

A wooden sculpture of a man's face and torso, with a red arm and a blue arm, set against a black background. The sculpture is made of light-colored wood and features a large, stylized eye with a blue iris and a red pupil, a red mouth, and a crown-like top with a blue sphere. The torso is a simple wooden box with a door and a latch. The red arm is on the left and the blue arm is on the right.

WESTERMANN

MEMORIAL TO THE IDEA OF MAN IF HE WAS AN IDEA

“Westermann: Memorial to the Idea of Man If He Was an Idea” is a 3D documentary film that chronicles the story of a marine veteran who navigated the profound traumas of war by making art, becoming a hero to generations of artists, including his friends Ed Ruscha and Frank Gehry, among others interviewed in this immersive film. The film features actor Ed Harris as the voice of H.C. Westermann.

[Please click here to view the trailer.](#)

Press Reviews & Accolades

“Staggeringly powerful; mind-blowing” — Frank Gehry during Hammer Museum post-screening discussion

“[Westermann’s] hand-carved wooden sculptures pop off cinema screens.” — *Art Report Today*

“The true star of ‘Westermann: Memorial to the Idea of Man If He Was an Idea’ is not its subject, the artist H.C. Westermann (1922-81), but its director, Leslie Buchbinder.” — *New York Sun*

“The details provided by [Westermann’s] letters and the heartfelt interviews with his family and friends (famous and otherwise), coupled with the 3D focus on his handcrafted objects, here provide a unique kind of intimacy with the subject.” — *Art Newspaper*

“Westermann lived a life destined for the documentary screen.” — *Chicago Reader*

“Like Pina, the category-defying artistry of H.C. Westermann lends itself to the expanded medium of 3D. Westermann’s personalized handcrafted sculptural assemblages come to life on screen. With a voiceover by Ed Harris, the film reveals how the tragedies of war find something close to resolution in the polished surfaces of Westermann’s surrealist and anthropomorphized totems.” — Art21 Executive Director Tina Kukielski in *Document*

“A star-studded ensemble” — *Art Net*

“Westermann, [was] a marine veteran whose anti-war stance and social commentary are humorously transformed in his art practice, and who influenced a generation of renowned artists.” — *Documentary Magazine*

“Recommended ✓” — *Time Out LA*

“Explores Westermann’s work, its novel insight into psychological trauma, its impact on generations of artists, conceptions of masculinity, hope, resiliency, and more.” — *HoloFiles*

“Extraordinary” — *Curate LA*

Runner-Up, Best Documentary Feature — Veterans Film Festival

Westermann Fall 2023 Premieres

In September and October of 2023, Pentimenti was thrilled to launch a premiere NYC, L.A., Chicago three-city tour - all 3D screenings – of *Westermann: Memorial to the Idea of Man If He Was an Idea*, partnering with an esteemed art institution for each screening. In NYC, the film screened as part of Art21 at the Movies alongside a program curated by Miranda July, and included a panel moderated by curator John Corbett, featuring contemporary artists Trenton Doyle Hancock and Aaron Curry, as well as Westermann film writer & director Leslie Buchbinder; The Hammer Museum's screening of *Westermann* in L.A. featured a legendary post-screening discussion with Ed Ruscha, Frank Gehry, Leslie Buchbinder, and curator Rani Singh. The tour concluded with a screening at the Art Institute of Chicago for a packed house of over 500 audience members. The event featured remarks by AIC President James Rondeau, a presentation on Westermann by Curator Makayla May, and an introduction by Leslie Buchbinder.

