CONVERSATIONAL ART
Homi K. Bhabha
One way of thinking of wisdom, as something of which the love is not the same as
that of argument, and of which the achievement does not consist in finding the
correct vocabulary for representing essence, is to think of it as the practical wisdom
necessary to participate in a conversation.

— Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature

THE RESONANCE OF CONVERSATION
Conversation, as a curatorial idea, could be seen as an antidote to the connoisseurial “silence”
that traditionally accompanies the awesome presence of Art. It is, of course, a silence that is
surrounded by the cacophony of the auction room, the sagacity of the seminar, even the snobbery
of the salon: “In the room the women come and go talking of Michelangelo” as T. S. Eliot once
remarked. The art object may be labeled, contextualized, compared with catalogues, and
burdened by interpretation, but there remains a common assumption that a pervasive silence is
appropriate for aesthetic attention. It is a silence embedded in the very moment at which artistic
practice achieves its “objecthood,” whether this happens in the atelier or the museum. In “Art and
Objecthood,” Michael Fried deftly turns this moment of silence into the space of spectatorship
itself, where silence stands for a certain determining distance between the viewer and the viewed:
“The experience of being distanced from the work in question seems crucial: the beholder knows
himself to stand in an indeterminate, open-ended — and unexpecting — relation as subject —
to the impasive object on the wall or on the floor. In fact, being distanced by such objects is not, I
suggest, entirely unlike being distanced or crowded by the silent presence of another person” (my
emphasis). Although one might question Fried’s wider “high modernism” agenda, he is surely right
when he suggests that the distance that separates subject and object also becomes the space in
which a certain ideological and institutional notion of “audience” comes to be constituted. I am,
of course, using audience in a double sense: to suggest both the encounter between the body of
the work and the public that stands before it — reception or consumption — as well as the defer-
tial attitude with which people often approach the temple of art — academy, museum, institute
— to seek an “audience” with some august, transcendent reality.

Mary Jane Jacob’s introductory essay — as well as the testimony of the participating artists —
makes it clear that the profound purpose in staging “Conversations at The Castle” was to shrink
this distance and shatter the silence. However, what is done in and through the practice of art

HOMI K. BHABHA was
born into the Parsi community of
Bombay, India. He received a BA
from Bombay University and an
MA and PhD from Christ Church,
Oxford University. Bhabha has
been a reader in English literature
at Sussex University; a senior fellow and Old Dominion Visiting
Professor at Princeton University;
the Steinberg Visiting
Professor at the University of
Pennsylvania, where he delivered
the Richard Wright Lecture
Series; and a faculty fellow in the
School of Criticism and Theory,
Dartmouth College. He is
currently the Chester D. Tripp
Professor in the Humanities at
the University of Chicago and
visiting professor of the humani-
ties at University College,
London. Bhabha will be delivering
the W. E. B. Du Bois Lectures at
Harvard University and will be
Beckman Professor of English at
the University of California,
Berkeley, in 1999. He edited the
collection of essays Nation and
Narration (Routledge, 1990) and is
the author of The Location of
Culture (Routledge, 1994). He is
currently working on the book A
Measure of Dwelling, a history of
cosmopolitanism. Bhabha also
writes regularly for Artforum.

1 Michael Fried, “Art and
Objecthood,” in Art in
Theory 1900-1990: An
Anthology of Changing
Ideas, ed. Charles Harri-
son and Paul Wood
(Oxford and Cambridge:
Blackwell, 1992), 826.
also requires acknowledgement in the language of criticism. What animates "Conversations," as a collaborative pursuit, is driven by the idea that the "distance that has long existed between contemporary art and the popular audience" — notice the return of Fried’s point — can be overcome by a radical shift in the guiding curatorial metaphor, from the language of theatricality and display — exhibition, show, opening — to the ongoing evolution of the discursive experience — dialogue, conversation: in Jacob’s words, a “forum where the art and the artist could come directly in touch with the audience with as little intervention and interference as possible. . . . [I]n defiance of the cardinal museum rule to simplify for the general public, the artists opened up complex ideas for dialogue, sometimes provocatively and speculatively. The conversations with the public that ensued were often multilayered, lengthy, and always surprising, leading in unplanned directions.”

