

## Notes on a state of conversation.

Lisa Kelly

### HOW DO WE COMMUNICATE?

On the short term, phones and email can be used to arrange meetings. But they often fail to provide the impetus that actually brings people in dialogue with one another. They act as alibis for the commitment that may or may not be sufficiently developed between people. Given the event-led cultural economy we live in today, communication after the fact proves to be the weakest link in our development. One might envisage setting up an AGENCY FOR AFTERMATH COMMUNICATIONS in art practice... Face to face contact is precious.

- Clementine Deliss<sup>1</sup>

Over a recent three-week period I was immersed in an incidental but noticeable sequence of visual arts dialogue events and encounters. These seem useful material for a part round-up, part temperature check on how occasions to talk to each other – as artists, audiences, people, peers, and communities – are being generated out of local practices, projects and spaces. And on the varying qualities of these [occasions](#), differing approaches to facilitation, and the meaningful potential and effects of thoughtful discursive practice.

1.

Saturday 19 April 2008, 4:30pm

*Kirsten Bradley ~ Josie Cavallaro ~ Leah McPherson*

*Artist talks > Firstdraft > Surry Hills.*

Under its current board of Directors Firstdraft coordinates artist talks for each program of exhibitions, and this year I've liked to [go along](#); whether to support friends, or simply support the opportunity to listen, learn and spend a bit more time than usual with artwork. That I expect to be in the role of a listener, more than part of a to-and-fro exchange, describes this standard talk model – where an artist serves up the what-where-why-and-how of their project – and [opens onto](#) my own mixed feelings [for](#) such talks. Of course, they are great to hear and important to do, especially for emerging artists finding a voice around their practice. And it's ultra-important not to take for granted the spaces we can create and utilise for speech. That said, many artists are shy of these talks and their medicinal flavour (i.e. it's 'good for you' and the kind of thing you should be able to do), and some opt out of them altogether. Sometimes this seems fair, given that the

exhaustion after realising an exhibition,<sup>2</sup> and possibly riding an anticlimax that has them wondering why they went to all the trouble in the first place. Shake this up with some public speaking nerves and you might well ask if this is the most supportive construct for expanding and facilitating understanding of artwork.

At this point, it might be just as useful for artists to get to do some listening themselves – to the feedback, questions and thoughts of viewers – rather than be obliged to give, perform and put out *more* than they have already. It's the performance quality of such talks that can seem like a problem. Where the artist stands up and delivers all their well-meant intentionality, but simultaneously grounds the wilder flight paths of interpretation that might have been at play for gathered viewers. This same performativity can give those that come along permission to settle back into a comfort zone of consumption. In showing respect for a speaker, a group can easily slip into a torpor and it's a challenge to maintain active listening. How, then, to supplant this reflex of consumption with one of engagement and make artist talks a really productive meeting of an artist's intentions and the viewer's experience?

On this Saturday at Firstdraft, we progressed through the galleries on stools for three talks; each a counterpoint of similarity and difference, micro-climates of speech and response – friendly, curious and supportive. The first work called for the artist to talk in the dark, a novelty that sharpened listening and the awareness of bodies and floating voices, while eyes strained to see what we were hearing we *should* see. In the second, an awkward but astute observation was made of the register of the artist's voice, with a slight slip from speaker for her own work to another role as an art educator. This opened a glimpse onto another terrain entirely – who is an artist speaking for here, herself or the audience? From what perspective: inside or outside a practice? – that wasn't further explored. It's interesting to imagine a dialogue structure that could support a consideration of sensitive but resonant questions like these.

In the third talk, the artist deftly flipped the responsibility for dialogue onto the audience. Distributing her hand-held works to get us looking and thinking, she voiced her nerves and a desire that the talk unfold more responsively, and then settled into a middle ground from which to mediate our questions and feedback. This gentle but significant shift in the dynamic prompted a much more active sequence of generous and interlocking responses from us audience members on stools. [Achieving](#) the energising organicism and traffic of a good conversation, arrived at by collaboration between two parties – speakers and listeners – the roles of each usefully mutable and elastic. The suite of three talks closed with a pleasing sense of having opened up some room to move a little [smarter](#), a little differently, within the shape of the artist talk.

*THISISCURATING1-40*

curator ~ Joel Mu

Firstdraft emerging curator program  
exhibition opening > Firstdraft.

Openings are the most reliable and recurring spaces the art world creates to meet up, speak and socialise, each with varying degrees of sincerity and (self) interest, in that weird amalgam of personal meets professional. I remember reading about Fiona Macdonald's film *Museum Emotions* (2002-2003), a soap-opera styled document of the Australian art scene, and how it clearly showed that at openings, people are really just talking to themselves. The film points to the sport of self-aggrandising that forms the baseline of much conversation, perhaps more so than the work an audience assembled to see. But then, openings are usually the least helpful conditions to view most kinds of work ('I'm going to come back for a proper look'). This is for fun, fizz, clamour and gossip – the happy and healthy celebration of another exhibition fronting up to the world, where the level of dialogue with an artist/curator will tend to be one of support, praise and congratulation.

