

Introduction

The issue you are about to read focuses on the opportunities for informal and spontaneous talk—talk that is not directed towards a particular objective or designed according to a specific agenda or within the parameters of a pre-existing discourse. This kind of talk is sometimes, nevertheless, “important” in the subjects it addresses and the impact it has on its participants.

We begin, perhaps a little bit too obviously, with a conversation between the editors.

Christina Ritchie So, we should try to make this as concise as we can, because in the book I don’t think it should be more than a couple of pages. So I’m going to ask you, Jacob: how do you like the contents we’ve collected for *Talk*. [laughter]

Jacob Wren It seems to me, well, I always look at any project or enterprise as a kind of chasm between the reality and the ideal. But for me, or not even for me, it seems that a kind of ideal expression of the notion of talk in a printed form would come out of a group of people who all knew each other and were friends and socialized. And out of some sort of social, conversational activity would come ideas for articles and artist’s projects, and there would be this kind of life, which I’ve never experienced, this kind of energy of socializing...

CR You mean socializing or collegiality of some sort...

JW Some sort of peer environment. But most of the way material has been solicited for *Talk* has been writing formally to people we don’t know—though maybe for you there’s been a few more people you know—so in a way it seems like it’s the exact opposite of the ideal. I consider talk to be a more informal process and yet we’ve used a basically formal process to gather material about it. But still a lot of the material... it seems more about informal talk than coming out of, or of, informal talk. Which is interesting.

CR Well, what’s interesting to me is that the contents we have put together... I mean, I love it that we’ve got two days to deliver the manuscript to the copy editor and there are still a number of people that we haven’t heard from...

JW (*laughter*) People who aren't talking to us at the moment...

CR And putting it together reflects the kinds of things that happen in a conversation. I don't know if that's going to be reflected in the character of the issue, but what I mean is that there are people who have mis-spoken; there are instances where people change their mind; there are instances where people contradict each other even though there was no actual conversation between them. You know, from Dave Hickey's interview to the essay by William H. Gass, there's a total contradiction there. And I like the way someone like Emily Vey Duke has used the opportunity to speak the unspeakable. So I think that some really nice things have been done. Whether or not it's... you know, if I had a more comfortable lead time in which to put the material together, I don't think it would be the same issue. But that's kind of beside the point.

JW Something else I've realized over the course of this process, or project, is that in a way the original impulse was both about talk and about a lack of talk. And I think the contents very much reflect that. But also, in a way, there's the thinking that you can't have a sort of vibrant conversational tone without a kind of longing for it, or a feeling that you're lacking it; that it's a void that has to be filled. It's a void before it's a reality. And maybe as it becomes a reality, the void remains.

CR Yes, and that feeds into the idea of talk as a kind of paradoxical experience where to speak, in a public sense, is, in fact, to come into being socially, and yet the product of such an act is ephemeral—unless we happen to be running a tape recorder or some other mechanism that freezes it, and then it is no longer what it started out being. There is that sort of tension, which is perhaps what is longed for. In one conversation that we had, I don't know if we were particularly depressed that day, but we talked about talk as an antidote to lunacy. And I'm not sure why...

JW Because when you talk you realize everyone's just as crazy as you are and suddenly it doesn't seem so abnormal.

CR It's totally normal. And it takes up an incredible amount of our time. And most of the talk that we talk is pretty innocuous and predictable yet nonetheless necessary and fascinating. So we probably talk a lot more than you acknowledge. And it's just those very specific kinds of conversations where there is an idea that is based in an ethical or moral position that is nonetheless open and subject to alteration through action and interaction; well, that might happen just by discussing the price of beans, it doesn't necessarily have to be exhilarating. But I think it's that kind of exhilarating thing that you're looking for, right?

JW Sure, but also, well...the exhilaration, I think, comes just from the feeling that it's possible. And the deadening quality, that maybe I whine about, just comes from this feeling that you can talk endlessly with any number of people and nothing of any significance will ever be said. And just a moment, even if nothing is said, where it seems suddenly that it's possible, not just to speak your mind in an honest way—or to speak about ideas in a complex way—but to say something that you haven't thought before, a kind of social interaction in which a space is opened up where, because of what other people are saying, suddenly you can say something that hasn't occurred to you before. And even if you don't, that's the kind of rare, but I think essential, quality.