Photos (clockwise): Hammer Museum Panel: Rani Singh, Frank Gehry, Ed Ruscha, and Leslie Buchbinder; Art21 at the Movies marquee at the SVA Theater; AIC crowd with 3D glasses



Photo by Becca Marcela Oviatt



Photo by Jaclyn Simpson

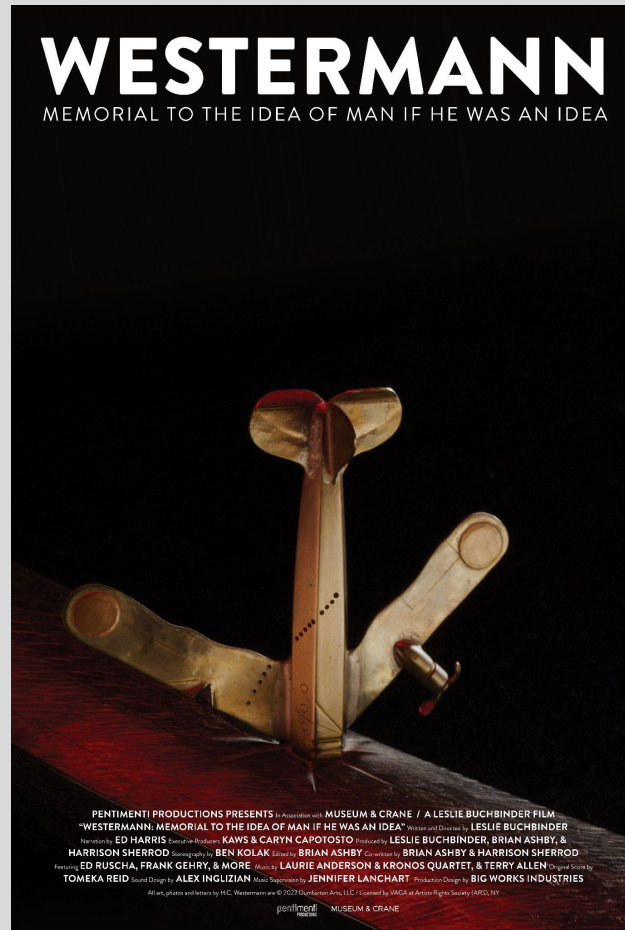


Photo by Michelle Puetz

About the Film

Westermann: Memorial to the Idea of Man If He Was an Idea is a 3D documentary film about the life and work of artist, marine, and acrobat H.C. (Cliff) Westermann. As a veteran of World War II and the Korean War, Westermann's dramatic personal history can be traced through beguiling, surreal artworks he made to process the horrors he witnessed on the front lines. In so doing, he became an inspiration for many young artists. The film reveals ways in which Westermann protected his empathic spirit – and sanity – by ‘sculpting’ his body, artworks, friendships, his hand-hewn house, and his art-filled letters to his dearest friends and family. Our documentary explores themes of resiliency, hope, and humor with a script culled from over a thousand of Westermann's letters and one audio-interview – voiced by four-time Academy-Award nominee Ed Harris.

The film was conceived and directed by Leslie Buchbinder, featuring interviews with Ed Ruscha, Frank Gehry, William T. Wiley, Billy Al Bengston, and other artist-pals, along with his beloved sister, Martha Westermann Renner. The film is executive produced by the internationally acclaimed artist, KAWS, along with award-winning documentary producer Caryn Capotosto, whose prior projects include *Won't You Be My Neighbor* and *Best of Enemies*. *Westermann* features music by legendary artists Laurie Anderson (with the Kronos Quartet) and Terry Allen; Tomeka Reid, MacArthur “Genius Grant” winner, composed the original score.



Above: Westermann film poster



Above: photo of Westermann layered over a Westermann museum retrospective photo

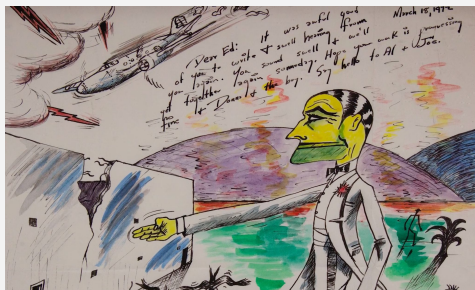


Above: Westermann actor/acrobat walking on a tightrope, backlit within black infinity space

