

Freedoms and Choices

A conversation between
Joel Anderson and Dora García

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Joel Anderson . Dora García

Zicht . Op . Zalmhaven

I Bread and Wine

Setting: At a dinner table philosopher Joel Anderson takes a seat opposite artist Dora García. The window next to the table offers a view on the exhibition *Blurred*, in Tent.

Joel Anderson: I just came back from Australia ...

Dora García: Oh yes?

JA: ... and they have these water bottles everywhere in the restaurant. [Points to bottles on the table.] It's great.

DG: I was in Australia twice this year.

JA: It was my first time.

DG: I have been twice this year for ten days each time.

JA: What did you think?

DG: I was meeting a lot of Aboriginal artists, but not the classic Aboriginal artists, but urban Aboriginal artists. Actually, they didn't look Aboriginal at all, some of them were really white with blue eyes etc. To me the Anglos looked and sounded very provincial. Do you know, it really has an effect to be that far away from everything. Maybe, how to say this, conservative, in every sense of the word. As for the Aboriginals, I found them very laid back and interesting and I enjoyed their company.

JA: Yeah, it's a funny set of combinations.

I was mostly with philosophers, so maybe that's why I didn't run into many conservatives. But what do you actually mean by conservative; when you say they struck you as conservative?

DG: They are provincial in a social sense.

I had to laugh, when a girl told me very proudly that finally women were getting an important position in society. That for instance the queen would be a woman next near. I was thinking "What?". [Laughs] In Australia you have a representative of the queen who just gets called 'The Queen'.

JA: Oh!

DG: ... and it was always a man.

JA: [Laughs loudly] Yeah, it's progress, but not something to write home about!

DG: So actually I was doing a very particular research about an event that happened in 1962 when Lenny Bruce was asked to perform in Sydney. He was arrested immediately after he saluted the audience with the words: "What a fucking wonderful audience!" It was the first

time that 'fuck' was said in public.

JA: How did the audience respond?

DG: They called the police.

[Laughter]

JA: I see what you mean by conservative.

DG: That happened in 1962. I researched the conditions concerning that incident and I discovered that counterculture in Australia had started, more or less, coincidentally at the same time. With Richard Neville, you know, who did the *Oz* magazine. He's a kind of guru of the counter culture.

JA: Oh, yeah right.

DG: He's back in Sydney already for many years and I worked together with him. He was telling me how hard it was to be anything other than white, heterosexual, etcetera. Of course everything happened underground, but that was underground. It was really 'Don't ask, don't tell'.

JA: You mean, when you think about a place like Australia, it's so big and so open and so empty, you'd think there would be room for everybody just to do their own thing. Maybe it's similar to the US in that respect; historically they have a sense of the wild areas being kind of threatening, but even more so in Australia. So you stay in this narrow strip along the coast. The southeast is actually a very densely populated region, these areas are as densely populated as the Netherlands. And so you get this same kind of homogenising, social pressures. Because if everybody has to get along, you can either be very laid back about the things ... but often there's a sense of decorum and propriety. It's almost 'more British than the British'.

All the kids wear school uniforms.

DG: Yes, and they have these funny hats. We got stopped by the police because we were drinking beer in the street. When I went out with my Aboriginal friends they weren't allowed in many places because they were accused of being drunk. But they certainly weren't drunk. The only thing was that they were black. So they said: "No, you can't go in. You're drunk."

Esmé Valk: Can I offer you something to drink? I have white wine, red wine or Japanese beer with green tea.

JA: I would love a glass of white wine, actually.

EV: I've tasted this one recently, it was quite nice. They're both dry wines, this one is more with oak and I think this one has more fresh and fruity, full flavours.

DG: I'll go for the oaky.

JA: I'll go for the oaky too. Because my wife hates Chardonnay with oak taste in it and so I never get it. The slogan at home is ABC: Anything But Chardonnay [Laughter]. So what project are you working on now?

DG: I was telling Esmé that I just finished a book, that's called *Steal this Book*. It's based on Abbie Hoffman's book that carries the same title. There are three parts in the project; one part is a homage to *Steal this Book*, the cover is very similar. The second part is the content, that consists of the correspondence between me and people who worked with me in performance projects. The issue that comes through the correspondence is the idea of authorship that's being undermined; so who is really the author of those works? [The popping sound of a wine cork] The correspondence was made years ago, between 2001 until now. The content is formed by a selection of these letters that were not written with this purpose.

[The glasses are filled.] And then there is a third part to the project, that is the presentation of the book. It's presented both as a book in shops and it's presented as a sculpture. In an exhibition space there is a pile of these books.



Installation of *Steal this Book* during Biennial X in Lyon, 2009. Photo: Blaise Adillon

But actually you're not allowed to take it, you really have to steal it. The policy of the exhibition space is that you can't take the book. So you really have to go through the embarrassment that if they see you with the book in the hand, they're going to tell you to put it back.

JA: But they're not real police, they're police who are part of the exhibit?

DG: No, they're not police. They're just guards. You have always guards in exhibition spaces.

JA: What are the instructions you give to them?

DG: Well, you just have to inform people that they're not supposed to take the book. It is not: 'take this book' it is 'steal this book'. So they really have to want to steal it or they have to defy ...

JA: [Laughs] You've got all my philosophy of language juices flowing now.

DG: There are people going there who not only take one, but they take three because they say: "I want one for me, one for my archive and one to give away as a present." And they really have to defy the authority that says: "You can't take them." But they can say: "Well, I'm going to take them." So the only thing is that there can't be any punishment. The guards can't grab the visitors, they can't shake them, they can only inform them that they can't take that book. If you take it, that's your own responsibility. Everybody takes it, mostly ... well, not everybody. Students don't take it, they're very embarrassed to be stopped.

JA: This is in Brussels?

DG: It's a bit the same everywhere. This work has been in Lyon, in Paris and now it will be in Santiago Di Compostela. It's partly a reaction on a phenomenon of the Nineties, when you were allowed to take everything. There was this idea of exhibitions with all sort of things you could take and touch ... Salute! [Clinking of wine glasses.]

JA: Salute. I've never been on a blind date.

[Laughter]

DG: I never thought of it like that. [A short silence.] So in this case there is a criminalisation of this good will of exhibitions where you can take everything, touch everything, participate in everything.

JA: So you go to an exhibit with the expectation that there's something you're going to be able to take away free.

DG: People think that all the time now. And that has as a consequence that they don't respect injunctions not to touch or take works. It's very hard to rewind and say: "Actually you can't touch these and you're not allowed to take these." That's a very curious change in the behaviour of the public. There's this interesting revolution too that started in Denmark in the Seventies with an exhibition called *Playground*, where children were allowed to

be children. I heard that this was actually the origin of what is called the *Robinsons*. Before, the playgrounds for children were very conventional and this was the beginning of this sort of Robinson Crusoe construction, they're called *Robinsons* because of that, where children actually climb and fall. It's a bit more wild entertainment.

JA: Which is now illegal everywhere in the US; if you're not wearing a helmet and you don't have all sorts of padding ...

DG: [Outraged] It's illegal?

JA: No, I mean ... they've just been moving away from traditional playground equipment like swings; they're moving to the safety concerns because of being sued legally. You're responsible for any accident that happens on a playground that doesn't meet all the maximum requirements of safety. And so most of the playgrounds in the US at the moment are really boring. Anyway, with the exhibit, there's the question of responsibility for shaping people's expectations ... when you go into the situation, there's a message conveyed to you about what you're supposed to do: you're supposed to steal this book. How free are these ...

II Marinated Red Mull

[Esmé brings in the first course; a salad of red mull marinated with lime, ginger, star anise and coriander seeds. The fish is served on rocket leaves and fennel carpaccio.]

DG: Wow, that's fast.

EV: Yes. This is red mull, it's a fish marinated in ginger, rice vinegar, parsley and coriander seeds. I hope it's tasty. You can combine it with bread, it's a sourdough bread that I made.

JA: It's really good. You made it?

EV: Yeah.

JA: It's very nice. I love sourdough, yes.

EV: I recently got into sourdough bread baking. This is my third bread. [Esmé walks away from the table.]

JA: Okay, bon appetit.

DG: Bon appetit. [A moment of silence while they take their first bite.]

JA: That's terrific ... So freedom. I'm wondering in this case about your exhibit ...

DG: It's a challenge to behaviour in an art exhibition. What I did was very rude. At the moment that you're caught stealing you're confronted with what you're doing, and people look at you and all of a sudden you are the show. So that was the third idea in the project.

JA: That's a great project. What was Abbie Hoffman trying to do originally?

DG: Abbie Hoffman was undermining the state.

JA: The notion of private property.

DG: Not only that. That is of course the idea of *Steal this Book*. But the content of *Steal this Book* is divided in three chapters: *Fight*, *Survive* and *Get Together*. This is the same index as I used for my book. *Survive* is about how to make use of the state facilities, how to eat and get dressed and sleep for free. *Fight* is about how to fight the state. It gives you instructions on how to get dressed for a demonstration, how to make a Molotov-cocktail, how to do everything that involves fight. And *Get Together* is a directory of addresses of brothers and sisters. Because the world was simple for Abbie; there were brothers and sisters and then there were pigs. [Laughter] So the idea was to meet all their brothers and sisters to fight the pigs. And then of course, nobody wanted to publish this book so on the back cover you have a whole list

of publishers who refused to publish the book. Normally you have "Fantastic book!", "Great book." written on the back. In the end it was published by some sort of underground publishing house. The idea is that you don't actually pay for the book, you're supposed to steal it. So you sit in a library and you're supposed to take it because to pay for it would be to give money to the pigs! And actually before he died he still wrote another book that was called: *Steal this Drug Test*.

