



TALKING POINTS: CONVERSATION IN THE ART OF SOPHIE CALLE, JOSEPH GRIGELY AND SUZANNE MCCLELLAND

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May 2000

Language that begins out loud and winds up visual is rare. In the complicated relationship between words and images, one factor is generally fixed: visual artists most often concern themselves with written text, not speech.

Typography and graphic art, the places where writing bleeds into drawing, have long been fertile areas of intersection. Written directives for physical and, especially, perceptual behaviors are among Conceptualism's signal contributions to the field where language and image meet. These are not simple conjunctions. But when visual art concerns itself with speech, the situation becomes considerably trickier. Talk is a baseline for language, and a moving target; indeed, it has the lifespan of smoke. When it is introduced as the instigator of a relationship between reading and looking, its ghostly but indelible third-party presence produces difficulties as knotty as they are provocative.

Three artists who have recently tackled these difficulties are Suzanne McClelland, who has made a series of paintings and drawings based on dialogues between mothers and daughters; Joseph Grigely, a deaf artist who makes two- and three- dimensional work from the written notations with which hearing friends talk to him; and Sophie Calle, whose latest project, *Double Game*, is her most explicit, and reciprocal, dialogue with another artist, in this case the writer Paul Auster. Stimulating in very particular ways, when considered all together these bodies of work are as mutually illuminating as any good conversation.

Suzanne McClelland has long been interested in the way words can emerge from graphic composition and subside back into it, and she has relied in previous work on printed text. But, distinctively, she has also worked with speech for more than ten years, generally using "found" dialogue, including snippets of words overheard in crowds, and other conversation fragments that she records in small notebooks she keeps with her. The choice of spoken language reflects a frustration with the rigid left-to-right (in English), top-down structure of reading. Conversation, by contrast, has a complexity and ambiguity, an unchartable vastness ("for me, language is . . . like a weather condition," she once told an interviewer, "something huge, much bigger than we are"), and a reliance on subjective elements like tone, timing, volume, and intonation that make it amenable to visual representation. A greater similarity may exist between looking and listening, that is, than between looking and reading.

As materialized in the paintings in out of character (shown at Paul Kasmin gallery in New York in October 2000), the shape of these conversations often resembles a book stood upright with its pages partly opened, producing deep perspectives narrowing precipitously toward an imagined binding. The drawings, on the other hand, tend to be composed in scrolls, with texts circling dark centers like seashells, or petals; and the letters tend to be a little floral too, even flower power-ish, curvaceous, and wavering, with full bodies and pointed or feathery tips. They are executed in graphite on vellum, and some of the words run backwards, requiring reading from both sides of the page, so however delicate and frail they are, the drawings become objects, and, when viewed in layers (as in a book), objects with depth. And, objects with a deep capacity for infinitely mirrored selfreflection. "Everything is so deeply ingrained in me that I'm sure I could change anything without going back and changing everything," reads one. It is drawn in an off-center garland of spidery little script that surrounds the bubble-lettered word "unnatural," which is written backwards, with the "l" distended and isolated, like a phallus, or a stamen emerging from the cup of a darkly penciled blossom. "To save you from going through," begins another, archetypally parental, though the words are rendered in a lively circle-dance that jumps to the beat of quick, rhythmic pencil-strokes. In other drawings, admonitory fragments ("Keeping out of") and bursts of enthusiasm ("fresh when young"), set the tone for drawings that seem breathed as much as drawn, perceptible in a register that hovers convincingly between seen and heard.

Ten of these drawings are reproduced in the simple staple-bound book that accompanied the exhibition, on the back of which McClelland credits the influence of Gertrude Stein and Florine Stettheimer, presumably for, respectively, portraiture drawn in words, and an inimitably sprightly touch in rendering the human comedy. McClelland is now particularly interested in humor, in what is funny and when, and there is a great deal of rueful comedy in out of character. She began her career as a photographer, and however abstract her work is (and has long been), she still thinks in terms of snapshots, of short, fast takes from life. The formal composition of her word-based work has often been helped along with casual little set-ups involving funky letters modeled in clay, and mirrors arranged in a corner of her studio. Another established practice of McClelland's is tracing the space between Mary and the archangel Gabriel in trecento and quattrocento paintings of the Annunciation, to delineate the gestures and optical devices with which the word was made flesh.

It is a rich subject. Crucially, the word that is so fundamental to the JudeoChristian tradition (and hardly in the Annunciation alone) is fundamentally oral, not written, and its role as the basis for a wide variety of spiritual systems predates literacy. What distinguishes language meant to be spoken, not written? Looking at the differences between orality and literacy from a historical perspective, psychologist and linguist Walter Ong concludes that writing permits analytic thought, introspection, a sense of individual will, of past and future; it creates the concept of "objectivity" and allows for abstraction. Orality, by contrast, assumes a human character that is communal, externalized, eternal. Spoken language is dynamic: "There is no equivalent of a still shot for sound," Ong writes. It depends on the expenditure of energy ("Sound cannot be sounding without the use of power"), and is expressive of power relations ("Among 'primitive' [oral] peoples generally language is a mode of action and not simply a countersign of thought"). Most fundamentally, it is a mechanism of connection. "Sustained thought in an oral culture is tied to communication," while "writing separates the knower from the known." This distinction is supported by the different perceptual modes engaged in hearing and reading: "Sight isolates, sound incorporates . . . You can immerse yourself in hearing, in sound. There is no way to immerse yourself similarly in sight. By contrast with vision, the dissecting sense, sound is thus a unifying sense." Or, as recently observed by Charles Bernstein, "No sooner does the Greek alphabet appear than the 'l' of writing also appears."

