

Darren Murphy
Hours of Idle Conversation

First Publication

hoursofidleconversation.wordpress.com

**~ a program of discussion to be held for the duration of
Manchester School of Art's 2013 degree show**

- 14th June 2013 Opening [1700 - 2100]
- 15th June 2013 Conversation Experiment 1 [1100]
A Discussion: The Discursive, Liam Gillick [1300]
- 16th June 2013 Conversation Experiment 2 [1100]
A Discussion: The Experimental Factory, Liam Gillick [1300]
- 17th June 2013 Conversation Experiment 3 [1100]
A Discussion: Interruptions, Maurice Blanchot [1300]
- 18th June 2013 Conversation Experiment 3 [1100]
A Discussion: The Art of Conversation i, Monika Szewczyk [1300]
- 19th June 2013 Conversation Experiment 4 [1100]
A Discussion: The Art of Conversation ii, Monika Szewczyk [1300]

The titles of the 'A Discussion' events relate to the texts within this book that are to act as a catalyst for the discussions. The text will also be the departure point for that day's Conversation Experiments.

Unless stated otherwise, events run for approximately 45 minutes.

All of the events listed above are only those scheduled, unscheduled discussions and conversations will take place.



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First Publication
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14th June 1700 - 2100
15th & 16th June 1000 - 1600
17th - 19th June 1000 - 1800

Holden Gallery
Grosvenor Building
Cavendish Street
Manchester School of Art
M15 6BH

Introduction

Hours of Idle Conversation

hoursofidleconversation.wordpress.com

- *Hours of Idle Conversation (HOIC)* is a research project by Darren Murphy, which aims to facilitate conversation and explore it as a material. This, the first edition of *HOIC*, shall culminate in a publication to be made available online.

An interest in dialogue is the main drive behind my work. I previously felt it necessary to create objects to facilitate conversation and exchange. However, I realise the conversation itself is the integral part of my work.

Acting, in the words of Peter Dunn, as “context provider” rather than “content provider”. I create the environment for discussion rather than the object that provokes it. As a result, the social effects of the institution and location are an important consideration in my practice.

Recordings and documentation are produced to provoke further meditation on the dialogues enabled by my process-based practice, allowing me to widen the transmission of these conversations beyond the bounds of their initial participants.

With *Hours of Idle Conversation (HOIC)* I hope to begin collecting material to explore the conversation. Both subjectively, exploring ideas and theories within the texts, and objectively, considering the qualities and the form of the conversation. The use of ‘idle’ in the title relates to an objective view of conversation whereby its contents are always insignificant.

The essays contained within this book are to be the catalyst for discussions that form only part of *HOIC*. I wish to stress that they only form the catalyst, giving a departure point for discussions, and are not intended to become a dictare within them. Each discussion, taking place at 1300 each day from the 15th – 19th June, will begin by summarising the texts they initiate from.

Each morning at 1100 ‘Conversation Experiments’ shall take place. These are outlined in this book, but please note the order they are presented in this book is not indicative of a schedule.

For the duration of *HOIC*, Darren Murphy shall be in the Holden Gallery as much as possible. Conversations, scheduled or unscheduled, are to be recorded and transcribed. Scheduled conversations will then be made publicly available on hoursofidleconversation.wordpress.com

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Conversation Experiments

Conversation of Questions

Having witnessed a number of staged conversations including a conversation with a script of only questions, I've become interested in the effect placing a rule whereby only questions may be asked might have on natural (un-staged) conversations. Does the conversation become stuttered? Do people's agendas become more apparent than in an 'ordinary' conversation? A conversation isn't two or more people talking together, but the occurrence of speech and breaks in speech and these breaks, pauses, become extended in the question only format. What effect does this have on the interlocutors?

Interrupting the Conversation

Bearing in mind the definition of conversation by Maurice Blanchot within this book: "When two people speak together, they speak not together, but each in turn: one says something, then stops, the other something else (or the same thing), then stops". I wish to explore the effects on conversation altering these stops, or interruptions, has. When a metronomic element is built in to the conversation, perhaps people may only speak for a certain period of time and as a result the pause is extended as people collect their thoughts, or the actual interruptions, periods of silence, are stipulated, the conversation may completely change.

Flow of Conversation

The simplest experiment, and perhaps most cruel, is on the flow of conversation. By dictating that conversation must flow in a certain direction, in order of age or gender, or a certain way around the table. What happens to the silent members of a discussion? If neutrality resides in silence how will it be expressed?

Others

These are very brief descriptions of only three experiments. More information will be made available on hoursofidleconversation.wordpress.com, and as experiments remain unscheduled other than there times, information on other potential experiments shall also be available.

Liam Gillick

Maybe it would be better if we worked in groups of three? The Discursive

Some people are the motor of the event. Like an animator bringing characters to life. A character is drawn and through this process is free to behave in whatever way the animator wants it to. At our event you don't know exactly who animates who, but it is definitely taking place. Everyone is part of the same story, but with separate lives. They are in the style of recent Manga comics from Japan, where each character has a complex formulation that frequently changes from episode to episode or from story to story. Narratives are stretched and the stories have no specific end. The active people sometimes prefix a name with "our," as in "our Wallace" or "our Hugh." Each participant could be the son or the daughter of another person at the party. You never notice this, but these relationships give some of the interactions between people, an aim, and a story. There are also passive groups at the event. Maybe they are just visitors observing the party. They don't react much. They read a lot, talk a great deal and sometimes exchange pictures. In the same way that children make collections of things, the passive groups pass pictures around. It is not clear what they say to each other. Mumbling a bit. Conversations that are always difficult to overhear.

—Philippe Parreno, *Snow Dancing*, 1995

A discursive model of praxis has developed within the critical art context over the last twenty years. It is the offspring of critical theory and improvised, self-organized structures. It is the basis of art that involves the dissemination of information. It plays with social models and presents speculative constructs both within and beyond traditional gallery spaces. It is indebted to conceptual art's reframing of relationships, and it requires decentered and revised histories in order to evolve.

If we want to understand tendencies in art, we have to look at the structures that underscore the sharing of ideas. This is especially true when we consider discursive processes to be the base of self-conscious art practice. It is necessary to find a way to describe, map, and analogize the processes that have actually been taking place under the surface of recent models of curating and artistic practice. I'm trying for a moment to get away from anecdotal, local, and geographical relationships to artistic activity and away from "special event" consciousness. At the same time, I want to look at echoes in the culture that might provide a clue to parallel productive techniques.

The discursive is the key strategy employed by the most dynamic contemporary artists, whether they are providing a contribution to a larger model of exchange or using discursive strategies as a structural tool within their own work. I am trying to test the validity of this discursive framework in light of what has developed in the culture since the fall of The Berlin Wall. There are some returns and absences that may affect our ability to continue as before. We also need to examine the notion of the discursive as a model of production in its own right, alongside the production of objects for consideration or exchange. The discursive is what produces the work and, in the form of critical and impromptu exchanges, it is also the desired result.

The use of the word *discursive* includes the following considerations: first (a technical definition), the movement between subjects without or beyond order; second, a set of discussions marked by their adherence to one or more notions of analytical reason. At no point does my use of the word really imply coherence with notions of “discursive democracy” as posited by Habermas and others, yet within the cultural terrain it does have some connection to the idea of melding public deliberation while retaining the notion of individual practice within the “group.”



The discursive is a practice that offers one the opportunity to be a relatively unexamined, free agent within a collective project. While the discursive appears to be an open generator of positions, it actually functions best when it allows one to “hide within the collective.” It allows the artist to develop a set of arguments and individual positions without having to conform to an established model of artistic or educational quality. Incomplete projects and partial contributions are central to an effectively progressive, critical environment, but in the discursive they are not expressed—rather, they are perpetually reformed. The discursive needs to preserve this sense of reclaimed speculation in relation to “lived” future models if it is to retain its semi-autonomy in relation to instrumentalizing or divisive, chaotic and insincere market rationalizations.

The discursive framework differentiates certain collective models, not the other way around. It is a mode of generating ideas and placing structures into the culture that emerges from collaborative, collective, or negotiated positions rather than as varied forms of “pure” expression or super-subjectivity. However, the discursive also provides a space where all these approaches can be included. The rise of content-heavy discussions—seminars, symposia, and discussion programs—alongside every serious art project over the last twenty years is very significant here. This phenomenon has given us a lot of time to excuse ourselves, to qualify ourselves and to provide an excess of specific positions that are not necessarily in sync with what is presented in the spaces for art. These discussions are functional parallels that project in many directions. They are free zones of real production. They have also become an essential component of both didactic and contingent projects. Yet the discursive as a form of art practice in its own right is not reliant on these official parallel events. It both goes beyond and absorbs such moments, making them both material and structure, operating openly in opposition to official programming.



The discursive leads to the proliferation of the short text and statement, which both cover up and announce. The site of production today often exists within the text alone. The text is the key event, the key moment, the idea carrier as well as the collective project itself. The critical text is also the voice of the curatorial context. The site of the critical text is now often produced by the person who is an implicated multiple personality within the cultural field. The anxiety of contemporary curating is not the cliché of the idea of the curator as mega-artist or the curator as neurotic traveler. The anxiety is that the critical voice has been merged with that of the curatorial. A misunderstanding has emerged here in the reaction to relational aesthetics, with the implication that this curatorial voice directs the critical flow. But this analysis of relational aesthetics got the moment of engagement the wrong way round—critical self-consciousness was activated before the predictive text backtracked and set the scene.

This is a common phenomenon of the discursive: the post-description of critical awareness, often in a straightforward form. The idea of a directed series of actions comes after the negotiated quality of the discursive. Moments of entry into the critical framework are muddled and inverted as a result of the struggle over the text having been transferred (as an anxiety) from the artist to the curator. Yet we still make assumptions about critical potential emerging from the moment at which a flow is identified, rather than from the flow itself.

Recently we have seen the rise of a new group of people who have studied art history but have resisted or found no place within the standard systems of curating. This new “non-group” has not been completely identified, manipulated, or instrumentalized by the dominant culture, yet. They appear to be deeply embedded within hierarchical academic structures, but also do not deal with the merging of voices that constitutes a symbiotic alliance between the discursive and the curatorial. They have studied art history but do not all want to be curators—or traditional critics, either. They have started developing a series of relationships, discussions, and texts that have created a new series of links between the potential of the discursive framework and much more traditional forms of academic work. The greater part of this new work is focused on trying to understand where the critical flow exists within the culture.