JA: It sounds like a great project.

DG: And Abbie Hoffman was the protagonist of this famous moment in Woodstock. Do you know about that?

JA: Yes, but I've forgotten.

DG: He tried to gain the stage while *The Who* were playing and he wanted to give a speech to his brothers and sisters when he was hit off the stage by Pete Townsend.

JA: I've never heard that story.

DG: "Get off my fucking stage!", was what he was saying. So he just hit him with the bass guitar, or the guitar, I don't know what he was playing anymore.

JA: He was dangerous with the guitar. He was the one who would smash guitars on stage. Quite a lethal weapon!

DG: I think Abbie understood and went off the stage. So that was it.

JA: Hmm, pop music wins over art again.

[Silence] I mean, there's a sense in which one of the things that Abbie Hoffman seems to stand for was an understanding of freedom as spontaneity, as operating without any rules, undermining existing orders and so on. It's an old point, but it seems kind of parasitic on its ... I mean it only works as a reaction to something else. It's a pretty extreme form of dependence in the sense of, you can have that kind of rebellious freedom only if there's a tidy, well-ordered target to react against.

DG: A typical situation appeared amongst the avant-garde in the Communist time, when the dictatorship ended. At that moment many artists seemed to be jobless because they had no frame anymore to rebel against. They had built a whole secret code to be able to talk about things, provided that they could not.

JA: But I think it's true, a lot of these concepts

like freedom, like autonomy, like spontaneity, independence, that can often get defined in opposition to something established.

DG: And yet, it's just the same matter as parental control.

JA: I often find myself saying things, that when I step back from it, sound awfully conservative. [Dora laughs] But I think the point is to move beyond a certain set of oppositions between ways of thinking about freedom, ways of thinking about autonomy, to get to something better. I have a good friend, in Frankfurt, who had a son ... actually, it was unclear who was really the father of the kid, but it didn't matter because they were all raising the child collectively in an anti-authoritarian way. *Anti Autoritaire Erziehung* was the slogan. It was heartbreaking to hear this friend of mine talk about – and I met his son a couple of times – how just completely confused, lost, angry and sad this child was. And apparently it's true of a whole generation of kids raised within that movement. So it's a kind of freedom: "Let's show them to be free, let's show them to be spontaneous." It's Rousseau's ideal of taking away all the nasty influences of society; let children be their pure selves and then they will naturally emerge as good and well adapted creatures. And maybe it's just that society is so screwed up right now that a healthy child wouldn't be able to survive in the current environment. But I think it's naive.



Joel Anderson and Dora García

DG: I went to Amsterdam to study. I was a healthy smoker of pot and I had done that also through university. When I went to Amsterdam I thought: "This is paradise. I will finally be able to have my Coca-Cola together with my pot." And then I couldn't find anybody to come with me to the coffee shop. [Laughter] None of the people I knew wanted to come to the coffee

shop with me, because they thought it was completely uncool and they were sick of their parents smoking pot at home. It stinks and they can't stand the smell and that was the end of my happy days as a pot smoker. It's so sad to smoke pot alone. My happiness that came from hiding in the school or in my parents house to smoke was now all gone. It was a sort of transition to adulthood.

JA: So the question becomes: can we be free by ourselves? Or is freedom necessarily connected with pushing away from something else, being free from something else?

DG: Yes, well I don't have a complex education about that but I believe the question is, you can't imagine a free person because the things that limit your freedom or the things that determine your choices, they're as much what limits your freedom as what you are. I think the same comparison can be done with the parents. When you reach your teenage years, your parents are everything you want to be against. That's healthy apparently, a healthy way of growing up. But then your parents are everything. It's incredible how much they determine. Later on you come to realise, when you're older, how much of your mother and father is in you.

JA: Uh huh.

DG: So I think we could apply this to everything; what limits your freedom is also what you are. So I don't know to what point you can free yourself.

JA: And maybe it's that there are different kinds of freedom. You could have the view that we're all simply byproducts of forces and it's an illusion to think that we can actually shape, direct, mold who we are. Because you're always reacting to something else and what you're reacting to is more determinative of what you are than your sort of helpless attempts to flail around and push your parents away. But they're always coming back; the power of the mother and father watching over you. Or you might think that there's another kind of freedom which could be involved in saying:

"I accept this about myself." Now, there is probably some influence on whether you do that as well. But at some point, all the kinds of metaphysical speculations run amok, run wild, about every single thing we do being pushed by something else. It then all becomes meaningless, because if everything is influencing us, if there's no contrast between being free and not

being free ... Here's a context in which I'm really being pushed around and here's a context in which I have this sense of being fully engaged in what I'm doing and being expressive of what I care most deeply about, and so on. Unless we can make a contrast like that, then I don't think we even have a clear understanding of the kind of freedom that we would value.

DG: Uh huh. I always have this idea of absolute freedom as being a real fuck-up that you have on yourself, more a curse than an advantage. Because you have always this difference in Christianity about the 'Libre Albedrío', as you say in Spanish. The idea that you always have the possibility to choose and that nothing is determined in advance. As I remember it, that was a difference between Protestantism and Catholicism. So that's a fuck-up, because you really can't throw balls outside. You really always have to have the ball and to decide what you're going to do with the ball.

JA: Yeah, existential crisis. But when you are working on a project and you're going to develop a particular idea, whether you're going to do a project or whether you're not, does it feel like fuck-up? Does it feel like you're stuck there, you're trapped?

DG: No, of course not.

JA: But you're also not rolling a die, your not flipping a coin?

DG: No, but I mean a fuck-up in the sense that you're responsible for your actions and you can't blame anyone else.

JA: Yeah, okay.

DG: I'm trying to think now, what is the feeling of freedom.

JA: But sometimes you are forced to do something.

DG: Yes, of course. But it's always possible to choose.

JA: Well, according to that conception of freedom, if somebody sticks a gun to my head and says: "Your wallet or your life." Well, I'm free to choose [Laughter], am I perfectly free here? ... I don't know. Somebody came up with the idea that it was clever to take this out as an extreme, and you have to step back for a second and say: "We don't really know what we mean with the words we use if it's going to extend to that as well." I mean if that counts as a free choice, then we might just as well dispense with the word.

DG: You can also try to convince the robber of "You can't rob me." There are much more pos-

sibilities that you have to take in consideration.

JA: "Let's have a cup of coffee, come on. I have a joint here, let's talk and celebrate."

[Laughter]

DG: Yes, of course.

JA: You know that there was really interesting research done by Carol Gilligan about the moral development of children. She was responding to this guy named Lawrence Kohlberg who developed a stage theory of moral development and there were six stages. Oddly enough he did all his research on boys and she was actually, I think, even a student of his or a junior colleague in his laboratory at Harvard and she started asking women and girls the same questions. They ended up scoring much lower because they started saying things like: "Well, but it depends on the situation." And all the boys were really good just following the rules when it's a dilemma; either this or that, no other options.

DG: I made once a work that was called *The Prophets*. One of the questions the prophets were asking people was if they prefer an ugly truth or a beautiful lie. And there was absolutely a sexist difference: men wanted an ugly truth and woman a beautiful lie. I think that says it all.

JA: Wow. Did you ask them why?

DG: No, I didn't think of it.

JA: But you see, it's just art, right? You don't have to meet standards of research. But it happens all the time. Psychologists will do these experiments, you know [Joel starts speaking in a low voice.] "A forced choice between A or B." and you have to pick it. Nobody ever asks why? Because then the data gets just really, really messy. But then you actually understand how minds work. Whereas now a lot of this research on how people approach choices uses situations that are so pre-cooked and then huge conclusions are drawn from this. Most famous example of this, is a guy named Benjamin Libet who did these experiments on people watching a clock. So there's a huge clock on the wall and you're supposed to move your finger, and it's attached to an electrode or something, you move your finger at a particular moment. You're supposed to pick the moment that you're going to do it and you report back the exact moment when you made the decision. You're supposed to be completely spontaneous and just move it at a certain point. Your brain is, in the mean time, hooked up to machinery

that can measure the action potentials.

DG: It's a bit like torture.

JA: It measures when the brain sends the signal to move your finger and it turns out the signal gets sent to your muscles before you think you made the decision. This has generated a lot of excitement. People said this experiment proves there is no free will because if the action is generated before you decide what to do, then it's an illusion to think that we can ...

DG: But it takes some time to move your finger.

JA: Yeah, they factored that in and so on. But even when you do that ... I think the big problem with this is, these are totally absurd situations.

DG: Absolutely it is.

JA: It's just, you know ... of what ... [Making sputtering sounds.] ... that's not how we work. We act in contexts; like when I'm on my bike and all of a sudden something comes out in front of me and I respond to that, or I'm going to turn right because I know I need to make this detour on the way home. And all of that makes perfect sense. Those decisions aren't happening after I turn the bicycle, because I did it intentionally. In these experiments the idea is, you strip everything away and you just get down to the pure moment of action and you're really going to see freedom under the microscope.

DG: But there are also decisions that take a very long time. I mean, you are talking about decisions on whether to go left or right, but you also take the decision whether you're going to take the divorce or not, or whether you're going to have children or not ...

