

TO CONVERSE

‘To converse, it seems, is not only to turn away from saying what, thanks to language, is – the present of a presence. To converse is also to turn language away from itself, maintaining it outside of all unity, outside even the unity of that which is. To converse is to divert language from itself by letting it differ and defer, answering with an always already to a never yet.’¹

“I feel sure we’ve met before... Aren’t you a Maker, spending all your time making-for-art? Perhaps we could have a brief conversation about what you do?”

“... don’t recognise... making... conversing... mutually exclusive...”

“Well surely conversing is just taking a turn together around matters of mutual concern! Doubtless you’re familiar with conversation’s only rule: ‘one at a time’! It would give you a chance to have your say rather than always leaving it to critics, administrators, editors, curators, journalists, academics, or whatever-scribes to put you in your, or rather their, place. I’m certain you could open out a few things about making’s desires for me, for us, after all, as a Maker, you must...”

“... no ‘must’ about it... I... I... I am not... a category... not even an I...”

“No, no, of course not! But for now, here, for me, for us... you could *become*, or at least epitomise, Art’s Body...”

“...never have been, can never be...”

“...no, but just for now...for writing’s, for my, for here’s, *for Art’s*, sake...”

“...well... just as long as you remember that my ‘becoming’ as you call it, is nothing but a differing and deferring...”

“...perhaps we could intertwine your unchallengeable singularity with some frayed typifications, just for the time being...to see if we could move into a space between all those relative fixities common to the contexts of most kinds of art making, and your own unique unwriteable path. If we borrow some of your particularity we may be able to draw a little nearer to, make out, the vague outlines of your making’s necessary obscurity.”

“This particularity, if each making’s broken sequence of disparate actions can be described as such, is not mine to lend. I am as much owned as owner. Do with it what you will! My various I’s and those of other makers are used to appropriation. All you need to remember is that, however you figure me out, I am not and cannot be myself, my several selves, here. If you are trying to write on making’s behalf you will almost certainly end up writing only on your own. If each maker’s tracking is singular there will be an uncrossable gap between your typifications of making’s project and any maker’s making-life.”

¹ Maurice Blanchot, ‘The Writing of the Disaster’, trans.by Ann Smock, University of Nebraska Press, London, 1986, pp. 34-5.

“Yes, I recognise the gap. I can do no more than try to respect it, show it and hover in its in-betweenness.”

“Yet already I feel my selves appearing here as a coherence, as if you need to collect my severals together under and in the name of making as, finally, a one, a process at one with itself. And you want me to stand for that. I can’t speak for all my selves but that’s not how I feel.”

“But isn’t that making’s universal plight wherever it seeks to make its way: the maker’s multiple is gathered up, framed and congealed into a one for the convenience of the representers and, through them, the arts’ eventual respondents. You cannot avoid their categories; they are surely fundamental constituents of your own everyday life to which you have to attend endlessly.”

“Just as they are of *yours*! And they will surely worm their way into this writing in unanticipatable ways. In wanting to stand for, be the voice of making’s singularity you have to make me appear to be a typical case. You are no less trapped than you say I am. If there is no making-as-such, no common high road that all we, by now uncountable, would-be makers share, then your recruitment displays the fundamental flaw in your project. I/We are many – definable and celebrated only in terms of our differences. You should give up.”

“Not until I’ve tried to see if there might be a place-time for discoursing about and for art and your fragmented body that can avoid being immediately placed on one or other side of the supposed ‘practice-theory’ divide. Precisely because, throughout the occident, making (and few making-spots remain anoccidental... perhaps one or two un-navigable enclosures up the Amazon or the Sepik...) has to find ways of coping with the highly organised terms of response to and representation of the arts, it seems probable that making’s many lives are ordered, at least partially, around the dilemmas and paradoxes representation confronts it with. Indeed it may be this very multiplicity that testifies to the arts’ survival instinct in difficult times. Ahead of all judgment, all application of criteria of aesthetic value to its things, making hangs on as and in celebration of its multiplicity. And unless it actively engages with others’ very real and effective representing work the things it makes will be given no place in the culture. To try to make outside the terms of representation is to condemn its things to invisibility and disappearance.”