There can be no shortcut to the democratization of artistic production or circulation. Populist, agitprop approaches arrogantly assume that the “people” or the “masses” will follow. Nor can we be sanguine that the instant connectivity and accessibility of the new digital technologies will necessarily democratize artistic practices and communities. This new technological utopianism is as unconvincing as the influential “free market” myth that assumes that economic opportunity is equally open to all who trade in goods and services and effect rational choices. Pulling down the bastions of privilege or the edifices of elitism has never, in itself, assured a more democratic future. Democracy depends, to a great degree, on a culture of public belief that takes seriously the proposition that questions of value and knowledge are as deeply linked to the matter of cultural practice and public policy as the issues of morality and action are wedded to the concept of “good” citizenship.

It is in this cause that “conversational” art practice, to coin a phrase, speaks most profoundly and productively. It must be acknowledged that what intervenes and interferes, in a productive way, between the artists’ intentions and the audience’s expectations — museum committees, curators, and trustees notwithstanding — is the compulsion of the artwork itself to be a creative site of “unplanned directions” and “multilayered interpretations.” Conversational art, dedicated to constructing its “object” and its “audience” through a process of ongoing dialogue, is committed to exploring contextual contingency in defining the nature and values of the aesthetic experience. It embodies an experience that cannot appropriately be defined within the current art-historical discussion, where the values of “painting” — the sign of a fast diminishing respect for the artist as auteur — are polemically pitted against public art projects that are considered to be the manufactures of a regnant resentment, or multiculturalism as it is so often called.

When “conversation” as a curatorial and creative process seeks to transform the distance between art and its audience, it does so by changing our sense of the “space” of the artwork itself, by making us rethink fundamental questions concerned with the category of the aesthetic. These questions are somehow prior to the critic’s concern with genres and periods as the historical measure of art’s social vision. The conversational approach poses these questions: What
kind of “knowledge” do we expect from the practice and the presentation of art? How does conversation change our relation, as artists and audiences, to cultural experience and the social transformations of our times?

The term “conversation,” as a way of understanding the dialogue between culture and community, has a rich philosophical genealogy that is crucial, in my view, to the aims of this project. My own phrase, contextual contingency, which I shall elaborate below as a way of reading the general vision of the show — multilayered dialogues, unplanned directions — as well as the strategies of individual works, owes much to the pioneering work of America’s preeminent “liberal” pragmatist philosopher, Richard Rorty. In Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979), a book that set the terms of philosophical discussion for a decade, he elaborates an “anti-epistemological” position, seeking to unsettle “the way in which the West became obsessed with the notion of our primary relation to objects as analogous to visual perception, and thus to suggest that there could be other conceptions of our relation to things.” What accompanies this “visualization” of reality is a dependence on the foundational myths of the Enlightenment — rationalism, scientism, universalism — as the bedrock of cultural judgment, producing a tyranny of fact over value, logic over rhetoric. “It is the search for a way in which one can avoid the need for conversation and deliberation and simply tick off the way things are. The idea is to acquire beliefs about interesting and important matters in a way as much like visual perception as possible — by confronting an object and responding to it as programmed.”