JA: Yes, exactly. When did you decide to get the divorce? It's an absurd question. Does that mean you didn't decide? No! I think most of the things we do aren't decisions.

DG: Or, when did you decide to become an artist? That's also a very typical question.

JA: Yes, exactly. Like an undergraduate asking you an interview question.

DG: There are many things you actually never decide.

JA: Right. But does that mean you're not responsible for what happened?

DG: Yes, you are responsible. There is also the question of information. Because you can't really decide to become an artist, because you don't know what it is. In a way, you could say that of everything. You can't decide to get mar-

ried, because you don't know what it is. You can't decide to have children, because you don't know what it is.

JA: Oh, that's interesting.

DG: So actually what you decide has nothing to do with what happens.

JA: You decide to set something in motion.

DG: Yes. But you can't say that your decision was really thought through, because you have no idea what it would be.

JA: Well, but wait a second, there is something that you intend. Very often when you're doing something, you do have a particular goal in mind. It's often really confused, it's undetermined, it's patchy, but you have a conception of what you're trying to bring about.

DG: Yeah, but it can be completely different, what you actually end up with and so you can't say that you chose for something that had the same name.

JA: It happens often enough that people say: "This is not what I asked for." Whereas this, [Referring to the dinner] on the other hand, is exactly what I was hoping for.

DG: I have a very interesting case, of a friend of mine who actually had a wife and a girlfriend for a very long time.

JA: Did they know about each other?

DG: Yes. Both of them were constantly asking him to make a decision: "You have to make a decision!"



The prepared ingredients to be used in the salad.

III

Vegetables and Noodles in a Coconut-Lemongrass Sauce

[Esmé brings the salad first; kohlrabi with lemon, peanuts and shallots. The main course is a dish with noodles served with grilled pumpkin, carrots and courgette in a coconut, lime and lemongrass flavoured sauce.]

EV: Can I take your plate?

DG: Yes, please.

JA: What's this? [Joel is pointing to a yellow, elastic band attached to the ceramic, salad bowls.]

DG: This you can eat too.

EV: No!

[Laughter]

JA: Be careful, we might. But the carrots you can eat, right?

[Esmé has carved carrot flowers she used for decorating the salad.]

EV: Yeah, you can eat them.

JA: That's very clever. Look at that.

DG: It's very nice, colour wise it is very nice.

EV: You can have the salad with coriander if you like.

DG: But in Chinese restaurants they always say not to eat these.

EV: That's true. But I made these fresh, I didn't keep them for weeks.

DG: I can eat them.

JA: And this is tarragon?

EV: That's Thai basil and this is chili to spice things up and lime.

JA: And that's for this? [He points to the salad.]

EV: No, the main dish is coming.

JA: I always need lots of instructions.

DG: Going back to my friend, the funny thing was that he wanted to change the whole family system so that it would be possible to have two wives.

JA: But did the other two want that as well? [Laughter] I think he wanted the situation probably just the way it was and that's why he was saying that it was so hard for him to decide.

DG: But he didn't decide anything. They decided for him.

JA: And he got neither, right? We've mentioned this point about 'you're always free to choose'. I think there's a lot of contexts in which the appropriate thing to say to somebody is: "Don't give me that bullshit. You can

make a decision." I think the best way to think about a lot of things is in thinking about what are the circumstances in which saying this or that makes sense.

DG: Well, I don't know if it's bullshit, because now we're talking about these two women ... why is it not appropriate to say you like both women equally, while it is completely not appropriate that you like one of your children more than the other? So when you have children you can say: "I like them equally, I can't choose." But why can't you do the same with women or with men, for that matter?

JA: I think in polygamous societies they do say exactly that.

DG: Yeah.

[Laughter]

JA: I'm sure they say: "Ooohh, don't make me ask, don't make me choose between my wives!"

DG: "I love them all!"

JA: Ai, ai, ai, the problems we fortunately don't have to struggle with.

DG: So, it's not bullshit. It is actually very reasonable.

JA: It's a good case. Although you could say – and this underscores your point, I think – that there are contexts in which it is perfectly reasonable to say: "I love them both equally."

DG: Maybe that's not true, but you're supposed to say that.

JA: Of course it's not true. [Laughter]

DG: Maybe it's true, but sometimes it's not. I'm sure that many times it's not true.

JA: [In a deep, radio-like voice] For the record, if my children are listening: I love you both equally.

[Both laugh loudly.]

JA: A Woody Allen moment in which I step out of the film and talk to the audience. [Laughter]

Saying you love one of your children more than the other is just something that we've collectively decided to put in a taboo zone. Somebody who asks that question is the one who's committed the violation. Because you're putting someone on the spot to say something that nobody should be asked to have to think about. I mean, this is *Sofie's Choice*, you know this film?

DG: Yeah, yeah, I know. She made a lot of choices in that film, Sofie.

JA: There are some people who say that as

long as you stand behind your decisions it can't ever go wrong. I think for Sofie that was pretty clearly not the case. There probably are cultures and there have been times in the past, in which a responsibility of parents was to decide on some kind of rank ordering of which of the children was more worthy of the inheritance.

DG: They did that all the time. And there are famous stories on how to earn the love of your parents.

JA: A lot of children's stories have that structure to them. Yeah, it's hard to convince the kids to work hard. [Then to Esmé] I love this bread, by the way.

EV: Great.

DG: It's very good, yes.

JA: But I think it's true with a lot of things, like how free you are, we just decide not to pose the question. Because we don't know how to deal with the answer.

DG: I would say, that I feel free mostly when I don't have to make compromises. For instance, I've fought hard to achieve a position in art where I do only what I want, or what I think that I want. We could also discuss that of course. I would not change my mind because of pressures of any kind. That's a feeling of freedom. You accept the other side with that too; you know that if you do that you'll not be very successful economically and simultaneously you accept that you will always stay within a certain circuit, without accessing another circuit. In a way, you are aware of the consequences of that.

JA: What if that circuit was very, very small? Vanishingly small? What if you were only doing it for yourself? Would it still be freedom?

DG: Yes, I'm convinced that would still be the case. More free even. But what I wanted to say was that curiously one wonders, especially when you are working for a number of years, if you really made that choice? I could never imagine myself as a successful commercial artist. I just think I'm not made for that. So I don't know to what point I really made a decision. I can say I feel free, for instance, when I make work which is scandalous in a certain way. Not deliberately, but it turned out that way and when I'm happy I'm not going to change it. I feel happy with myself, I feel comfortable with myself and I think I'm free and I don't have to listen to anybody. But on the other hand I don't know if I could have really chosen something else.

JA: There's a famous example of Martin

Luther ...

DG: ... that great man.

[Laughter]

JA: One of the things he said – there are probably a lot of people who've said something similar, but – when he proclaimed his thesis of opposition to the Catholic church, he said: "Here I stand. I can do no other." And of course, the puzzle with which people replied: "If he couldn't do anything differently, then he must not have been free." When there is no moment of greater freedom then finding yourself completely in your place. It's not even just where you belong, I think that is an important dimension of it as well, but sometimes it's just that everything about me is, as we say, four-square behind doing this. It's unthinkable to me to do something else. Am I trapped? I'm trapped in my freedom.

DG: This goes back to what we were saying in the beginning, that the things that limit you, are the things that determine what you are. So for instance, something that I often say is that for me, when I was a student, I never really decided to become an artist but it was very clear to me that I didn't want to do what my father wanted. [Laughter] That was super clear. Because what my father wanted, was not only to study a certain thing, it was also a way of life.

JA: What did he wanted for you to be?

DG: Law.

JA: You probably would've been a very good lawyer.

DG: Yeah, probably but that's his fault. I did not do that, it's his fault.

JA: Do you ever think about meeting this other person that you might have become?

DG: Well yes, there's a lot of fiction about that.

JA: It actually is horrifying. I don't know why. There's something fascinating about it, but there is also this sense of that you loose ... Because I think we find great comfort – Sartre did his best to undermine this – in the sense that 'this is what I was destined to be', 'I couldn't be anything else'. And of course that's false.

DG: It probably is.

JA: But the more you genuinely become a person, the more you become a self, the more you have an identity, the richer the details and depth of that is, the less possible it is to switch into something else. Which I think means there's a real trade-off between, on the one hand, being an interesting person and having

this kind of deep sense of freedom and, on the other hand, just being able to, at a whim, do something else. That's what the teenage years are for, right? In trying all these different things out.

DG: I mean, the idea of the killing of the father, it is a fundamental idea and I always mistrusted 'good sons' or 'good daughters'.

JA: Yeah, I'm a good son. My father majored in philosophy.

DG: Okay, [Laughs] I mistrust you.

[Both laugh]

JA: Well, at least I have this comfort. Either you mistrust me or your theory has some holes in it.

DG: Yeah, probably, I don't know.

[Esmé brings in the main course.]

JA: Wow.

EV: It's noodles with pumpkin, carrot and courgette and it's nice to combine it with a selection of these. [She points to the coriander, chili, lime and Thai basil.]

JA: I absolutely will. For those of you who can't see this, for those of you following this on the radio ... I love listening to art shows on the radio when they try to describe what's going on and you just have to imagine. I think actually sports are much more exciting via the radio because you can let your imagination ...

DG: Something that I always think how it would be – and actually this is a sort of inspiration for me – to connect the comments of the sport commentator to the players, so they hear what he says.

JA: [Laughs] That's a really interesting idea.

DG: Yeah, I think so too. I always wanted to do that. That would be an absolute short circuit.