“Well, naturally, contemporary makers, self-affiliating to Art’s Body, have only come to making by picking ways through the orders of representation you describe. As the supposed epitome of that Body I am no exception. I am happy enough to explore aspects of this situation, this ‘plight’...”

“...plight, yes, a promisingly paradoxical term...”

“...just as long as you accept that together, here, we can never touch making. Conversing will never get it right. Even though we may, for different reasons, disavow something typically characterised as ‘theory’ (as the putative other of ‘practice’) our very entry into writing condemns us to typicality. The tendency of any reading will always be to take us as ‘stand-ins’, ‘representatives’, of a prevalent dualism, Making and Response, Practice and Theory, and of how ‘typically’ these activities go about things.”

“That will indeed be our lot. But in the face of it the challenge is to try to find ways of staying outside the frames, concerns and terms of aesthetic discourse, of gathering the arts’ things through judgments of value which stem from the interests of respondents, of non-makers-for-art. After all it is this gathering-judging work that not only puts art in its place in our culture but also is taken to be the arbiter of its ‘meaning’. Our culture relies on, the specialised discourses of aesthetic judgment for the assigning of value and significance to the arts and their things; it is their concerns, criteria and terms that filter down into everyday life and programme the taken-for-granted ways the arts are allotted a ‘life’, put to work and made to mean. The judgments of aesthetic (and economic) value that constitute the culture’s response to the arts’ things are developed on sites of felt-thought (and eventually of discourse-writing, *of representation*) that are precisely not those of making. In developing their judgments and assessments of the arts’ ‘meaning’, aesthetic discourses focus exclusively on their own concerns; the worlds of making are irrelevant to the construction of judgment. Making is simply something that once it has, conveniently, provided the discourses with some ‘thing’ they can get stuck into, can safely be ignored. The implicit assumption in any case is that makers share these concerns and that making’s world-view is basically identical to that of aesthetic discourse, to be distinguished only, perhaps, by being slightly less developed formally. Makers are just treated as more practically-oriented judges. So if you are with me, at least in part, maybe you can contribute in some way to bringing out aspects of this difference between making and response. Then our interest here would be both to show this separation and to speak (write) up for making. To include making in any wider consideration of the arts’ life in contemporary culture would be to show this life as just this tension of an irreconcilable and inexplicable double and not something whose ‘significance’ could be comprehended from a distance by the institutions of aesthetic discourse.”

“It is you who are caught between these two poles. Embodying making, I have little interest in the internal dynamics of aesthetic discourse, although I do dip into it whimsily; I’m certainly all too well aware of the ways it seems to act as the integrator and congealer of the response patterns to art’s things. But just trying to hold to my making-life leaves me little time and no inclination to participate in some diagnosis of art’s current fate.”

“Good! I intend no such diagnosis. But your mention of ‘plight’ points towards a site where our concerns might be temporarily reconciled. Wherever making butts up against others’ interests (that is, everywhere) it has to devise ways of coming to terms with them while trying not to let itself be diluted or diverted. Your having to pick your way ‘through the orders of representation’ not as a matter of theoretical interest but precisely as a matter of making (of ‘practice’) tangentially meets my attempt to consider art-making on its own terrain and aside from all engagement of, let alone subservience to, the practice-obliterating terms of aesthetic discourse. It’s a matter for me of holding to making’s primacy.”

“Well we share that aim then. But I’ve no interest in participating in some knowledge-oriented project that wants to theorise the movement, the event(s), of making, to find some hidden reason or determinants behind its supposed surface appearances.”

