, who wrote the Futurist Manifesto. And she wrote a kind of poetry that really would have saved American literature from T. S. Eliot (**laughter**) and actually would have saved American poetry from this eternal feud between Pound and Eliot. Because what she did was write an extremely contemporary-sounding verse that was right on and very direct about her relationships, her life. And to read Mina Loy, actually, not Myrna Loy, which my students constantly confuses her with, because, you know, she was the better known one of those.

But Mina Loy walked that path. She didn't take it. She went to New York and she had her moments, you know, including a famous threesome with Marcel Duchamp and his wife which they all wrote about and became a sort of a bag lady who collected things in New York, you know, and then went and lived with her daughter, you know, never looked after her literary career. And had she done that, you know, she would have probably solved our Eliot/Pound problem, but she didn't, and, you know, consequently, you know, we have to write about her and sort of try to bring her back. But that's impossible, I mean, you know, she didn't do her thing at the time, which is another, you know, Dada problem, if you don't go with the zeitgeist, you're fucked.

HENRY ALFORD: Right. And that was an interesting part of the book, too, where you talked about how for some of the visual artists that Dadaism, that New York was central to their project simply because there's more stuff to be found on the street.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): And more congestion.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Well, there's more stuff, I mean when Max Ernst married Peggy Guggenheim he had lots of time and money, so he could run around with André Breton and find stuff in the junk stores. So they could run around and make art—

HENRY ALFORD: Who would leave that house in Venice?

ANDREI CODRESCU: And they would make art, so yeah. Well, he was loved—I don't know, maybe she loved her dogs, more, I don't know. Does anyone know?

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): You had very unkind things to say at the beginning about libraries, quoting Marinetti, yet libraries, we are in one of them at this moment, the New York Public Library that has fifty-two million items and seven floors of books and goes right under Bryant Park, it's a very prestigious library, a very heavy library. I've actually always wondered how much it weighed. And actually nobody has to this day been able to tell me, do you know how much it weighs by any chance?

ANDREI CODRESCU: I think it weighs as much as your soul.

(laughter)

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Well, that is right. This is oracular. We were saying oracular.

HENRY ALFORD: It certainly weighs more now that we've said penis and fuck inside it.

(laughter)

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): But what I would like to know—

ANDREI CODRESCU: It decreases the weight.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): But for both of you, libraries have played an incredibly important role. You, Henry, went as your book relates in *How to Live*, a lot to libraries.

HENRY ALFORD: Yes, and I quote your favorite library quote about the death of an old person is like the burning of a library.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): That is true, it's not my quote, Mark Twain's quote, it's a quote.

HENRY ALFORD: It is your African quote, I've heard you say it. It's the Holdengraber who lives in Africa.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): I do suffer from a disease called quoteomania, you are right about that. And he does say that a wise old man who dies is like a library on fire, something like that. But I digressed (**laughter**) and it is the sunshine of narrative.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Please, two hours away in the library.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): But the library—You go in search of wisdom in the library, you—

HENRY ALFORD: Wouldn't you? I mean, where else would you go?

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Exactly. And what do you find when you are looking for wisdom in the library? You are looking for quotations from great writers, because your book is a mixture, I might say, a potpourri, to use a French word, it is a potpourri of people's experience and great wisdom throughout the ages.

HENRY ALFORD: Yes, and like potpourri it's something that people are putting on top of their toilet—

(laughter)

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): They are, yeah, yeah, yeah, but I would want to know you know among the wisdom—well, maybe differently put. What wisdom did you in fact find at the library?

HENRY ALFORD: Well, I do—I am someone who love aphorisms, I have to say that they boil a lot down into a few words.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): That is an aphorism.

ANDREI CODRESCU: I have one of them for you.

HENRY ALFORD: Do you? Let's hear it.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): In your cheat sheet.

ANDREI CODRESCU: I hate ambiguity. It takes two of them to get me off.

(laughter)

HENRY ALFORD: That's nice. Yeah.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): You have discovered amazing wisdom in libraries. For instance, you quote this wonderful line of the I Ching, I love that line where it says deliver yourself from your great toe, then the companion comes and him you can trust.

HENRY ALFORD: Right, as an example of just crazy wisdom—I mean, what the what? Yeah, go figure. Another—

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): So you don't have a clue what that means.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Is that the Wilhelm Reich translation?