JA: Wow. I think it would be a disaster. It would be an artistic accomplishment and a sporting catastrophe. [Laughs and then to Esmé] And so, Esmé, what are we supposed to do? Is this on the side?

EV: Yeah, the salad is on the side.

JA: I'll try some of this in it.

DG: Hmmm, super good. Excellent.

EV: This is one of my favorite dishes. I love eating this.

DG: Yeah?

JA: Do you have some for yourself? That's always a good sign, when the chef likes it.

DG: Yeah, the idea of the fat chef who ate everything before.

JA: Never trust a skinny chef. [A moment of silence while they eat.] And is it pumpkin or is

it a different type of squash?

EV: It's a pumpkin, the one with an orange peel. It's an organic one.

JA: It's very nice. It has a lot of flavour, more than they usually do. There's something that's called an acorn squash, which is half green on top and then orange on the bottom and it's smaller usually.

DG: I thought they were for decoration.

JA: No, not so much. Some of them are. But it has that kind of sweetness to it.

EV: You have this butternut squash, you know this kind of pear shaped one, which can be very good too. But yesterday I had a try-out with both of them and then this one turned out to be much more flavourful.

JA: Good, it's terrific.



The roasted pumpkin Esmé tried the previous evening.

DG: Well, the idea of the bad son, of the bad daughter ... you have both types; you have the type of the child that killed the father, like you have with all sorts of artistic movements. But a very interesting one is the father who dislikes the son.

JA: [Laughs] That is a good one, the father who kills the son.

DG: For instance, I know Giorgio de Chirico extremely disliked the surrealists and he really got furious when they insisted in calling him the forefather of surrealism. Same went for Artaud, for instance. He extremely disliked to be considered an inspirational source for surrealists. Because if you think of Breton and Artaud, they're absolute the opposite, but nevertheless in the text books they're always put together.

JA: And he's turning over in his grave.

DG: [Laughs] Suffering, like always.

JA: There's a case of this where a guy named Charles Sanders Peirce first came up with the

term 'pragmatism' for his philosophical movement and then there were people like William James and others who were using it in a much looser way. And Peirce was furious about other people taking over the idea and then polluting it. So it wasn't the same pure idea anymore. So he changed the name of what he was defending to 'Pragmatacism' and he said: "It's such an ugly word nobody is going to be inclined to misuse it." And he was right about that, but of course the other view became much more famous. [A moment of silence while they eat.] There's this artwork of yours with the online *The Choice*.

DG: The *Yes and No*.

JA: What were you trying to get out of that?

DG: It's a satire on interactive works.

JA: Good, [Laughs] I'm relieved.

DG: I always hate interactivity, especially in exhibitions. In the Nineties you had this explosion of interactive, electronic, new media shows, where when you enter and you move your arm and you move your leg it went orange. Everything was interactive and I always thought it was such a false situation, you had such a limited choice actually. There was absolutely no possibility to really interact with the work or modify the work. I tried to make a satire on interactivity and also on the idea of understanding the author. So, if you wanted to be able to understand the person who'd made the work you had to either lie or to think unethically. They're completely idiotic questions, like: "Are you having an affair?" or "Are you Michel Rein?", where only one person could answer with yes. My intention was that the person would always fail when answering the questions.

JA: Do you have any idea how many people have visited?

DG: No. There's no recording.

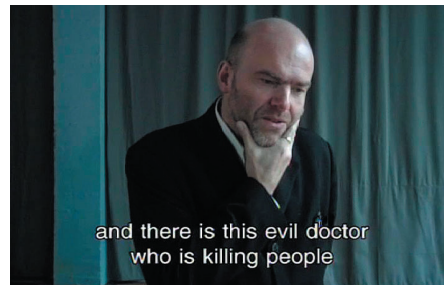
JA: I spent a whole day just trying to figure out what I really thought about the work. [Laughs] Because I figured I'll do it scientifically: I'll keep track of how I answered it and that after a certain number of trials I would know the real me.

DG: So many of the things you do, whether you write or something else, they're coming forward out of a feeling of malaise. So I grow irritated with 'Take me' works. The pioneers are okay but afterwards when everybody is doing it, it becomes very tiring. So this idea of *Steal this Book* was also a satire on this. And this

work was a satire on the interactive works because I really got tired of them. I have another work on a similar idea where a psychiatrist tells a terrible story about the Prinzhorn collection, and the terrorist group made of psychiatric patients that was called the SPK. I don't know if you heard of this?

JA: No, no.

DG: In Heidelberg. Horror stories. But at the same time it's a game where you have to pick up some words. Every time you hear the word 'psychiatrist', 'holocaust' or 'extermination' in his speech, you have to click a key on the keyboard and then you start earning points. And so that becomes a very sinister game.



Game, 2008. Audio-video installation made in Flash.

JA: There are these studies, that you can do online as well, that are supposed to give you a sense of your unconscious racist tendencies. You see a person of a particular ethnicity or race and then you see two pictures that are sort of ambiguous. You're supposed to say whether the object in the picture looks more like a gun or some other object that's roughly the same shape. And it's ambiguous. When the person shown is a black man in his twenties then the frequency of disambiguating the object as a gun goes way up.

DG: On the other hand, you are ready to prove that you're not a racist, that you would never identify the thing that the black man has in his hands as a gun. Because I'm not a racist, therefore I don't see guns in black hands.

JA: But one of the things that I think is going to be a major topic politically, philosophically, legally maybe, in the next years is that as we come to know more and more about how people respond to their environments and that their actions are shaped by their environments in ways that they're completely unaware of, it has huge implications for whether we hold peo-

ple to be responsible, whether we can predict that people will do things. Because we know everybody who has these and these psychological features will do this and that.

DG: In this wonderful movie ... what's the name of it? With Tom Cruise. You know this movie where they stop crime before it happens?

JA: *Minority Report*.

DG: Yes.

JA: Yeah, that kind of thing. The whole idea of a psychological profile of somebody is already in that category. And look, here's a hard case, if we're going to have a diagnosis according to which we could say, and maybe even the person diagnosed would agree with this, "I'm not going to be able to control myself. I'm going to sexually abuse small children. I can't control this, so lock me up." That is one question: could we ever know that about a person? That he or she would be unable to resist certain impulses?

DG: It's hard to say.

JA: Well we know some things about the brain. We know many of the most important centers in the brain responsible for suppressing impulses. If we know of somebody, in whom that part of the brain is severely damaged then we either have to say: "Maybe the person can't do otherwise, but we're not going to intervene." Because you don't want to be diagnosing somebody just on the basis of their brain scan. Or you have to be able to say: "No, there are measures that somebody can take to address these issues."

DG: I certainly would always be against labeling somebody on the basis of any sort of test that he has gone through. You can't label someone a pervert just because he's thinking about it.

JA: What if he says himself that he can't control himself? Someone who wants the responsibility taken away from him?

DG: I would say he's a real bastard! [Laughs] I mean, that's exactly going back to what we were talking about; that is somebody who refuses responsibility.

JA: But that is then again the question: can we really rule out, entirely, that somebody might lack this freedom?

DG: That's impossible. I observed this funny idea that heterosexual males have. They think that all homosexual males want to have sex with them. [Joel laughs] I have this with my brother who never wanted to have dinner with

my homosexual friends because he was afraid for his physical integrity.

JA: And they don't think the same about women, they don't think all women want them. [Laughter] Well, some do.

DG: But women don't think that all heterosexual men or all homosexual women want to have sex with them. I never had this idea, or never encountered this idea amongst women. So for the same reason, I find it hard to believe that pedophiles can't contain themselves if they think it is profoundly wrong. I mean, you can't control your sexual impulse, you can have a hard-on but you can decide not to go any further.

JA: Yes, exactly and it's those kind of gradations. But also the indirect measures you can take. Maybe this is something we can learn through science; we need to understand better what the circumstances are in which we might lose control, in that particular context. To see it coming and indirectly manage ourselves. We do this all the time. You don't go shopping on an empty stomach. You don't make important decisions ...

DG: ... on Tuesday the 13th. [Laughs] You control yourself.

JA: So maybe in the future, this would be a cool art installation, you get some little iPod or an iPhone that displays your current competence to make decisions right now. So you give, everybody who comes into an exhibit a little meter that gives a reading based on their skin tension and various other bio-information. It could all be made up probably, but maybe it could be realistic. You have to answer questions like: 'Are you menstruating?', 'Have you had much to drink?', 'Do you take any drugs?'. And on the basis of all that make a prediction about how reliable your decision making at this point ought to be. I think one of the things that will be different in our culture, fifty years from now, is we will trust that information more. It will be more detailed, it will tell us more about whether or not our bodies and minds are in optimal states for making decisions.

DG: That's very well possible. But what I would say is, I would never ever trust that.

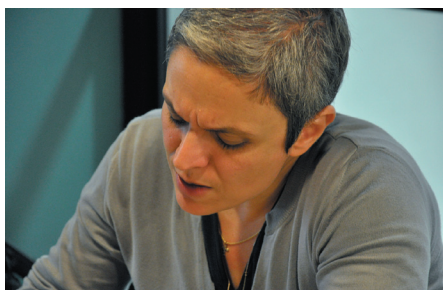
JA: Why not? Because we fool ourselves all the time with what we feel. You know, as in: [He puts on a funny voice] "I write my best poetry when I'm stoned." We know how stupid that is, right? But people can really sincerely believe it.