To move toward the act of conversation is to move away from this notion that reality and value lie in a “confrontation” with a given object or reality that contains, within itself, a privileged “truth” about its nature and being. Conversation moves away from the temptations of transcendence and teleology toward a notion that cultural value, or the “truth” of art, lies in the contingent relations that come to be constructed through the working out of a particular practice, or in the performative act by which the work at once encounters its audience and constructs its community of interpretation. In the conversationalist view, then, contingency — metaphor and figurative language — must play the part that is attributed, in the confrontational epistemological model, to consequentinality — “realism” and reportage. Where once the metaphors of cultural and social value were derived from the certainty of “causes,” Rorty suggests that for our times we should build a cultural imaginary from the experience of art: “A poeticized culture would be one which would not insist we find the real wall behind the painted ones, the real touchstones of truth as opposed to touchstones which are merely cultural artifacts. It would be a culture which, precisely by appreciating that all touchstones are such artifacts, would take as its goal the creation of ever more various and multicolored artifacts.” If this sounds like a proposal that merely suggests that “surfaces” are as real as “depths,” or proposes an unregulated relativism, then it is important to point out that Rorty is not merely philosophically redescribing the “object” of art, culture, or truth. His contention is that the value we ascribe to objects or practices is no less consequential or effective because their “reality” corresponds less to some immanent “truth” than

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3 Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 164.

4 Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism, 54.

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to the vocabularies through which we describe them and the discourses with which we locate them on the social horizon. “Conversational realities” are not immaculate conceptions or “real” correspondences that satisfy the “eye” of the mind; they are dependent for their authority on the messy, contingent communicability that meshes together a community: “Our identification with our community,” Rorty writes, “our society, our political tradition, our intellectual heritage ... is heightened when we see this community as ours rather than nature’s, shaped rather than found, one among many which men have made... [W]hat matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right.”

This somber image of “conversation” as the community of human survival is not devoid of sustained hope. It is, in fact, the great gift of conversational art to actively engage in the ambivalences and ambiguities that emerge as contextual contingencies from the ironic and contradictory forces that constitute social reality. Taking an antiepistemological stance, the conversationalist develops a discourse that, in attacking “the notion of truth as accuracy of representation [also attacks] the traditional distinctions between reason and desire, reason and appetite, reason and will. For none of these distinctions make sense unless reason is thought of on the model of vision.” Contextual contingency, which I see as central to the structure and idea of conversational art, is not opposed to reason. It unsettles the foundational role of reason as the primary source of social and cultural value, while unseating the sovereignty of visuality — reason’s mimetic measure — and its advocacy of “accurate” representation as the reproduction, or reflection, of reality. It is by contesting the primacy of reason and its visual analogue that conversation shrinks the distance between subject and object and shatters the cultural silence around the art object. This results in an aesthetic strategy that articulates hitherto unconnected moments between memory and history, revises the traditional divisions between private and public, rearticulates the past and the present, and, through the performance of the artwork, fosters unexplored relationships between historical or biographical events, artistic innovations, and an enlarged sense of cultural community. If, as Rorty says, the confrontational, epistemological approach treats reality as already programmed, then the conversational perspective is at once more provisional, and for that very reason more deeply committed to, the ethical and political “choice” that contingency forces us to be responsible for.

Regina Frank’s project, The Glass Bead Game, turns my theoretical reflections on conversational art into the experience of live art. If, as I’ve argued, contextual contingency liberates us from a binary and polarized view that opposes reason to passion, the present to the past, it also commits us to living our lives and making our art from experiences that are ambivalent, contradictory, and unresolved. Such a disturbing, even dark, thought is to be found in the very depths of Frank’s project, in the deepest folds of time and memory from which her bead game emerges:

I connected [beads] with certain important events in my life and understood them in a Janus-headed way: connected with luxury and with sorrow, as if these little beads could unify poles of my being. One such personal story, my most important memory

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of beads, happened two months before my father died. He gave my mother a long
string of pearls for her birthday. As she put it around her neck, she said: "Oh, there
are so many pearls. I hope this does not mean I will have so many tears." Only later
did I realize the connection between this memory and my art, and I started to explore
my relationship to beads and pearls as a reflection of my own past.