HENRY ALFORD: Very possibly. It's so out there. The other one that was very odd to me—oh, there was a Jean Cocteau one about whatever the public criticizes in you, amplify. It is you. Which on the face of it, you think, “Oh, that's very counterintuitive and interesting,” but then you think, wait—again, like exaggerating your worst facial feature. That you're going to take your worst quality and amplify it?

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): I do that all the time. When you just quoted that, I immediately thought to myself, can I be witty, and can I come up with another Cocteau line?

HENRY ALFORD: Yeah, right.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): And some of the public might have had it of my quotations and yet I cannot keep myself from quoting this line from Cocteau about Victor Hugo. Do you know it?

HENRY ALFORD: I don't, no.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Cocteau said that Victor Hugo was a madman who mistook himself for Victor Hugo.

(laughter)

HENRY ALFORD: Ooooh!

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): You don't know that one?

HENRY ALFORD: That's good. I'll hit you back with a quote. What your problem is, son—

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): No, quote it you have to say quotation.

HENRY ALFORD: Get off of my lawn! **(laughter)** What your problem is, son, is you have the Fran Lebowitz quotation problem, which she said the opposite of talking is not listening, **(laughter)** it's waiting.

ANDREI CODRESCU: I'm with you, Henry, that must be a European thing, man.

HENRY ALFORD: Waiting, plan, scheming.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): I'm silent now. I am just going to be here waiting.

HENRY ALFORD: No, come back, come back to the raft, Huck, honey.

(laughter)

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Which one was your favorite?

ANDREI CODRESCU: I hope Flash got that one.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Which one was your favorite? I'm sure she has. Which—tell us some wisdoms, because the I Ching stuff I read. You learned, why write this book about old people? I mean, why did you bother? I mean, why did both of you bother writing your books?

HENRY ALFORD: Well, maybe mine was an elaborate excuse to spend some time with Sylvia Miles. Are you familiar with Sylvia Miles?

ANDREI CODRESCU: Is Sylvia here?

HENRY ALFORD: No, she is not here.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): And with Harold Bloom.

HENRY ALFORD: And with Harold Bloom, yes, totally charming, but Sylvia, I've been to the apartment is what I'm saying and Sylvia has a famous again speaking of quotes, "people disappoint you, lovers disappoint you, but theatrical memorabilia stays with you as long as you keep it under clear plastic wrap," and so Sylvia, whose age is not to be mentioned ever, lives on Central Park South in about a six-hundred-square-foot apartment, and this is essentially the Sylvia Miles Museum of Memorabilia and literally I was walking around and I had to literally suck in my stomach at one point lest I knock over, you know, a like teetering pile of *Playbills*. Pictures, pictures, pictures, all over the wall. We walked by one and she said, "That's me and Shelley Winters, she's the fat one."

(laughter)

And the reason why you would talk to someone like Sylvia Miles, Oscar-nominated actress, is that she at one point in her career she got a very, very nasty review from John

Simon, who is the meanest critic in the world, and she—to respond to this, Sylvia found out about a party that he was going to be at and she went to the party, went up to the buffet table, got a plate, filled it with cottage cheese and a pork chop and some little ham rolls and an onion puff and some Melba toast and then walked up to John Simon and then *whomp*, dumped it on his head. Talk about Dada in a posthuman world—I mean . . .

(laughter)

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Well, you know, I have written about that in some way. I wrote a piece, which you may be familiar with, since I had Paul FedEx it to you whenever I'm about—whenever I'm about to publish a book—whenever I'm about to publish a book, I feel an impatient desire to know what kind of a book it is. Of course, I can find this out only by waiting until the critics shall have printed their reviews. **(laughter)** I do know beforehand that the verdict of the general public will be, because I have a sure and simple method of ascertaining that, which is this—if you care to know.

HENRY ALFORD: We do, please, proceed. Andrei, not so much.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): No, it's just because—it's because—No, I stopped there because of the mean things you said before to me, you know, about Fran Lebowitz and myself.