All of this is based on the understanding that statements are also events. Statements depend on the conditions from which they emerge, and begin their existence within a field of discourse. Statements as events are important within the discursive—they provide a “location” from which to propose a physical potential beyond the immediate art context. Putting a statement into play will create an event “at some point”—or a series of events projected into the near future to recuperate the recent past.

By the time a generation born in the early 1960s had become activated recipients of a postwar social dynamic, they were simultaneously told that the physical manifestations of it—in varied forms of applied modernism—were failing. They were told that they were within something that might appear to be succeeding and functioning in theory, but that certain markers of progressive modern existence were not functional, wouldn’t work, and no one wanted them. Reconfiguring the recent past accounts for this tension. It is a crucial component of a desire to be involved in a discursive frame that is often marked by architectural and structural legacies of the recent past—from public housing projects to communal experiments—which were viewed as a failure on both the right and the left.



At the heart of the discursive is a reexamination of “the day before” as a model for understanding how to behave, activate, and present. It tries to get to the point *just before* the only option was to play the tuba to the workers. In the past I have used this quite frequently as a device: the day before the Brass Band became the only option; the day before the mob became the workers; the day before the factory closed; the day before *Hotel California* was released—the idea of a French bar in the middle of nowhere, with nothing to listen to and everyone waiting for the arrival of the “soft” future.

The role of the discursive is to not look back too far. However, this creates peculiar problems. Reoccupation, recuperation, and aimless renovation are the daily activities of a unified Europe, and the function of the discursive framework as well—creating engagement and providing activity. However, the intellectual and ideological implications are rather more problematic.



We are currently in a situation in which suspension and repression are the dominant models. There is anxiety about who controls the reshaping of the stories of the recent past. The discursive framework has been predicated upon the rejection of the idea of a dominant authored voice. Clear-cut, authored content is considered to be politically, socially, and ideologically suspect. However, there is still the feeling that stories get told, that the past is being reconfigured, and that the near future gets shaped. There is a constant anxiety within the discursive frame about who is doing this, who is marking time. The discursive is the only structure that allows you to project a problem just out of reach and to work with that permanent displacement. Every other mode merely reflects a problem, generates a problem, denies a problem, and so on. The discursive framework projects a problem just out of reach, and this is why it can also confront a socio-economic system that bases its growth upon “projections.” In the discursive art process we are constantly projecting. We are projecting that something will lead to something else “at some point.” True work, true activity, true significance will happen in a constant, perpetual displacement.

This permanent displacement provides a location for refusal and collective ennui. The projection of the critical moment is the political potential of the discursive. It is not a location for action, but instead provides an infinite suspension of critical moments—the opposite of performance. This is its “just-around-the-corner-ness”—a permanent interplay of micro-critical expressions within the context of a “setting.” Projects are realized that expose a power relationship with the culture. They achieve this through an adherence to parasitical techniques: destroying relations of production through a constant layering of profoundly differing and contradictory aims. Somehow it might be possible to bring together small groupings and create temporary, suspended, semi-autonomous frameworks. It is possible that we have seen a rise in the idea of parasitical relationships to the point where they have

reached a fluid state of acceptance. We may have reached a moment of constant reoccupation, recuperation, and aimless renovation. Maybe the discursive makes possible a parasite without a host—feeding off copies of itself, speaking to itself, regenerating among its own kind.



The discursive demonstrates a clear desire to produce situations that are open and exchange-orientated in tension with the forces that encourage self-redundancy. It is an activation of counter-methods: we've had flexibility and now we are redundant, yet we refuse to stop working. The discursive cultural framework is the only way to challenge the forces that encourage self-redundancy, as it internalizes and expresses consciousness of the most complex and imploded forms of post-Operaistic models of developed capitalism—the notion that capitalism mutates in the face of a reluctant workforce rather than due to some naturalistic quality or due to its own drive. Team-worked, flexibilized environments are also a way to induce people to create predictive models that are resistant to true projections of future circumstances. Everything is permanently conditional and contingent and needs to be predicted in speculative form.

This phenomenon is combined with the increased sophistication of the dominant culture in finding ways to use and absorb earlier critical structures, in order to create a degree of information control. The discursive adopts and co-opts this structural approach too but to different ends. It is the only way to offer a functional parallel to the dominant culture. In a discursive frame, there is always a critical double that has a degree of parallelity with the machinations of globalized capital. The discursive always functions in parallel, or just across from the idea of something that is already taking place structurally within society—this is its strength and its weakness.

The political potential of the discursive framework comes from its being simultaneously “out of reach” and “too close”—it is art functioning as a structural parallel to contemporary working dilemmas in the dominant culture. In a discursive frame there is always an element that parallels the machinations of globalized capital—that is both its strength and its weakness. It starts from the position of understanding the process of redundancy-via-flexibility, and it co-opts that process for different ends, in order to redirect its apparent loss.

Taken from *e-flux 2009 #2 [01/2009]*

Liam Gillick

Maybe it would be better if we worked in groups of three? The Experimental Factory

There is a doorman working at the entrance who is very good at recognizing people. He is also a judge of character based on facial appearance. However, he is blindfolded. The doorman is accompanied by a colleague who is unable to move. Tied to a chair. Incapable of physical activity. At the right time, when the music has finally stopped, people stream out past the doorman. After their activity and all their engagement with the party, the mood is subdued, people just leave normally. Not making any fuss, no rushing, just moving away. There are no lengthy periods spent milling around, talking and looking at cars. At the end of this party there's just a group of people quietly going on their way.

—Philippe Parreno, *Snow Dancing*, 1995

Maybe we're trying to catch a moment, maybe an earlier moment. Maybe it's a Volvo moment—June 17, 1974, when the view from the factory was of the trees, and the way to work together was as a team, and we know that the future is going to work out—that everything is a trajectory as long as we can keep things this way and Ford don't buy the company.

For those who grew up in postwar Europe, notions of group work were embedded in educational systems. From preschool “play-groups” through the organizing structures of management, with group discussion and teamwork, we find a set of social models that carry complex implications for people who think they can create something using a related, if semiautonomous, methodology.

The discursive is wedded to the notion of postwar social democracy. It is both a product of its education systems and subject to its critical potentials and collapses. The European context has surrounded itself with experiment-machines in the culture. The discursive framework's success or failure is connected to various postwar phenomena connected to identity politics and postcolonial theory. At the same time, the discursive is suspicious and resistant to the idea of a key protagonist. Without key protagonists, however, it is very hard to know what to do, when to occupy and when to function; however, the lack of leading voices does permit the discursive to evolve and include.



Production/manufacturing of the Volvo C30 at the Volvo Cars plant in Ghent, 2006. © Volvo Car Corporation

If we accept the postwar period as a closed one, we have to think harder about whether the discursive is merely a gesture towards recuperation of ideas, places, and values. The discursive frame may merely be playing out various recuperative projects that are tacitly encouraged within a terrain of closure and globalization simultaneously.

The decentered quality of critical art practices meets an anxiety about the combination of the localized and the internationalized. This contradictory quality is exemplified by the discursive frame, with its displays of the local to the international (and vice-versa) within the context of globalized cultural journeys. The discursive offers the potential for art to operate within smallish groupings out of sync with contemporary circumstances, yet deeply embedded within its values and flows. This has a lot to do with a coalescence of smallish groupings, which then play out a suspension of aims and results within a context of indifference and projected future meetings.

The potential of the discursive framework is to engage the “out of reach” and the “too close” simultaneously—art functioning as a structural parallel to contemporary working dilemmas. A dominant, visible feature of certain developed, late-modern art practices is the idea that prior to being manufactured, a product must be sold. The discursive makes use of theories of immaterial labor in order to account for the blurred factors that surround and produce commodity value—to understand the set of factors that produce the informational and cultural content of a commodity. The discursive becomes a negotiation and demonstration of immaterial labor used for other ends.

Marx described the idea of identifying the true value of a chair in opposition to the commodity value of a chair. It is one of the philosophically weakest parts of *Capital*. Marx's notion that a chair has an essential value prior to its commodification—a natural “chairness” before being corrupted and commodified by capitalism—is at the heart of classic understandings of post-Duchampian art. This idea is exceeded and abandoned by the discursive, in sync with recent critical texts on commodity value.



Production in the Kalmar plant, which produced cars for Volvo between 1974 to 1994. © Volvo Car Corporation

I have worked on the “Volvo question” for the last few years. Most of my research on Volvo has been done through Brazilian academic papers concerning the legacy of 1970s production techniques in Scandinavia and models of flexibility, collaboration, and the idea of a better working environment in an ideally productive post-Fordist context. There has been a synchronization of desire and structure: in the last ten or fifteen years, discursive, fragmented, atomized, content-heavy art projects have somehow freed themselves from classical ideas concerning the problem of commodity culture. They have taken on the deep structure of work and life.

In the Volvo factory you can see trees while you are making the cars. But you are still making cars, never taking a walk in the woods. Where are the models for contemporary art production in the recent past? Is it Volvo, is it the collective, or is it the infinite display of the super-subjective? Do these factors share a similar cultural DNA? The idea of collective action and the idea of being able to determine the speed with which you produce a car, whether you produce it in a group or individually, at night, or very slowly, seems close to the question of how to make art over the last fifty years.

At Volvo, people ended up creating more and more free time, and during that free time they talked about ways to work faster. In both the cultural sphere and the traditional productive sphere, the trauma and attractiveness of infinite flexibility lead to the logic of redundancy. In the end, Ford bought the company and reintroduced the standard production line, not because it was more efficient in pure capitalist terms, but because it reinforced relations of production.



Production in the Kalmar plant, which produced cars for Volvo between 1974 to 1994. © Volvo Car Corporation

One of the reasons why I think the factory needs to be looked at again is that the factory, as a system, allows you to look at relationships in a totalizing way. In terms of productive potential, the struggle between speculation and planning has been one of the great struggles of the twentieth century. We can now say that speculation won, and the rhetoric of planning has become something we do for the people we do not know what to do with. We plan for them, but everyone else should speculate.

The factory model is of use here: the factory has a planned quality in spite of the fact that it is always the playing field of the speculative. The myth is that speculation lures production, lures industry, lures investment, and in this way the factory is always caught in a psychological and philosophical dilemma: in order to effectively activate speculation, you have to plan.