The Glass Bead Game emerges from a "Janus-headed" experience where beads are at once
signs of the presence of love and luxury — pearls — and symbolic of the absence of life —
sorrow, tears, death. The pearl necklace is the token of a memory that suddenly, contingently,
reveals to Frank the overarching intentionality of her work — without her realizing it: "Only
later did I realize...." It is in this initiatory gesture, belatedly recognized, where her own past is
revealed through the creative artifice and which she translates into the conversational structure
of her installation. She is the subject and object of her own artwork — "both present and absent
at the same time" — and it is this game of shifting identifications between art and audience,
between history and memory, that becomes the dialectical strategy of her game. Through the
intercession of the Internet, the audience "converses" with Frank through virtual beads that
transmit messages reflecting on various aspects of the "event": on the work itself, Atlanta and the
Olympics, personal experiences, and meditative reflections. Just as Frank was assailed by her
deepest memories and experiences through the performance of the artwork, so too is the audi-
ence, whose identities are being remade in the very process by which they compose their
"moves" in the ongoing play of the bead game:

Friday July 12, 1996 19:17:35
The secret, hidden text exists
like a lover, whose trace must be erased,
like history,
whose erasures cannot be traced.

Tuesday, July 30, 1996 19:00:59
I'm a South African art student from Johannesburg...The marks in the sand are
important for me because they speak of opposites and the communication or "gap"
between these opposites. Namely the process of the trace, the act of healing.

As conversations develop through the fabrication of beads and their encrypted narratives, the
gesture of aesthetic communication that I have called contextual contingency emerges to thread
together the diversity of bead messages. The messages, as evidenced above, weave the artwork
into a digital tapestry of local and global contexts, each time healing the breach of confronta-
tional, binary thinking. At the same time, the bead game demonstrates the transformed environ-
ment of cultural representation within which the contemporary artist works — from the crafts-
manship of rare Japanese paper cloth and Venetian glass beads, to the computer-generated bead,
to the narrative tissue of personal and collective memory. Understanding the value of culture as a texture of experience that will not abide polarities in its attempt to work with the ambivalent and contradictory forces of contemporary culture — the hallmark of a conversational art practice — is precisely what the bead game is about. And in Regina Frank's work we have a distillation of the creative possibilities of contexts — social and aesthetic — that do not necessarily “belong” to each other but have come to coexist contingently, in a way that is strongly suggestive of styles of life and art at the end of our century. “If we concentrate on the essence of the game, it could evoke special powers,” writes Frank, “as it is, [quoting Schiller] ‘the ingenious unification of reason and lust, intellect and emotions.’”

**SHRINKING THE DISTANCE: THE ARTIST AND THE COMMUNITY**

Contextual contingency, the defining gesture of conversational art, has particular significance for the place of the artist in the community and the status of the artwork in its address to an audience. The “ingenious unification” of artist and community in the “Conversations” program is, as with the general theory of conversational art, a question of articulating and negotiating cultural and social differences without the promise of some privileged and accurate representation of “totality” or a teleological resolution. The spirit of conversational art lies in initiating “unplanned directions” and provoking “multilayered interpretations,” in Jacob's words; this is apparent in the audience's response to, and collaboration with, Regina Frank. They produce bead chains that follow traces that lead from personal testimony to political witnessing, each time acknowledging the pleasure of participating in the making and remaking of the artwork itself. What kind of communal relationship is possible when the artist desires to become, however imperfectly, a member of the community she or he represents? Or when the artwork refuses to respect the “distance” between “subject and object” and the connoisseurial silence that accompanies it?

