

SUNDAY, AUGUST 18, 6:00 P.M.

Session Leader:

MICHAEL BRENSON

Topic:

CONVERSATION

Location:

HEARTFIELD MANOR, 182 ELIZABETH STREET

The conversation took place in a room of a turn-of-the-century, craftsman-style home in Atlanta's historic Inman Park. This intimate setting contains antique furniture, books, and family photographs.

Method of Preparation:

COMPOSTA

On the first evening the food and table setting underlined the concept of "conversations": each dish was constructed of many little parts, built one upon the other. Thus, the method rather than the type of food was important. If conversations are the result of interactions and integration, then the menu for this evening — like ideas into words, words into phrases, phrases into sentences — was created of food in many parts. The table was set with a handmade cotton tablecloth and white ceramic dishes. The meal was placed in the center of the table and shared among the guests according to the time and rhythm of the conversation. The dessert was thought of like a photograph of the group: on the occasion of a dinner among friends, instead of a Polaroid, "Le Faccie di Crema" (plates of pudding with fruit) carried the portraits of the guests.

Menu:

PROSECCO PRIMO FRANCO



**SHISH KEBAB
WITH FRUIT AND CHEESE
FISH AND VEGETABLES
MEAT AND VEGETABLES**



INSALATA DOLCE



INSALATA DI MARE



MACEDONIA



FRAGOLINO BIANCO



"LE FACCIE DI CREMA"



ESPRESSO ILLY



GRAPPA

CONVERSATION

By definition, conversation is a hopeful word. It is an assurance that trust is possible, that listening can be as creative as speaking, that people can be open about their vulnerability and doubt and not be ridiculed or dismissed. The existence of the word suggests that the us-them, insider-outsider mentality, which has been ingrained in art museums and the news media and unwittingly reinforced by theoretical buzzwords like “audience” and “public,” is not inevitable, and that bridges between people are as natural as walls. The currency of expressions like bringing so-and-so “into the conversation,” or initiating a “national conversation” on issues like culture or race, is an indication of the widespread longing for an alternative to the politics of accusation and demonization that have made election campaigns, as well as exchanges about almost every major national issue, demoralizing. For John Dewey, belief in the “possibility of conducting disputes, controversies, and conflicts as co-operative undertakings in which both parties learn by giving the other a chance to express itself, instead of having one party conquer by forceful suppression of the other” was essential to the democratic faith.¹ “To take as far as possible every controversy which arises — and they are bound to arise — out of the atmosphere and medium of force, of violence as a means of settlement, into that of discussion and of intelligence,” Dewey wrote in “Creative Democracy,” “is to treat those who disagree — even profoundly — with us as those from whom we may learn, and in so far, as friends.” For Primo Levi, who struggled for forty years to grasp the lessons and meanings of Auschwitz, where he had witnessed perhaps the ultimate consequences of demonization, discussion was essential to progress and justice. In *Facing the Extreme*, subtitled *Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, Tsvetan Todorov makes a passionate argument against the Manichaenism that gives license to the most sinister discrimination and brutality, and for the value, even when one has little or no stomach for it, of communication. Discussing a courageous and necessary book that grew out of interviews between British journalist Gitta Sereny and Franz Stengel, a Nazi she abhorred, Todorov writes: “To talk *with* someone rather than *about* him implies that I recognize a commonality with that person even if my words are incompatible in meaning with his.”²

Conversation is fundamental. It is part of the machinery of culture, of society, of the self. It stretches the imagination and makes it possible to envisage new narratives at the end of a century in which some of the most controlling master narratives have collapsed. It shapes almost everyone’s notion — or dream — of friendship and family. It shapes the creative visions of musicians, poets, community leaders, and politicians. It is not just actual conversations that are decisive. Artists of all kinds establish imaginary conversations with other artists within their work. I cannot imagine the process of thinking apart from conversation. The way I work out an essay or lecture always involves

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John Dewey, “Creative Democracy — The Task Before Us,” in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953: The Later Works*, vol. 14 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 224.

2

The book is Sereny’s *Into That Darkness*. Stangl was the former commandant of both Sobibor and Treblinka. See Tsvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996), 279.

women than from men. It comes more from those who feel their realities have been silenced or repressed. It comes more from groups trying to be heard than from those in power. You don't hear conservatives like Jesse Helms, Dick Armev, or Hilton Kramer, who are convinced they possess the truth and have no intention of allowing it to be challenged, expressing a hunger for conversation. People in power on the Left as well as the Right may be reluctant to exchange feelings and thoughts if they feel they and only they have something to lose in the conversation. While on assignment for *The Times*, I found from time to time that people who worked for institutions I was visiting experienced my conversational manner, which seemed to me perfectly natural, as a violation, as putting them on the spot; to converse was to be exposed, and if they were going to express themselves openly, even on subjects that seemed to me inconsequential, they had to be certain I would respect their vulnerable positions. Conversation can certainly be a means of exploitation or repression. We all know people who have skillfully adopted controlling conversational styles as ways of *preventing* genuine communication from taking place. We all know institutional authorities who attempt to draw those who oppose their policies into conversation not in order to respond to their grievances but as a way of neutralizing them. I'm sure that the benevolent missionary approach that made it possible for Christians to violate people different from them and conceal their violence from themselves was conversational.