I always read the manuscript to a private group of friends composed of as follows. 1. Man and woman with no sense of humor. Man and woman with medium sense of humor. Man and woman with prodigious sense of humor. An intensely practical person. A sentimental person. A person who must have a moral in and a purpose. A hypercritical person, a natural flaw-picker and fault-finder. An enthusiast, a person who enjoys anything and everything, almost. A person who watches the others and applauds or condemns with the majority. Half a dozen bright young girls and boys unclassified. A person who relishes slang and familiar flippancy. A person who detests them. A person of evenly balanced, judicial mind, and last, but as you will see from what I say, a man who always goes to sleep. **(laughter)**

These—and I will just read the following paragraph to give you a sense of how I survived for all these years and ever since I've been dead, all the critics. These people accurately represent the general public. Their verdict is a sure forecast of the verdict of the general public. There is not a person among them whose opinion is not valuable to me but the man who I most depend upon, the man whom I watch with the deepest solicitude, the man who does most towards deciding me as to whether I shall publish the book or burn it, is the man who always goes to sleep. If he drops off within fifteen minutes, I burn the book. If he keeps awake three-quarters of an hour, I publish, and I publish with the greatest confidence, too, for the intent of my works is to entertain, and by making this man comfortable on a sofa and timing him I can tell within a shade or two what degree of success I'm going to achieve. His verdict has burned several books for me—five to be accurate.

(laughter)

So—

ANDREI CODRESCU: Probably quite charitable, actually.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Yeah, so what kind of a book, Andrei, do you think you have written?

ANDREI CODRESCU: Well, Gogol burned the second part of *Dead Souls*, the good part, because he was told that it was a very bad thing to have written the dead souls part, because it was evil and sinful, and he burned the second, which Nabokov called the most charitable act in Russian literary history. **(laughter)** So it's not a bad thing to burn those things, you know, whether because of an audience reaction or not, you know. But I can't afford to burn anything, because I am so exuberant and they pay me so little for being optimistic. **(laughter)**

So I wrote, "Eaters of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains. If you were a restaurant, what restaurant would you be? Laura: the Half-Moon Café in Baton Rouge. Beans and greens and ham hocks, everything. Starting up from beans again, the next day, gumbo. Stewed chicken dumplings after a late-night drunk. Andrei: A Greek diner in midtown Manhattan. Hard to find, actually. Huge menu. Liver and onions,

mashed potatoes, dumplings, matzo balls, soup, roast beef, moussaka, coffee, pie a la mode, everything, incredibly fast and efficient in the middle of winter, ten degrees outside. Less than a year after this conversation, the Half-Moon Café in Baton Rouge closed and there were no more Greek diners in Manhattan. America chained itself to frozen food and to pretentious, inexorably correct slaughter.”

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): I have very little to say—you?

HENRY ALFORD: Wow, that’s heavy stuff. I don’t know why I’m put in mind of this but I recently wrote a story for the *New York Times* that was headlined “How I Learned to Love Eating Goat,” and when the paper put it online the pooh-bahs at the Times felt that it was a vaguely pornographic headline—

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): They removed the “a”?

HENRY ALFORD: No, they changed it to “How I Learned to Love Goat Meat.”

(laughter)

ANDREI CODRESCU: If you add the word meat to anything, it sounds—

HENRY ALFORD: We’re back to meat, but no, typically, yes, when you’re making an attempt at decorousness, I think you want to inject the word “meat” into the situation.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Oh, yes.

(laughter)

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Old people you met are hopeful?

HENRY ALFORD: Yeah, yeah, lots of. Crabby, there was some crabbiness, I'm not going to—I won't lie to you.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): I mean, for instance, let's focus for a moment, because I like his crabbiness, I mean he's so cantankerous, and one feels he drinks Drano in the morning. Harold Bloom.

HENRY ALFORD: Harold Bloom has taught at Yale for fifty consecutive years. That's quite something.

ANDREI CODRESCU: That's like a consecutive sentence he's served. He's served.

HENRY ALFORD: He's served, yes. This is a gentleman who looks exactly like Zero Mostel.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): **(sings)** Do you love me?

HENRY ALFORD: He called me “my dear” I’m going to say twenty-three times in the course of two and a half hours.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): He liked you!

HENRY ALFORD: He had to—with this *punim*? And he—there was an interesting moment with Bloom, where—where his telephone rang, and it was a student of his who was calling to contest a grade, and Bloom gets on the phone and ends the conversation saying “No, no, no, no, no!” *bam!*, slams down the phone, then turns around and yells back to his wife who’s back in the kitchen, “Darling! If that gentleman calls again, tell him that your husband has died.”