We have returned to the questions posed at the very beginning of my essay, to move beyond the philosophical implications of a conversational practice and confront its implications for the politics of art and representation. Both approaches share the belief that cultural judgment cannot be founded on a disembodied reading of an image or a sculptural form whose evaluation is based on what Rorty calls “the model of vision,” where truth is signified as the accuracy of representation or mimetic “authenticity.” The artists in “Conversations” seek an identification with their “subjects” that is profoundly ambitious and ambiguous. Although they are, as a group, as “international” as the cadre of Olympic athletes, “Conversations” skillfully subverts the “nationalist” criteria of cultural representation that informs the international spirit of the Games. The artists who participate in “Conversations” come from a range of countries — Germany, Italy, Ireland, Slovenia, Switzerland, Senegal — but it is neither their national origins nor their pure professional identities that they bring to Atlanta. They do not come in order to make large, nation-based comparisons between Europe and America or East and West. The originality of
their projects lies in the common cause sought between the location of the artist as a naturally “displaced” person, often standing on the critical “edge” of society, and those peoples — poor, minoritized, discriminated against — who are consigned to the margins of strongly centralized, powerful metropolitan cultures. In the rage for “global” representation, which increasingly holds the art world in its circular grip as it spins from one international show to another, it is salutary, for instance, to note that Ery Camara chose to identify with Reynoldstown, an African-American area of cultural and community revitalization, and that Dias and Riedweg initiated a dialogue between the inmates of the Fulton County Child Treatment Center and the Atlanta U.S. Federal Penitentiary, because as these artists said, by “exposing fragility or even ignorance we have a possibility of establishing contact with groups of people to which we ourselves do not belong.”

One of our most common contemporary self-descriptions is to say that we belong to the “global” village. Advances in digital technologies, the creation of cyberspace, and the international division of labor go some way toward suggesting that we are all members of a brave new global world. But from the local communities we inhabit, the global world still seems full of anxious apprehensions. For as we reach out to touch the new geopolitical surfaces and cultural circumstances that are offered to us through the rhetoric of the “global,” we often lose a tangible connection and are thrown back, willy nilly, on cultivating a national perspective in the most effective areas of our lives. This does not mean that we should be Luddites and fail to see what is opening up before us — a world of more complex boundaries, where we are forced to stretch our social and historical imaginations beyond what we can readily visualize or experience. But as we make our global leap — a leap in technology as well as human faith — we must be aware of that early form of globalization, which we have known for the last 250 years as imperialism and neocolonialism. Can the inequalities of power and wealth between the first and third worlds, the north and the south within the West itself, allow us to celebrate the global as if we are all participants in the same local festival? The human family still has its poor relatives, its stepchildren, its orphans. What these ambiguities in the global condition produce are profound anxieties about the way in which we see ourselves as part of a “shared” history of human civilization and barbarism. In a recent essay, the historian of urban experience, Richard Sennett, suggests that we can only properly relate to the global cosmopolitan experience by confronting our deepest anxieties about our own identities and pushing against the ego’s narcissistic limits: a real connection to others in the global context “arises from recognizing the insufficiencies of the self ... the fractures, self-destructiveness, and irresolvable conflicts of desires within ourselves which ... will prompt us to cross boundaries. Openness to the needs of others comes from ceasing to dream of the world made whole.”

The art of conversation, as I have suggested, dreams not of the world made whole as much as it emphasizes the need to attend to a world whose making is, at best, a contingent and contradictory enterprise. For this reason “conversation” eschews the vaunting rhetoric of global and local, focusing instead on the problematic of “exclusion” and “inclusion” — that dynamic of
marginalization and empowerment that regulates both the global perspective and the local terrain. As the language of globalization threatens to announce a brave new world, it would be well to listen to the community conversations of Camara, for whom, like Sennett, the purpose of conversation is to encounter the lack in ourselves, which then leads to the dialogic desire for the “other” who does not simply fill the gap as much as make possible a process that sloughs off the calloused, dead skin that covers up our vulnerabilities to “difference” — the strange and the unknown — which we parade in a series of stereotypes that circulate, short-sightedly and evasively, as authoritative images. As Camara states:

One of the rules of conversation is to know how to listen, to receive from someone what is missing in ourselves or to make a link between our sameness and difference. Listening allows a person to better speak or express him- or herself.... It is a constant opposition, and at the same time a transaction, of monologue and conversation, history and memory.

