

Monika Szewczyk
**Art of
Conversation,
Part II**

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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.¹

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.

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

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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.

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



Signed:

Ian Wilson

Ian Wilson, *Discussion Note*.

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.² 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.³ 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.⁴

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 animated⁵) 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

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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.

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.⁶ 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

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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



Brian Jungen, *Talking Sticks*, 2005.

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?

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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.”⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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

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

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.¹³ 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.

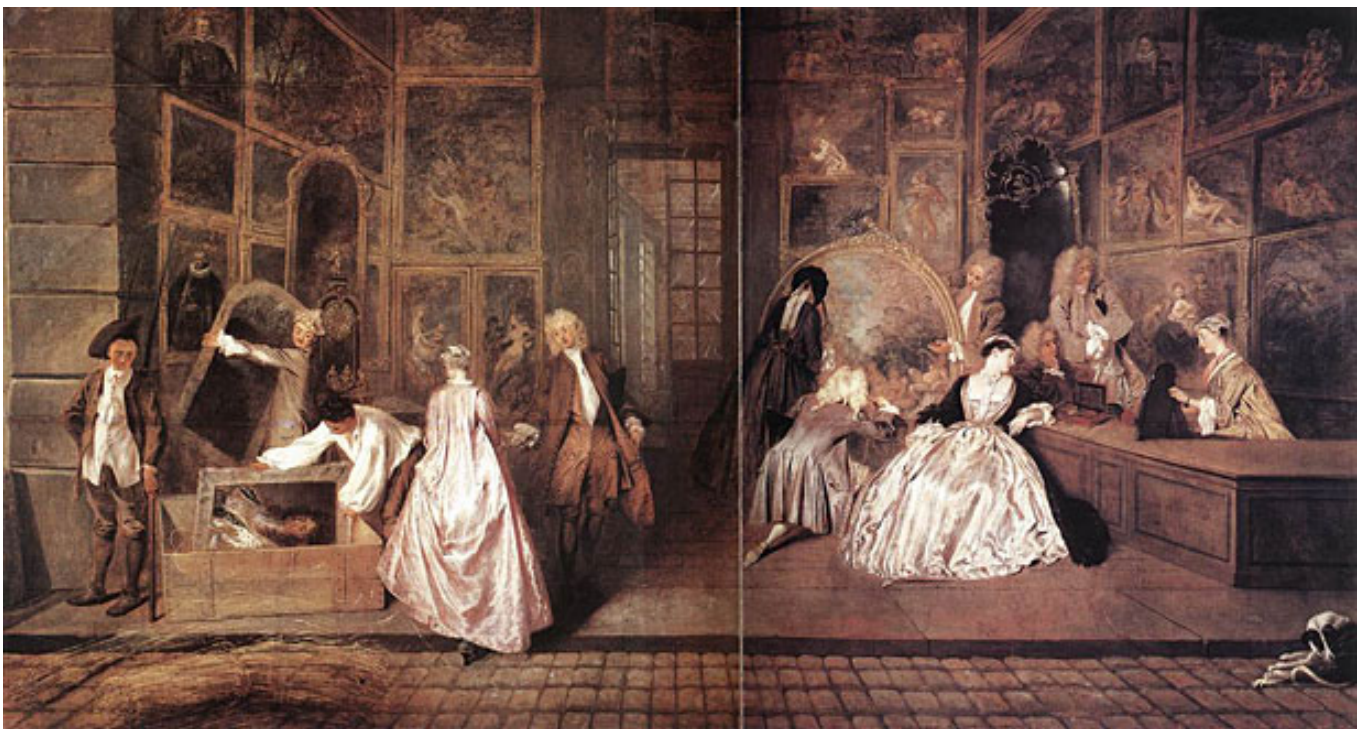
I am thinking here of Hila Peleg’s *A Crime Against Art*, a film which is based on an eponymous mock trial staged at the 2007 ARCO Art Fair in Madrid. The charge: collusion with the bourgeoisie. Here again, silence speaks volumes about a very current taboo, but one that has been with us for centuries. 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

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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.¹⁴ 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



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

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 Cithère* [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?

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*.¹⁵ 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 Diederich 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.¹⁶

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.”¹⁷ 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.

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.¹⁸ 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 Cythère*) 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.¹⁹ 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.

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Art of Conversation, Part II

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Part I of this ongoing essay, published in *e-flux journal* #3, worked through Maurice Blanchot's notion of conversation developed in his polyphonous book *The Infinite Conversation*, ed. and trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). It focuses particularly on Blanchot's idea of conversation as interrupted thought and speech; and on genuine interruption as coming from *autrui*, or "the other." Blanchot's notion of *autrui*, which is somewhat enigmatic and radically open, posits silence as a key form of interruption and a space of neutrality. Thus conversational interlocutors that greet us with silence – such as God, animals, and finally a rock (as these are found in certain films, artworks, and poetry) – featured prominently in the text. Further following Blanchot's notion that *true conversation* is shaped by the profound silence of the other, which is always understood beyond binary opposition, Part I posed the question of whether what currently passes for conversation is really that. The question may never be resolved, but is likely to spur the continuation of this multi-part essay infinitely, without end or a clear horizon.

