

**John Hammersley**

**Case reflection for An invitation to dialogue  
— Blackweir Bridge 2009, Cardiff.**

We can try to envisage the flow of life in terms of the changing environment or see it, with Heraclitus, as seeming, but not being, the same, as seeming both many and one. But, however much we try—by some special effort—to experience the flow and strengthen our awareness of it, we are subject to the law of life itself according to which every observed moment of life is a remembered moment and not a flow; it is fixed by attention which arrests what is essentially flow (Dilthey, cited in Mueller-Vollmer 1986).

**Introduction**

From the 5th to the 12th of June 2009, a poster on an A-board stood next to a bridge by a river in a park. It read, 'this is *An invitation to dialogue*, you are invited to participate in a conversation on the Blackweir Bridge over the River Taff in Cardiff. John will be participating in conversations on Friday June the 19th from 9.00am until 6.00pm. Please feel free to join John for a while if you wish to participate.

Between the banks spanned by this bridge, grey-green waters from the valleys rushed complaining as they met the engineering works of the salmon leap. Downstream was Cardiff Bay and behind me the river tucked itself back into a bend. The bridge was a popular route through Pontcanna fields and Bute Park, which cut a swathe through Cardiff and linked the trendy middle class neighbourhood of Pontcanna with the city centre and Cardiff University. Commissioned as part of the site-specific curatorial project Open Empty Spaces, this was my third 'invitation to dialogue'.

**Context and background**

Open Empty Spaces aimed to create temporary, non-gallery exhibition spaces in the public realm. The curators hoped to bring contemporary art to new audiences and create debate about the space that contemporary art inhabits.

In response to the themes of the project's title, Jennie Savage (2009) described openness as suggestive of inclusivity and availability, openness to interpretation and meaning, and as a sense of waiting for an assignation. Empty conjured thoughts of empty physical spaces that bring out collective fears for physical and mental safety. However such fear of outer spaces is for Savage possibly a metaphor for inner emptiness; a state which we attempt to distract ourselves from by engaging in activities, a state that Savage (2009) describes as, 'a crushing tide of existential crisis, a fear of nothingness.' Such spaces are different from place as Savage (2009) argues, 'A sense of place' is what architects strive to achieve when they open shells of concrete and glass to the public.' Savage proposes that spaces are a blank canvas for the artist to draw on free of meaning and association, or the messiness of emotion.

I conceived of the artwork *An invitation to dialogue* as a naturalistic conversational encounter in a public place. The work of art and possible dialogue continuing through case reflection. Multi-site case reflections are an auto-ethnographic social science method where the researcher reflects on their experience and writes a narrative account of it. In particular a researcher reflects on the relative success or problems with the work or activity. Robert Stake (cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) states multisite case reflections may be used so that, 'a number of cases may be studied jointly in order to investigate a phenomenon, popula-

tion, or general condition.' Here I attempt to investigate the general conditions for and of dialogue in this work of art, in particular focusing on what is said in or emerges from the conversations. In proposing this work as potential dialogue I identify with Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of real dialogue, which is one that leads to new understanding through questioning (Gadamer, 2004). Gadamer (2004) states:

As the art of asking questions, dialectic proves its value because only the person who knows how to ask questions is able to persist in his questioning, which involves being able to preserve his orientation toward openness. The art of questioning is the art of questioning even further—i.e., the art of thinking. It is called dialectic because it is the art of conducting real dialogue.

To participate in real dialogue a participant must remain open to yet more questions. I seek to remain open to new questions in part by continuing the dialogue on the bridge through this case reflection, which is part of the on-going dialogue or on-going questioning of a series of works titled *An invitation to dialogue*. This reflection also forms part of my wider investigation into dialogue as practice and understanding in contemporary art.