The opening of *THISISCURATING1-40* was big and buzzy, with a shift of the usual compression and spill of bodies thanks to a change of entrance from the front to side-street garage door. Going along without plans to meet anyone or really knowing any of the artists, I was free to float and settle, less distracted by the social structure bracketing the exhibition. Though this was no obstacle to some quality chat, like one conversation where two of us pondered exactly this social dimension of the exhibition opening as a kind of *force*. A positive force, my conversation-friend insisted, while I was more interested in how and when the artwork might hold up as the stronger power in the situation. Another opening at Firstdraft from earlier in the year came to mind, of a work that included death metal playing at full volume,<sup>3</sup> an element which the artists felt had genuinely unsettled people's typical responses and behaviour at the opening (which in turn unsettled them). While my friend remembered hearing of an opening in Perth where the artist hired two hundred security guards to just be there, with neither party – the guards or audience – really knowing what to do about the other. In both instances a device of 'overwhelming' seemed able to interrupt usual behaviour and allow something less certain to happen. The opening of *THISISCURATING1-40* finished as many do, by leaving the pretext of the exhibition behind and transplanting its social platform to a more fitting location. I was enfolded into a drift up to the pub, where conversations branched naturally and strangers became acquaintances.

3.

Saturday 26 April 2008, 4pm

*THISISCURATING 1-40*

H&M ~ Victoria Lawson ~ Nadia Wagner

40 minute mics: artist talks > Firstdraft.

Saturday 3 May 2008, 4pm

*THISISCURATING 1-40*  
*Aaron Seeto ~ Anneke Jaspers*  
40 minute mics: curator talks > Firstdraft.

Saturday 10 May 2008, 4pm  
*THISISCURATING 1-40*  
*Biljana Jancic*  
40 minute mics: artist talk > Firstdraft.

The exhibition *THISISCURATING1-40* was also the platform for a [tailored](#) program of artist and curator talks. Thursday evenings and Saturday afternoons during the show fostered micro-gatherings of participating artists, peer practitioners and anyone else who wandered along, as I did on each of the Saturdays. In accord with the project title, the talks tended to foreground curatorial process and practice, particularly highlighting the point of dialogue and relationship between the artist/artwork and curator. The talks were actively hosted and facilitated by the curator and as a result, they all had a more managed, discursive tone than straight-up artist talks. [Though](#) still [with](#) some sticking points, particularly in teasing discussion out into a group endeavour. The conversation [thread](#) was [often](#) determined by the two or three confident speakers, [who enabled](#) the quieter or less-assured to sit back and watch the show.

The first Saturday talk had an interesting example of a reluctant speaker – a participant whose work occupied a liminal space in the show as a ‘perfume’ or smell, for whom it seemed that to speak freely about its fabrication or make-up might diminish this marginality and in turn its effect. This was probably quite true, but it set up a funny conflict given that the work only really came to light via the construct of the talk, which the artist met with a concerted effort to say as little as possible, obstinately dodging and resisting the group’s natural curiosity. [While](#) the last of the [set of](#) talks started with the artist speaking to a PowerPoint of images and then blossomed into a more freeform feedback environment, care of the intimate assortment of folk who did and didn’t know the practice, jointly tracing the lines of reference and connection running through the body of work. [The](#) program’s strength was in the space it made to engage with an exhibition over its lifetime, expanding relations among participants [while](#) folding in [peer](#) practices alongside viewers using the tool of dialogue. Along with the pleasure [to be had](#) from [simply](#) showing up. By the second week, three of us in the audience recognised each other from the first talks and joked we imagined we’d see each other next week too – which we did, not quite strangers anymore. Like exercising a muscle, the practice of talking generously to each other about what we do might get healthier with continuity and accumulation.

4.  
Thursday 1 May 2008, 6:30pm  
*Cesare Pietroiusti*  
Paradoxical Forms of Exchange  
Artist lecture > Artspace > Woolloomooloo.

