We Spoke Again: Dialogue in Display

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For fifteen days in 2011, I furtively performed a materialization of speech.¹ The highly varied and mostly memorable content of conversations was for me an ideal and eminently available source for an art project about dialogical aesthetics. But conversational content captured with a recording device was not what I was after. I am a visual artist, after all. I wanted to accumulate and eventually see the conversations that I had experienced and recalled. So, the project involved putting recalled conversational content through layers of cognitive and visual manipulation—filters, you might say. I am referring here to the techniques of retrieval, handwriting, and display. The conversations, which quickly became unwieldy and endlessly mutating inside of my head (at least that’s how I imagined them), had to be metaphorically yanked out of my head and transferred, through a hand-and-pencil process, onto paper. The mental sorting and ordering that was involved resulted in what might be called fictionalization—a filtration that was dispersed during both retrieval and documentation. I had to work quickly with all of this, to prevent my unstable memory from another process: overwriting.

Let me emphasize this: my aim of research was aesthetic.

I wanted to see what my side of the story looked like.²

Preparations for We Spoke included two beautifully wordless afternoons spent in the letterpress studio where these words were centered and imprinted in stately italic font onto about forty pieces of heavy paper:

We spoke

Once the project was rolling, I made sure that wherever I went I was equipped with a few of the printed cards and a pencil. After nearly every conversation I had during the course of the project, I would privately pencil my memories of what was said onto the cards. As soon as I could, I then deposited these reports into a shiny mailbox, which was affixed to a gallery wall in the exhibition called A Furtive Conundrum. The results have been further fictionalized and transcribed for publication here.³
April 1

*We spoke*

About your very large, very well-stocked textile studio.
About how you might fabricate for her a graduation dress.
About the meaning of *valediction*.
About community art projects and about our experiences with ethics board supervision; about community projects that go badly, and the vulnerability of artists.
About how you were once a Mennonite, and how you know where to get Mennonite sausage.

This is the second conversation in one evening about Mennonites. Earlier, I had heard myself blurting out that three or four of the artists in “Beaver” had Mennonite names.

(That conversation happened in the hours before I started this project, so I will leave it alone.)

April 2

*We spoke*

About the exhibition openings last night.
About “Beaver.” We speculated in a gossipy kind of way about the sexualized curatorial premise and how the participating artists were mostly young women,

(and how the curator is dating one of the artists).

About making art as older women.
About a local documentary filmmaker-in-residence.
About the challenges of applying research models to visual art practices.

We uttered this word far too many times:

K’moon-it-ee
Ku-MOO-nit-ee
K’mūnity
Kah-myūn-ĭt-ē
*Kamunity
*K’moonity

I am desperately sick of that word, which seems to be meaninglessly accumulating inside of my head.
April 3

We spoke

About media art and the old *Storyum.*
About the art work called *Vancouver [de]Tour Guide 2010,*
and unsettled land claims.
About Canada.
I told you that I thought our project was “coming along,” when you asked.

I should have said, “coming along nicely. Thank you for your good work,” or
“We have a long way to go but I am confident it will be a very strong piece,” or
“It’s going to be GREAT!”

I feel (and see) conversational regret.

April 3

We spoke

About change.
You said you would not ever be able to change professions.
You wondered what led to him to change from
being specialized in one area to a new one.

The conversation made me question for the first time how my appraisal of his reasons was
framed by my own needs: I told you that he chose a safer, more secure, more lucrative profes-
sion (for his family).

No actually I didn’t—I was just thinking it through,
while we were talking.

About voting in Australia, and how it is a cause for joining friends later for a BBQ,
*will that happen here?*, you asked—and—
*what is voter turnout in Canada?*
*I don’t know,* I told you.

April 3

We spoke

About immigration & the upcoming election: how can immigrant communities consider voting
for a government that has so recently curtailed the unification of immigrant families, we asked
—not so much questions as assertions.

Word of Mouth
About racial tensions in Europe.
About an article I am writing for Public.
You thanked me for taking up Olympics / fascism liaisons.

**We fought**

April 4

over hospitality.

**We spoke**

You apologized with a text message, *sorry*.
So did I.

April 4

**We spoke**

—We talked & talked—
All I remember is telling
you that if you ever dream
up a “social engagement”
project that requires someone
to “monitor” content for “appropriateness”
the project is likely all wrong.

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.
.

I also hinted to you about this project.

I am beginning to truncate my conversations because I
don’t want to let it slip that everything said
is getting written down and deposited into a letter box in an obscure gallery.
I don’t want to compromise the pleasures of talking
for this episode of creative practice.

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.
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I notice that in the usual course of conversations
I talk a lot about talking with others. I talk as if what gets said in one conversation needs to be added to another. I feel the need to fill conversations (and this artwork) with content taken from somewhere else.

April 4

*We spoke*

At the meal he made when we met his fiancée. I remember at dinner that all of us kept talking about how to convert imperial length into metric… how tall is everyone in imperial and how tall is everyone in metric.

(How is this interesting in anyway, I asked myself!) Was this a lame way of negotiating our enormous age, language & ethnic differences—a way to laugh, about measurements & food?