Working within the conversational mode from the perspective of contextual contingency, Camara yokes together oppositional realities and qualities, bringing together various generations of the Reynoldstown community. He constructs his own “bead game” through discussions and art workshops that enable the participants to reflect upon their own “locality” in two important ways: first, to place Reynoldstown in relation to the other cultural communities of Atlanta; and then, to explore and expunge through their own revitalization the dialogue that ensues between groups when the semiotic currency of public discourse is the soiled coin of stereotypy. What emerges in such encounters is the posture of the victim, and Camara’s purpose, as I understand it, is to unsettle any such easy identification with the hard lessons of history. For Camara, the aesthetics of “revitalization,” whether it applies to a community, a locality, or a tradition of craftsmanship, requires a particular kind of conversational experience that opens itself up to the contingent and paradoxical nature of the dialogic event: “New expressions of relations convert exchanges into living borders. Like seashores renewing the geometry of limits — displacements of time, people, and objects — the whole iconography of paradoxes brings about more perplexity.” Camara’s project enkindles hope in the conversational artifice; Reynoldstown’s revitalization is part of a new and emergent identity for the community, one that revises limits and turns dead ends into living borders.

But what of the art of incarceration to which Dias and Riedweg devote their Question Marks? I want to conclude my essay with a consideration of Dias and Riedweg’s work with people in detention, who are deprived of dialogue and cast out of society because they represent the “limit” case in the aesthetic journey I have undertaken, from the connoisseurial pedagogies of silence to the contingent and contextual practices of conversation. Dias and Riedweg, like Camara, seek to enlarge the possibilities of art’s dialogue, its public address, by deploying it to deconstruct stereotypes and displace social territories so that prisoners may, in the public imagination, be drawn out of the prison house of language and prejudice, in which they are incarcer-
ated quite beyond their physical detention. Dias and Riedweg enter into this creative undertaking — to represent a social group that has in many ways, renounced its rights of conversation and representation — because of outrage at a quite simple and searing “global” statistic: “Like the United States, about 75 percent of the inmate population in Brazil is black males; in Switzerland, every second inmate is a foreigner. Not only because of our past interests but because of this outrageous reality, we decided to again involve youth in our project in Atlanta.”

“[W]hat matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right.” Rorty’s words become ever more poignant and urgent when read alongside Dias and Riedweg’s description of the “nesting places” the youth inmate-participants imaginatively reconstructed in a series of floorplans. For those who live in the unblinking glare of official surveillance and regulation, the act of drawing a space of their own, marked by the uniqueness and intimacy of a spontaneous everydayness, is a small measure of self-respect regained. Clinging together against the dark develops its own luminous metaphor of communal living. I will let the artists’ record take on the story from here:

[T]his aspect led to the next idea: the making of a nest, a home, a nurturing and secure place. The youth chose to model their nest on those of the African weaver birds, who share one nest that has many entrances allowing a multitude of birds to occupy individual “cells,” as they are referred to. The nest the youth created was made by sewing their memories (about a hundred acetate strips upon which were written questions from their lives) into a huge amorphous structure of coconut fibers. This sculpture eventually found its habitat at The Castle.

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Let the nest of African weaver birds, built by the inmates, stand as a monument to the paradoxes of conversational art. It can be read as a double motif, turning the sculpture into a deeply ironic icon for the human need for intimacy and independence, fealty and freedom. From the liberatory perspective, the nest may be the inmates’ imagined vision of a community whose diverse points of entry can generously accommodate individuals and groups who represent different interests, even conflicting social passions. Norms would be negotiated, and ethics would be situational and contextual. But the nest is open to another darker reading: that the imagination of the inmates is shaped by the notion of “individual cells”; and there is a sense of conformity and the carceral that clings to the sculpted structure, as if the intimacy of association was based on a fear of the outside world.

The freedom of the conversational critic lies not in choosing the more hopeful, progressive reading while obscuring the obduracy of the negative impulse. For conversation, as I’ve suggested, depends for its ethical and aesthetic inquiry on living through contradiction and articulating ambivalent interests and identities. Maintaining a belief in a world of bead games and floor plans, which does not accommodate all of humanity, proud and whole, is no less significant for the spirit of survival it embodies and the narrative of endurance it envisages.