(laughter)

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): So writing a book about—

ANDREI CODRESCU: What number wife was this?

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): But writing a book about aging and old age is writing a book also about that last chapter.

HENRY ALFORD: Yeah, 'cause in a weird way, you know, if you're going interview people over the age of seventy about wisdom, you just—you're just—you're writing a book about aging, too, it just, there's no way around it, the aches and pains are definitely there.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Kind of the organ symphony.

HENRY ALFORD: The organ symphony, yes, a meat parade.

(laughter)

ANDREI CODRESCU: Well, You gentlemen are being terribly coherent. **(laughter)** How about we just went to the oracular method and asked our books a question, and, you know, the things about books being asked questions, they are always right, if they are good books, and ours are. You ask a question and then you open the book and then you read the answer. And if it doesn't quite satisfy you, then (a), too bad, (b), we may explain.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Excellent. I think, Henry, you should start.

HENRY ALFORD: Okay, and I pose the question myself?

ANDREI CODRESCU: I could pose one to you, you pose one to me.

HENRY ALFORD: Why don't you—yeah, why don't you pose me a question and then I'll—

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): And then I'll answer.

ANDREI CODRESCU: I'll be very happy to. The *Posthuman Dada Guide* would like to ask Mr. Alford's book *How To Live*, how to live, with an example if possible.

HENRY ALFORD: How to live, okay, opening it up at random. "You could say that the theme of fierce ambivalence in human relations has been present in Edward Albee's work for a long time."

(laughter)

ANDREI CODRESCU: Yes.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): It's the ambivalence, yeah.

ANDREI CODRESCU: So, Twain, can I ask you a question?

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): You can, but before that—Albee was an easy interview?

HENRY ALFORD: No, he's tough.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): He's really tough, yeah.

HENRY ALFORD: He famously, there was a *New Yorker* profile about seven years ago where I think it was Daryl Roth, it was one of the backers of one of his Broadway plays refers to him as Edward Albee, and Albee says, “actually, it's Albee.” It's like, “yes, you have ponied up four million dollars for my play on Broadway, but I'm just going to correct your pronunciation of my name.”

ANDREI CODRESCU: Spell me right or die.

(laughter)

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): He says something that you quote in your book which I quite like that for him the most important thing is to pay attention.

HENRY ALFORD: Pay attention is—was part of his wisdom and then his other, he agrees with William James that wisdom is knowing what to overlook.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Also known as Alzheimer's.

(laughter)

HENRY ALFORD: Yeah, some people don't choose what they overlook. It falls upon them. So let's ask that of Andrei. What shall we overlook?

ANDREI CODRESCU: What shall we overlook? "Lenin does not underestimate the pawns, and he is not moved by their eventual disposition. Millions of them could be sacrificed in a tactical move as far as he is concerned, but it has to be the right move, the wise move, the dialectically useful move. Damn them all. If only the Swiss could be induced to forcefully eject him and his comrades on the grounds of inciting sedition, of trying to overthrow the fat cow of its government. That has to be the way. And so without much effort, Lenin creates the rudimentary rhetorical bestiary of the next seventy-five years of the Soviet regime: snakes, hyenas, dogs, and crows will be the basis of all attacks on the future enemies of the Soviet state: capitalist hyenas, deviationist snakes, speculator crows, and the rabid nationalist dogs are born in a single flash of Leninist thought."

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): I think, let me try myself what needs to be overlooked. "It was being whispered around that Satan was in Vienna, incognito, and the thought came into my mind that it would be great happiness to me if I could have the privilege of interviewing him. When you think of the Devil, he appears, you know. It was

past midnight. I was standing at the window of my workroom, aloft, high aloft on the third floor of the hotel, and was looking down upon a stage setting which is always effective and impressive at that late hour. The great vacant stone-paved square of Morzin Platz with its sleeping file of cab horses and drivers counterfeiting the stillness and solemnity of death and beyond the square, a broad Milky Way of innumerable lamps bending around the far-reaching curve of the Donaukanal, which with not a suggestion of life or motion visible anywhere under the glinting belt from end to end.”

ANDREI CODRESCU: He was getting paid by the word, man.