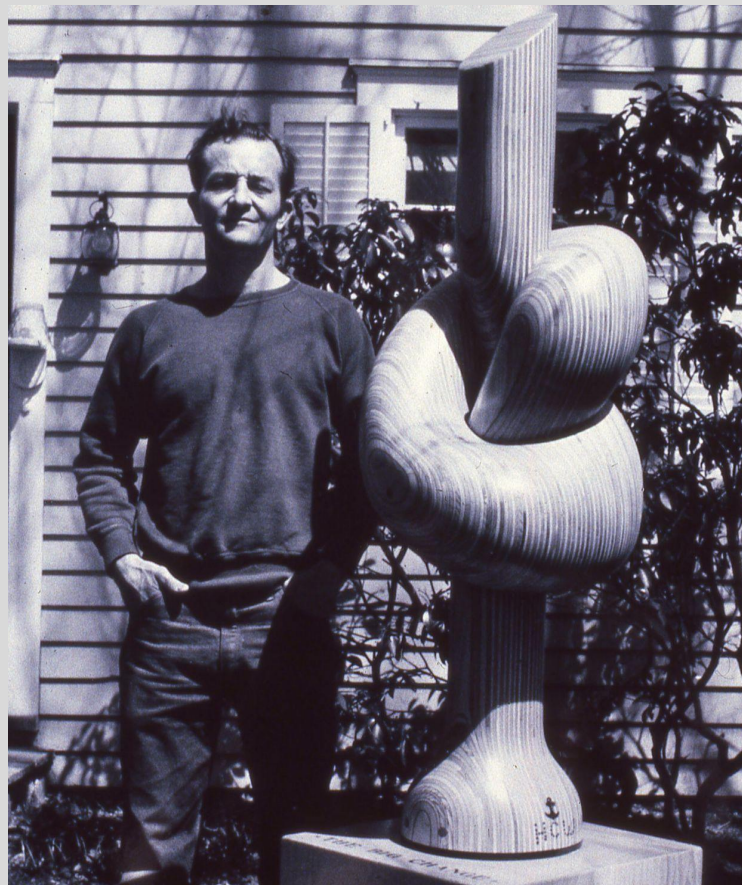
About H.C. Westermann

H.C. (Cliff) Westermann, born in Los Angeles in 1922, led a life that reads like the plot of a great American novel. As a young man, he worked in logging camps in the Pacific Northwest, witnessed kamikaze attacks as a Marine gunner on the USS Enterprise in WWII, and toured Asia as a performing acrobat with the USO. In 1947, he enrolled at the School of the Art Institute under the GI Bill, left in 1950 to fight in the Korean War, then later returned to Chicago to complete his studies. Westermann had a Zelig-like tendency to find himself aligned with significant moments and figures in 20th century history: he sold his first sculpture to the architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in 1957. In 1959, he married fellow artist Joanna Beall, a former student of Josef Albers at Yale University. The couple moved in 1961 to Brookfield Center, CT, where they later built their own house and two art studios.

In 1967, he was among the crowd pictured on The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album cover. In 1968, while in residence at Tamarind Lithography Workshop in L.A., Westermann quickly became a beloved figure in the flourishing art scene, where he was friend and mentor to artists like Ed Ruscha, Billy Al Bengston, and Ken Price. One of Westermann's first notable solo museum exhibitions was in 1968 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, alongside Billy Al Bengston's gallery installation designed by the young, burgeoning architect, Frank Gehry, who also became a close friend of Cliff's. In 1978, the Whitney Museum of American Art staged a major retrospective of Westermann's work, launching him into greater international visibility. By 1980, his career was accelerating, with exhibitions at museums across the U.S. and internationally. He and Joanna were nearly finished with their hand-built home – referred to as a large-scale sculpture by his artist friends – when Westermann tragically died of a heart attack in 1981 at the age of 58. Solo retrospectives of Westermann's art have been exhibited internationally, most recently at the [Reina Sofia, Madrid](#) (2019), and the [Fondazione Prada, Milan](#) (2018).



Left: Westermann
Letter to Ed Ruscha



Above: photo of Westermann with "The Big Change" sculpture

Story Synopsis

The film follows Cliff Westermann's compelling journey to process his post-war PTSD through the act of making art. Act 1 immerses the viewer in Westermann's experiences of sea and ground combat in the Pacific theater of World War II and the Korean War, respectively, and explores how this crucible forged his unlikely commitment to the path of a visual artist.