We don't live in an oral culture, and indeed societies untouched by literacy are nearly nonexistent. But the axis between these two unbridgeably different ways of being in the world helps organize the issues raised by McClelland, Grigely, and Calle. In McClelland's work, conversation is represented at one order of remove, the spoken words recorded in a way that preserves much of their physical nature. Joseph Grigely's work is both more abstract and more immediate. Left partially deaf by a fever at the age of one, Grigely lost his remaining hearing at ten, as the result of an accident. He holds a doctorate in English, has studied at Oxford, and has taught history and literature; his book, *Textualterity: Art, Theory and Textual Criticism*, was published in 1995. But since 1994, Grigely's focus has been on his own artwork, assembled from the notes that hearing people write to him in conversation (his replies are spoken). A recent show at the Cohan Leslie and Browne gallery in New York included hundreds of notes on scraps of white paper pinned to the wall in a loose grid. Other

groupings were similarly color coordinated, in shades of pink, pale blue, and pale green. There were also assemblages involving decoratively finished, whitewashed shelves on which were placed framed conversation fragments; in previous installations, he has included actual domestic furnishings—chairs, tables, remnants of meals—to suggest the contexts in which conversations had taken place.

All of the conversations recorded are supremely mundane. “You’d think that it is the weird elaborate academicky stuff that’s interesting,” Grigely says, “but to me it’s the banal stuff that is—stuff that we say every day, but never write down.” He is interested in the social picture that is framed by interpersonal spoken exchange and has long been intrigued by the visual representation of conversation in genre works by such 18th –century English artists as Gainsborough, Hogarth, and Rowlandson. In his precisely considered and beautifully realized 1998 artist’s book *Conversation Pieces* (Center for Contemporary Art, Kitakyushu), Grigely collected dozens of historical images of conversation from both Western and Asian paintings. His concern, however, is not just with how everyday talk is allegorized, but with what happens when it is shown in a way that can only be called literal, word for word. “We all know what a conversation sounds like—but what does a conversation look like?” he asks. And referring to the difference between writing and speaking, he says it is “huge,” explaining, in terms very like McClelland’s (and Ong’s), “Conversation is fundamentally discursive, not linear. When you read, you know where the beginning, middle and end are. But when someone talks on paper, it’s hard to find a beginning or an end.”

Grigely’s work bears that out with a vengeance, representing language at its least tidy, not sanitized by jargon, theory, or even grammar—the handwriting as messy and irregular as the syntax, the paper scraps organized in the most blatantly superficial way, by color, and to fit together on the wall. Along with the fundamental human hunger to connect, all the other appetites—gustatory, social, and sexual—are much in evidence. Indeed the propulsive energy of Grigely’s work, which is remarkably successful at preserving the dynamics of orality without the sound, makes it almost coercively engaging. Not least important to its impact is its off-center mode of address. Like the mirror in *Las Meninas* (1656), the written notes are all addressed to an artist who is not present, but is presumed to stand in the place occupied by the viewer. Hence, just as powerfully as in front of a painting by Velazquez, we’re aware of the illusion at this work’s basis, its troubled status as a record that wouldn’t exist if the spontaneity it suggests were uncompromised. One result is acute awareness of the fallibility of translation from one language to another and between materiality and its opposite. Grigely says both kinds of transposition are especially hard for Americans, as “America is fundamentally a monolingual country: people here don’t regularly experience the necessary importance of having to construct linguistic bridges In Europe there’s a more considered understanding of the vicissitudes of communicating from one language to another, or from one modality to another.”

But at the risk of belaboring the obvious, what resonates most with Grigely’s work, in the physically encompassing terms that Ong says characterize oral culture, is silence. Contemplative silence is so widespread a spiritual discipline and experiential goal as to defy historical analysis. But withdrawal from the spoken word has a quality that is specifically modernist, in the sense George Steiner meant when he wrote, “This revaluation of silence—in the epistemology of Wittgenstein, in the aesthetics of Webern and Cage, in the poetics of Beckett—is one of the most original, characteristic acts of the modern spirit.” For Steiner, the silence of modernism distinguishes it from the noise of the media-saturated culture that followed these mid-century figures. On the other hand, Susan Sontag called the silence that was a cardinal feature of 1960s Minimalism a reaction to the widespread commercial debasement of spoken and written language that had already taken place. “As the prestige of language falls,” Sontag wrote, “that of silence rises.” In either case, it is under the dominion of modernist silence that Conceptualism emerged, the aspiration to soundlessness legitimizing, arguably, the status of an undeniably loquacious art form as a visual discipline.