2
Thanks to Michał Woliński for noting Żmijewski's legacy recently.

3
Though this is not to say that this is what Blanchot meant with the title of his eponymous book!

4
See Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), 165–166.

5
As audience participation matched the engagement of the invited speakers.

6
I have never attended one of Wilson's discussions so cannot elaborate on their content, but what I know from meeting the artist is that the crafting of a discussion is of great importance, and that the absence of all recording devices makes for an atmosphere that puts a much greater emphasis on participation and the role of each participant as a witness to an event. The task of memory could here be taken as primary. Or, given the inability to remember perfectly, one could completely give oneself over to participation and let

oneself then be the evidence of what took place by virtue of any transformation of the person.

7
Jonah Lundh is a freelance curator developing a program of conversations for this artist-run center, and Candice Hopkins is the curator of exhibitions there.

8
As can be seen in the photograph, Jungen's *Talking Sticks* are usually displayed to emphasize their relation to the sports equipment they are made from – baseball bats. But in the context of his work, which often takes up questions of First Nations identity and its commercialization in North American sports culture, they are often seen to echo totem poles (at the size they might be made for the tourist industry). Having worked with Jungen at the time he developed these carvings, I do recall discussions of their formal relation to the kind of carved staffs, which are often decorated with First Nations motifs and paraded at official functions by the Lieutenant Governor of the province of British Columbia (the Queen's representative) or the presidents of the universities in Vancouver. Each time, such objects slyly enact a kind of transfer of sovereignty from the First Nations, which never took place legally and continues to be a point of debate.

9
See *Whispered Art History: Twenty Years at the Western Front*, ed. Keith Wallace (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002).

10
What you are reading now was added towards the end of writing this text, but it seemed right to interrupt myself in this context.

11
Recall Libera's highly controversial *LEGO Concentration Camp* (1996), which was recently purchased by the Jewish Museum in New York.

12
This is not the first instance in which Dawicki has used conversation as a form of meta-art to stress impossibility or refusal. In his earlier work with the members of the artists' "supergroup" Azorro (*supergroup* in the sense that each artist also has an

independent practice), entitled *Everything has been done* (2003), a conversation expresses the impossibility of making certain works of conceptual art quite simply because they have already been conceived. But in the case of the current work about the difficulty of addressing the Holocaust in art, the tone is very different. The conversation is situated amidst works that deal much more symbolically with the search for knowledge, failure, death, and palliatives, using a variety of neo-conceptual pictorial media (and one soft-sculpture consisting of the artist's clothes, tied together to form an escape line out the window of the gallery). Ironically, this conversation about strategic silence was totally missed by a reviewer in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, who took time to mention every other work in the exhibition. See Dorota Jarecka, "Przegrywamy do Końca" *Gazeta Wyborcza*, May 28, 2009, 14.

13

The structural undercurrents of conversation in court proceedings and the construction of judgments in particular are explored in a recent single-channel video work by Judy Radul: a seemingly natural conversation that turns out to be completely constructed on the basis of the three elements announced in its title: *Question, Answer, Judgment* (2008).

14

Those who have seen the film may know that the defendant happens to be one of the editors of this journal, Anton Vidokle. And I am as aware that my text may be read as an act of collusion (with those already accused of collusion!) as I am interested in forging a way to speak from within such conditions of complicity. In eschewing the fiction of critical distance, it might be possible to think through more complex notions of thinking critically, not only about dead or distant figures, but also about the people we tend to have conversations with and the very conditions we are immersed in.

15

Interestingly, in a recent review of Vidokle's activities by Taraneh Fazeli in the Summer 2009 issue of *Artforum* titled "Class Consciousness," the focus is not awareness of social class – rather the title alludes to the educational activities of e-flux, which are discussed in terms of social consciousness, but not in terms of class.

16

Diedrich Diederichsen, "On (Surplus) Value in Art," ed. Nicolaus Schafhausen, Caroline Schneider, and Monika Szewczyk (Rotterdam and Berlin: Witte de With Publishers and Sternberg Press, 2008), 48.

17

Mary Vidal, *Watteau's Painted Conversations: Art, Literature and Talk in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 95. Thanks to Søren Andreasen for recommending this fascinating book.

18

Not that the latter is void of tension. In fact there is some debate about whether the aristocrats are already on the island and finding it difficult to leave, or whether they are about to embark. Regardless of whether the good trip is deferred or coming to an end, the conversationalists are in limbo.

19

One was "The New York Conversations," in June 2008 in the new e-flux space; another was at the above-mentioned "Rotterdam Dialogues: The Artists" at Witte de With, where Rosler was a keynote speaker.

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