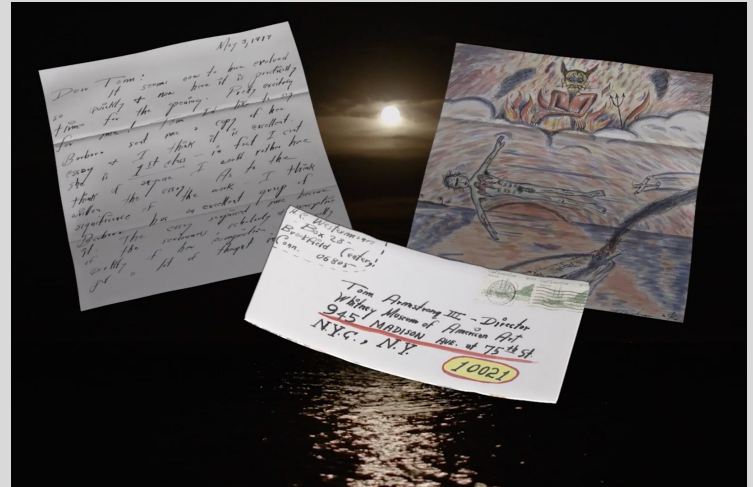
Act 2 probes the struggles of post-traumatic stress and the challenge of extracting meaning from war – while also finding love with fellow artist Joanna Beall. Westermann speaks of morally ambiguous events which led him to a skeptical position that has a strong kinship with the literature of post-WWII veteran authors Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, and Norman Mailer. Act 3 culminates with Westermann, heretofore a patriotic marine, experiencing a surprising anti-war transformation in response to the Vietnam War, describing himself to a fellow marine as having taken “a left wing right-about face”.

Filed within mirrored settings that create the illusion of infinite space, the film also includes acrobatic-theatrical scenes that further the themes of our film about a man who not only was a professional artist, but an acrobat as well, whose life was a constant balancing act, as he stated in a letter to his sister Martha:

“I have been working exceedingly hard over quite an extended period of time now and I'm a little beat... Seems I'm always spending my last nickel on a piece of wood or glue or a tool and I don't worry. I have a roof over my head and eat... I only owe 10\$ altogether + generally I have the time I need which is the most important thing. The responsibility that art requires is unimaginable, even to most artists, oddly enough... I guess I'm relegated to always walking this tightrope, but this is the way it has to be.”