“Nor have I. Rather it’s the situations of making that interest me, and, in particular, the possibility of exploring makers’ responses to this situation (your ‘plight’). It is the qualities of these responses that define the arts’ double life by maintaining a relation, albeit from an oblique angle and necessary distance, with the aesthetic economy (the placing value-judgments). You, for example...”

“...I am not an example of anything except perhaps the need shared by makers to make their own distinctive way, to de-exemplify themselves in the very course of their making...”

“...exemplifying nothing, then, you are already deeply entangled with making are you not?”

“Certainly I cannot separate my living from my making.”

“I won’t ask ‘why?’. I can see that it’s too late to turn you aside from your predicament. You’re in it up to your neck and above. Look, maybe the only thing for it is to consider the possible consequences for you of your course of action. I’ll wager you’ve already had to deal with many of the troubles and paradoxes confronting art making. You’ll have worked out your own practical solutions which in any case is precisely what art requires, given that there can never be a theory either explaining it or for guiding its practices. But the conditions under which making makes become ever more densely complex. The processes of reflection, of fore- and after-thought, that have always been intrinsic to making across the arts, may need in their turn to be increasingly sensitive to the conditions surrounding, setting up and invading making’s situation. But let’s get back to basics!

Somehow you became involved with making. It got you in its grip! And the inexplicable intensities fixing you there continue to recede in the face of all your self-questioning. Indeed, when you cast around for textual help most of it has been written in response to non-art interests and problems. *It all seems to be written for readers consumed by problems of analysis – of philosophy, of aesthetics, of critique, of art appreciation, or even (heaven forbid!) of the social sciences.* However interesting the material may be, its language and concerns put themselves on the far side of an unbridgeable gap to art. Perhaps there are no writings that speak both to and for your or the arts’ interests. Yet, across the arts, artists themselves do write and speak of, and, crucially, show their making in a wide variety of contexts (diaries, essays, books, notes, manifestos, commentaries, letters, catalogues, interviews, fragmented dialogues...), *but above all in and through the very things that are the residues of their making life – the things our culture calls ‘works of art’!* Such ‘texts’ (let us use this word just for now to cover all the outcomes of making across the arts - we may try other terms later) are intrinsic to their making processes without ever straining to become ‘theories of practice’. For actually they want nothing of theory – they offer themselves precisely in and as the specificity of the non-conceptual! And because some art things are constituted in written language, most obviously in what the culture gathers as ‘literature’, *art itself can become a topic or theme of the things.* Precisely by being not-theory these ‘texts’ complement and partially constitute the making without (usually) undermining it. As you are already familiar with a range of this material you will recognise that it is possible to write on art’s behalf in a non-judgmental, non-critical way from somewhere other than the space of aesthetic discourse, without any consideration having to be given to fitting the writing into and making it meet the rules of pre-existing analytic orders. Terms and concerns from these orders can obviously be transferred to the needs of art-making, always recognising that they are being transformed in the process and are always bound to the singularity of each art-thing. Far from any need for theoretical ‘help’, making desires only that input from whatever source will help it to sustain the singularity of its things – atheorisable one-offs! From within making’s spaces (the ‘where’ of your ‘practice’) the ‘dialogues’ you might have with fragments of analysis cannot be about comprehending your making. Even assuming you could slip easily into analysis’s space the only point of returning with fragments of analysis’s research would be to transform them into materials vital to the making of your singularities. *For is it not precisely your intense relations with singularities, your responses to particular*

art-things, that attracted you to, sucked you into, making? What enwrapped you were the specific sensations you experienced in engaging each thing as just that thing.”

“Coming to the possibility of making, to the arts (as all makers do now, through the filtering devices, the discriminating terms, of aesthetic judgment built routinely into our exposure to the arts from our earliest days in the formal systems of education, and as often as not finding them at odds with intensities, relations, feelings, thoughts and valuings that constituted the rest of my early life), was an endless process of transformation. It was a shift from enthusiastic appreciation into something else altogether. The switch was nothing if not fractured, consisting of breaks, false trails, mis-recognitions, directionless probings, falls, ascents up wrong hills, all of which still seem to intervene in my making in unpredict...”