(laughter)

HENRY ALFORD: Yeah, it’s true.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Sorry, I mean the devil is really a great figure, but that’s the European devil. I made him up too in the novel he wrote and he’s great, when he appears, the European devil is great, he just shows up and he’s civilized. He’s not like the American devil annihilating the entire universe. He shows up, sits down, has a drink, has preferences in tobacco. He’s civilized. And you know Twain’s devil is obviously civilized in that way, but then Twain, of course, you know, drove that point home because, you know, his readers probably didn’t know what a Viennese civilized setting was like.

HENRY ALFORD: There's another famous—there's a famous quote, a Twain quote about—that's sort of about what to overlook. He says, "Be careful when reading a book about health. You might die of a misprint."

(laughter)

ANDREI CODRESCU: Well, my great teacher Ted Berrigan said "great art is a great mistake." And he was completely right, because, for instance, one of the great poetry books of our time is a book called *Meditations in an Emergency* by Frank O'Hara and I always thought that that was the quintessential expression of what we do now, is meditations in an emergency, because we have to think fast in the middle of a fire, so I saw this in a factory building—I'm walking in there and there's a little first-aid thing and it says Medications in an Emergency. And I thought, man, what a misreading. You know, that's genius, for Frank to read Medications in an Emergency as Meditations in an Emergency. That is a wonderful thing. Vive le typo!

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): So that in a way brings us back to Bloom and to notions of misreading, of reading badly.

ANDREI CODRESCU: It doesn't bring us back to Bloom, it takes us away from Bloom.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): You might be right.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Bloom is a real reader, he's a careful reader, you know. What this takes us to is this misreading, you know, the genius of misreading, the spontaneity of not paying attention to your—to your, you know, consecrated culture, your libraries.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): What do your books tell us about the importance of intuition?

HENRY ALFORD: Deathly silence.

(laughter)

ANDREI CODRESCU: Several of my detachable organs come out when you say that.

(laughter)

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): I think intuition is important.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Intuition is leaving your reserve, or preserve.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Which one?

ANDREI CODRESCU: Both.

HENRY ALFORD: Intuition is everything. That's something that I write about, is essentially.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Well, open, just, let's try the random game. Open your book and see what you might—

HENRY ALFORD: Okay, I'm going to try to get something towards the end.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): I feel like there is something about intuition. Both of you are interested in your different way. The old people in what is happening right now and Tzara is interested in some way, also, in the now.

ANDREI CODRESCU: We're still human, somewhat.

HENRY ALFORD: Okay, P. T. Barnum said, "How were the receipts today at Madison Square Garden?"

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): This is when he's dying.

HENRY ALFORD: These are famous last words, yes. And this speaks to intuition, which is that what I'm trying to say in my book is that I think that as we get older we become more and more like ourselves, that either we're sloughing off societal constraints

in a Dada way, or we're, you know, it took us a lifetime of fucking up to finally get it right, what have you, but that gradually you're becoming more and more the person who is quintessentially you. And at this point in the book I'm trying to even trace it all the way to last words, that so many people's last words are so quintessential and so inimitable that they're almost like parody to me. You know, famously Oscar Wilde died in a Parisian flophouse and said, "Either the wallpaper goes or I do." I mean, if you put that line in a movie, it would be bad dramaturgy. Or Henrik Ibsen spent his career scandalizing Victorian morality. On his deathbed, his nurse came up to him and said, "You look better today, Herr Ibsen," and he said, "On the contrary," and died. **(laughter)**

ANDREI CODRESCU: It is a very good lesson to practice your last word.

HENRY ALFORD: Practice your last line.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Because you never know when it might come.

HENRY ALFORD: Get it ready, yeah.

ANDREI CODRESCU: The first assignment I give my students is to write their epitaph and write an epitaph every morning, just before you have your coffee, just after you have your coffee, write your epitaph, because you don't know whether you're going to die that day or not and then eventually you'll have a collection of epitaphs. Of course that's

becoming a little tenuous just like writing and publishing and libraries are because now people have video epitaphs. You can go watch a grave that has a whole ten minutes of deceased's collected wisdom written by a ghostwriter for hire, or two hours, you know, or even, Andy Warhol style, eight-hour epitaph of the deceased saying nothing and, you know, it's not, you know, nothing really ends that beautifully. I mean, it ended beautifully for some people, you know, it ended terrifically.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Did you see this? This is pretty good. I like that.