April 5

*We spoke*

About your day at school. You found the chemistry in-class assignment easy. The new assignment for video production is going to be your favourite assignment, you said.

April 6

*We spoke*

Today I had 2 more conversations about conversation:

CG told me of a conversation they had with a friend. It revealed a new way of talking … they talked about their sexuality in a way they had never done before. Now CG wants to take on the subject of intimate conversations between friends in a new film project.

FC told me about a conversation with people he had never met before. He felt a sense of appreciation
for them as outsiders—people whose experiences were similar to his, but vastly different at the same time.

In both of these situations, the conversation revealed a longing—something missing that became revealed through the presence of another. When I heard this I tried to imagine the feelings that might accompany awareness and revelation.

April 10

*We spoke*

I am furtively observing foreign speech acts at the Saskatoon Airport.

“This is really weird.”
A young stewardess is talking on her cell phone with an older man who has just walked off a flight. He is on one side of the glass barricade & she is on the other.
While looking into his face, close enough to touch but blocked by the floor to ceiling barricade, she narrates the entire day into her phone.

I think he is her father & he wants to know where she has been.

Later, sitting on the toilet in the airport, I can hear laughing & loud talking. I recognize the voices of the conference moderator & a panelist from this morning’s event.
They seem to be on the same page now, and on the same flight back to Toronto.
I guess their fundamental differences of opinion from the panel have been resolved or at least tabled.

Do they like each other now?
(Maybe they always did—I hadn’t considered that earlier today.)

The conference was a lot of talking about talking.
The featured artist at the conference said that she was wary of the word “dialogue” because it has been over-used.

...It’s absurd...it has become meaningless.
She said that dialogue is something that doesn’t really exist in artworks.
She tries to be very accurate about what form it takes in her work.

She did not give a lecture.
Instead, she had one of the curators interview her.
We spoke later—
I told her about how I was very nervous about showing my final video piece to the participants whose speech acts formed the content of the piece… about how, like her, I was planning to project images of them speaking into a public space.
She told me that in her way of working she never offered her participants withdrawal rights.

Our conversation got hijacked by a famous young artist-guy.
She gave me a knowing look and invited me to email her later.

April 13

We spoke

On my cell phone
About your trip to Vancouver.
I was conscious of the cost of the call.
So I agreed with everything you said.
(“Can’t wait to see you!”)

April 14

We spoke

About parenting.

Later, I spoke to him
about homework & finding a job.
He said nothing.

April 14

We spoke

About your depression.
I tried to deflect the intensity of the conversation by talking about the sorry state of mental health services. I asked about how you had conquered depression in the past.
I invited you for dinner.

You didn’t come.

Word of Mouth
April 16

*We spoke*

for a long time about a number of conversations that I’d had with another person.

The more I re-played those interactions in my head, the more upset I became. I couldn’t sleep that night. I was completely worked up over the condition of powerlessness. I should have spoken up back then, but I didn’t know how.

April 16

*We spoke*

Your conversation style is forceful, direct, critical. There are large gaps in the topics you cover. One strong opinion chasing down another. Something like batting practice—or a driving range.

Some months after *We Spoke* was finished and the exhibition closed, I prepared a more formal textual response to a performance artwork by Casey Wei called *Answers: A Monologue*. I was struck by how specifically Wei’s performance made use of found speech as aesthetic content. Whereas I had furtively collected and produced words and ideas from intimate exchanges, her art was made when her body reenacted portions of highly public speech acts. Neither of us intended to provide a ready analysis or easy rationale for our work to our audiences. As with other contemporary art and creative writing, our work was meant to provoke further dialogue and imaginative detours amongst its own audiences. At the conclusion of the symposium in which Wei performed, I was invited to produce a response to her work. I chose to offer a rudimentary literary analysis, using well-known theoretical texts on dialogical aesthetics that had inspired me during the development of *We Spoke*—such as,

The topic of a speaking person has enormous importance in everyday life…. We can go so far as to say that in real life people talk most of all about what others talk about—they transmit, recall, weigh and pass judgment on other people’s words, opinions, assertions, information…. (Bakhtin 77)

By the time it was my turn to speak on the afternoon of the second day at the *Liminal Positions Symposium*, I was thoroughly enjoying the unexpected intersections of meanings that were laying tracks in and around my imagination. We were talking about a kind of border zone between people—an intersubjective location for dialogue. Thoroughly liminal, dialogue relies on the participants’ endless supply of past influences and tangential thoughts that work their way into its zone. If we could picture it, this liminal zone might look like the seemingly indiscriminate...
but evocatively considered arrangements of pictures on attractive black velvet panels that form Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*, which Lisa Robertson impressively summarized in her keynote lecture.⁷