“...yet something kept you going, re-minded you, pushed you towards an unfathomable figure of desire...”

“...well, no, I sensed no figure up ahead, only vague hints of openings where as yet unrevealable parts of my selves might begin to expand and release some fragment of themselves. I had no idea what they might be.”

“Perhaps not, but presumably there was at least one enormous constraining condition on your movement – that of Art’s Body’s bursting legacies. Something tenuously holding the arts together in their differences kept you going in spite of and across the fractures. You already had to have absorbed, however inchoately, a sense of a way, ways, of responding to your experience that sensed and wanted to live within art’s difference. Vague enough, this sense of something, somewhere, else, a tradition of otherness perhaps, within which all the things for which you had an affection, seemed to beckon you towards a place otherwise unavailable. You were, are, after, on the trail of, elseness.”

“That goes without saying: I could put no boundaries around my ever-shifting sense of art’s possibilities, but I tried to concentrate my selves (through whatever little influence I had over them) within them. Alerted, I listened, watched, attended to what seemed to be going on in the things that drew me towards themselves for no good reason. They had escaped from the good reason that we invariably tried to use to account for all the other things in our everyday lives.”

“So, unlike most people with a love of the arts (or at least of some things from some of the arts) for whom these things are possible pleasurable sources of sustenance, renewal, escape and delight, to be turned to dealing with the demands of the working day-night, *your* response has been different. *Your* relation to some of the arts’ things so resonated with your shifting tentative sense of the gap between what your everyday life was and what it might become that you sensed that a plunge into making might just become your way of bridging it. The arts’ things are now so routinely available that it’s difficult for any of us to avoid being occasionally touched by them in their and our passing. In any case, in culture’s metamorphosing onrush, the boundaries between the arts and other kinds of making are now so hazy, thanks to the conditions of their representation, that it may be increasingly difficult for us to recognise or locate art’s distinctive touching. Writing about contemporary information systems, the poet Christopher Middleton argues that the arts now ‘...intent on display, come to be absorbed into such systems, which assure circulation – and do so by

reducing intrinsic values to factors contributing to the system'.² Thus the profusive hybridising effects of representation blur all boundaries between the arts and whatever else is represented proximate to them.

Yet *you* seek to cling to the possibility and importance of the arts' distinction and of trying to realise yourself as making's sole matter. In making for Art's Body your practical dialogue with art, embodied in the things you make in hope and in and for its name, places you on a different experiential site to those of us, the vast majority, who constitute the audiences and respondents for the arts. And making's site-conditions are different in turn to those of the arts' reception. Art's possibility (what it might be 'about', 'for', or 'doing') is perceived, felt, in very different terms on the two sites."

"Well, I soon discovered, in the cause and course of trying to construct singularity's way, that art demanded very different things than those to which my forays (necessarily part-time...) into the world of work had accustomed me. Nor did these demands have much to do with 'art appreciation'. For when my making began to define the direction and contents of my daily life then everything constituting that life seemed to be implicated, brought into play, in the making process. The things themselves, obscurely and without my noticing it, as they emerged, haltingly, seemed to bear untraceable traces of my attempts to reconcile everyday getting by, itself already a ceaseless metamorphosis, with what I tried to tease, feel, out as art's requirements."

"They are untraceable precisely because they have been transformed in the course of your struggle to meet art's needs, and to keep open your dialogue with its (to you) moving parts. I suspect that for you each thing is a merged double, embedding the intensities of your vision in what you took art's responses to be in the movement of your dialogue with it. In the made-thing these two are inseparable. However fascinating they may be to biographers the infinite particulars of your life can neither be recovered from the thing(s) you make nor used as explanations of what is going on 'in' those things. But perhaps what can be explored (and maybe we can do this to, for, and with you)..."

"...well...I..."