ANDREI CODRESCU: It ended terrifically for some people, so you know.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Before you read something, what's on your epitaph for the moment?

ANDREI CODRESCU: See you later. **(laughter)** “Eventually the gates of hell were located in a town called Sunnydale California, where Buffy the Vampire Slayer, working with academic textualists, works both to stem the tide of escapees from those dark regions and to keep the young from going in. Buffy does this forever on cable TV. “Wherever there is cable, there I am.” Grandpa Munster, Al Lewis, to me in Havana, 1996. Buffy works for the department of postmodern sanity produced by the postmodern state of nausea and amusement,” and so on. It goes on, but the epitaphs will never be definitive if you eat them. I've taught a seminar from three to six in the afternoon. My

students get very hungry, and so I had them write a poem on fruit, and they ate it. And they were happy. They ate their last words.

HENRY ALFORD: And then.

ANDREI CODRESCU: You know, you have to like speak wisely but also feed yourself and the masses, you know, it's not a matter of dollars anymore, it's a matter of sharing the fruit of your salary.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): I think this is kind of the perfect moment and I don't know why, but I feel it's the perfect moment to have Max rada dada if he is around, and if he isn't around, where might he be? It would be good to have him perhaps read a question or two. He's coming, slowly.

HENRY ALFORD: I thought he was going to be standing over on the tinselly rug.

ANDREI CODRESCU: I thought he was collecting questions from the audience.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): I thought he was collecting questions, too. But you know while Max rada dada comes, I'd love to read something of my own because I feel that I haven't shared enough of my posthumous or preposthumous work. Here is a piece I wrote called "Interviewing the Interviewer." It's hard, I find that my accent gets in the way.

ANDREI CODRESCU: It's worse if you're on LSD.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): It's true, but imagine both of our accents here on stage. "Interviewing the Interviewer." Enter the reporter. "Mr. Mark Twain is dead, at least it is so reported." "Is that so? Well, we have nothing against him. He never did any good. Publish an apparently friendly obituary of him and say at the end that we are pained to have to state that for many years he gained his livelihood by the nefarious practice of robbing graveyards. That will be sufficient. I have already dished him up in a column editorial about his imbecile article upon the Cuban patriot." I said, "Mr. D., I beg pardon for mentioning it, but I am Mark Twain, whose remains you propose to give a unique and pleasant interest and I am not dead." "Oh, you are the person, are you, and you are not dead? Well, I am sorry but I cannot help the matter. The obituary must be published. We are not responsible for your eccentricities. You could have been dead if you had chosen. Nobody hindered you. The obituary's fair game—for whatever is rumor to another paper is fact to the *Sun*. And now that you are here, handy, I will interview you. Please do give me the details of any aggravated or unnatural crimes you may have committed."

ANDREI CODRESCU: That's not a question.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): No, it's just something I wrote which I think is really quite special.

(laughter)

ANDREI CODRESCU: In the South when they say “special”—

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): They mean something different?

ANDREI CODRESCU: —it means something quite different.

HENRY ALFORD: It does. And they pronounce it “spatial.”

ANDREI CODRESCU: Yeah, “he’s so spatial.”

(laughter)

HENRY ALFORD: That was very confusing to me.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): This?

HENRY ALFORD: No, when I went—part of my book is my mom leaves her husband
and—

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Your mom is there a lot.

HENRY ALFORD: There's a lot of Mother. Yes. Can I lie down, Doctor?

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Yeah, yeah, no, please, please.

HENRY ALFORD: No, but, we go and visit a lot of assisted-living facilities in the South and there's a lot of places that are "spatial." I think Max was lurking—

Max rada dada: I have some questions.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Do we have a mic on Max rada dada?

We do? We have turned it on?

ANDREI CODRESCU: The rada dada mic.

Q: Explain the significance of your wardrobe choices.

(laughter)

HENRY ALFORD: Ohh, weirdly, pajamas figure a couple of times in my book. One is that an elder gentleman tells me at one point, "if you are an old man and you go into a bar wearing pajamas people will buy you drinks." **(laughter)** And then something similar reoccurs when I ask my stepfather, who has since passed away, but who was a consultant.