In the Soviet Union, every large city had an experimental factory. At Magdeburg today, they have an experimental factory. The experimental factory is a dynamic paradox: a model for the experimental, without experiments; the factory that exists but does not produce. The idea of the experimental factory or workshop remains a dynamic legacy within the notion of productive cultural work. The postwar social project activated compromised forms of earlier idealized modernisms, and created a mesh of alleviated working circumstances that left

behind the experimental factory as an attractive model of potential. You can draw a parallel between the rise of the experimental factory as a functional promise and the way critical cultural exhibition structures developed alongside it. Without even considering the common phenomenon of occupying abandoned plants of the recent past as the site of art, these exhibition structures did so according to a program of regeneration within the mainstream contemporary art context.

Perhaps it is possible to explain the discursive cultural framework within a context of difference and collectivity—*difference* being the key word that defines our time, and *collectivity* being the thing that is so hard to achieve while frequently being so longed for. We have to negotiate and recognize difference and collectivity simultaneously. It is an aspect of social consciousness that is exemplified in the art context. As social definitions and processes of recognition, difference and collectivity feed from the examples of modern and contemporary art. Art is nurtured and encouraged in return by way of a cultural permission that grants a space for that which cannot be tolerated, but can be accommodated under the conditions of neoliberal globalization.



Dresden car factory

The discursive thrives when we are increasingly alienated from sites of traditional production, owing to the displacing effects of globalization and the increasing tendency towards infinite subcontracting. Struggles over the site of production still exist, but they are constantly displaced and projected—the struggles are reported, but are sometimes resistant to

identification across borders. They exist within a context that offers an excessive assertion of specificities, as well as tense arguments on the Left about how to accept difference and protect the local.

Difference and collectivity are semiautonomous concepts in an art context. The logic of their pursuit leads us to the conclusion that we should destroy all traditional relations of production in order to encourage a constant recognition of disagreement and profoundly different aims within a context of desire. The focus of the discursive is more on the aims and structural efficacy of the cultural exercise than on what is produced. In turn, what is produced operates in parallel—unfettered by the requirement to be the total story.



At work on the Volvo production floor lining the XC60 concept car in dark-brown saddle-quality leather. © Volvo Car Corporation

But all of this is problematized by a nostalgia for the group. We are sometimes in thrall to structures from the recent past that were not supposed to be a model for anything. Some of the structures that we use, as cultural producers, echo a past that was part of a contingent set of accommodations and dynamic stresses within the postwar social project. Around this, there remain old relationships of production that still exist outside complex theories of the postindustrial that are at the heart of postwar “developed” societies.

We can see how this developed and left traces in the culture. Consider the history of the French Groupe Medvedkin, which made films between 1967 and 1974 in the context of factories and other sites of production. They worked, filmed, and agitated at the Lipp watch factory in France and subsequently in the Peugeot factory in Sochaux. What you see very clearly in these films is a shift that is mirrored in the dominant art context. When looking today at one of their films shot in 1967, you do not see any superficial or linguistic differences

between those who run the factory, those who work in the factory, and those who criticize the factory from outside—they are all from the same culture. Physically, they look the same. Though certain differences of detail can be determined, they are nuanced and require acute class-consciousness. The effects of postcolonialism have not yet shifted the source of cheap labor from the various colonies to the neighborhood of the consumer. But Bruno Muel's 1974 film *Avec le sang des autres* opens with a group of longhaired activists wearing old military jackets, standing outside the factory gates. They are attempting to play as a brass band to a group of silent, clearly embarrassed immigrant car-workers primarily from North Africa.



Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin

Through this series of films you see a clarification and separation of aesthetics in terms of identification, language, and techniques of protest. Simultaneously, you see a conspicuous drop in easy communication. Modes of address have separated. Different groupings are talking, but only within each group, and each group has developed a sophisticated role-playing function in relation to the others. They demonstrate “positions” to each other. This shift towards the notion of a public faced by a complex display of self-conscious role-playing is familiar within an art context. It does not lack insincerity, and it does not lack genuine political engagement—it is a functional parallel.

We have created the conditions for the experimental, but no actual experiments (or vice-versa). Micro-communities of redundancy have joined together to play with the difference between art time and work time. The question is how to develop a discursive project without becoming an experimental factory—without slipping into a set of conditions that lead to a certain redundancy. It is the attempt to hold the collective on this brink that energizes the discursive context.



Car fire, unidentified, 6/24/2004

The discursive is peopled by artists who increasingly accept a large number of permanently redundant citizens and who have come to terms with the notion of the permanently part-time worker in the face of the permanently educated artist. The notion of continual and permanent education is used in different cultures in order to escape what are actually clear political differences to do with class, situation, and power. It is the promise to the poor child of a way to escape bad conditions. But within the discursive, the notion of self-improvement is ideologically specific and accompanies a philosophy connected to postwar power structures.

My grandfather's questions always concerned what I would do with all the leisure time I would have in the future. The question now is: how do you know how much leisure time you have? We have to address the reduction of leisure as a promise, and as a marker within the postwar. The discursive is linked to the question of who is managing time. Control of time was traditionally the dominant managerial tool, and it was rightly challenged. Self-management has subsequently become generalized in a postindustrial environment. It is the way even mundane jobs are advertised now.

The idea has become that it is essentially better to manage your own time within a framework that involves limitless amounts of work, with no concrete barrier between working and non-working. This is something that underscores the discursive frame—the potentially neurotic, anxiety-provoking situation within which we find cultural producers operating. It has superficial advantages and clear disadvantages. It is a notion of permanent soft pressure (which finds form via the computer and digital media) to manage your own time in relationship to broader networks.



The museum cafe.

The discursive demonstrates a neurotic relationship to the management of time as a negatively activated excess of discussion, discourse, and hanging around. The rise of teamwork and networks is linked to a denial of the location of complex and disturbing old-school production relationships that still exist as a phantom for progressive thinkers. The notion of flexibility within the workplace is a way to encourage people to rationalize their own disappearance or redundancy when necessary. Working situations are not changed—the idea is that YOU have to change.

Maybe we have to think about revised languages of production within the context of self-management. Via small, multiple, flexible groupings, the discursive art context intends to go beyond an echo or a mirroring of simple production relations, though they remain subject to the same complexities that afflict any self-managed environment even when they refuse to create a timetable. As a production cycle rather than a fixed performative moment in time, the discursive uses certain production analogies in relation to what “could be useful” instead of a permanent “association of free(d) time.” It occupies the increasing gap between the trajectory of modernity (understood here as a flow of technologies and demographic developments) and the somewhat melancholic, imploded, self-conscious trajectory of modernism.

It is within this zone that we can explain the idea of no surprise, sudden returns, and acceptance of gains and losses as simultaneous symptoms and catalysts. It is here that we can build contingent critical structures that critique both modernity and its critical double.

Taken from *e-flux 2009 #3 [02/2009]*

Maurice Blanchot

Interruptions: As on a Reimann Surface

The definition of conversation (that is, the most simple description of the most simple conversation) might be the following: when two people speak together, they speak not together, but each in turn: one says something, then stops, the other something else (or the same thing), then stops. The coherent discourse they carry on is composed of sequences that are interrupted when the conversation moves from partner to partner, even if adjustments are made so that they correspond to one another. The fact that speech needs to pass from one interlocutor to another in order to be confirmed, contradicted, or developed shows the necessity of interval. The power of speaking interrupts itself, and this interruption plays a role that appears to be minor—precisely the role of a subordinated alteration. This role, nonetheless, is so enigmatic that it can be interpreted as bearing the very enigma of language: pause between sentences, pause from one interlocutor to another, and pause of attention, the hearing that doubles the force of locution.

I wonder if we have reflected enough upon the various significations of this pause that alone permits speech to be constituted as conversation, and even as speech. We end up by confining someone who speaks without pause. (Let us recall Hitler's terrible monologues. And every head of state participates in the same violence of this dictate, the repetition of an imperious monologue, when he enjoys the power of being the only one to speak and, rejoicing in possession of his high solitary word, imposes it without restraint as a superior and supreme speech upon others.) But let us take the most steady conversation, the conversation least exposed to chance caprice; even if its discourse is coherent, it must always fragment itself by changing protagonists. Moving from one to the other interlocutor, it interrupts itself: interruption permits the exchange. Interrupting for the sake of understanding, understanding in order to speak.

It is clear, however, that the stops that punctuate, measure, and articulate dialogue are not always of the same kind: some block conversation. Kafka wondered at what moment and how many times, when eight people are seated within the horizon of a conversation, it is appropriate to speak if one does not wish to be considered silent. But such silence, even if disapproving, constitutes the part that moves discourse. Without it, one would not speak, or only to ask oneself belatedly if one had not mistaken the interlocutor's attitude and if it had not been the other who made you speak (just as, in other circumstances, one might reproach the host for having made you drink – it is, after all, the same intoxication). And even when remaining silent is a refusal it is rarely abrupt; it takes part in the discourse, inflecting it with its nuances, contributing to the hope for, or the despair of, a final concord. Silence is still only a deferred speech, or else it bears the signification of a difference obstinately maintained.

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Interruption is necessary to any succession of words; intermittence makes their becoming possible, discontinuity ensure the continuity of understanding. There would certainly be a great deal to conclude from this. But for the moment, I would like to show that the intermittence by which discourse becomes dialogue, that is to say dis-course, presents itself in two very different words.

In the first case, the arrest-interval is comparable to the ordinary pause that permits the conversation's "each in turn." Here, discontinuity is essential since it promises exchange – essential, but relative. What it aims at, be it later or never, and yet at the same time starting from today, is affirmation of a unitary truth where coherent discourse will no longer cease and, no longer ceasing, will merge with its other, silent side. From this perspective, rupture still plays into the functioning of common speech, even if it fragments it, thwarts it, or impedes it. Not only does rupture give meaning, but it also brings common sense forth as a horizon. It is the respiration of discourse. In this category could be grouped all the forms of speech that belong to a dialectical experience of existence and history – from everyday chatter to the highest moments of reason, of struggle and of practice. Interrupting for the sake of understanding.