In short, although the word is wrapped in an aura of reciprocity and acceptance, conversation, as often as not, is a form of manipulation. Many conversations are astonishingly complex mixtures of candor and performance. Most have an agenda determined by the person or the side who initiated it and set the terms. Most, even those as good-natured and free-wheeling as exchanges in locker rooms, car pools, and diners, are extremely conventionalized in ways that make certain kinds of communication possible, but others not. Only in conversations with the most trusted loved ones and friends — and perhaps not even then — can everything that someone may want to say actually be said. Conversations can be disheartening as well as inspiring. Every conversation, even the most liberating, depends upon conventions that people from some backgrounds have an easier time mastering than others. The kind of conversation I will advocate here may be as strange to people of other religions and races as their conventions of conversation may be to me. While the conventions vary from family to family, neighborhood to neighborhood, and culture to culture, however, I strongly believe conversation is so indispensable throughout the world that discussing the idea with citizens of countries as different as, let's say, Senegal, Switzerland, Slovenia, and Brazil would make communication, if not conversation, across cultures possible.

There is little use in condemning stylized or manipulative conversations, or in arguing that some kinds are authentic and others are not. Together they reveal not only the multitude of conversations through which each individual's and each society's awareness is shaped, but also the multitude of conversations that may exist within each conversation. They are clues to the density and difficulty but also to the richness and fluidity of our private and interconnective worlds. There is no unmediated spontaneity. The masters of dialogue in fiction have understood that all conversa-

tions, creative or destructive, empathetic or deceitful, are governed by codes or rules. So have filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray and Eric Rohmer, who have made clear that conversation is an art that has to be understood by anyone wanting to communicate effectively across class and gender, and by so doing to define with maximum clarity his or her place in society. And even the most codified conversations can have beneficial results: conversational rituals like business lunches can demand such attentiveness and style that genuine bonds can be created from them. Functioning well in any industrialized nation, or perhaps anywhere else for that matter, requires respecting that different contexts demand different conversations and being able to maintain the kind of conversation each situation demands.

Once the fundamental importance of conversation has been recognized and the complexity of the word acknowledged, I can define the kind I believe is most valuable, which is the kind I think the majority of the people who came to Atlanta to participate in "Conversations at The Castle" were after. This conversation is informal and flexible. It is driven not by the desire to reinforce entrenched positions but by a need for common probing. It is driven by a belief in the value of attentiveness. Listening not only mobilizes conversation but also makes it a creative force. It gives the potential at each moment for surprise and transformation. It enables participants to feel they are taken seriously even when others disagree with them. As long as the responses resonate with what has just been spoken and heard, there are few limits on what can be expressed, and criticism or questioning will not descend into personal attack. This conversation may have an agenda, but it is one that can be shaped by everyone present. Power is shared. This does not mean that in the course of the exchanges people who have more knowledge and who see some issues more clearly will not have authority over others. However, their influence is earned. What it also means is that the power relationships within the conversation are unstable, that they can shift at any moment, and that imposition of power is not the objective of any participant.

While this kind of exchange of feelings and thoughts is widely understood as being, by its nature, an alternative to violence, it must not exclude the possibility of aggression and conflict. It cannot be conversation at its fullest unless every participant knows he or she has the right to speak openly and, if need be, with anger. Everyone also has the right to speak up without worrying if the others present will find his or her responses stupid. The most sustaining conversations depend as much upon a suspension of judgment as they do upon direct engagement and nuanced concern. They also depend upon a capacity for self-criticism, both within the individual and the group. Participants must be able to hear the challenges to them. While participants in a conversation are not obliged to question its assumptions and justifications, the conversation must be open to analysis at any moment. Just as important, in the most meaningful conversation the burden for success, which in large measure depends upon safeguarding the freedom and confidence of each participant, is accepted by everyone present. This kind of conversation requires responsibility as well as risk and work.