"... are the conditions defining the context of your making life. For while none of these are completely fixed (indeed some are utterly ephemeral and unique to your passage through them) many of them are obdurate and common to making across the arts. Although they are beyond and quite alien to the sites of making they do impinge directly on the latter. Typically ordered by institutional interests *they control the means through which both your dialogue with art can occur and your makings might have an after-life when you have finished with them*. Permeating your making's space-time you ignore them at your peril! For they are what set up and deliver the arts for all of us, both for you and your co-makers and for the rest of we-eventual-recipients of your makings. *Your* struggle is always in crucial ways on *their* terms."

"It was ever thus. I have no illusions. But if it were purely struggle I doubt I'd be doing it."

"Perhaps not, but once you have responded to the given summons – to Art's Body's call to itself through you - ..."

² C. Middleton, 'If from the Distance: Two essays', Menard, London, 2007, p. 20.

“...aaah, yes, art’s now barely audible but still absolutely captivating cry from ‘here’s’ outside, art’s becoming wilderness...”

“...and learned to trust yourself to it as you obviously have, you find it almost impossible to resist. I suspect that, whatever the prevailing response to your things, you will always go doggedly on. You’re already in too deep...”

“...no, it’s nothing to do with depth! *I’m entirely gathered up and swept along by and at the things’ surfaces. Forget depth! Art’s things are nothing but surfacing surfaces.* It’s how they surface in, across, me, and how these surfaces sustain me, that are crucial. Everything is there at and as the out-sounding, out-lining, out-colouring, out-spacing, out-voicing, out-dancing, out-rolling depthless surfaces.”

“You’re right! Your, *Art’s*, Body lives only in the surfacing of things. But these resonate in utterly different ways for the maker and the respondent! The only ‘deeps’ are generated by commentators long after art’s surfaces have passed through and away. Often using quasi-geological or physiological structural metaphors, their very perspective’s inner need is to stratify the things. For them the ‘real’ inner meaning, what makes the things function, is always buried deep in some withinness that analysis has to construct to satisfy its own formal needs. This has then to be excavated and brought to the surface by its tools. Naturally the analyses are successful *because their very method constitutes their objects each time according to their field-specific interests.* They destine themselves to establish the hidden depths of everything. Scintillating surfaces alone are beyond their comprehension because they seem to be the denial of the inner reason analysis condemns itself to find in everything. But from what you are saying it seems that you were drawn towards making precisely by being touched, swept along, by the surfaces of various art things?”

“Look, this process has no origin, no point to which I could return and say ‘that’s when it all began!’. No, it was, and still is, rather the ways that, gradually and without my realising it at the time, some art surfaces picked me out, colliding and overlapping with, and adhering to the trajectory of my routine life-surfacing. Somehow they found their way into the border regions between my imagination, my unfixable barely articulatable feelings, my dreams, and the demands of everyday practicalities. Clinging on in these gaps they began, with my silent half-aware collusion (and perhaps even subtly desperate conniving...) to cunningly re-direct my surfacing. I soon enough became their willing accomplice.”

“So, either early, middling or late, perhaps even long after you already believed you had a strong sense of what the arts were about, an art thing or things touched you, seemed to ‘take you out of yourself’ and, however momentarily, carried you off and away into another unrecognisable but fascinating region (neither a clearly inner nor outer time-space). Abandoning it for the affairs of the day, as one always has to, you were left, perhaps, excited, curious, baffled, troubled even, but wanting to get to that unplaceable yet in-between spot (or somewhere like it) again. You sought out more things by the same maker(s). Slowly, haltingly, you began to establish an idiosyncratic context for your own experience through increasing contact with the responses of others to these things. And of course the arts are now so carefully positioned and programmed within the generalised provision of ‘culture’, made accessible on very particular terms (most typically through formal programmes of education and the mass media), that, like everybody else, you will already have had a context and a way of attending to the things of art. Your largely taken-for-granted, vague and edgeless pattern of responses had already emerged out of

extended and diverse contact with and participation in countless discussions about the arts and their things. You never really considered that your own efforts at making (largely confined to ‘technical exercises’ performed under instruction and supervision or as spare-time noodlings) had any direct relation to the life of the arts.