But there is another kind of interruption, more enigmatic and more grave. It introduces the wait that measures the distance between two interlocutors – no longer a reducible, but an irreducible distance. Having mentioned this often in these investigations, I will simply allude to it again. Within an interrelation space, I can seek to communicate with someone in a number of ways: first, by considering him as an objective possibility in the world, according to ways of objectivity; another time, by regarding him as another self, perhaps quite different, but whose difference passes by way of a primary identity, that of two beings each equally able to speak in the first person; and a third time, no longer by a mediate relation of impersonal knowledge or of personal comprehension, but by attempting to achieve an immediate relation wherein the same and the other seek to lose themselves in one another or draw near to one another through the proximity of a familiar address that forgets or effaces distance. These relations have in common the fact that all three tend toward unity: the "I" wants to annex the other (identify the other with itself) by making of it its own thing, or by studying it as a thing, or, yet again, in wanting to find in it another myself, whether this be through free recognition or through the instantaneous union of two souls. There remains another modality (without a mode). This time, it is no longer a question of seeking to unify. In the other I no longer want to recognise one whom a still common measure – the belonging to a common space – holds in a relation of continuity or unity with me. What is in play now is the foreignness between us, and not only the obscure part that escapes our mutual knowledge and is nothing more than obscurity of the self's position – the singularity of the self; this foreignness is still very relative (a self is always close to a self, even in difference, competition, desire, and need). What is now in play, and demands relation, is everything that separates me from the other, that is to say the other insofar as I am infinitely separated from him – a separation, fissure, or interval that leaves him infinitely separated from me, but also requires that I found my relation with him upon this very interruption that is an interruption of being. This alterity, it must be repeated, makes him neither another self for me, or another existence, neither a modality nor a moment of universal existence, nor a super-existence, a god or non-god, but rather the unknown in its infinite distance.

An alterity that holds in the name of the neutral.

To simplify, let us say that through the presence of the other understood in the neutral there is in the field of relations a distortion preventing any direct communication and my relation of unity; or again, there is a fundamental anomaly that it falls to speech not to reduce but to convey, even if it does so without saying it or signifying it. Now it is to this hiatus – to the strangeness, to the infinity between us – that the interruption in language itself responds, the interruption that introduces waiting. But let us understand that the arrest here is not necessarily or simply marked by silence, by a blank or a gap (this would be too crude), but by a change in the form or the structure of language (when speaking is first of all writing) – a change metaphorically comparable to that which made Euclid's geometry into that of Riemann. (Valéry once confided to a mathematician that he was planning to write – to speak – on “a Riemann surface.”) A change such that to speak (to write) is to cease thinking solely with a view to unity, and to make the relations of words an essentially dissymmetrical field governed by discontinuity; as though, having renounced the uninterrupted force of a coherent discourse, it were a matter of drawing out a level of language where one might gain the power not only to express oneself in an intermittent manner, but also to allow intermittence itself to speak: a speech that, non-unifying, is no longer content with being a passage or a bridge – a non-pontificating speech capable of clearing the two shores separated by the abyss, but without filling in the abyss or reuniting its shores: a speech without reference to unity.

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The difference between these two kinds of interruption, as I have just schematised them, is theoretically very firm. It corresponds to the two kinds of experience we have with speech: one is dialectical, the other is not. One is the speech of the universe, tending toward unity and helping to accomplish the whole; the other, the speech of writing, bears a relation of infinity and strangeness. This decisive difference is nonetheless always ambiguous: when two persons speak, the silence that permits them to speak in turn as they speak together is still no more than the alternating pause of the first degree; but in this alternance there may also, already, be at work the interruption by which the unknown announces itself. Yet there is something more grave; when the power of speech is interrupted, one does not know, one can never know with certainty, what is at work: the interruption that permits exchange, the interruption that suspends speech in order to reestablish it at another level, or the negating interruption that, far from still being a speech that recovers its wind and breathes, undertakes – if that is possible – to asphyxiate speech and destroy it as though forever. When, for example, interruptions arise out of fatigue, out of pain or affliction (all forms of neutral), do we know to which experience it belongs? Can we be sure, even though it may be sterilizing, that it is simply barren? No, we are not sure (and this, moreover, adds to the fatigue and the affliction). We sense as well that if pain (fatigue or affliction) hollows out an infinite gap between beings, this gap is perhaps what would be most important to bring to expression, all the while leaving it empty, so that to speak out of fatigue, out of pain or affliction [malheur], could be to speak according to the infinite dimension of language. And can we not go still further? Let us suppose an interruption that would in some sense be absolute and absolutely neutral; let us conceive of it being no longer within the sphere of language, but exterior and anterior to all speech and to all silence; let us call it the ultimate, the hyperbolic. Would we have attained with it the rupture that would deliver us, even if hyperbolically, not only from all reason (this would be little), but from all unreason, that is, from the reason that madness remains? Or would we not be obliged to ask ourselves whether from out of such an interruption – barbarity itself – there would not come an exigency to which it would still be necessary to respond by speaking? And would we not even have to ask whether speech (writing) does not always mean attempting to involve the outside of any language in language itself, that is to say, speaking within this Outside, speaking according to the measure of this

“outside,” which, being in all speech, may very well also risk turning speech back into what is excluded from all speaking? To write: to trace a circle in the interior of which would come to be inscribed the outside of every circle...

Let us go no further and summarise. We have, first of all, two important distinctions: one corresponding to a dialectical, the other to a non-dialectical exigency of speech: the pause that permits exchange, the wait that measures infinite distance. But in waiting it is not simply the delicate rupture preparing the poetic act that declares itself, but also, at the same time, other forms of arrest that are very profound, very perverse, more and more perverse, and always such that if one distinguishes them, the distinction does not avert but rather postulates ambiguity. We have “distinguished” in this way three of them: one wherein emptiness becomes work; another wherein emptiness is fatigue, affliction; and the other, the ultimate, the hyperbolic, wherein wordlessness (perhaps thought) indicates itself. To interrupt oneself for the sake of understanding. To understand in order to speak. Speaking, finally, only to interrupt oneself and to render possible the impossible interruption.

**Taken from *The Infinite Conversation* by Maurice Blanchot.
Translation by Susan Hanson.**

Monika Szewczyk

Art of Conversation, Part I

Much has been said of late about “the conversational” or “the discursive” in and around the field of contemporary art. And yet we seem reluctant to talk about an art of conversation in the same breath. Maybe it is the all-too-powdery whiff of seventeenth-century aristocratic ladies and gentlemen, fanning themselves amidst idle chatter, whose connections to our own aspirations we would rather sweep under the shaggy carpet? Or perhaps it is because we are desperately hoping to talk ourselves out of stale notions of art as a cultural practice that to suggest an art of conversation might at first seem utterly oxymoronic?

Binaries

My attempt to resuscitate this term in all its discomforts stems from its potential to unhinge a particular binary concept, which might be summarized in the title of a recent exhibition curated by Nicolaus Schafhausen and Florian Waldvogel as part of the Brussels Biennial—*Show me, don't tell me*. Why not show *and* tell? The same question might be posed to the proponents of the discursive as a way out of a *mere* looking at art. Why do we so rarely hear of doing or thinking two things at once? A dialectical intertwining of positions might demand that we ask of art (as makers, viewers, critics, students, teachers) to suspend, boggle, or otherwise challenge available discourses *and* that we in turn develop a discourse to elaborate evasions, deferrals, or misunderstandings of its available notions. Or, we could remain actively neutral with respect to this binary—however dialectically complex it may be, something seems to be missing from the equation.

With this in mind, I have been thinking about certain staged or filmed conversations, with an eye to how conversation is forged and what it forges. At stake are productive notions of how thought can move through conversation and how conversation can move thought that probably have very little to do with clichés of conversation operating in the art world. This may be understood as an aesthetic point of view insofar as aesthetics is the attention to ways of appearing, perceiving, sensing. Conversation is often understood as an equal, rational, democratic exchange that builds bridges, communities, understandings, and is thus a way for people to recognize each other. The thorny issue of whether or not one should talk to dictators (with or without pre-conditions) that continually flared up in the run-up to the recent American presidential elections points to a particular concern in the political culture with regard to how, when, and with whom one should engage in dialogue. To converse with dictators is to forestall their annihilation, to see—in the sense of acknowledging—they somehow.

Yet this *a priori* recognition confuses the matter. What if conversation is understood not as the space of seeing, but of coming to terms with certain forms of blindness? In other words, what I think is not being articulated, but what drives the reticence for conversation, is the acknowledgement of non-knowledge rather than recognition. To have a conversation with

Chavez or Ahmadinejad is to recognize that one does not know them and wants to. In this way, conversation is always political and aesthetic because it shows who we want to see, who or what we admit into a world order. To put it somewhat differently: if, as an art, conversation is the creation of worlds, we could say that to choose to have a conversation with someone is to admit them into the field where worlds are constructed. And this ultimately runs the risk of redefining not only the “other,” but us as well. Art and conversation share this space of invention, yet only conversation comes with the precondition of plurality that might totally undo the notion of the creative agent.

Plurals

One can develop a discourse about the conversation, but at least two must have a conversation about discourse (which in turn might become plural). In *The Infinite Conversation*, Maurice Blanchot creates a plural discourse on conversation as plurality, attempting to disrupt his own writing, often making it sound like a conversation (with an unnamed interlocutor who may be Georges Bataille)—all this to extend thought infinitely. Common sense and manuals on the art of conversation may tell us that it is rude to interrupt; Blanchot thinks differently:

“The definition of conversation (that is, the most simple description of the most simple conversation) might be the following: when two people speak together, they speak not together, but each in turn: one says something, then stops, the other something else (or the same thing), then stops. The coherent discourse they carry on is composed of sequences that are interrupted when the conversation moves from partner to partner, even if adjustments are made so that they correspond to one another. The fact that speech needs to pass from one interlocutor to another in order to be confirmed, contradicted, or developed shows the necessity of interval. The power of speaking interrupts itself, and this interruption plays a role that appears to be minor—precisely the role of a subordinated alteration. This role, nonetheless, is so enigmatic that it can be interpreted as bearing the very enigma of language: pause between sentences, pause from one interlocutor to another, and pause of attention, the hearing that doubles the force of locution.”

I’d almost like to stop here—to pause indefinitely and allow myself and everyone reading this to think about Blanchot’s sense of the conversation, especially the force it accords to hearing.

To resume, with this in mind, is to attempt a conversation with Blanchot (or more specifically, with this particular text). So then, how can we consider a conversation through its interruptions?

A recent film that resonates with these questions is Steve McQueen’s first feature film, *Hunger* (2008), which concerns the 1981 hunger strike led by Bobby Sands inside Belfast’s Maze Prison. The film is virtually without speech. It proceeds through a war of gestures: the coldly administered abuse of prisoners (in scenes that evoke the inhuman conditions of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay) and the prisoners’ retaliation with acts that perversely aestheticize their abject conditions, under which they are refused political status, and people are reduced to bodies for silent administration. The sublime swirl of shit painted on the walls of one grimy cell in all the deliberate blankness of a Jasper Johns (shown half-washed-off in the poster for the film) is one emblem of the prisoners’ mute tactics. The other, of course, is the hunger strike itself; wherein Bobby Sands’ emaciated body slowly approximates the figure of Christ on the cross.