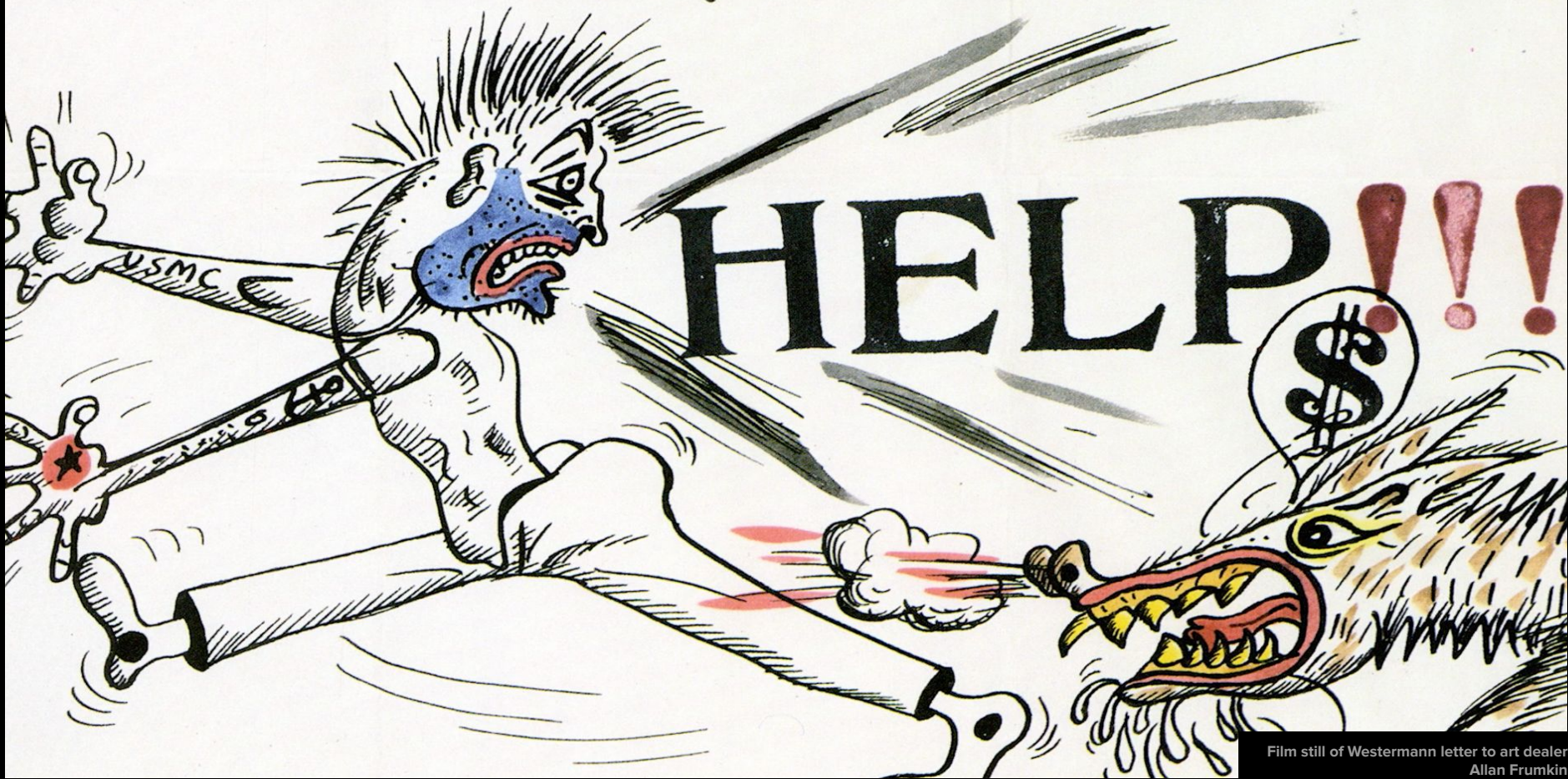
- H.C. Westermann

Above Right: film still of Westermann's letter, drawing, and envelope to Whitney Museum Director Tom Armstrong, animated and layered atop footage shot of the moon over water;
Below Right: Westermann's “Death Ship on the Equator” within a mirror box built for the film



DEAR ALLAN:

HELP!!!



Film still of Westermann letter to art dealer
Allan Frumkin

Director's Statement

Cliff Westermann was enamored of the creative potential of tools, and their ability to transform raw materials into objects of totemic power. Wanting to respect Westermann's ethos, I determined that the tools of 3D technology offered the ideal conduit to convey the literal and metaphorical multidimensionality of Westermann's works in a visually lush, meditative way.

My goal for this film was to create an immersive infinity space where H.C. Westermann's artworks could exist within their own world – a Westermann-Land – that offers the viewer powerful, intimate experiences of these remarkable vestiges of his survival of WWII, the Korean War, as well as an ever-looming sense of the existential threats of nuclear annihilation. I took inspiration from Wim Wenders' 3D film, *Pina*, that brought the sculptural beauty of Pina Bausch's dancers to full life, as I wished to do for Westermann's artworks.

The artist's studio is a place of solace and meditation – a respite from the 24/7 newsfeed recounting our current world's own horrors – and for Westermann, a 'home' to return to after traveling for exhibition installations, openings, artist residencies, speaking engagements, interviews, etc. I've always been drawn to Westermann's ability to create a haven for art-making, where empathy mitigates rage, and flow supplants the endless voices that tap, tap, tap our brains. In that hand-built space, he also crafted a safety net for himself and others, woven of a veritable tapestry of letters plus art-gifts to and from his nearest, dearest pals that protected him from falling off life's tightrope into the abyss. There, he could feel radical empathy for all who fought wars, including his enemies, as exemplified by his artwork, "Death Ship Out of San Pedro, Adrift: Dedicated to All the Dead Kamikaze Pilots and to All The Men Killed by Them."