As part of this wider investigation into dialogue in contemporary art I understand *An invitation to dialogue* to be part of a recent tradition of neo-conceptual conversational artworks such as Peter Snyder's Listening Post 2008/2009 and Simon Pope's Mountains and Lacunæ 2009 which emphasise a more personal conversational exchange between artist and other participants. Peter Snyder says his motivation for Listening Post stems from his simple belief in the power of face-to-face communication (Snyder, 2009). Simon Pope's Mountains

and Lacunæ proposes dialogue as a collective picturing or dialogue as foregrounding of memory (Pope & Cullen, 2010). *An invitation to dialogue* shares more with the intimacy of Snyder's one-to-one face-to-faceness and the recall of personal memories through conversation of Mountains and Lacunæ than with larger scale public conversational performances such as Tino Sehgal's This Progress 2010 or more social activist works such as Suzanne Lacy's Code 33 where the artist organises conversational encounters but may not participate and thus is literally not answerable in the work.

In this Invitation to dialogue I participated in fourteen open-themed conversations throughout the course of the day. I stood in the centre of the bridge, which passed over a salmon leap, which was under construction. An area around the bridge had been fenced off for the construction machinery and materials. Just downstream from the bridge a line of large boulders had been placed in the river to mark out a roadway for dumper trucks shifting concrete and rocks to the salmon leap.

### The conversations

A well-dressed man stopped and asked, 'Is bird song a dialogue?' I said dialogue could be reflective or an act of recognition and not simply a semantic exchange, so if I felt recognised by the bird or its song provoked a mental conversation then I thought it could be understood to be dialogue in some sense. He thought recognition was important. He had already had a dialogue while approaching me and had asked himself, 'What do I think of this guy? How is he dressed? What can I tell from his body language? Is this someone I feel safe approaching?' and, 'What is he after?'

Later another man asked pointedly, 'What is the conversation about?' 'What is any

conversation about?' I said. 'That is no good' the man said, 'you don't invite someone to dinner and then ask them what's for tea.' 'But you can invite someone to dinner and ask them what they would like to eat' I said. 'Was I getting paid for being there?' I said I didn't accept payment for the work. 'That isn't the same as saying that you can't see any reason why anyone would pay you. You are taking the moral high ground' he said. I agreed, but I still couldn't see any good reason why someone should pay me for doing this.

A while later he returned to tell me what he really wanted to know was whether I 'pulled' doing this. He usually went to the pub to talk about sex, sport and take the piss. Apparently remembering some distant conversation he said he wanted to share a beautiful phrase he had heard about a Northern Soul dance. 'The tension blossomed' he said. That was not the only time that I heard mention of pubs that day.

During a long pause between encounters, I measured the bridge counting one hundred and eleven planks to its span. I was still wondering about the use of such an observation when a woman stopped to talk. She told me the theatre where she worked had recently staged a piece in which the audience was invited onto the stage to sit one-to-one with young people at tables. Other performers moved around the tables whilst the audience member and the performer had a conversation. 'Do you live in Cardiff?' I asked. Yes, but she wasn't sure she really 'lived' there, even after fourteen years. 'It's a Welsh thing. I'm English.' She changed the subject saying I had picked a good location for talking to people.

I wasn't sure I belonged. As if noticing me out of place the foreman came up and asked why I was there. I am having conversations I told him. He was more used to

people asking about his work, its costs and progress. As if to fit in I asked about how long the leap would take. It was a rush to try and complete the salmon leap before the season at the end of September. Some people had complained about the site and they had had to make concessions moving fencing to allow sunbathers access to a pier.

I was trying to imagine anyone wanting to sunbathe next to a construction site when three women asked if I was John. Wasn't it nice that I wasn't wearing a label. It seemed everything they went to involved wearing a label. 'Was I an art piece or an artwork?' I said I was John. 'You haven't asked us our names' they said. After the ice was broken they told me they were annoyed the council hadn't restored Pontcanna fields after last year's Eisteddfod (festival of Welsh culture). The festival's marquees, vehicles and foot traffic had killed the grass. 'Parks are owned by the public and only looked after by the council' they said.