Roughly in the middle of the film, between the two moving images, speechlessness is interrupted with a conversation between Sands and a priest. Their exchange is captured (almost) entirely in one long take, shot from the side so that the two men face each other (and not the camera, as is customary in the shot-reverse-shot style of filming conversations). The effect is all too real: priest and prisoner banter, becoming regular guys that joke, smoke, show their affinities and their humanity, then fall into an intense debate on the merits of the hunger strike. The priest implores Sands not to mistake selfish delusions of martyrdom for political efficacy and Sands rejects the priest's suggestion that talking to the Protestants is possible or could solve the political impasse. The conversation stops and, soon thereafter, so does Sands' life. He refuses the infinity of conversation.

For all the naturalism of this scene, it is a strange thing to see a priest smoking: God's worker on earth speeding his way to the grave even as he defends the sanctity of life. Yet in mingling, the exhalations of Sands and those of the priest materialize and form something third, which lets their moral and ethical confusions hover. After Sands dies, and just before the film ends, we hear the contemptuous monologue of Margaret Thatcher on BBC Radio—another killer of conversation.

Conversation, the converse of monologue. When Blanchot wrote his polyphonous book in 1969, with the memory of the Second World War still vivid, he juxtaposed conversation to the dictatorial monologue of Hitler, most exemplarily, but added that "every head of state participates in the same violence of this *dictare*, the repetition of an imperious monologue, when he enjoys the power of being the only one to speak and, rejoicing in possession of his high solitary word, imposes it without restraint as a superior and supreme speech upon others." Conversation, Blanchot continues, even in its most coherent form must "always fragment itself by changing protagonists" with an "interruption for the sake of understanding, understanding in order to speak." What is beautiful about Blanchot's notion of interruption is that he considers silence to be one of its strongest forms. He cites Kafka, who wondered, "at what moment and how many times, when eight people are seated within the horizon of a conversation, it is appropriate to speak if one does not wish to be considered silent."

Who doesn't have the urge to remain silent in a conversation—to let it unfold without being implicated and without taking sides, remaining blissfully neutral and knowing? But this omniscience or even omnipotence is not quite what is at stake in this notion of conversation. For Blanchot, speaking (in turn) and silence—as the two means of interrupting—can either serve understanding (via a dialectic) or they can produce something altogether more enigmatic. It all depends on how we conceive of the interlocutors of a conversation: if I address someone as my opposite, either as object of my subjective discourse or as a subject who is infinitely different but equal to me, I enter into a dialectic which seeks synthesis and unity (understanding). Yet Blanchot also explores conversation with, and interruption by, something other—one that cannot complete or understand its interlocutor, but interrupts in another way. Following Lévinas, Blanchot designates this someone as *autrui*, understood, not as the opposite, but as the neutral—"an alterity that holds in the name of the neutral." Blanchot's notion of the neutral is close to Barthes' in that it is not a nothing, but something beyond the binaries that structure dialectics—a way to move in thought and sensation differently. Conceiving of dialogue beyond dialectics (which holds out unity and synthesis as an end), we can approach the infinity that proliferates via its deployment of the neutral. This is to say that a kind of geometry of thought is at stake that might allow for thought itself to move differently altogether.

God, avatar of autrui

Of all the avatars of *autrui* as the infinite and the neutral that appear in Blanchot's text, I am perhaps most uncomfortable with God. Yet perhaps it is God as interlocutor that best boggles thinking on the conversation—it is the stuff of revolution if you think of the Protestant Reformation and the aspirations to talk more directly with God. Blanchot considers Levinas' notion that "All true discourse . . . is discourse with God, not a conversation held between equals." A sphinx-of-a-scribe, Blanchot understands Levinas "in the strongest sense, as one always must. And in remembering, perhaps, what is said in Exodus of God speaking: as one man to another" (maybe that is why the sight of Bobby Sands and a priest—God's ambassador—talking as equals comes with a little extra strangeness). This god/man duplicity comes back later, when Blanchot speaks of Apollo, himself speaking through the poet Bacchylides to Admetus, the founder of dialogue (a plural speech indeed): "*You are a mere mortal; therefore your mind must harbor two thoughts at once.*" (Tell me about it...) And how difficult it is to speak such a mind, especially if the dialectic is not its figure. To be of two positions at once—this is what is afforded to the viewer of McQueen's particular angle (in profile) on the conversation of Bobby Sands and the priest. There is something to be said for film as a particularly complex medium that lets us observe the polyphony (which includes glances and silences) that makes up the plural speech of conversation.

Rather than taking this plurality of thought as something to be reproached while unity is elevated to divine heights, Blanchot concludes something that one might take to heart when confronted with all unitary voices:

"What, fundamentally, is the god asking of Admetus? Perhaps nothing less than that he shake off the yoke of the god and finally leave the circle in which he remains enclosed by a fascination with unity. And this is no small thing, certainly, for it means ceasing to think only with a view to unity. And this means therefore: not fearing to affirm interruption and rupture in order to come to the point of proposing and expressing—an infinite task—a truly plural speech."

Another moving image to consider: Peter Geyer's documentary film *Jesus Christus Erlöser* (2008), where the cranky Klaus Kinski incants a monologue of/as Jesus. In our schizophrenically Godless and post-secular world, this conversation with God might be a place to linger. Kinsky plays the savior to a disaffected bohemian proletariat assembled at the Deutschlandhalle in Berlin on November 20, 1971. His message of radical equality, social redemption, and brotherly love competes with his superstar persona (swathed in a vintage Technicolor flower chemise) and, in light of this glaring contradiction; Kinski is repeatedly interrupted by members of the audience who want to turn his monologue into a conversation. Each time someone takes up the mic, Kinsky fights back or storms off the stage, only to return and begin again. By the end of the film, even after the credits have rolled (which extends the ordeal into infinity in filmic terms) Kinski is shown down in the stands, amongst the two dozen or so remaining devotees, trying to remember his lines so that he can finally deliver his gospel in full. Here, then, is the failure of conversation as the failure of interruption—the audience is hushed; Kinsky continues.

I saw *Jesus Christus Erlöser* (again), shortly after visiting the Joseph Beuys retrospective *Die Revolution sind wir* (We are the Revolution) at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin—a burgeoning show staged under the broader city-wide theme of "Kult des Künstlers" adopted by the Staatliche Museen in Berlin. Posters in the U-bahn stations include Dürer's famous

Self-portrait at 28 of 1500, which makes the artist look like a princely Christ; and I was expecting that Beuys would fit neatly into this long history of the Jesus complex in art. My eyes and ears were strained for signs of a Messiah, and these signs proliferated—only in the guise of a divine conversationalist.

With his gaunt face and intense jaw, Beuys bears a striking physical resemblance to Kinsky. His sense of himself as a shaman and the gravitas he projects could lead to further comparison. Yet Beuys embraced the conversational mode in his public persona as well as his artistic practice in a way that Kinsky failed to do. The exhibition features ample footage of the artist involved in public discussions on German and American television or on taped videos, also within the student milieu of the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie. And to be sure, he is often seen as the typical maestro of the German art academy—sole authority and source of mystical wisdom, at times mocking or condescending to his interlocutors. But, he retains a sense of humor—I especially think that *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965) needs to be considered as much for its arch comedy as for its mysticism and priestly ritual. Not one *or* the other, but both—Beuys’ mentality clearly harbors at least two thoughts at once. Here I might note that, all in all, I do not take Beuys’ particular mystique as completely repulsive. A messiah needs disciples in order for the mysticism of the work to be as much a product of its reading as the character of its intent. If one option for breaking the circumscribed view wherein figures such as Beuys embody (near) divinity is simply not to congregate around them (and after their death to skip the show), another might be to bring the work of the neutral into play in confronting them.

Another Neutral

The film footage of the 1965 performance of *How to explain* shows the artist inside the Galerie Alfred Schmela, Düsseldorf, wherein he cradles said dead animal while pointing out and discussing his drawings. The entire exercise stages a kind of impossible or aborted conversation that could almost be understood as a negative manifesto. In other words, it proceeds through a series of refusals: the first to be rejected is the (human/animal) binary. The artist doubles up as a god—his head covered in honey and gold leaf for maximum Apollonian oomph. Then, the human is virtually removed from the equation, if we consider that the camera has captured the performance from the street (through the window), stressing that the audience was emphatically excluded from the gallery space as the space for communion between the man (playing a god) and the dead or sacrificed animal. Finally—and this refusal is particularly ambiguous—in obscuring the audience’s ability to hear any lesson imparted to the hare, does the mystical teacher curb his authority or does he silence the authority of discourse? The work of silence, a key cipher of the neutral, is to perpetually put signification and representation into question. The lesson of Beuys’ pictures is withheld. Announced as explanation, the performance is in fact a question engine. It echoes Blanchot’s notion of the neutral within the space of conversation as “initiating significance, but signifying nothing, or nothing determined.”

This “nothing determined” makes way for conversation. And it is not to determine, but to extend indeterminacy (infinitely) that conversations occur. What emerges here is a notion of the neutral stripped of its beige, eventless character. *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* involves both show-*and*-tell. It is plural and extravagantly symbolic. As such, it opens up to a sense of the neutral as excess and remainder alongside the identification of the neutral with the void. Voids—especially the avoidance of judgment—have an important part to play in

neutrality. The neutral is a radical other in that it is neither opposite nor like anything because it cannot be judged. Only when there is a tendency to kneel before a void (veneration is a form of judgment) does it break with the sense of the neutral.

Here, Beuys' *Das Schweigen von Marcel Duchamp wird überbewertet* (The Silence of Marcel Duchamp is Overrated), painted in the year before *How to explain*, refuses an overly respectful interpretation of Duchamp's inscrutable seclusion. And although the attempt to undervalue his silence, or at least question its overvaluation, plays into the game of judgment (and thereby ruins its neutrality), the painting highlights another powerful engine of conversation: listening. By troubling Duchamp's silence, Beuys' shows how loudly he heard it. For all the criticism leveled at Beuys regarding his inability to absorb the lessons of Marcel Duchamp, one artist's refusal to take the other at his silence may be read as a conversational gesture. Indeed, we could say that the registering, even the amplification, of a silence is a fine beginning for a conversation. For all their differences, I do wonder if both artists were not exploring registers of "the neutral," albeit in very different ways.