DG: Yeah. There are some situations that I

think are really unbearable; one is certainly to label somebody for something that he hasn't done yet. That would be one terrible thing. Honestly you shouldn't punish them, because they were not really responsible. So that's terrible.

JA: Absolutely.

DG: On the other hand, on a daily basis I see lots of things, like now with the children in school. They're being tested all the time. And the stupidity I have to hear from the teachers is really amazing. I think it's completely idiotic if somebody tells me that the child has difficulties writing because I'm still breast feeding the brother. I think that is completely idiotic and nobody can convince me of the contrary. I mean, this woman – this woman who also has her period – is telling me that I have to stop breast feeding.



Dora García

JA: But you yourself were saying it, that it is having an effect. I mean, do you deny that various influences on our body effect our ability to, for example, exercise self-control?

DG: In this example, a mother has two children, the teacher says: "Because you're still breast feeding the younger child, the other one doesn't want to learn to write because he doesn't want to grow."

JA: Okay, but that's a bad theory. We don't believe it because it's ... because it's stupid. But what about if it was a plausible theory?

DG: But this is a plausible theory because ... I mean, what you have to listen from school psychologists. They always say: "Well he's not doing well because he doesn't want to grow. He refuses responsibility." In the end, for some reason the mother is always the guilty one.

JA: Yeah, always. For everything.

DG: Because you give too much attention, because you don't give enough attention. Because

you work, because you don't work. Maybe that's one of the factors that influences that he's not really willing to learn how to write, but you can't possibly verify that. You can't pretend that if you do this you're going to have that effect. So it's both ways. You can't control it. If you try to change it, you have no guarantee that it is going to happen. Because it's much more complex.

JA: [Addressing Esmé] Heerlijk. Echt lekker! (Wonderful. Really delicious!)

EV: Ja? (Yes?)

DG: Super.

EV: Great.

DG: You have this famous episode of *The Simpsons* ...

JA: ... which is of course the highpoint of American cultural development. There's no question about that.

DG: Absolutely, it's fantastic. My children and I are always watching *The Simpsons*, and when we're not watching it we're talking about it. There's this famous episode where Simpson travels to the past and he has a special kind of toaster that when he touches it he travels to the time of the dinosaurs. And then when he gets to the dinosaurs he says: "Remember what you father told you, when you travel to the time of the dinosaurs don't touch anything!" And he steps on a mosquito, or something like that, and when he comes back to the future incredible things happen. Everything is similar but not really. They will change into reptiles or there are no bagels any more.

JA: No bagels? Oh, no! ...

[Laughter]

DG: So, it's a bit like that. I mean, you can't say: "This happened because of that." But it doesn't mean that if you change that, you will have the desired effect. You can't possibly control that.

JA: Okay. But that generates certain problems, as we say in philosophy. Because if we take that attitude towards our actions when we're planning them then we can't really take ourselves seriously.

DG: I think that's a very good thing!

[Laughter]

JA: I could've seen that coming. But then you might just as well roll a dice or flip a coin.

DG: I don't know.

JA: For example, you're putting together an artwork and you're faced with the choice – here's a philosophy thought experiment –

you have this very nice software that an artist named Stephen Linhart developed; it's called *The Mondrimat*. [Laughs]

DG: What?

JA: So, it's Mondriaan, but then it automatically generates patterns. [Dora laughs.] And so, you can either press *The Mondrimat* and it will generate a random display which maybe is even based on patterns that you've chosen in the past, that you like or didn't like. So you run through a thousand cases were *The Mondrimat* displays a yellow, blue, red pattern, and you say whether you like it or you don't. And after a thousand runs, the system has been trained. And now the question is: you have a choice, you're going to make a design that's going to have these blocks of yellow and red and blue. You can do it yourself or you can press the button that will automatically generate one. In which case are you doing something?

DG: That's a false problem in art.

JA: Okay. Why?

DG: You can't separate that, because already for a long time virtuosity has no value in art. This goes back to Duchamp. Technical virtuosity has been replaced by other virtuosities. There are other virtuosities, as I say; mental virtuosity, which has taken the place where manual, technical virtuosity was before. There is no difference actually making it yourself or asking somebody else to do it, or a machine. The only thing you have to be aware of, is that everything means something. And every decision you make, whether you make it yourself or not does not really add proportionally or in a rhetorical way to the value of the artwork. But absolutely every decision that you make is establishing a layer of meaning in the work. It depends how you play those layers. That is actually the artistic work itself.

JA: Okay. But is the playing of the layers, is that something you do? I mean I'm trying to set up a situation in which there's two routes you can go. I mean, one view would be: "No, it's an illusion to think you're ever more involved in one case than another. Every claim about being the author, being the creative force behind something, is always retrospective. You're always looking back and adding meaning to something that happened that you were involved with." But do you want to go that far? I mean, do you want to say that there is no room for saying: "I know what I'm doing now. I'm doing it because I intend to realise a cer-

tain idea, I'm the agent of what's happening." Is that always just afterwards?

DG: Well, you're always the agent. Whether you choose one thing or the other, it doesn't make you a better artist; you're just a different one. So you choose a different path. You're always serving the purpose. Recently I was listening to very interesting recordings of surrealists talking about art. There was one of Duchamp that was very funny, in which he says that he had invented a mathematical formula to determine the value of an artwork. [Laughter] So there would be an equation where you could find the quotient between what was intended but unexpressed and what was expressed but unintended.

[Laughter]

JA: That's simple to measure. All the grant agencies can use this formula!

DG: This is the absurd. It's one of the values of art.

JA: *Reductio ad absurdum*.

DG: It's completely reactionary, absolutely. Which by the way, I think is the best way to express human activity in general. So sometimes when I give classes to very young artists, I always say that as a young student of art you have a clear idea of what art is. The more you progress the less you know about what art is. And when you finally become a professional, you have no fucking idea what it is. So it's a bit like that. In a sense I think you could almost extend this to every discipline and that's why I think it's very interesting to discuss the anti-movements; the anti-psychiatry, anti-theatre, anti-art and I suppose also anti-philosophy.

JA: But again it comes back to the point where we started with: the freedom that comes from reacting to something is still trapped in a dependency on what you're responding to. So maybe it would be really interesting to get a clear sense of what is interesting about the anti-movements? I mean, there are moments in which something is broken open. So the negation of something creates an open space in which things are no longer just moving in a groove that's been laid down. There's more room ... It's less predictable, what comes out of an anti-movement.

DG: But in the case of anti-psychiatry, which is what I'm reading about at the moment, this was absolutely the acknowledgement that actually psychiatry was nowhere.

JA: That psychiatry itself was nowhere?

DG: ... was nowhere. So the only possibility was to start from zero. At the moment when anti-psychiatry was born, let's say in the Sixties, they realised that they were not able to cure anybody and they have no ...

JA: Yeah, but maybe this is going to sound really conservative, but I think that anti-movements are actually more of an expression of overblown expectations. The problem is that expectations get raised to a level where nobody could possibly satisfy them. And then you get this anti-movement, a rejection – a 'slechte Aufhebung einer falschen Dialektik' as they say in Frankfurt. The critique is coming out of what was a mistaken set of expectations to begin with. And you see this a lot with the '68 generation. It would be interesting to go through art movements and look at whether or not that isn't part of what's going on. Maybe itself, a sort of psychological dynamic of disappointed, in a sense totalitarian, hopes. The hope that things are going to be completely different. Huge, new movements that are changing everything promise the world, and then it turns out it doesn't happen.

DG: Uh huh. Are you talking about the psychiatry and psychiatry revolved around ...

JA: No, I mean more generally.

[Esmé comes to the table.]

EV: You're finished, right?

DG: Yeah, it was very good. Excellent.

EV: Thank you.

JA: Yeah, I really enjoyed it. Very nice, fresh flavours.

VI

Chai Ice Cream with Fruit

[The dessert is fresh starfruit and warm mango, cooked in vanilla flavoured sugar water. This is served with home-made chai ice cream.]

JA: There was awful stuff going on in psychiatry, there's no question about that. People being given electro-shock therapy and a kind of attitude toward human beings as malleable ...

DG: But is it also not likely the case in art? When I say that, I extrapolate. I realise that they were actually serving other purposes than they thought. As they say, mental asylums are for the protection of the sane and not for the protection of the insane.

JA: Yeah, I completely agree with that critique.

DG: So the reaction against the instrumentalisation... or the feeling of we're working for the wrong person. And in art as well, a phenomenon called the dematerialisation of art was a reaction against merchandising, against the saleable object. Artists were putting collectors and the market in a really difficult position. And you could say they were able to sell that too. "They can sell anything!"

[Laughter]

JA: The power of the dollar.

DG: Yes. Nevertheless it requires more 'well-trained' sellers. They made it a bit more difficult for them.

JA: So they end up getting even more of a share of the profits of the sale of art, [Laughter] in a nasty inversion and unintended side effect.

DG: Right, indeed. It is also, for instance, curious to know that actually these are things that are not solved in any way. So there is no progress and you're constantly discussing the same things again and again.

JA: Do you believe that? Do you believe that there's no progress? I mean, people say that a lot and I'm not sure ...

DG: ... there is no progress? There is progress, but you get the same response only in a different height.

JA: So, it is cyclical progression?

DG: Yeah, it's a spiral.

JA: Hegel had a word for that, that was the dialectic.

DG: Voilà. That is also a word that the school of anti-psychiatry use all the time; the dialectical progression.