A couple with a double buggy stopped and asked, 'Is this the art conversation?' They were taking a walk with the kids but had recently got back from an Antarctic expedition. 'The Antarctic was like a snowy Cambridge, all flat and white.' Now that they were back they felt everyday routine and life with the kids was tiring and mundane. Once the kids were in bed they were ready to switch off. I asked them what they thought art was. They mentioned something about creativity. They did not see themselves as very creative but they did enjoy seeing the world afresh through their kids' eyes and laughing with them.

I sat down to rest and listen to the birds and the water. Two young men stopped, undressed down to their underwear and I stood up, a little uncomfortable and unsure. They then climbed on to the side of the bridge and jumped. I was surprised

and remember thinking that the water didn't look very deep. As they came back I asked, 'How did you know the water was deep enough?' They said they had jumped there before. They did occasional work in Birmingham and driving to Cardiff had seen people jumping off the bridge at Monmouth. 'The bridge is much higher there though' they added. They asked if I would watch their clothes as their friend wouldn't. I hadn't noticed him in the distance and asked why he wasn't jumping. He was worried they would throw him in with his clothes on. 'Wasn't it a bit cold?' I asked as they climbed up again. 'Yes, but it kills the time until the pubs open'.

The park was busier now and Joggers passed, sealed off from the sound of the river and birdsong by MP3 players. An angler stopped briefly to talk about salmon poaching and the cost of fishing licences. It still costs about £7.50 a day from the post office but you have to fill in every detail he told me. In the last hour, a young man with prominent piercings and tattoos pulled up on a bike. I thought back to what someone had said earlier about the prior dialogue and appearance. He gave me his name and said he was a performer. He was interested in the physical rather than the theatrical side of circus and wanted to take what he had learned from street performance away from the stage which he felt protected him and other performers. It's the unpredictability of being close up with the audience member. 'It's more demanding, more rewarding,' he said. 'On stage you can hold back or maybe you can be more self-contained.'

At six I retreated to a pub tired from being open to conversation and wanting to capture something of what was still speaking to me from the day's conversation.

## What I made of the conversation

### Openness

That potential participants obviously reflect on my appearance, my dress, body-language and whether they feel safe approaching me demonstrates the dimension of trust necessary in this dialogue. This work is open to whoever approaches me, but it is open enough for people to change their mind or simply not to participate. I ask myself similar questions of whether I feel safe with participants but this work is about vulnerability and exposure.

To engage in dialogue is to be exposed. This is not just physically exposed to others but in dialogue our motives may be exposed, drawn out by the conversation. As Rokeach (cited in Hayakawa, 1978) states:

Psychologically... all human beings are engaged simultaneously in two tasks: (1) they seek to know more about the world, and (2) they wish to protect themselves from the world – especially from information that might prove upsetting. As the need for defence against disturbing information gets stronger, curiosity about the world gets weaker.

Dialogue may place the individual in the dilemma of seeking to know more about the world through engaging in conversation with others whilst at the same time having one's own view of the world challenged by different perspectives.

My views about the positive openness of dialogue or what I understood as the possibility of emergent themes was questioned when one participant asked 'What is the conversation about?' 'What is any conversation about?' I said. 'That is no good' he replied, 'you don't invite some-

one to dinner and then ask them what's for tea.' 'But you can invite someone to dinner and ask them what they would like to eat' I said. In dialogue are interlocutors ever truly self-effacing, so open to the other or altruistic so as not to wish to lead the dialogue? For Nietzsche the notion that altruism was an absolutely self-less act was impossible (Schacht, 1983). In acting in a manner that appears to put the needs of others first the individual gains recognition and social esteem for being a team player. But I am clearly doing this in my search to know more about the world of dialogue and so this work is clearly not a self-less act in that sense. But what may be learned in dialogue may transcend my (self) understanding. For Gadamer the understanding that emerges or is 'unfolded' through dialogue is a truth that is neither my interlocutor's nor mine but transcends individual understanding and opinion (2004). The openness may be the place from which we are able to depart from self-interest towards interest in the other.