Bestiary

How then to proliferate the neutral? This is the question at the heart of the art of conversation. This is at once very close and very far from the common sense of conversation. There is: "let's not fight; we'll meet on neutral ground and talk it over." But there is also: "how can we listen to the inaudible, the unheard of, that which does not so much transcend as suspends not only the binaries but also the equivalences which constitute subjectivity?" A radical misalignment of interlocutors is needed for the work of neutrality to occur. This is how Beuys' *How to explain* may prove most interesting. In introducing this strange sense of conversation, my aim is to apply pressure on the givens of conversation as a harmonious unifying operation. BBC Radio tells me every twenty minutes to "join the global conversation" as if something of the sort were naturally taking place. A lot of things are called conversation; and to work in the name of this model of exchange is to mark one's tolerance for diversity, but often only as a mask for unifying operations.

A few last words from Blanchot, for whom the idea of conversation resides in a downright weird conception of the interlocutor as possessing a speech "beyond hearing and to which I must nonetheless respond." This notion is conjured in a fictive dialogue, which includes the following retort: "Such then, would be my task: to respond to this speech that surpasses my hearing, to respond to it without having really understood it, and to respond to it in repeating it, in making it speak." How to exercise such a hearing? Here is the other great question of conversation—not one of articulating (which is more proper to discourse), but one of hearing (which is proper to a notion of conversation as that which interrupts discourse as we know it). I cannot think through this proposition except maybe by considering certain exchanges between a woman and a stone, between a man and an animal. For the former, Wislawa Szymborska's 1962 poem, "Conversation with a Stone," conjures up the geological specimen's stone-cold voice of reproach to the human poet: "You lack the sense of taking part / No other sense can make up for your missing sense of taking part. / Even sight heightened to become all-seeing / will do you no good without a sense of taking part." For the latter, consider Marcel Broodthaers' *Interview with a Cat*, a rather "bad example" perhaps, in that Broodthaers also has no "sense of taking part" beyond a well-rehearsed "sense of the absurd." But it is a somewhat fitting example nonetheless, as Broodthaers' gesture was recorded (in 1972) at the *Musée d'art Moderne, Département des Aigles* in Düsseldorf, and thus in Beuys' backyard.

Marcel Broodthaers' Interview with a Cat

[http://ubu.wfmu.org/sound/broodthaers_marcel/Broodthaers-Marcel_Interview-With-A-Cat.mp3]

The tangle of Broodthaers and Beuys, whose own conversations with animals did not stop at the hare, are most often read through Broodthaers' open letter dated September 25, 1972, published in the *Rheinische Post* on October of that year, where he effectively accuses Beuys of being too Wagnerian. Yet, in sharp contrast to his interview with the cat, Broodthaers' *Department of Eagles* encroaches on the sinister uses of the bird by administrative and totalitarian forces. His interview is thus imbedded within an extensive project of extravagant animal symbolism. Like Beuys with the hare, Broodthaers chooses to talk pictures with the cat. In a stroke of arch-irony, we hear the comparison of conceptual art with an unseen canvas—constituted as pure concept. A climax of sorts comes as Broodthaers, ventriloquizing Magritte, alternately repeats "*C'est une pipe*" and "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*" as the feline chimes in with its loud inarticulate noises. The recording feels manipulated, in that the cat's timing, his absolutely polite waiting for its turn, turns the disruptive element of the animal's voice into the mechanical certainty of a laugh track. In the end, Broodthaers poses many questions, but does not articulate any questions that he hears of himself so that he might invent "a response without understanding."

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Now dear, patient reader, you might ask:

"Where does this leave us? What have we learned about the art of conversation, which is already dead, or is by most accounts dying? Are we meant to put ourselves in the shoes of Beuys' hare? Is this some elaborate funeral?"

I might respond, provisionally, or as a preface to the next chapter, that:

"The thought of conversation needs to become stranger still if we want conversation to forge something altogether new. In de-naturalizing it—and veering towards the neutral—we might get out of the circle we're in, take God and animal, and forge some kind of Sphinx to listen to, posing questions that interrupt what we have thus far called conversation."

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Monika Szewczyk

Art of Conversation, Part II

In continuing this written monologue about conversation, I am becoming aware of the sheer weirdness of thinking in this way about something that behaves so differently than writing “for the record.” But if, as Maurice Blanchot demonstrates, conversation can be defined as a series of interruptions—perhaps the most powerful of which being the neutrality of silence—then writing, which is a kind of silent speech, may itself constitute an interruption to the way conversation is imagined.

Watching What We Say

When I think of conversation I increasingly think of *overhearing*. Recall Gene Hackman in Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Conversation*. Hackman’s character—Harry Caul—is a professional wiretapper whose obsessive records of conversations are haunted by the possibility of fatal consequences. One job may have cost a man his life; another job, the one underway during the film, may prevent another man’s death. The film, which won the Palme d’Or at Cannes in May 1974, was a fortuitous echo of the Watergate Scandal that came to a boil in the summer months of the same year—a political event that churned around the *overhearing* of conversations, thereby accentuating wiretapping as an invaluable political tool—provided that one does not get caught. Richard “Tricky Dick” Nixon was the unlucky Republican president who did get caught, and he was nearly impeached for indiscriminately wiretapping the conversations of his opponents in the Democratic Party during their convention at the Watergate Hotel in Washington. Nixon and Henry Kissinger, his Secretary of State, also compulsively recorded their own conversations; understanding that what is said seemingly “off the record” is often of the greatest political consequence. The recordings of their secret and semi-secret conversations, many of which took place between 1971 and 1973, are now available online. Just as they hold the potential to reveal the truths of policy and power, so too do they paint a general picture of a cynical political era that saw a fundamental transformation in the popular conception of conversation as not only something that shapes and reflects values—of wit, pleasure and elegance, of time well spent—but also as information, tangible evidence, something to be placed before the Law.



Harry Caul is
an invader of privacy.
The best in the business.
He can record
any conversation
between two people
anywhere.

So far,
three people are dead
because of him.

The Directors Company presents

GENE HACKMAN
in
"THE CONVERSATION"

Co-starring JOHN CAZALE · ALLEN GARFIELD · CINDY WILLIAMS · FREDERIC FORREST

Music scored by **DAVID SHIRE** · Co-producer **FRED ROOS** · Written, Produced and Directed by **FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA**

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SOME MATERIAL MAY NOT BE
SUITABLE FOR PRE-TEENAGERS

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"THE CONVERSATION"

The Conversation, film poster.

To be sure, spies and other lucky listeners had overheard conversations for centuries and used them for political gain, but it was only with the increasingly rampant wiretapping of the Cold War era that words could be spoken “for the record” without the speakers’ knowledge or willingness. Hence *everything* you said could be used against you. And this has come to beg the question: How do we watch what we say as a result? Have we become more cautious, even paranoid, about how we break a silence, less able to test our radical ideas in the open—all because there is a greater chance of the record of such conversations coming back to haunt us, even once we have changed our minds? If so, the amount of willfully recorded and also scripted conversations—and their recent proliferation in the art world—becomes particularly curious. Artur Żmijewski’s video for Documenta 12, *Oni* [They] which synthesized an entire body of behavioral research about wordless conversations among Polish artists of his and earlier generations; Falke Pisano’s script for *A Sculpture Turning into a Conversation*, performed on occasion with Will Holder; Gerard Byrne’s re-enactments of printed interviews from past decades, such as *Homme à Femmes (Michel Debrane)*, based on Catherine Chaine’s 1977 interview with Sartre about women, or *1984 and Beyond*, which restages a speculative volley between futurologist writers such as Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke, and Robert Heinlein; and Rainer Ganahl’s continuous photographic documentation of talks and symposia—these examples only scratch the surface, highlighting the most formalized instances, which may not always involve something to be heard, but always offer a view onto conversation. But there are also conversations that seemingly replace other ways of showing art, examples of which I will come to shortly. All this is to say that, in the realm of contemporary art, we do not seem to be watching what we say in terms of holding back. Rather, we may be increasingly interested in considering the aesthetics of people talking together.

But what to make of the sheer volume of conversation in art? It may be that, in our hyper-communicative world, any record of a person’s speech is just a droplet in an ocean of such taped talk. In this kind of “infinite conversation” it might in fact be the volume that counts. Is the idea to talk more so as to turn the droplet into a weightier drop, maybe even a “new wave”? If so, it remains to be seen whether a shared horizon of social change grounds many of the artistic and curatorial projects that have taken up conversation as a subject and form of late.

The most convincing arguments regarding the rise of discursive activity point to its foundational relation with a kind of informal education that allows for various, often oral and communal means of transmitting knowledge and shaping thoughts and values. All this is happening as education in the humanities and the arts experiences ever-greater pressures to standardize its approaches, especially in Europe under the Bologna Process. In response, there arises a growing need for a heterodox educational exchange that allows new information, and (especially) the type of knowledge that cannot even be quantified as information, to flow more easily. It has been noted that this expansion blurs the boundaries between educational time and free time, or that it secretly hopes to erase the category of work time as an isolated activity. The expansion and cultivation of minds must not be restricted to a few years at school, after which the professional life follows; rather, these activities constitute the (necessarily constant) “care of the self”—a concept from Ancient Greek philosophy resuscitated by Foucault. The more I think about it, the more important it becomes to reactivate the category of the *aesthetic* in this context as a frame of mind that combines education and pleasure, that does not reduce knowledge to information, and, perhaps most problematically, that grounds the faculty of judgment in categories that are difficult to set in stone—often requiring conversations and debates to bring these to life.

Elaborating on the care of the self in a lecture on *parrhesia*, or fearless speech, Foucault underscores the need to step back, not so much to judge oneself, but to practice an “aesthetics of the self.” The distinctions he draws between aesthetics and judgment are lucid, and help to clarify the spirit in which I am proposing that an “art of conversation” may be aesthetically conceived and practiced:

“The truth of the self involves, on the one hand, a set of rational principles which are grounded in general statements about the world, human life, necessity, happiness, freedom, and so on, and, on the other hand, practical rules for behaviour. And the question which is raised in these different exercises is oriented towards the following problem: Are we familiar enough with these rational principles? Are they sufficiently well-established in our minds to become practical rules for our everyday behaviour? And the problem of memory is at the heart of these techniques, but in the form of an attempt to remind ourselves of what we have done, thought, or felt so that we may reactivate our rational principles, thus making them as permanent and as effective as possible in our life. These exercises are part of what we could call an “aesthetics of the self.” For one does not have to take up a position or role towards oneself as that of a judge pronouncing a verdict. One can comport oneself towards oneself in the role of a technician, of a craftsman, of an artist, who from time to time stops working, examines what he is doing, reminds himself of the rules of his art, and compares these rules with what he has achieved thus far.”