JA: Yeah, it's true. And in fact many psychiatric interventions are a very good example of creating a new problem while trying to solve one.

DG: Yeah, that's the thing. What I mean when you speak about the Duchampian revolution, and then it happens again. Every ten years there's a similar movement that wants to finish with the state of things that are unbearable for that generation. And the same thing happens again and again.

JA: It's amazing. It's a striking fact, I think, that we can't predict these things. You'd think given how long we've been studying ourselves; complicated mathematics, computer models and so on, you would think that we would've figured out: "Well, okay, you've got this art movement..." and then as soon as the next movement comes along, everybody predicted it somehow. But not beforehand, only after it happened.

DG: This brilliant Francis Fukuyama ...

JA: Yeah, *The End of History*.

DG: Somehow he got it wrong.

JA: His next book was called *Trust*. [Laughter] No coincidence. He had some repair work to do. [Pause] But we can't predict things.

DG: Well, you have the famous phenomenon of 'the pendulum', as they say.

JA: But when is it going to stop? It's a pendulum, where you know, that at some point it's going to come back. You know that the stock market at some point is going to go off ...

DG: You know, this famous discussion when they ask: "Do you think that fashion is going to come back? Do you think that when you keep your clothes long enough that they'll be in fashion again?" [In a stern voice.] "No, never! They'll be similar, it'll not be the same."

JA: It's again Hegel, because it never comes back. The circles that I run in, in analytic philosophy, Hegel doesn't get a lot of good press. People tend to dismiss him as being confused and working with too big a system and so on. But there are so many things that he got just right. And one of them is: everything is historical. I mean, what things are is fundamentally a function of how they emerged. And you can't really understand what things are, you can't understand an art movement, except in see-

ing the process out of which it emerged. You can't understand a person, you can't be a person, without having gone through all of these twists and turns along the way to getting there. Very often we just have this kind of snapshot of someone of a particular point in time.

DG: And then you have another phenomenon; it's this moment of recognition. So that you have a sort of affinity that isn't based on understanding but on recognition.

JA: Yeah.

DG: That is very often called 'aesthetic pleasure'. You can make an equation and believe that you can also do the same with other things that you don't quite understand. In a way I believe that this is also the process of love. You don't know anything, but all of a sudden you have this moment of recognition; you identify. In a way you enter the discussion that this is also a form of knowledge. I remember reading this in *Ways of Worldmaking* by Nelson Goodman, he said that the difference between scientific and artistic thought was a difference of speed.

JA: Which is slower?

DG: Scientific, of course! What a question.

[Laughter]

JA: Cause I can imagine ... anyway ... go ahead ... We'll tell this story, and then we'll tell a completely different story in which it's reversed.

DG: Goodman studied a lot on classical painting, he invented the concept of 'Topos' to discuss the settings of classical painting. If you understand art as a tool of knowledge, a way of understanding the world, then you can't split the ideas being transmitted into sequences. You can't say, like you say in logical knowledge from A to B, from B to C but instead you often start at A and all of a sudden you're at C. You don't know really how it happened but you have this instance of recognition. Where you say: "That's it. I understand now what it is." Of course we're talking in theory and this happens very rarely when you go to an exhibition. But it happens sometimes.

JA: If you read enough about how awful our intuitions are about a lot of things. You know, like I-write-my-best-poetry-when-I'm-stoned kind of intuition. [Then addressing Esmé] This is wonderful.

EV: It's chai ice cream.

JA: That's what it is!

DG: And this?

EV: Mango cooked in lemon and sugar water.

And then there's candied orange peel and star fruit.

DG: Excellent.

EV: Yeah, I tried the ice cream recently and I was really happy with it.

JA: Yeah, it's very good. I was expecting it to be cinnamon, when I looked at it. So it threw me for a second. [Pause]



Chai ice cream with fruit.

JA: What was I saying? Oh, trusting our intuitions. In one way we can't do without them, at some point you say: "This work is the way I want it to be. I'm done with this essay."

DG: There was this famous sentence of Einstein, I think it was Einstein ... at a certain point someone was saying that the way of proving that the theory was true is the beauty of it.

JA: It sounds like Einstein, let's say it was Einstein. That must be true. My children say: "If it rhymes it must be true." But that's an in-house joke.

DG: Our relationship with truth and beauty ...

JA: It's very big in mathematics and in fundamental physics. But why? Why wouldn't nature be ugly?

DG: We're not talking about nature, we're talking about thought.

JA: Okay. [Laughter] I think Einstein was talking part about nature, about the world, about the universe. How things are. But we also know that we're sometimes seduced by beautiful thoughts that aren't true.

DG: Lured by mermaids ...

JA: Exactly.

DG: Yeah, but there's something that I recognise in the idea of simplicity, for instance. It's a bit like when they research criminal cases. That they always say that the most simple explanation is usually the real one.

JA: Yeah. That's because we're not really as complicated as we think we are. [Laughs]

DG: I heard that in 99% of the times the killer is someone who the victim really loves.

JA: What does that say about us?

DG: I think it says that the family is everything that psychosis needs to know about.

JA: Yeah.

[Silence]

DG: But we've come far from our original point.

JA: We did it of our own free will.

[Laughter]

DG: But in the end it's also the same discussion that you would go to the family and say: "How much is inborn?"

JA: Yeah, totally. Socialisation, etcetera. But you can also approach it from the other end, you can approach it from the engineering question. So you can say: "Plato, in *The Republic*, argued that the only way to raise a generation of people who could really think clearly, would be to separate them from their parents."

DG: How wrong that is! I once made a work related to East Germany. They say the reason so many East Germans were ready to collaborate with the Stasi is because the state had the means to almost finish with family loyalty. This system offered daycare facilities for children so that women didn't need to stop working.

Apparently what they say is that the state created such loyalty so that no children ever saw their parents. Also the women who wanted to divorce were so well supported that a woman would never stay with her husband for purely economic reasons. So they created dysfunctional families. A woman often had two or three children with different fathers. Because of that the young citizens only found loyalty in the state. Actually the secret of the efficiency of the Stasi is that they managed to establish family ties with the agents. As you know, at a certain point one in ten Germans was an agent, and it never crossed their minds that they were doing something wrong. They were really doing their duty to the only family they knew.

JA: But here's the question: what if the state were a good state?

DG: A state is by nature bad!

JA: Oh, we're back with Abbie Hoffman, are we?

[Laughter]

DG: A good state is impossible.

JA: But you will grant me that there are bad parents.

DG: Yes, that's true. [Laughter] A bad parent

is better than a good state. It's just my nature to think that it's impossible a good state would exist.

JA: You do have situations in which the parents are awful and are inculcating all kinds of horrible things in their children, or are trying to. I don't think we can say that loyalty to evil parents is a good thing.

DG: Children are always loyal to ...

JA: Not in the DDR. I'm just saying, if we had a society in which most of the forces who decide what happens were progressive ...

DG: I don't know. I'm referring now to a child psychology book I once read. There was a sentence that was completely demolishing for me and it said: "The mother is the most important person in the life of anybody, even if you never ever met her." So, that's terrible.

JA: That's a lot of responsibility and no free will. But what could that even mean?

DG: Do you mean, whether it's for the good or the bad that you are loyal or unloyal? It's absolutely cutting your free will either way. I only wanted to say that I read that. And something that has been written is always part of the truth.

JA: According to my children only if it rhymes. [Laughter] Which I've taken on as my theory of truth.

DG: Oh, I don't know.

JA: [Addressing Esmé as she comes to the table.] This is an exceptional restaurant experience, I have to say. There is nobody else. It's all very nice.

EV: [Laughs] Thanks. I hoped it would be. Can I make you some tea or coffee?

DG: Yeah, okay that would be nice.

EV: I have Darjeeling, Rooibos or green tea.

JA: Some Darjeeling, I think. [Talking to Dora again.] You have a long trip back.

DG: No, no, I'm with the fast train.

DG: I also have a sister who works for international adoption and mistreated children. And one of the things she told me, what is very difficult with these sort of children, is that it doesn't matter how bad they've been treated by their mother, they're always loyal to the mother and they would rarely say something bad about her.

JA: That's the kind of case I'm talking about. That's the case in which the loyalty to the mother; the family loyalty, stands in the way of the healthy development of a child, or not?

DG: It's hard to say.

JA: That's what I think, she's saying, right?

DG: Yeah, yeah, of course. But on the other hand, would it be hurtful for the child to accuse the mother and live for ever with that weight? Maybe that's not the best way either? It's a bit like when you decide to make decisions that are against your own welfare or well-being, but nevertheless you feel that you did the right thing because of whatever moral principles you have.

JA: There is something very important, very beautiful, I think, about the willingness to ... it's biblical, right? It's the prodigal son; the son who has wasted his life has gone off and comes back and unconditionally is accepted, received and celebrated. That notion of unconditional love.

DG: Maybe that's the only kind of love that exists, probably. [A pause]

JA and DG: Nah!

JA: No. It sounded good for a second, but ... [Laughter]

DG: Yeah, I don't know. It depends. With your children I can believe that. With any other type of love I don't really believe in unconditional love. I wonder if you can really decide to who you're loyal to? There has been a big discussion about whether if there would be a war, would you help your children to desert. And I say without doubt: "Immediately!" There is no war worth ... But what about if it was a good war?

JA: Yeah. And what if your child is just a coward?

DG: [Laughs] I always had a lot of sympathy for cowards.