But the motivation of seeking new knowledge about the world still seems a noble motive, a Socratic quest for enlightenment. What about baser motives and appetites? 'Have you 'pulled' doing this?' the man asked. 'Not yet,' I said. 'Was I getting paid for being there?' I said, 'I don't accept payment for the work.' 'That isn't the same as saying that you can't see any reason why anyone would pay you. You are taking the moral high ground,' he said. Is this work an appeal to the group for my status as artist as moral team player? For Bakhtin, dialogue is intrinsically moral as in our face-to-face encounter with each other we become answerable for our actions and opinions. Bakhtin argues art is answerable to life and vice-versa (Holquist & Liapunov, 1990). I am perhaps identifying with this moral perspective as I do not wish to be absolved from

responsibility for my being, or indeed for being an artist.

I mistrust the moral get out of jail card of absolute artistic autonomy. Mistrust however seems to work against dialogue. The women were angry at the council for not repairing the Pontcanna fields after Eisteddfod. I felt they mistrusted the council for profiting from the event but not accepting the cost. They felt the Pontcanna fields were borrowed from the public but the council appeared unanswerable for their damage. Political answerability may be increasingly difficult however as Tonn recognises that politicians have often appropriated the language of conversation, healing and dialogue in order to mitigate against criticism and garner support (2005). This may contribute to a wider mistrust of politicians but also of the language and instrumentalism of dialogue.

Dialogue may also be mistrusted as its patterns of language hold potential for manipulating and making others more amenable to agreement as Dolinski et al. recognise (2001). The bridge jumpers' friend wouldn't come on to the bridge as he didn't trust them not to throw him in with his clothes on yet after talking with me only briefly they asked if I would watch their clothes and mobile phones. The openness and trust necessary in dialogue thus seems a delicate balancing act of judging when it is safe to learn more about the world and our capacity for risking the security of what we feel we already know. At some point though, dialogue may be a leap of faith into a stream of uncertain depth.

### Emptiness

In these conversations, I was struck by the process of filling. The tension filled the atmosphere, blossoming at a dance. I

imagined an empty dance floor about to fill. People fill their time in pubs with conversation. But the bridge jumpers didn't fill time, they killed time until the pubs opened. Time thus seems a threat, a threatening void and emptiness to be filled. We fill the threatening void of our lives with the promise of blossom on the dance floor, cycling and jogging around parks and jumping from bridges. Is conversation a compensation for those not active enough to dance or play sport? Does it allow us to participate vicariously in 'Strictly', the football or share the activities we never quite got around to last holiday? Or is it just still an activity sufficient to fill the void?

A full daily routine didn't seem to satisfy like the flat white emptiness of the Antarctic. There isn't an empty space in the day until the kids are put to bed, by which time parents' energy reserves are running empty. Without something killing or filling it, time seems like something troubling or irksome, much like the wearisome monotonous daily routine of taking kids to school. Spare time seems to be experienced in much the same way as the daily routine. Both seem to lack something or need to be escaped from.

In this talk of time I feel the echoes of Kierkegaard's criticism of modern boredom. The aesthete's assumption that boredom was a tedium of the world rather than a deficit of the bored subject (Dalle Pezze & Salzani, 2009). These conversations speak of a boredom with life, a wider aesthetic attitude, a taste for experience set apart from the sameness of modern living. George Simmel saw modern boredom as a by-product of the increased pressures on time, which make it increasingly difficult for individuals to develop adequate value systems for leading a meaningful life (cited in Dalle Pezze & Salzani, 2009). Yet people had enough time to stop and talk.

Is conversation a filler, a distraction from the emptiness of modern living or are we paradoxically too busy for a full dialogue, our lives too full to stop and take time to consider its meaning?