Foucault’s notion of aesthetics might be applied to conversation as much as to the self. But in the former case, it needs to be understood dialectically—within a notion of conversation that is as much the *means* of constructing an aesthetics as it is the *object* of this stepping back. Such a double role complicates critical distance. And what is at stake is not some conclusive verdict on what it means to have a conversation, but a continual grasping at what has been accomplished (what can be seen and said) and what else needs to be crafted through an infinitely interrupted speech. When we step back for a moment from a conversation, there arises a golden opportunity to catch something of the strange knowledge it produces.

If the catch here is to sense things anew and (as Foucault would have us consider) to perceive the truth of a situation, such perception is (ironically) often reserved for the uneducated. Recall the small child in Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, who is the only one able to cry out the truth about the emperor. Parading a purely discursive wardrobe through town, the sovereign is too afraid to admit that he cannot see the “nothing” under discussion as his finest clothes. In a perfect premonition of the dematerialized art object, Andersen describes how the elaborate descriptions offered by two tricksters, conjuring clothes so fine they are invisible to the riff-raff, gains the support of the king’s ministers who dare not contradict their king or, worse still, betray their arbitrary authority by admitting to seeing nothing. They keep up the appearance by elaborating the descriptions in conversation. This conversation upholds the regime. The fact that it takes a child to cry out the simple truth that the emperor has no clothes aligns with a moral habit of sorts: it used to be the aim of art education to get adults to challenge the status quo by thinking like children, *again*. (Consider Paul Klee before WWII and COBRA afterwards, or Rafie Lavie at the Israeli Pavilion in this year’s Venice Biennale). Now the game is different. In an information economy, the power of discourse to shape the world gives conversation ever more complex and concrete potential. And the question becomes how to employ conversation as a medium.

And if conversation can be a medium, it is also increasingly subject to mediation. This childlike, unmediated view gives way to another fantasy: a neutral or *other* perspective. The plurality of conversation—made up of so many interruptions—may forge a complex neutral space. And, currently, the roaming eye of a film or video camera still seems to embody this neutrality with lenses that have carried the mantle of truth since their inception; to a lesser extent, the still photograph or the electronic sound recording could be trusted. Hence the proliferating documents of conversational activity in art may be understood as carving out

that neutral space of conversation—an aesthetic means of stepping back. Put differently, there seems to be a hope that the increasing number of intersections of conversation and recording technologies may produce a point of reflection that teaches us what we cannot perceive when we are *in the middle of* such a discursive event.

Thus immersion is, paradoxically, part and parcel of the stepping back. I do not think, moreover, that the obsession with documentation becomes strongest amongst those driving some radical and absolute social change. Rather, it seems most logical for those who see themselves as the guardians of a living history, which may not be popular or part of the most widely taught curriculum—the most visible reality—but nevertheless exists. This history may be forged in parallel with official records; i.e. it is interested in continuing and perhaps refining *aspects of* the status quo. If there is any hope of social change at stake, another notion of revolution haunts it—one that assures the *continuation* of a minor history. The flourishing of a documentary impulse for keeping records then becomes competitive. This is less about turning things upside down than it is about keeping the proverbial wheels turning, ensuring that “we” survive.

Quiet as It’s Kept

“I can’t believe we’re not filming this!” whispered a friend of mine recently, during the final (and the most polyphonic and animated) of three symposia entitled “The Rotterdam Dialogues: The Critics, The Curators, The Artists” held recently at the Witte de With, where I work as the head of publications. The entirety of the three events was recorded for sound only—a self-conscious wiretapping that nevertheless excluded numerous exchanges in the corridors, or at the bar, or in the back of the gallery spaces that were converted into stages for panels and dialogues. These offstage sites may have been where the “real” conversations took place. Certainly for me, this friend’s whispered comment was crucial and will likely filter into the official talk about how Witte de With will shape a book from these comings together that cannot be fully re-presented. Granted, it would have taken a Cold War mentality to record all of the pertinent exchanges in full. For now, it is up to the people who attended the symposia to allow their most valuable conversations to continue to do their work after the event.

There was a discussion in New York City, in 1968,
on the idea of Time.



Signed:

Ian Wilson

In light of this work of witnessing, I wonder what would have happened had we insisted on cutting *all* electronic recording devices and committed ourselves more consciously to the role of living archives? I have also wondered for some time about what is being kept silent by the presence of cameras at numerous discursive events that I have attended or helped organize recently. Would something different be shared were there no cameras rolling, were the sound recorders turned off? In thinking this, I am inspired by the example of an artist like Ian Wilson who, over the course of the past forty-one years, has organized specific, meticulously framed discussions, which always take place *in camera*, but without cameras or other recording devices that could transmit the proceedings to those who did not attend. The only thing that remains, if the work is collected, is a certificate stating that a discussion has taken place (and when and where). This certificate is only produced if the work is bought, not if it is presented without purchase, as has been the case on occasion. The gesture of generating a certificate thus intersects specifically and somewhat paradoxically with the money economy: on the one hand, there is the implication that money cannot buy the real heart of the work, the experience of the discussion which could be made available, albeit at a remove, were an index created; on the other hand, the commodification of a discussion does ensure that a paper record of its having taken place exists for posterity. A discussion is only visible if it involves the exchange of currency. People who come across such a record forty years after the event will wonder—I certainly did—what precisely was said when this discussion took place in New York in 1968? The administrative blankness of the small typed notes holds a great, almost conspiratorial promise. Adding to this is the artist's conduct: Wilson never divulges the details of the discussions he organizes; he prefers to talk about the structure and the larger frames of the project. He honors a shared secret that only those present can fully enjoy and remember.

Having only ever been *outside* an Ian Wilson discussion, and as someone who encountered first a certificate and then sought out the artist himself, I wonder about entering this structure. Would my attention—especially my sight and hearing—be more acute at such an event due to its elaborate frames and the lack of a camera? Or—without the distractions of snapping pictures, the worry that some recording device is out of batteries, or the carelessness that comes from knowing that you can come back to what is said via a recording—would I forget about remembering and be fully present at the event once and for all?



Brian Jungen, *Talking Sticks*, 2005.

Recently, I tried to test these questions in the course of a public conversation that I was invited to at the Western Front in Vancouver. Jonah Lundh and Candice Hopkins had asked me to elaborate upon my interest in thinking through what it might mean to consider conversation as an art today; hence the occasion had something of the *mise en abyme* about it. The audience was made up largely of friends, so it seemed especially necessary to make things a little ceremonial, a little strange. I borrowed a *Talking Stick* made by Brian Jungen from a friend who had been given this work—one of several baseball bats that Jungen had had router-carved with archly ironic slogans alluding to the simultaneous embrace and disempowerment of First Nations cultures in Canada. Jungen often “misuses” sports equipment in his art, and I have always fantasized about misusing this particular work of his in turn; that is to say, I wanted to take the art object, which is usually presented with a “Do Not Touch” sign, and simply use it. In this case, misusing it meant to use it *literally*. In the course of our public discussion, we ended up passing the carved baseball bat around, going through the motions of an idea of oral culture that we could hardly access, the systematic persecution of such practices in Canada having broken much of the continuity that ensures

the life and survival of storytelling. Nonetheless, this very physical thing in the midst of the dematerialized space of conversation did somehow render material the movement of ideas around the room, even as it all remained rather theatrical, especially since everything was wired for sound, and a camera looked me right in the eye as I sat at the head of the room.

This tension between the logic of oral culture and the logic of recording gatherings and conversations seemed to be working against the spirit of what I had intended, and at some point I insisted on switching off the camera and the sound recorder that had been rigged up in the room. In my mind, and some who were there may disagree, the moment the recording devices were unplugged, another kind of electricity also faded away. The performative flair of many people's utterances dissipated and there was a lot of straight talk, mostly about the naïveté of my gesture. Judy Radul—an artist and onetime poet who performed live at the Western Front and who has shifted her focus to experiments with the roles cameras play, especially in defining space as mechanisms of law and sovereignty—was most adamant in reminding me that, were it not for the people who bothered to turn *on* the cameras and other recording devices in the very room where we sat, much of what has been called the “whispered” history of art in Vancouver would have been lost. This is a history of media experimentation, persona formation, poetry, music, and other variants of the living arts that have received much less historical attention than what is known internationally as the “Vancouver School of Photography.” She also pointed out that cameras have the uncanny ability to capture the non-verbal aspects of conversation, especially the incredible power of—and here she stopped speaking for what seemed like eternity, though it was probably less than a minute—silence. The next day, Hopkins and I discussed how Radul's long silence had brought the electricity back into the room and how we regretted not capturing it on camera. This is partly why I am writing about it, but only a camera could have fully represented this strange interruption. Subsequently, my ears have since been more attuned to such silences.

And recently (midway through writing this text, in fact), I had an encounter with a self-declared silence in the form of a conversation—a kind of non-work (or maybe a meta-work?)—in the midst of an exhibition by Oskar Dawicki at Raster in Warsaw. This took the form of a typed-out text, simply pinned on the doors dividing the two exhibition spaces of the prewar Warsaw apartment-turned-gallery. It is entitled “I have never made a work about the Holocaust,” and in it Łukasz Gorczyca—who founded Raster—questions Dawicki about this pronouncement and another conversation the artist had with Zbigniew Libera. We read about Libera's concerns regarding the reductive approaches to the subject. Artist and curator further discuss feeling called upon to address the Holocaust, particularly in Poland, and the simultaneous impossibility of creating something that preserves an artwork's integrity—that is, its autonomy—in relation to this subject. Here conversation performs a limit by paradoxically speaking a type of silence. Adorno and Wittgenstein haunt the text, especially Adorno's assertion that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz. But I'm interested in how this impossibility bears on the other, more properly autonomous works in the exhibition, which grant the conversation the status of something on the edge of art making—something that is done when making work is impossible.

This brings me to another conversation I would like to discuss—and I realize I am employing a rather loose definition of the term “conversation,” allowing it to hold together various forms of discourse; as may be clear by now, in each case my defining criteria involve interruptions by means of silence and a shaky claim to the status of art. The conversation in question is in fact twice removed from (what I'll dare to call) “a natural state”: not only is it a staged trial (and therefore another kind of meta-conversation), but it is also a record of this staged event—a very purposeful document that used several cameras, and was strongly manipulated in its editing into a film. We might say that art has been made of a conversation,

which was a kind of performance art in the first place. Yet this artfulness is particular in that the film never really asserted itself as gallery art, but was rather distributed on the festival circuit and left open to various classifications.