In making this film, I wanted to pay homage to the companionship and courage Westermann's life, art, and letters have provided me – as well as to multitudes of other artists beyond those interviewed in the film, e.g. Paul McCarthy, Jim Shaw, Laura Owens, Jeff Koons, Aaron Curry, Amy Sillman, Ed Moses, Larry Bell, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Roger Brown, Karl Wirsum, Christina Ramberg, and KAWS.



Top: film still of Westermann's "Exotic Garden" within a mirror box;
Bottom (from left to right): Westermann's "Korea", "Monument to Martha", and "Burning House", filmed on a mirrored floor

Interviews with

Ed Ruscha


Frank Gehry

Terry Allen

Billy Al Bengston

William T. Wiley

Martha Westermann Renner

A photograph of Frank Gehry in his studio. He is an elderly man with white hair and glasses, wearing a grey t-shirt, sitting at a wooden table with his hands clasped. The studio is filled with various objects, including framed pictures, a globe, and architectural models. A large glass window in the background shows a multi-level building structure. The text is overlaid in a white, cursive font.

“Cliff was walking on his hands throughout the galleries & talking to me for, it seemed like an hour. So I instantly fell in love with him.”

-
Frank Gehry



Above: Westermann's "Abandoned & Listing Death Ship" filmed on mirrored surface within black infinity space



Leslie Buchbinder

Director, Writer, & Producer

Leslie Buchbinder is a Chicago-based writer, director, and founder/Artistic Director of Pentimenti Productions, an arts non-profit dedicated to producing, supporting, and exhibiting films about art and artists. Prior to film-making, Buchbinder was a professional dancer in companies in Chicago and San Francisco, then pivoted to a career in international arts public relations in NYC and Chicago, where she established her own company working with local and international museums. Her directorial debut was the award-winning, critically acclaimed *Hairy Who & The Chicago Imagists*, a 2014 documentary chronicling the history and impact of an iconoclastic group of young artists from the School of the Art Institute, often referred to as Chicago's answer to Pop Art. Buchbinder's second feature, *Westermann: Memorial to the Idea of Man If He Was an Idea*, was released in 2023.



KAWA

Executive Producer / Artist

Pentimenti is honored to have the internationally acclaimed artist KAWA as an Executive Producer of *Westermann*. As an avid collector of H.C. Westermann's art, KAWA is a champion and steward of Westermann's legacy.

KAWA (b.1974) lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. His prolific body of work straddles the worlds of art and design to include paintings, graphic and product design, and large-scale sculpture. KAWA has shown solo exhibitions at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum (CT), High Museum of Art (Georgia), Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth (TX), Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MI), National Gallery of Victoria (AUS), Brooklyn Museum (NY), Mori Arts Center Gallery (Tokyo), & Serpentine Gallery (UK). KAWA is represented by Skarstedt Gallery, (NY, London, Paris).



Caryn Capotosto

Executive Producer

A multi-award winning producer, Caryn Capotosto is a co-producer of this year's Sundance opening film, *Little Richard: I Am Everything*. Also known for *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*, a feature documentary about Mister Rogers that won a 2019 Independent Spirit Award for Best Documentary, a Producers Guild Award, and a 2018 Critics' Choice Award for Best Documentary. She received a 2016 News & Documentary Award for her role as co-producer of *Best of Enemies*, contributed to the Academy Award and Grammy Award-winning documentary, *20 Feet From Stardom* (Associate Producer 2013). Recent projects include the Emmy-nominated Netflix series *Ugly Delicious* and *Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner* (Executive Producer 2019-2020), plus the Emmy Award-winning documentary *Feels Good Man* (Producer 2021).