I realized that he was a consultant and I am a freelance writer, and so we have this commonality, and it occurs to me to ask him, “So, how do you bill? Is it hour to hour?” And he said, “No, pajama to pajama.” **(laughter)** So, the meter is running.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Question—repeat?

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): No, but you—do you have something to say about—?

ANDREI CODRESCU: My answer to that is God created Jews to sing his praises.
(laughter) There are no bad Jews, only Jews who sing differently than other Jews.

(laughter)

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): I think I just wanted to look as—I wanted to wear one of the best suits I have. I wanted to look better than both of you. I wanted—my mother always said “fine and dandy,” and I wanted both of those to be illustrated here onstage. Also, black, black, no black is somehow—I felt, I’m dead, I’m dead, I’m black.

ANDREI CODRESCU: So TV is the new black.

HENRY ALFORD: Those are good.

(laughter)

Q: The answer is because all the wrong people have self-esteem.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Yourself at a keyboard?

HENRY ALFORD: The question what is California?

(laughter)

Q: Question: Not always a double affirmation is a negation. Is Dada an affirmation or a negation?

HENRY ALFORD: Oh, right, because there's one theory that holds that Dada is the sarcastic, "Yeah, yeah."

ANDREI CODRESCU: That's no fucking theory.

(laughter)

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): That's a good point. Dada, Dada. Say something about the origin of Dada.

ANDREI CODRESCU: I'm going to ask my book, I'll say nothing. Tzara chuckles to himself, already convinced that Lenin's next move will be straight out of a book.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): No, that makes it clear for me.

Q: I'm not sure if this is question or answer, but there are several in this group. Raspberry Jell-O, baby buggy, rainbows, unicorns, and oranges.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Yeah, now you take the second one.

(laughter)

HENRY ALFORD: The question is, "What should I call my new Mylar balloon shop?"

(laughter)

ANDREI CODRESCU: I think we can leave it there, that's perfectly nauseating.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Yeah, I feel like you covered it.

Q: How would you characterize the state of contemporary fiction?

ANDREI CODRESCU: It is always being said that Lenin is guarded by Chinese.

(laughter) There are no Chinese here. Already one way to look at Lenin is always guarded by the Chinese is put to rest. W. T. Good was not in the mood to pass on more prejudice about supposed Chinese fanaticism or Lenin's "Oriental" roots. He really, really talked to the real guy, a difficult matter. Not because he's unapproachable, he goes about with as little external trappings or precautions as myself, but because his time is so precious. He even more than the other commissaries is always at work. There, the workingmen's idol works.

HENRY ALFORD: What he said.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): No, no, no, and what I would say to this is whenever I am about to publish a book, I feel an impatient desire to know what kind of book it is and then I have a whole category of people who respond to the book differently and the most important one to remember is "man who always goes to sleep."

ANDREI CODRESCU: I think this book's answer was about pure realism. That if you can actually commit realism, you're sort of in business, and your book does that, actually, in an amazing way. And that's the truth of the matter. I mean, I'm just not so interested in reading fiction, unless it is true. Not to say it's nonfiction, it's just true, that's all.

HENRY ALFORD: Right.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): But not for you, right? Because you have certain habits.

HENRY ALFORD: In terms of reading material? Yeah, I read mostly fiction.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): And every year you read books again and again and again that transport you into—

HENRY ALFORD: Oh, yes! And my Jane Austen takes such a beating in that Twain book. She is totally bitch-slapped in your book.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): He doesn't use those terms, but that's—yeah—

ANDREI CODRESCU: And he's so right, actually.

HENRY ALFORD: She takes one wow up the head. Twain thought that Jane Austen, her point in writing books was to make really unlikable characters, characters that you would hate until halfway through the book.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Which you never got to.

HENRY ALFORD: Like, how would he know? Exactly!

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): And you take those books on vacation, summer readings, or?

HENRY ALFORD: I might do, I might do. Sure, repetitive reading, yes, is good, like repetitive wardrobe and movies.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Yes, or making your students type a whole novel you've just read.

Q: Just a few more. Answer: the paradox was confusing but the dancing was nice.

HENRY ALFORD: Oh, that's lovely. For some reason it puts me in mind of the Tallulah Bankhead story where someone takes her to a Catholic mass and the priest comes down the aisle swinging the censer and gets up to Tallulah and she says, "Darling, your drag is divine, but your bag is on fire."