Then, out of this constantly shifting emergent involvement with the arts, something slightly different to the developing ‘appreciation’ (the enjoyable challenging renewal of your relation to the arts’ things) began to stir. Touched as you were by specific art things and to one side of any formal ‘exercises’ in making (the universal exposure to ‘drawing’/ ‘colouring’/ ‘wording’/ ‘sounding’/ ‘moving’ that constitute part of the contemporary educational experience) *you started to make something yourself*. Discovering, hesitatingly at first no doubt, previously unsuspected fluencies, resources, pleasures, inhibitions, blocks, puzzles, you sensed the possibility of pathways opening up into the previously uninteresting, unattended to and seemingly inaccessible terrain of art’s making...”

“I can feel myself becoming an example again in the story you seem to want to develop, a story which, I feel, is no longer mine (though I’m not even sure you really needed me in the first place).”

“... but, as with your making, there *was* no identifiable first place...you and I have always been in some kind of silent dialogue, though perhaps without our explicitly admitting it to ourselves. Without wanting to speak in place of you, to represent you, I may still be able to speak for your art-full hopes in trying to out-fold some of the more intransigent conditions of art-making now. I want both to retain your inimitable singularity and simultaneously to gather and assemble you with all those others trying to come to terms with this intransigence. From the days of your first soundings-out by the summons, you had been all too aware that your always emergent fluid shifting sense of the things of art (what they might offer, how they might be recognised, felt and made) was not shared by the wider culture. You soon realised (and occasional contact with other makers confirmed this) that the working terms of the entire machinery that has taken over responsibility (supposedly on all our behalves) for handling the arts, for judging, placing, representing, disseminating, selling, exchanging and accounting for them, are profoundly different to your own approaches to making. You couldn’t, still can’t, reconcile yourself to the ways in which the arts’ things were set up and made available. I’m sure you recall Seth Price’s suggestion that making-for-art might explore the public sites constituted by ‘distributed media’ (the very ‘places’ where information and judgments *about* art are themselves routinely distributed) as possible conduits for making’s gests.³ I sense that the value-hierarchies surrounding and permeating all efforts to make-for-art, with their pervasive narratives and publicity rhetorics, were anathema to you. You recognised all too clearly that they represented the arts’ things as if they were simply one among a plurality of products competing for our attention and money on the same terms. It seemed to you that the possibility of the arts’ difference, *the grains of otherness that they might just secrete and offer*, was expunged in favour of a sense of their things as offering the same kind of rewards as all the other products with which they are supposedly competing (a competition not recognised or attended to by you and your fellow-makers) for our attention and money and into whose proliferating texture they are being carefully woven. Fundamentally you considered, I think, that the arts are being scattered across and fixed into the schedules of entertainment-to-excess. This surely resonates with what Christopher Middleton argues in his exploration of the relations between the imagination and ‘lyric

³ See Seth Price’s ‘Dispersion’ at <http://www.distributedhistory.com/>; you’ll find the term ‘gest’ introduced here is elaborated further in the text ‘To Gest’.

voice', where he writes that the arts now, '...divested of every last clout of contrariety, doctored by yet another internationale of functionaries, ... are being minced up by the amusement industries.'⁴

Yet to you art is nothing but not-entertainment!"

"Maybe, maybe... but I've had enough of your projections. I'm off and away, called elsewhere..."

"I beg you to stay within ear-and-eye-shot, ready-to-hand... I cannot do this without you..."

"...perhaps, but thanks to you I already feel myself becoming disembodied, and I give no guarantees..."

⁴ Christopher Middleton, 'Jackdaw Jiving', Carcanet, Manchester, 1998, p. 5.