It's a welcome change to be able to go to talks by artists working in studios down at Artspace, whether locals, or interstate and international visitors on residencies. This talk by established Italian artist Cesare Pietrouisti was pegged as an 'artist lecture' – a [marked shift](#) in phrasing from 'talk' or 'discussion'. It can be interesting to read the arrangement of furniture at public programs and watch how it then determines the dynamic between the people sitting [on it](#). The level 2 seminar room at The Gunnery was set up with tight rows of chairs facing a projection screen and desk with a large computer, which Pietrouisti sat beside with an easy, open grace, rather than disappearing behind. A survey of his solo practice, the lecture moved through a range of works from the late eighties to the present, illustrating the shift from his production of photographic works within galleries to [a](#) focus on creating situations and performances that reveal the relations and spaces *around* galleries. [As in](#) *Quelli che non c'entrano* (2006), [where](#) a group of elderly friends and relations of the gallery were stationed at street-front tables and chairs outside the gallery entrance, engaged in lively socialising. The title, translating as both *Those who don't go in* and *Those that have nothing to do with*, subtly exposing [ing](#) some limits to demographics and participation in contemporary art contexts.

As people mingled and milled to speak with Pietrouisti personally afterwards – heartened [maybe](#) by the gift he made all of us [of](#) a drawing with Woolloomooloo tap water on paper – we browsed some of his publications laid out on the front desk. One was a collection of propositions for actions as artworks, including 'Bring the three most disquieting people you know to an opening', suggesting gentle subterfuge as a method to aerate the scripted social spaces and interactions the art world can hinge on.

5.

Friday 2 May 2008, 3pm

*Peter Newman*

*Swarm Transfer*

Gallery visit > Institute for Contemporary Art, Newtown.

It was a sunshiny afternoon and stopping in to a gallery which I knew a friend was minding, a happy accident to find three other friends and peers doing the same. Gallery visits can be the best opportunities for more spacious one-to-one encounters, particularly in artist-driven projects where the exhibitor plays their part in housekeeping and is often present. The Saturday gallery crawl is a well-instituted phenomenon, where you can bank on running into someone you know as small search parties of art fans drift and collide across the city, 'doing the rounds'. This weekday afternoon felt more rare and random, collapsing for a moment the frequent sense that artists [in Sydney](#) live such far-flung and busy working lives. [A](#)mplifying the nature of these spaces as less about static presentations than a continuum and community of the people, plans and relationships that flow through them.

We paid shamefully little mind to the work on show, with two there to case the space for their own upcoming project, and the rest of us choosing the sun and the front step and the world wheeling

by. A curatorial statement for a group show at a commercial gallery that had opened the night before was fished from a backpack. Studying it we agreed we could make neither head nor tail of such writing – a buttress of language that forgets to actually communicate. We aired our gripes with the local contemporary art space, wondered if anyone was passing on the gripes, and workshopped some useful phrasing for talking with male peers ([like](#) ‘Now is the point in the conversation where it would be polite for you to ask me about my work’), giving us room to laugh and linger before pressing on with our days.

6.

Tuesday 6 May 2008, 6:30pm

Feedback meeting > convened at Firstdraft.

One night after work, a small group of artists and curators convened over an informal drink to float ideas for activating more rigorous discussion of local practices and exhibitions. Among a healthy generational mix of emerging and established practitioners, there was agreement on the lack of time and space made for sustained critical dialogue and the limitations of prevalent artist talk models. Sharing our experiences of other approaches to facilitating discussion, we set on starting a local dialogue practice, using an open source feedback model developed by CLUBSproject in Melbourne as a starting point that we might gradually customise to local needs. The CLUBS feedback sessions work with an intimate, invited group of an artist’s peers and related professionals to stage a structured conversation. Significantly, the artist is present but doesn’t speak. The emphasis is instead re-oriented to an active and generous interpretive process by viewers, which the artist gets a unique opportunity to listen to. Excited by the prospect of mustering a missing something on the local scene, we each headed home holding the germ and intention for a positive new project.



Soon after this spate of talks, meetings and encounters, I chanced upon the spectacle of freshly blacked out traffic lights at Cleveland and Regent streets. Stopping to watch, it was surprising how well the heavy traffic on two arterial roads could self-organise according to natural gaps and flows, degenerating only now and then when single-mindedness overpowered cooperation and drivers chose to edge and ram across the intersection. Five police cars blazed through in the space of ten minutes, clearly tending to more pressing matters than directing traffic. Which seemed to draft a nice analogy to the agency we all have as peers, to foster more spacious and attentive relations and conversations around contemporary art practice.

lisa kelly > june 08.

resources.

firstdraftgallery.com  
icanart.wordpress.com  
artspace.org.au  
clubspjroject.org.au/feedback.php

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- (1) <sup>1</sup> Clementine Deliss *Metronome* No.10, published Future Academy (Oregon), unpaginated.
- (2) <sup>2</sup> Thinking here of some Primavera and Biennale talks at the MCA and not Firstdraft, who sensibly schedule their talks towards the end of exhibitions.
- (3) <sup>3</sup> *We'll keep our cow shit in the country if you keep your bull shit in the city*, Vicky Browne, Shane Haseman & Koji Ryui. Firstdraft, January 30 - February 16 2008.