Brian Ashby

Producer, Editor, & Co-Writer

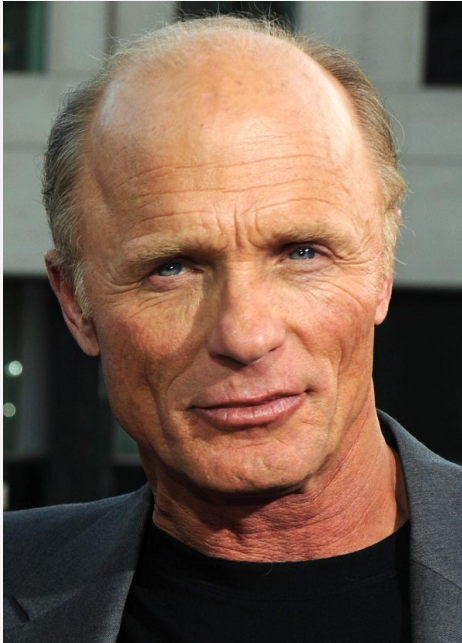
Brian Ashby is a Chicago-based filmmaker, known for his contributions to documentary projects including *The Area*, *Scrappers*, *Central Standard: On Education*, and *Accident, MD*. Brian joined the *Hairy Who & The Chicago Imagists* film team in 2008. He also helped establish Pentimenti as a non-profit in 2010. For the *Hairy Who* film, Ashby served as co-producer, a member of the scriptwriting team, a contributing cinematographer, and an archival researcher, plus music supervisor. For the *Westermann* film, Ashby is a co-producer; he led efforts to compile 1,400 of the artist's letters, from which he worked with writer/director Buchbinder to create the film's script. After working as a member of the 3D stereography team on shoots across the country, and assistant-directing the film's larger staged productions, Ashby has been the *Westermann* film's editor since 2020.



Harrison Sherrod

Producer & Executive Director, Pentimenti Productions

Harrison Sherrod is the Executive Director of Pentimenti Productions and a producer on the *Westermann* project. He oversees all day-to-day operations of the company, and is responsible for Pentimenti's expansion in public programming and educational initiatives. As an educator, he has regularly taught classes at the Newberry Library and Hyde Park Art Center, has delivered talks on film and philosophy at the School of the Art Institute, University of Chicago, Stony Island Arts Bank, and more. Sherrod is also an accomplished film programmer and critic. He is the co-chair of the Gene Siskel Film Center's Associate Producers board, and holds a BA from Sarah Lawrence College and an MA from the University of Chicago.



Ed Harris

as H.C. Westermann

Pentimenti is thrilled to collaborate with multi-award winning, four-time Oscar nominee Ed Harris, who provides the voice of artist H.C. Westermann. Harris recently completed filming on a feature version of Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* opposite Jessica Lange for director Jonathan Kent.

Harris starred as the enigmatic 'Man in Black' in the HBO series sensation, *Westworld*, reprising his role in the show's fourth and final season. In season 2 he received an Emmy nomination for his performance. He appears in *Top Gun: Maverick*, and co-starred last year in Netflix's *The Lost Daughter*, Maggie Gyllenhaal's award-winning film adaptation of the Elena Ferrante novel, with Olivia Coleman and Dakota Johnson.

Harris made his feature film directing debut on *Pollock*, receiving an Academy Award nomination as Best Actor for his performance in the title role. His co-star, Marcia Gay Harden, won a Best Supporting Actress Oscar under his direction. Harris also directed, as well as co-wrote *Appaloosa*, starring opposite Viggo Mortensen. His film credits include *A History of Violence* (Natl. Society of Film Critics Award); *The Hours* (Oscar, Golden Globe, SAG and BAFTA nominations); *The Truman Show* (Oscar nomination, Golden Globe Award); *Apollo 13* (Oscar and Golden Globe nominations, SAG Award); *Kodachrome* opposite Jason Sudeikis and Elizabeth Olson; Darren Aronofsky's *Mother!*; *In Dubious Battle*, *Run All Night*, *Frontera*, *The Face of Love*, *The Way Back*, *Copying Beethoven*, *The Right Stuff*, *The Abyss*, *The Rock*, *The Human Stain*, *A Beautiful Mind*, *Stepmom*, *The Firm*, *Places in the Heart*, *Alamo Bay*, *Sweet Dreams*, *Jackknife*, *State of Grace*, *The Third Miracle*, *Touching Home* and Victor Nunez's *A Flash of Green*.

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