JA: What if you knew your child was going to commit a terrorist act? There is this case. There was someone called *The Unabomber* in the US,

he was a kind of radical, anti-technology person. He send these packages with hand carved wood bombs, that exploded and killed a few people and injured several people permanently. At some point he published a manifesto, the New York times printed it. And at that point his brother knew: "It's gotta be him." He was agonised about what to do, whether to betray his only brother.

DG: It's hard to say.

JA: This goes back to antiquity. It goes back very far.

[Esmé brings the nut biscotti's to the table.]

DG: The exquisite things never stop, he?

JA: And I guess you baked these too?

EV: Yeah. And I also have sweet wine to accompany it; a desert wine for dipping.

JA: I think it's part of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. [Laughs]

EV: [To Dora] Are you finished?

DG: Yeah, I'm finished.

JA: It was a lot of food. It was great.

[Then pointing at the sugar dispenser.] What's this?

EV: That's for sugar. It's from the Fifties

JA: Cool!

EV: When you press here, loose sugar comes out, the same amount as a sugar cube.

JA: Wow. I don't usually put sugar in, but I'm going to do it anyway. [Laughter]

DG: Yes, I want to see this. I've never seen anything like this before.

[Joel presses the push button. With a clicking sound of the dispenser, the sugar comes out.]

JA: Just the right dosage.

DG: I remember now this case of a terrorist group in the United States who hated taxes. They send a bomb to the tax office, but it exploded in the hands of ...

JA: ... the postal worker, yeah. But if you knew that your own child was about to do something like that and the only way to stop the person is by going to the police ...

DG: Yeah. I don't think you can really predict what you're going to do in that case.

JA: No, but you can decide. I think that's a really important point, just the way you said it; you can't know what you're going to do in that situation. You can make all the decisions in the world that you think that's what you ought to

do.

DG: Yeah, it's impossible to know. It's also impossible to know if you would be able to make a big sacrifice. Would you give your life for the country? I don't think so. For instance, there are people who consider it a big tragedy if a country loses leadership. They consider the faith of their country as something very important to them. Where for instance for me, I couldn't care less. [The sound of tea being poured.] Provided that all children can go to school and go to the dentist. That's all that matters to me.

JA: But we are alienated, nomadic intellectuals [Laughter] We're cosmopolitans without any roots. Or not?

DG: But how could we know that? [Pause] It would be terrible to say: "I'm cosmopolitan." Other people have to say that for you, you can't say that.

JA: The same thing with 'philosopher'. Probably the same thing with 'artist'.

DG: Yes. There is this discussion for instance – one of the many discussions you can have – on who decides? People always go, like: "If there's no critique of quality, if virtuosity doesn't mean anything, who then decides the quality of an artwork?" And the people who've thought about this for a long time they say that the artistic community decides that. Which is an entity made by many different types of people. Which is by no means only the museums or the galleries, they're also the art students, the artists themselves. Pretty much anybody who has something to do with it.

JA: Does that mean that something in the past, that wasn't art could become art retrospectively?

DG: It was exactly the same, always. Only in the perception of the profane ...

JA: But the community changes.

DG: The community changes but the critique has always been the same. [Joel protests.] There was this famous paper of Gombrich, he's an Austrian, fundamental art theorist, who has a very brilliant expression: "Is art a symptom or a remedy?" And that's fantastic, because there's also a big theory that says: "Is art expressing a sign of the times; a *Zeitgeist*? Or is art a remedy; a medicine on the terrible sign of the times?" So he said it was actually a remedy. There was never an epoch that could produce Giotto by itself. That was for him the 'rien ne va plus'; the absolute. And there was never a time

that was so wonderful, so perfect, to be able to produce naturally that as a symptom. Il Giotto really was a single man, who gave the view, the remedy of that time in the paintings he made. But profane people might think that the quality of art before was determined by the relation between model and representation, how close it was to reality and that sort of thing. But that was never true. I mean, virtually everybody knows that no nature looks like Michelangelo, no man looks like Tiziano. That was absolutely abstract.

JA: Do you think art solves problems?

DG: [Laughs] Depends what problems.

JA: I mean, the question what art does with us? What the effect of art on us is?

DG: Well, I think you can't separate visual art from any other type of art. I think the effect is always the same: it's consolation.

JA: Really?

DG: I think so, yes. [Silence] Consolation of absurdity, of nonsense, of loneliness. I think that is primarily what an artwork does, whether it's visual art, or a film, novel, literature, poetry. It's mainly consolation. It's help.

JA: It helps, but sometimes it helps by opening new ways of seeing that create something you've got to think about.

DG: That's a form of consolation too. I mean consolation is not to make you feel more comfortable. I mean consolation in the sense that you find sense where there was no sense. Mainly that.

JA: But sometimes it puzzles too, or not?

DG: In any case, it lifts you from your completely idiotic systems.

JA: I like this phrase that Adorno uses: "Der welterschliessende Kraft des Kunstwerks". That means 'world disclosing', so opening up new ways of seeing things. You've never looked at a flower the same way after seeing a Georgia O'Keefe. I'm just picking a prominent example. It's just opening up new angles. I see what you mean about consolation being a big part of that. It makes sense in new ways. So more things make sense because you've expanded the palette of intelligibility.

DG: In Freud's famous *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, he discusses the question "What are humans seeking?" They're seeking happiness in different ways. And I found it remarkable, talking about this idea of the anti-psychiatry, that ... [Esmé is joins the dinner table.] ... that both art-science, in his case science-art and

psychosis were all ways of seeking happiness. But that's something that when you have a profane view for instance on mental disease, you always think it's an dysfunction. But actually a mental disfunction is an active construction; it's not something that falls on you. It's something that you built in order to make a situation bearable. In a way I think he's right about what he says, that it has basically the same origin as an artistic construction. It's something that you built in order to make something bearable. So going back to the idea of the remedy ...

JA: Yeah, exactly. But whether or not art is primarily consolation ... because that sounds like it does exclude art having the function of rebellion and provocation.

DG: Maybe I should find another word for it. But mainly it lifts you from the shallowness of life, in one way or the other it's always the same. But you make it less shallow. Take waiting, for instance. In a way this isn't shallow, because it recalls many other situations you've come to know from things you've read and things you've been taught.

EV: Do you think that art makes you live more consciously? Or that artworks can make you be more conscious of yourself as a person?

DG: Well, there is no other way of being, than as a person. I would say "Yes". Lately there has been a trend that generally compares art to gymnastics.

JA: Yeah, mental gymnastics. Gymnastics for your soul.

[Laughter]

DG: Something that helps you to relax after a day of working in the office. That you go there and then you relax a bit ...

EV: Like Pipilotti Rist? She had a large installation in Boijmans recently. It was almost like a cocoon, there were these video's and there was carpet. People were invited to lay down and to be overwhelmed.

DG: This is so Nineties. [Laughter] That was really the moment for that. You took the art away with you, you lay down on the art, you slept on the art.

JA: But it's also ancient Greece, right? Trying to integrate beauty into your daily life in a way that it enriches your daily life.

DG: Yeah, but what is daily life? I mean, that is a problem. Why do you separate art from daily life? So that's the question.

JA: Yeah, okay.

DG: Another famous discussion as well; art

coming closer to life, the difference between art and life. But what is the difference?

JA: But you asked the question about consciousness, or awareness, or a heightened sense of attentiveness. There's a difference between having even the same piece of music as background music, and being in a concert. But even great ... , confession time here, I commute back and forth between Leiden and Utrecht and there are people yakking away on their cellphones, so I go in my little cocoon. I have my isolating ear buds so I can do some reading or whatever. And I have Corelli or Bach's *Orchestral Suites*, which I think is beautiful music. It helps me, it's in the background. I'm not really paying attention to it, I don't really even hear it at some level. But if I were to hear the same piece of music in a concert hall and were attending to it, it would be a completely different experience. Now, you could say: "That's bad. You should never be allowing great works of art to fade into the background. You should always ..."

DG: ... kneel down and pray. [Laughter]



Joel Anderson

JA: But somebody could say: "People make life too easy for themselves, or make life too comfortable for themselves. What art is about, is constantly raising up people's levels of consciousness, giving them that extra dimension of meaning and complexity and depth. Even if they don't want it." I'm not sure how much art we can take, whether we can be in a heightened level of consciousness all the time.

DG: And then you have to distinguish how much bad art you can take, how much good art you can take, and so on. And this bad art... I mean you can almost count how much you'll be able to take. Still ten more minutes. But it's art nevertheless, I mean bad art and good art.

JA: I'm thinking of the tension between absorbing more and more beautiful things into a routine

versus being aware.

DG: Beautiful things? I mean that's not really the definition of art.

EV: I also think that when an artwork is made, that then the artwork is given away. The author can't control how it will be perceived. So when you listen to a piece as background music or listening to it in a heightened awareness way during a concert, that's up to the user of the artwork.

DG: Well, that's not always true. You can ask for you artwork back.

JA: Yeah, but you can't ask back the reception of it.

EV: Yeah.

DG: I don't know. I think I work on that.

EV: How do you do that?