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means. Process becomes product. The conversation becomes a tissue of connectedness that may turn out to be more substantial and enduring than any intellectual resolution it may have achieved. I don't remember who was hired as a result of some of the search committees on which I have served, but I remember vividly those conversational hours in which each person gave himself or herself freely and fully for months. I have no idea what a friend and I spoke about during a long descent down Mount Washington forty years ago, but as a result of the openness and warmth of that dialogue I will always remember the descent and her. In the twenty-five years of my friendship with Jonathan, a Reagan Republican, we never agreed on anything political but talked constantly and freely about almost everything. I never changed his political views and he never changed mine, but our effect on each other was profound, and the intensity and breadth of our conversations sustains me years after his death. The one time Jonathan met Irving, a Marxist and the other closest friend of my adult life, they spoke passionately all evening. What they had in common was curiosity, introspectiveness, suppleness of mind, and a love of intensely engaged conversation. These kinds of exchanges of energy and commitment, of speaking and listening, of reaction and perception, concentrate space and time. They have for me a poetic intensity that is not different in nature from the intensity of my encounters with painting and sculpture.

Conversation, at its fullest, illuminates the aesthetic. It can generate an aesthetic experience that may not be as self-contained and therefore as physical as one's encounters with painting and sculpture, but it can take on a comparable resonance and eventually may inhabit the same region of the imagination. Like the give-and-take between a viewer and a painting or sculpture, conversation of the profoundest kind depends upon and therefore draws out virtues like attentiveness, goodness, generosity, and commitment. It also makes each person who partakes of it feel part of something larger than his or her individual self. Like my experience of a Brancusi sculpture, for example, or of a painting by Malevich or Mondrian, conversation can create a sense of infinite possibility within the here and now. Through conversation, a connection that is worthy of careful investigation can be made between, on one hand, the aesthetic and, on the other hand, the composition and potential of self and culture.

My first model for art was conversational. With van Gogh and Cézanne, the two artists I have loved since my father first took me to The Museum of Modern Art when I was a child, the conversations have been constant. I see their work, it says something to me, I respond, it responds. Over the years my questions change; so do its answers. My conversations with these and many other artists will never end. The idea of art as dialogue — not as the divine spirit or Word being passed down (as in so much of the religious art I also need) but as a mutual exchange — is modernist. It began to shape art during that post-impressionist moment when Cézanne felt the world was no longer knowable through established classifications. It had to be empirically reexamined, seen each day as if from scratch. In Cézanne's paintings, this examination took the form of a sustained poetic conversation in which the process of perceiving, doubting, and recording came to define not only the structure of the painting but also the way it was experienced. Partly because there were

so many layers of conversation in the work's formation, there are many layers of conversation in the response to it. Because of Cézanne the conversational process is part of cubism and everything that comes out of it, including abstract art wherein continuing personal discovery is of paramount importance. Part of the modernist faith was that the conversational exchange built into the experience of art would help bring into being a more open and inventive relationship between individuals and their social and spiritual environments.

Obviously, the modernist model developed in a world very different from the one in which we live. "Conversations at The Castle" was conceived with a full awareness of that model's limits. To me, however, a program constructed around actual conversations in Atlanta between artists from outside the United States and individuals and communities not normally engaged by museum art is not a repudiation of modernism but both a radical critique and extension of it. Many artists who shaped modernism believed in a fundamental link between artistic necessity and human transformation. Many modernists believed that the materials and ways of seeing passed down to them were inadequate to deal with the human and artistic challenges they faced, and that in order to have any chance of maintaining its vitality the past had to be rigorously questioned as it was being assimilated and reimaged. Modernists consistently challenged institutional thinking and interests, in part by taking ever more seriously realities — like those of children, or the working classes, or non-Western cultures — that had been considered superficially, if at all, by Western artists before them.

But modernism went only so far. Only rarely were working-class men and women, men and women from non-Western societies, or young people — not to speak of women and those of African descent — welcomed into the debates about whom art was for, how it could heal and transform, and what it could be. One of the consequences of the culture wars is that many arts professionals now recognize that some of the voices and cultures that helped inspire the modernist imagination constitute audiences with views of art that have little or nothing to do with modernism or with museums, and these are audiences upon which they increasingly depend. Even more challenging to the purpose, if not to the soul of these institutions, many members of these audiences believe that far from wanting to initiate conversations with them, modernism and museums are determined to leave them out. "Conversations at The Castle" was informed by a conviction that art could be available to everyone, and that if it did become a way of building and reinforcing communication among segments of society that have remained largely cut off from one another, both art and democracy would be strengthened. When artistic and curatorial imaginations are applied to the development of interaction among actual people, challenging all participants both to confront real life situations and to transform them through an enhanced communal understanding, conversation is revealed as an activity that is indispensable to an inclusive vision. It is also revealed as an activity that exposes, and therefore makes it easier to develop, connections among the political, the spiritual, and the aesthetic. If there is one need most worth exploring now, it may be conversation.