(laughter)

Q: Please tell me it will be okay.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): No, it won't. It really won't.

HENRY ALFORD: I don't think that person has come to the right event.

(laughter)

ANDREI CODRESCU: No actually I disagree with that completely. I think it is going to be totally okay. I think the spontaneity and sexy freedom of improvised revolt gave work to the grim work of Breton and his followers to find the secret keys to another world by employing the severely maintained marvelous. It's really not important to do that kind of grim work. It will be totally okay and there really is no difference between life and death. You heard it here and elsewhere, but it's true.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): You know, it brings to mind a quotation.

HENRY ALFORD: Oh, *really?*

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): You know that gesture I can't get over it, because when I arrived in this country after my trip through Europe I was always amazed by that gesture whenever anybody in this country wanted to be ironic, they wanted to be sure that you would know it?

HENRY ALFORD: Well, you could do this?

ANDREI CODRESCU: You know that Nabokov says that the single quotes between double quotes is a sign of impending insanity.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): I think he was absolutely right.

HENRY ALFORD: I have a new gesture and then we'll hear your quotation.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): No, I won't forget it, believe me, believe me, I'll bring it in at any moment even out of context.

HENRY ALFORD: Okay, but a new gesture, a friend was trying to be convinced to go on to the tour bus of the rock star Jon Bon Jovi and was told by this other friend, "Oh, you've gotta come on the bus, there will be all these suburban women, and it might get"—**(laughter)** and that's the symbol for "tops come off," for crazy time is—

ANDREI CODRESCU: Now you're dissing New Orleans, man, you just watch it.

(laughter)

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Well, this, for some reason, and for no good reason, this brought up two quotations now—

HENRY ALFORD: Oh, my, we're digging a deeper hole.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): The first one is Woody Allen ending one of his standup comedy shows saying, you know, I would love to leave you with a positive comment, but would you accept two negatives? That's one of them, that's a good one, and the other one is I think more profound and D. H. Lawrence said that "reserving judgment is a matter of infinite hope."

ANDREI CODRESCU: Is that when he didn't know what to say?

HENRY ALFORD: That's beautiful, I like that.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Yes, I always reserve judgment when I have absolutely no idea what to say.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): If not, you're just simply more cutting.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Well, you know, that's a privilege of age, you know, you just don't say anything when you don't have anything to say and it looks okay.

HENRY ALFORD: I think that winning a big award, like I think that if you win a Pulitzer or a Nobel, that you can go to a party and say nothing and you're just being quietly brilliant.

ANDREI CODRESCU: It makes a big hole in your—it makes a majestic hole in your—

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Well, I have, you know, interestingly enough, in preparing myself for both your intelligences.

ANDREI CODRESCU: There is no defense.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Between the two.

ANDREI CODRESCU: No, between any.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Well, I prepared myself with a Nobel Prize quotation because I figured, you never know when you might need it. And Juan Ramón Jimenez, in 1956 won the Nobel Prize.

HENRY ALFORD: I'm sorry, who?

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Juan Ramón Jimenez, do you remember him?

HENRY ALFORD: Okay, that was very spitty and lovely.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): On the scales of your life give as much to forgetting as to remembering; watch for their point of equilibrium.

HENRY ALFORD: So again, it's again wisdom is about knowing—

ANDREI CODRESCU: How much was it back then?

HENRY ALFORD: But again wisdom is knowing what to overlook. You know, we come back to the maybe Alzheimer's is a weird kind of blessing, it can be, yeah.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Hell, I mean, yeah, I practice forgetting and so has the world since writing was invented, we have been practicing forgetting, you put everything you know in books, put them in the library, put them in memory sticks, so that you can be free to—

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): And the American language does it beautifully. If you want to speak about something that's irrelevant, you just say, "That's history."

ANDREI CODRESCU: In the present, that is history. That's history.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): But that saddens me, somehow.

ANDREI CODRESCU: It doesn't sadden me at all.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Can you imagine a French saying *c'est la histoire?*

ANDREI CODRESCU: They do, actually, they mean that's another story.

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): But let's move on from Vichy—please.

Q: There's another one this is an answer. In the end is all Dada.

ANDREI CODRESCU: Question. Romania had a rich menu of identities before it?

MARK TWAIN (PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER): Well, look, however.