There is, for example, the sometimes deafening silence of Sophie Calle’s carefully measured neo-Conceptualist conversations. Almost all of Calle’s work involves dialogue, frequently though not always mute, sometimes flirtatious, and always, on some level, erotic; often what it flirts with is resistance, even danger. Her most recent undertaking, an unusually extended one, involves, uncharacteristically, a conversation in which both parties are actively engaged. In his 1992 novel *Leviathan*, Paul Auster created a character named Maria, who plays out several of the rituals that Calle had enacted in her earlier work: surreptitiously following a stranger on a trip from Paris to Venice, working as a hotel chambermaid and diligently snooping on each guest,

hiring a detective (through a third party) to share the experience of being spied on, and then having someone shadow the detective in turn. But a few of the rituals ascribed to Maria in *Leviathan* were Auster's inventions, and after reading the novel, Calle undertook to make them her own as well: one involved eating monochlor meals every day for a week (carrots, cantaloupe, and orange juice Monday, tomatoes and steak tartare Tuesday), another living each day under the spell (as it were) of a different letter of the alphabet (starting with "big-time blond bimbo").

In an elegant, physically and intellectually complex book called *Double Game* (London, Violette Editions, 1999), Calle reproduces, as an insert, the pages from the novel in which Maria's exploits are described. In the succeeding pages, all the projects mentioned in *Leviathan*, both those original to Calle and those suggested by Auster's fiction, are fully documented in color photographs and (English) text. The book's final segment consists of a pair of post-*Leviathan* rituals scripted for Calle, at her insistent behest, by a reluctant Auster. These "Personal Instructions for SC on How to Improve Life in New York City (Because she asked. . .)" led Calle to station herself (and on occasion a proxy) at a public phone booth in lower Manhattan, which she domesticated with inexpensive decorations and snacks and used as a casual surveillance center, listening in on phone calls and encouraging customers and passerby to comment on her "improvements." Auster's instructions also specified that Calle engaged in actual, out-loud conversation with strangers, as well as distributing smiles and, when it seemed helpful, free food. The choice seems pointed, as it throws into relief the ways in which Calle's work conforms to, and resists, the mechanics of dialogue. She does not conceal her distaste for these chores, but she carried them out to the letter and documents them lavishly in the concluding section of *Double Game*.

In fact, much of the electricity in Calle's work comes from a persistent underlying struggle for control—artistic, social, physical, even financial. There is almost always a considerable measure of discomfort for the strangers through whom the games are played out and, as a result, for her audience as well. The arrogation of power implicit in Calle's work is addressed with great clarity in an unusual epistolary project, occasioned by her 1991 New York exhibition *Les aveugles* (*The Blind*), for which people who were blind from birth were asked to describe their image of beauty (the images they named were approximated with photographs; Calle also exhibited photoportraits of the subjects, and their verbal accounts). The correspondence was initiated by Joseph Grigely, who didn't know Calle (and had not yet begun to exhibit the written notes addressed to him in ordinary conversation) when he wrote her 35 postcards about the exhibition. She received them only two years later, in 1993; shortly after, they were excerpted in the magazine *Parkett*.

In a neat inversion of Grigely's own work, the postcards give us only one side—this time, his—of a dialogue; his word for it is "monospondence." Grigely is fascinated by how the "imposed transmodality" enacted in *Les aveugles* "reconfigures our physiological conventions and the language with which we describe these conventions." Based on his own experience of deafness, he guesses that, for the blind, "touching itself is elided, it is a semantic projection of our own physiology, not that of the blind. If everyone in the world were blind, perhaps touching would be called seeing." But extended consideration makes him increasingly skeptical about the project, and at one point he accuses Calle of desiring to "control the other." In one of the last notes printed in *Parkett*, he urges Calle to "undress your psyche in a room frequented by the blind and let them run their fingers over your body as you have run your eyes over theirs."

Though they strongly imply progressive familiarity, these postcards became a dialogue only by virtue of publication—in the context, it's worth noting, of a series of essays about Calle, and with her express permission (and hers alone). For two years, the notes were barely a monologue. But even as such, Grigely's observations on *Les aveugles* were hardly less substantial than any spoken exchange. In contrast to text composed for reading, conversation is ephemeral by definition; it lives in air. Unlike collaborative art, which is anchored by a third term (the product), or performance, which is similarly rooted in a script or score or, simply, an enduring concept, true oral dialogue does not survive its first expression. By setting art at its side, rather than standard text, talk gets caught in a peculiarly illuminating set of headlights, revealed in its complex materiality, and also its unstinting silences. "What happens when we make an effort—say in writing a letter—to find the right expression for our thoughts?" Wittgenstein asked. Or, put another way, "What did the thought consist in, as it existed before its expression?" Visual art, is one answer. And by placing the most physically embodied, socially entangled form of word use under its charge, these three artists have made wordless thoughts speak.