As I was listening to Casey Wei’s performance of found and fragmented speech acts, Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogical aesthetics seemed to be an obvious way to frame the myriad of influences that enter the conversational zone. Wei’s performance, *Answers: A Monologue*, is not at all monologic in the Bakhtinian sense. It is composed of dialogue, or more accurately, isolated pieces of publicized dialogue from movies and television broadcasts. From the inter-textual clues, I guessed that she had assembled answers from artists and celebrities during interviews that were somehow circulated through mass media. According to Bakhtin, all utterances, not just the answers, are Janus-faced: “[Each] word is a two sided act…. Each and every word expresses the ‘one’ in relation to the ‘other’” (58). We form and speak words that anticipate a receiver. By giving the listener of her performance only fragments of dialogic exchanges, Wei was demonstrating how, in mass media, an audience stands in for the dialogic other. The isolated answers were performed as invitations for the audience to engage actively by completing the picture and banishing the unknown. Unknowing is so familiar and so objectionable at the same time. By actively repressing it, we hardly notice our own unknowing. In my *We Spoke* project I became conscious of my tendency to cover up unknowing. I also became aware of how intimate were the conversations that revealed the speaker’s awareness of unknowing (see “April 6”). Wei’s performance, in contrast, positioned unknowing (and nearly knowing) foremost in the action and meaning of the artwork. In the usual circumstances of mass-circulated dialogue, we may know a whole lot less than we think. Mass media, celebrity culture, and the world of art stars were all referenced in Wei’s *Answers*. All of these sites work within centralized language systems—one could say there exists a “unitary language” or “monologism” of mass-circulated culture and capital, to borrow Bakhtin’s terminology. He describes a centripetal force within language that works to build ideological centralization and unification through the words we circulate. Authoritative words require specific responses. This is a requirement and not really a choice; an authoritative utterance already has power attached to it—we do not choose to give it power. To reinforce hegemonic power, we are called on to learn and repeat the words of authoritative discourse and to make them our own.

Mikhail Bakhtin worked out ideas of authoritarian discourse amidst intellectual repression in Stalinist Russia. Despite formidable setbacks in publishing and distribution, the survival of his work is evidence of the other, more optimistic feature of authoritative discourse that Bakhtin articulated. In the midst of people talking, there is always an opposing centrifugal force that continually stratifies and fragments the meanings produced by the authority. In this way, there is always the tendency for authoritative language to be profaned, parodied and possibly liberated. In *Answers: A Monologue*, the out-of-context words of aging moviemakers and art stars, spoken in
fractured pieces through the voice of a young woman on stage, seemed puzzling and funny. For that moment, the authority of mass culture was disempowered.

As if speaking to you now,
I am trying to tell you that what I saw and heard in Casey Wei’s *Answers: A Monologue* was a disruption of the monologue in the context of an intersecting and splintering dialogue.

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1 The resulting artwork, *We Spoke: Modes of Discourse* was included in the exhibition, *A Furtive Conundrum: Practicing the Furtive*, at 1612 Gallery, Vancouver. Mariane Bourcheix-Laporte and Ryan Mathieson curated this group exhibition which also included works by the following Vancouver-based graduate student artists: Dylan Cree, Kevin Day, Angela Ferreira, Natalie Schneck, Sara French, Jany Lastoria, Vitor Munhoz, Jacquelyn Ross, Karen Spencer, Yi Xin Tong, Casey Wei, Anthony Schrag.

2 I am typographically emphasizing this distinction not just to clarify my artistic inquiry for readers unfamiliar with artistic methodologies, but more importantly to distinguish this project from participant research methodologies in which participants are expected to provide responses that are “analyzed to answer a research question,” as described in the guidelines governing research ethics review in Canada (TCPS2 - http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-epct2/chapter2-chapitre2/ ). Though the results of this creative project are being circulated in an academic publication, the project emerged from a creative practice inquiry. This report draws on the project’s initial “publication” in an art exhibition and includes further fictionalizing, based on my interests in materializing dialogue aesthetics. In these ways, it remains distinct from academic research involving research participants. That is why an academic research ethics review board has not reviewed this project and why there were no consent agreements or debriefing events built into the methodology. Instead, the ethical consideration of the risks and benefits of its “furtive” methodology for the public were evaluated internally by the exhibition’s curators and artists. As an artwork, its ethics continue to be evaluated by viewers and readers who encounter it as a lingering artifact and text.

3 While a number of people have read these entries and provided feedback, I want to acknowledge the very helpful and inspiring responses provided by poet Sarah Klassen in 2014.

4 *Storyeum* was an ambitious, albeit short-lived, tourist attraction that operated in Vancouver’s Gastown district from 2004-2006. Premised on storytelling, the facility was made up of a series of large-scale theatrical settings in which actors performed narratives from the province’s history.

5 This community mapping project was initiated in the months leading up to the Vancouver Olympic Games by artists Rob Brownie, Althea Thauberger, Kristina Lee Podesva, and Annabel Vaughan. See - http://vancouvertourguide2010.org/

6 *Liminal Positions Student Symposium*, Emily Carr University, 2011.

7 Robertson’s presentation described her work as writer in residence at the Warburg Institute Library in London. A new publication from her Warburg research has recently become available. See, Lisa Robertson, *Thinking Space*. Brooklyn: Organization of Poetic Research, 2014.
Works Cited