### Space

I counted one hundred and eleven planks of wood. My stage? Was I sharing the stage through conversation? All the participants in *An invitation to dialogue* shared the immediate stage and were visible and on show. But where did the space of the work start and stop? Where does the stage or context of dialogue start and stop? The bridge, the riverbanks, Bute Park, Pontcanna fields, Cardiff itself and the previous artworks of Open Empty Spaces all define the space and the dialogue. Miwon Kwon believes that the space of art can no longer be a tabula rasa or blank slate but must be considered a real place where the work of art or event is (Kwon, 2004), 'to be singularly and multiply experienced in the here and now through the bodily presence of each viewing subject, in a sensory immediacy of spatial extension and temporal duration (what Michael Fried derisively characterized as theatricality), rather than instantaneously perceived in a visual epiphany by a disembodied eye.' In Kwon's account, place and space seem to collapse into a total context of space and time. But is this collapse mere theatricality?

One participant felt the physical work of being in the space of a circus was different from the theatrical work. Paradoxically he felt the stage as space protected him. I can only imagine being drawn from the audience onto a theatre stage must be quite intimidating yet I find I am increasingly comfortable with staging and being drawn into this work.

Being physical, occupying space was, the

performer suggested, more demanding than theatricality. The space of a stage allows the self to be contained. You can hold back. Without the stage the self is not contained, things are a little more unpredictable. Physical participation goes beyond the passive Brechtian and may be closer to the physicality of Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty (Bishop, 2006). This may be necessary to consider the work as dialogical as Guy DeBord (cited in Bishop, 2006) argues, 'The spectacle is by definition immune from human activity, inaccessible to any review or correction. It is the opposite of dialogue.' Yet for Ranciere, spectatorship is not passivity waiting to be transformed into action. Instead it is our normal mode of learning, acting and knowing (Bishop, 2006). But Ranciere's active spectatorship, a spectatorship of active interpretation might as Guy Debord suggests only unite us by emphasizing the space that separates us (Bishop, 2006). Perhaps it is dialogue that can bridge such a space.

### Limitations of this work

The values of truth and trust, and my identification with Bakhtin's notion of answerability in this invitation to dialogue speak of a quasi-religious tone of this work. It argues for an orientation towards openness, but dialogue as Tonn (2005) argues, 'tends to advantage the gregarious or articulate over the shy or slight of tongue.' An orientation towards openness may thus be an attitude or capacity afforded by my family and education background, which both place great importance on open and free conversation and articulateness. Openness for others may however leave them open to being manipulated or coerced.

This dialogue also suggests that some people kill time until they are able to render themselves inebriated. For others it can take such a radical stepping back from

routine as a trip to Antarctica to reveal the monotony of our daily life. Both lack of employment and being busy employed by parenthood seem to speak of an emptiness. As Isis Leslie reminds us boredom can be a referent for a kind of "blind" introspection or examination of a person's thoughts and emotions (Dalle Pezze & Salzani, 2009). This work assumes that many people seem to disagree with Socrates' assertion that the unreflective life is not worth living, or it perhaps overlooks that to be able to live a worthwhile or reflective life might actually require the prior resources to do so. Time or the tools to reflect may increasingly be a luxury afforded to artists, philosophers and a few privileged researchers 'able to empty their heads of everyday concerns to think allegedly more meaningful thoughts.'

### Further questions

Doing away with the notion of the bound stage is more than a mere act of theatricality. Participants may find themselves having to ask where does art end and everyday action begin, or vice versa. This may locate the work not so centrally in art but in the art of living, what Bürger describes as the praxis of life (cited in Bishop, 2006).

I think this work asks to what extent may dialogue offer a means for thinking and acting through a theory of what our lives mean. Might dialogue offer a way out of isolated subject-hood or solipsism and a means of maintaining and strengthening our curiosity about our everyday lives without becoming fearful of disturbing information. If dialogue reinforces our curiosity and openness about the world, protects against fear of inner emptiness and lack of meaning in our lives, what are the spaces where this potential might be best realised? And how best might we weigh up the dangers and gains of dialogue?

**Text**

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