DG: I work on controlling the situation. For instance I once made – and this is to the point of being absurd – a work called *Proxy/coma*. It was a combination of two things: one was a performance of a woman who's only instruction was to stay in the scope of a surveillance camera, apart from that she could do anything she wanted. But she was filmed all the time. This was also based in some sort of theory that represented time is contrary to lived time. And then on the other hand all the recordings were archived, so the longer the exhibition lasted, the more tapes there were. So there was a sort of inverse relationship between time left to live and recorded time. As the piece was growing, she was moving closer to death, like we all are as time passes. It was a bit like a spell on her, a sort of colonization. Afterwards, I watched all the tapes so I could, in a way, re-live the exhibition time where I had not been. In a way you got the feeling that you were getting back something, that you didn't really give it away, you got it back.

JA: Yeah, but everybody who saw it, everybody who went ...

DG: Not as much as me. [Laughter] I got the most of it.

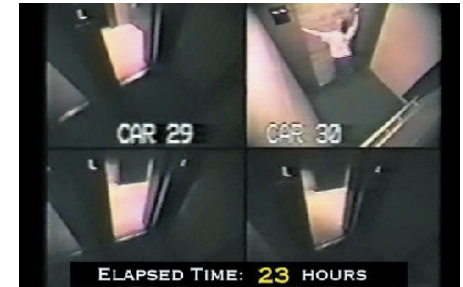
JA: If that gives some consolation for you to think that, then you're welcome to think that, [Laughs] but I'm with Esmé on this one.

EV: I saw this very interesting footage of a guy who was in New York in a building, he was in an elevator. He went up to the top level to have a smoke. When he came down, he was just wearing his shirt and his ...

JA: ... underwear.

EV: ... trousers. [Laughs] No, of course he was

wearing underwear too. But then the elevator got stuck and he was locked inside for 40 hours before they rescued him. And there was a camera pointed at him. So you saw his movements in this very enclosed space. He didn't have anything with him, not even water. He tried to sleep, so you see him laying curled up. It was very interesting to see how he used the space and how he made it his own. First he was of course waiting for the rescue team but after 24 hours being in such a small space, it became his space.



Nicholas White trapped in an elevator for 40 hours.

DG: How did he pee?

EV: I guess in the corner. I don't remember seeing ...

DG: In a corner of course!

[Laughter]

DG: I always think of that when I go in an elevator; where am I going to pee?

JA: With your installation, how did you handle with the surveillance camera?

DG: Well, that was different, because it was open. It was a performance, it was somebody else who was there. She ate, she smoked, she was allowed to do anything. She slept too.

EV: And when she needed a toilet?

DG: She just went to the toilet. I mean, I'm conceptual to a point. [Laughter] Well, you have these ideas of authors that never finish, something that they are constantly re-, re-, re-working it. And most of the time when they re-work something it is mainly based on the reactions they'd received. This happens in theatre all the time, in movies too. You have these famous secret screenings in the Mid-West ...

JA: Iowa! is one of the places they show them.

DG: And then they get papers where the audience have to say what they think.

JA: Oh, the best things are these with a dial where, as you're watching, you're supposed to

turn to more positive and less positive. [Laughter] Seriously. They do this for political advertisements. I saw once a film of this happening, where everybody is watching in rows and rows of people. And then you see forty people's results all fed into a computer, the results are displayed on a screen and they show: "Oh, that was a particular good line in the political speech."

DG: And now we're kind of starting to talk about democracy and this constant feedback between the leader and the voters. That makes you wonder exactly what democracy is?

JA: The FDP in Germany, they gave the middle class what they want. They did research, determined that people wanted to hear that taxes would go down and still education would be good.

DG: So for instance, talking about democracy, once when I voted – and I voted three times in my life for very idiotic things. The first time I voted just for the kick of it, then I voted again in 2004 after the train attacks in Madrid. I voted per post already before the attacks. I voted for such a silly thing because I wanted homosexual marriage to be allowed and I would vote for anybody who had that in their programme. There were two parties; one was a socialist party and the other a communist party. I thought: "I will vote for the communists. I don't want to be that soft to vote for the socialists." So I voted for the communists, but then I read recently that one of the programmes of a right party, of the PP in Spain, wanted free internet for everybody. Then I was thinking: "I'm ready to vote for that!" [Laughter] Then I was thinking: "This is as far as my political convictions go."

JA: Those are deep convictions. I voted in the European elections for the first time, speaking of a kick. I got Dutch citizenship a year ago. But voting this first time was a complete and utter disappointment. [Laughs] Very few people bothered to vote.

DG: Yes, indeed. And you have always these conscious, political engaged artists who tell you: "Well, if you don't vote, you have no right to complain. You really have to vote. That's your duty as a citizen."

JA: But there are others who say that you shouldn't vote because then you're giving legitimacy to a fraudulent process.

DG: Yes. Sadly I have to admit I don't vote because I can't be bothered to.

JA: But this gives you a more politically, challenging thing to say. "I don't vote out of principle because I don't want to participate in a completely illegitimate enterprise. It's corrupted to the core!"

[Laughter]

DG: But that's not really true, because now I'm going more personal and getting to the confessions. I always have this discussion with my mother who says always that democracy is a sick system and we should institute the government of 'the best'; the best government of the best. But then the question always rises: Who is the best? How do you decide that? Who decides who's the best? She then says: "Well, the best of the best."

JA: It's amazing, growing up in a country in which democracy was not an obvious positive thing.

DG: Where?

JA: In Spain.

DG: For most people it is. My mother is an exception.

JA: Okay but there are people alive today who've had experience with ...

DG: Alive today? We are not finished with them yet, you mean? [Laughter] Do you mean that people are nostalgic for Franco?

JA: Yeah.

DG: Yes, yes, lots. But there are always nostalgic people. After the war in Italy there were graffiti's all over Rome saying: "Give us back the *Big Head*." Meaning, give us back Mussolini. So, not to talk about 'ostalgia' and all this stuff, which in a way, I think, is very double-sided. Because actually these people think they're nostalgic for the communist time, but actually they're nostalgic about their youth, about their childhood, about something that didn't really exist, it only exists in their heads. And I think with Franco it's a bit the same.

JA: Yeah, I think also with the DDR, there's a big thing of 'now we're under the thumb of the Wessies; the West German won. And they're rubbing our noses in it. They're just gloating, they're so proud of how their system is so much better and now we all have to eat their shit.'

DG: I think with the money, when the wall fell they all got a tip. That was humiliating.

JA: I studied with Jürgen Habermas at various points and I was visiting Frankfurt in December 1989. So it was just a month after the wall had fallen and there were all these letters that were in circulation amongst various left intel-

lectuals, trying to figure out what the response was going to be. Habermas is a very vigorous guy, he's not always optimistic and he has a keen sense for when things are not going very well, but he's got a real fighting sort of spirit to him. He was just utterly demoralised when he saw how everybody was lining up to eliminate the possibility that the DDR might go its own route. It's hard to imagine now, but it was a live question for many people what form of government the DDR would take on. And it was entirely possible at the time that it would be an independent country. So you have the classical set up for political frustrations; people within the country who have a different sense of history, like what the possibilities were and what has been done to them, then everybody else outside. This creates more of a sense of alienation and anger and bitterness about everybody thinking that there's nothing special about you. You are now reunited with the rest of Germany, where you belong and so you're now just poor, that's all. There's nothing special about you, you're just a poor version of everybody else. [Laughter] It's not a winning life narrative, right?

DG: It was a colonisation, they say. They were colonised.

JA: *Der Anschluss*, that's what I call it. This was a term that was used for the annex of Austria by the Nazi's; I guess that's pretty hyperbolic. But still...

DG: Do you know who Martin Kippenberger is? He was a German artist and he was always saying: "With what right did they break down the Berlin Wall?" That was probably the best urban sculpture ever in Berlin that should have been kept for all reasons, as well as for aesthetic ones. And idiots broke it down ...

JA: There are pieces left, or not?

About ten meters or so.

JA: That's it?

EV: Yeah, it's a very small stretch.

DG: Once that the wall was down he had to think that before there have been no Nazi's and now there have never been any communists.

JA: Yeah, exactly.

DG: The need for amnesia ended the wall.

JA: Because as we noted earlier in our conversation, we are the result of the history. And so, of course, if you don't want to be somebody who had a history as a communist, you need to make sure that it never happened. Just erase it. [Pause] How late is it actually?

EV: Quarter to nine. If you want to round it up ...

DG: Yeah, let's round it up.

JA: Before we say something really stupid.

[Laughter]

DG: When we're off camera then we can say ...

JA: ... what we really think! [Laughter] But she's got that other tape recorder running over there as a back-up. [Laughter]

Colophon

This conversation was recorded on 29 September 2009 as part of the *Zicht op Zalmhaven* project. For more conversations please see: zichtopzalmhaven.esmevalk.com

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Zicht op Zalmhaven is a single-table restaurant to which guests are invited for a three course meal and an interdisciplinary conversation. The invitees are working in the fields of art, philosophy, social science, cultural theory and history.

I invite the guests on the basis of their work and research. The subjects of the conversations have come forth from questions I deal with in my own artistic practice. ‘Autonomy, Agency and Free Will’, ‘Gesture, Display and Body Language’, ‘Self-Organizing Structures’ and ‘Reading the City’ are amongst the topics that will be discussed. The idea for the project developed from a personal desire for conducting research that is driven by curiosity and sharing. The guests share their research, interests, and questions through conversation and I share by preparing a dedicated meal and its setting.

I think that conversation creates a space where new ideas can emerge through the exchange of thoughts and in the unexpected reply the other can give. With the meetings in *Zicht op Zalmhaven* I hope that new perspectives on a given subject can come to exist that feed back into the research of the participants and other interested parties.

Esmé Valk