I am thinking here of Hila Peleg's *A Crime Against Art*, a film which is based on an eponymous mock trial staged at the 2007 ARCO Art Fair in Madrid. The charge: collusion with the bourgeoisie. Here again, silence speaks volumes about a very current taboo, but one that has been with us for centuries. There is a lot to say about how this film captures a particular network within the art world, and how it articulates positions, constructs contradictions, and crafts a subtle comedy. But I will concentrate on one decisive detail of the cross-examination. Asked directly whether he considers himself to be a member of the bourgeoisie, the defendant blankly stares just shy of the camera's dead center and remains silent for a moment worthy of a Harold Pinter play. At this point, it is difficult to tell what he is thinking, but this interruption in the communicative exchange lets viewers consider the question in some detail. And (perhaps depending on whether you've read your Blanchot or not) you might say that this is precisely where the real conversation begins. By the time the answer yes is uttered—an effective admission of “guilt”—the binary code of yes/no has been filled with the neutrality of saying nothing. The cinematically amplified silence refreshes the question of class at a time when the charge that artists are affecting bourgeois norms—gentrifying neighborhoods, making more money than is good for them, and so on—is becoming something of a staple (a self-congratulatory one, as well) in art-related discourse. Here we get to the neutral ground of non-judgment that keeps a question alive.

Nothing Gold Can Stay

The moral of the story is thus temporary and tentative: maybe we need to think more about what class is, as well as which one we (want to) belong to. Considering that we are only “we” because we share values, and therefore can continue to create things that will prove valuable for us to exchange, it would be interesting to ask to what extent this creation and exchange of value is understood as a situation in which the sole or most important currency is money. In thinking this, readers might keep in the back of their minds a couple of conversations painted (so as to be watched, but not heard?) by Antoine Watteau during a time of growing confusion surrounding the ruling classes: *Le Pèlerinage à l'île de Cythère* [The Pilgrimage to the Island of Cythera] from 1717 and *L'Enseigne de Gersaint* [Gersaint's Sign] from 1720–1721, both of which hang today in the Schloss Charlottenburg in Berlin. In thinking further through the *currency* of conversation, it seems crucial to ask what values are both created and traded in the course of contemporary conversations. What interruptions are admitted and which ones are yet to be registered?



Antoine Watteau, *Le Pèlerinage à l'île de Cythère* [*The Pilgrimage to the Island of Cythera*], 1717.

A caveat (rich in irony): I'm writing this on a train from Warsaw to Berlin, and I've just been interrupted by a very polite Polish man who distributes language books abroad and is passionate about collecting coins and about the treatment of "our" people in Germany—Austria and Switzerland are better, he assures me, even though everyone speaks German there too. "As long as a German is your boss, he or she will be nice to you. If it's the opposite, well . . ." This is irritating—I don't want to think about collectible coins but about a wholly different kind of currency. And I'm weary of his notion of the "we." I thought of telling him that he is paranoid and that we all need to think less about nations and more about cities, better still about *civitas*. But I've decided to interrupt our conversation with my silence. I'm fully focused on my screen now, though I continue to think: whose interruption would I value at this moment? Here comes the German conductor—I hope she's nice so my neighbor has no base on which to build his biases!

The cinematic silence of one accused of collusion with the bourgeoisie may be the base for thinking about how conversation has everything to do with the construction of social class—especially one that is still difficult to name. I say "class" rather than "community" because the word resonates with key allusions, and it is also in danger of losing some of its *punctum*. The question of whether a class is being constructed by virtue of the co-presence of certain people at certain conversations and not others is perhaps only interesting if that notion of class escapes easy classification. Rather than advocating a return to Marxist dogma, I am

thinking of something that hovers somewhere between two more particular senses of the term. One is employed by Diedrich Diederichsen at the end of his essay *On (Surplus) Value in Art*:

“Previously, the bourgeoisie was a stable, cultural class that had its place at the center of cultural production, which it regulated by means of a mixture of free-market attitudes and subsidies, staging its own expression as both a ruling class and a life force that stood in need of legitimation. The bourgeoisie is now fragmenting into various anonymous economic profiteers who no longer constitute a single, cultural entity. For most economic processes, state and national cultural formations are no longer as crucial for the realization of economic interests as they were previously. As a result, the bourgeoisie, as a class that once fused political, economic, and cultural power, is becoming less visible. Instead, the most basic economic factors are becoming autonomous. Once these factors become autonomous, the obligation towards cultural values that even the worst forms of the culture industry kept as standards, disappears.”

The notion of class cannot be understood primarily in economic terms, Diederichsen reminds us, especially when we think of the “ruling class” and even if we think that money rules the world these days. Once money becomes the only currency that people trade in, the ruling class disappears. Conversely, it might be said that members of a specific class develop mechanisms for appearing to each other, and at a certain moment this can be called a shared aesthetics or a shared worldview. But we might ask: does watching what we say mark this process in its formation? And this brings up the other, more literal sense of class: namely, people who learn things together. If emphasis is placed on coming together to converse and to trade valuable information, what can then be seen in the process of many such activities is the construction of a style of living and a set of values that can only be exchanged by those who not only have read the same books, but who are also able to embody their knowledge and its most interesting limits.

The idea of knowledge as something that only a good conversation can transmit is inherited in part from the aristocracy, a class that did not distinguish between art and life, or not as much as we do. Interestingly, aristocrats only began to obsess about the subtleties of conversation, as they grew closer to losing their claims to a divine right to rule. In *Watteau's Painted Conversations*, Mary Vidal writes about aristocratic notions of conversation in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France as a “disguised, diluted, non-bourgeois type of education.” Sound familiar? Accused of an instrumental approach to all knowledge, the bourgeoisie was feared for promoting a trade in information that could be institutionally/democratically taught, which for the aristocrats amounted to an unnatural knowledge. Vidal argues that what Watteau depicts in his paintings is never the content of the conversations as something distinct from their form—never the pointed, instructional gestures of a Gainsborough painting that exaggerate things so as to render them readable, even to the (morally) unschooled. Rather, their secret knowledge is always embedded—a set of values (elegance, harmony with nature) is expressed in paintings that espouse those very values and posit conversation as an art of living. Vidal makes a strong case for considering the “naturalness” of the corseted aristocrats that Watteau painted in terms of being “God-given” and full of grace—something that might escape a contemporary (secular) eye which looks for naturalness in wildness or the absence of technology. The paintings are strange to us, perhaps because they do not reflect our values, but they are also somewhat *unheimlich* insofar as they point to the contemporary representation of conversation as the potential for creating a set of values, a common currency, a kind of network.

There is great interest nowadays in representing networks. The recent disclosure by the makers of Facebook that they will not fully delete records of their users—even those who choose to deactivate their accounts—underscores a somewhat paranoid logic that potentially preys on friendship as a mapping of consumers that lead to more consumers. It is with this in the back of my mind that I look at both of Watteau’s aforementioned paintings. The shop sign in the form of a painting was made for the art dealer Edme-François Gersaint and shows people evaluating and appreciating other paintings. The mass and mobility of these pictures—which are no longer attached to castle or church walls (as was customary for major commissions until about the 15th century), but can be packed in a crate (as shown on the left) and shipped to hang in anyone’s home—are a source of titillation. This early picture of the art market makes a point of exhibiting conversation as a basis of the market transaction. In some ways, conversation is the real value being exchanged; or it might be said that conversations arise in the places where value must be negotiated.



Antoine Watteau, *L'Enseigne de Gersaint* [*Gersaint's Sign*], 1720-1721.

Sure, I am reading into the picture—speculating, projecting, appreciating it in a way that might not be appreciated by scholars—but I do see a speculative sense of value in *L'Enseigne de Gersaint* that may account for the greater sense of tension in this image—greater even than is perceptible in Watteau’s earlier depiction of a pilgrimage to the Island of Cythera, the ludicrously lovely dwelling place of Aphrodite. If the earlier painting is gratuitously graceful—to my eyes at least—the heavenly element (embodied by the putti in the background of *Le Pèlerinage à l’île de Cithère*) is gone from the shop sign (and perhaps this is the reason for the midsummer melancholia of the embarkation). I’ll even play a little faster and looser with art history still, and posit that perhaps this grace has been replaced by another “other” in the very front of the picture—a dog that is quite obviously not taking part in

the conversations at Gersaint's shop. Since "dog" only spells "god" backwards in English, it is unlikely that Watteau was thinking in the same vein—seeing divinity in an animal and thus a true "other" to converse with—but even in French they say "*Le bon Dieu est dans le détail*," and this one needs some attention.

I've always been told that dogs in paintings are code for some abstract notion of "loyalty," but this one's not very convincing. If anything, he denaturalizes the entire scene. And if the dog refuses to play his allegorical part, his presence on the edge of the frame may be pointing to the fact that the pictures are *framed*, movable, and thus of continually reframed value. Looking at that oddly placed dog in Watteau's painted conversation, I wonder how *we* fit into this picture. On a couple of occasions, I have heard Martha Rosler confront her interlocutors in a public forum with the problem of forgetting about bohemia. For her, the staginess of conversations nowadays has evacuated some of the fun and much of the real political force from what she experienced when people gathered together in the sixties and seventies. But the real problem seems to be a kind of waning of a particular class-consciousness—a sense of common values involving a self-imposed poverty for the sake of other riches. Maybe Watteau's dog is a budding bohemian, or better still Diogenes, the "dog philosopher" who, when asked by Alexander the Great if the admiring Omnipotent could grant him any wish, any riches, simply requested that the emperor get out of his sun. The question of class might become more interesting if we begin to ask ourselves whether it is not just bohemia, but the middle class, that is being eclipsed—and with what. The other (increasingly urgent) question of what we are currently projecting onto animals will have to wait for another time, another conversation.

Taken from *e-flux 2009 #7 [06/2009]*

Recording and Documentation

As previously stated, most conversations on location for the duration of *HOIC* shall be recorded and transcribed. However, only the recordings and transcriptions of the scheduled events will be made publicly available on hoursofidleconversation.wordpress.com.

All recordings and documentation exist to allow a second study of the conversations, an evaluation, as well as allowing an opportunity to move the conversations beyond the bounds of their initial participants.

Unlike previous projects, such as nottoocritical.wordpress.com, recordings and transcriptions will take on the form of a material. Becoming subject to editing, manipulation and/or repurposing. Please contact me personally if you have any queries regarding this, details are available via the *HOIC* Wordpress.

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14th June 1700 - 2100
15th & 16th June 1000 – 1600
17th - 19th June 1000 – 1800

Holden Gallery
Grosvenor Building
Cavendish Street
Manchester School of Art
M15 6BH