



# RIVERS OF CONVERSATIONS

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## **A Courtyard Conversation, or a zoetological approach to the thinking of things**

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Inserted into the entrance hall of a small courtyard house that is inhabited by four families in Haiyan village, Kunming, China, the work *Symphony of the Everyday – Sunset Sonata* employs subtle interventions in the form of light, sound and kinetic objects to reveal the aesthetic dimension of everyday objects and materials. Technology is often seen to be in competition with heritage and tradition, frequently threatening them to the point of elimination for a new, smarter world. *Symphony of the Everyday – Sunset Sonata*, however, suggests that technology can be employed to spark a conversation on the meaning of heritage in everyday life. Grounded in cybernetic conversation theory, the installation uses technology to serve aesthetic experience. *Symphony of the Everyday – Sunset Sonata* reveals the role of architecture as a means of constructing an enriched life and renders the objects and materials that make up a village household's everyday life tangible in their aesthetic dimension. Activated by the movement of the visitors, playing in the presence of the setting sun, the kinetic objects and their sounds engage in a new conversation on the possibilities of technology to nurture a community's heritage and values. The presentation contextualises the installation *Symphony of the Everyday – Sunset Sonata*, linking Gordon Pask's concept of conversation and Roger T. Ames' zoetology, a term conceived to emphasise the particular dynamics of traditional Chinese philosophy.

KEYWORDS: conversation theory, zoetology, cybernetics, public art, everyday aesthetics, China

RSD TOPIC(S): Cases & Practice, Society & Culture

## **Presentation summary**

### **Conversation**

In cybernetic contexts, the term conversation plays a particular role. Based on the premise that all understanding is subjective, the idea of conversation is set against the idea of communication in the sense of transmitting information (cf. Dubberly & Pangaro, 2009; Pangaro & Dubberly, 2014). It is not too far-fetched to suggest that the conceptual framework of conversation marks the beginning of design cybernetics. In its cybernetic conception, the term conversation can be traced to Gordon Pask, whose work at the threshold of art, design and technology has been of significant influence in the second half of the 20th century, especially in Britain (Husbands et al., 2008). Pask had a background in engineering and psychology, but as a polymath and cybernetician, he engaged in many other disciplines. Teaching at the Architectural Association in London and at MIT in Boston, Pask worked on projects that would redefine what architecture is. He worked with Joan Littlewood and Cedric Price on the Fun Palace project (Mathews, 2005) and with Nicholas Negroponte on various projects of the Architecture Machine Group (Glanville, 1993). Pask could be considered the grandfather of design cybernetics. However, he is also well-known in the art world, where he is generally recognised as a pioneer of electronic art (Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, 2022).

A basis for all his later work, Gordon Pask's major theoretical endeavour is the conceptual framework entitled Conversation Theory (1975; 1976; 1992). The term conversation thus carries with it an entire world of connotations. Central to the concept of conversation, an activity that plays out in time between humans or between human and non-human entities, is the conception of humans as striving to learn and bound in their understanding by their subjectivity (Westermann, 2019).

In Pask's universe, the concepts of conversation and interaction are intrinsically linked (Glanville, 2001). Conversation is interaction operating on the basis of an ethics of openness towards an Other (Westermann, 2019; 2020). It can be explained in the following way. From the constructivist position of subjective understanding, any reaching out to someone or something else is a reaching out to an Other. This reaching

out is conceptualised as the basis for learning, essentially as 'good', operating on an implicit ethics of openness towards an Other. It foregrounds listening over speaking. Furthermore, there is an aesthetic dimension that is significant for the conception of conversation and its relation to art and design. Pask conceptualises aesthetic experiences as desirable because they provide novelty and initiate learning (Pask, 1970). For him, "aesthetically potent environments" are learning environments of the highest order (cf. Pask, 1970, p. 76). Within this context, play and learning nurture each other. As outlined in the publication entitled "The art of conversation: Design cybernetics and its ethics" (Westermann, 2020), Pask's concept of conversation carries with it a conception of art as everyday practice that aligns in fundamental aspects with John Dewey's formulations published in *Art as Experience* (1934/2005). For John Dewey, everyday experience is "art in germ," as "[e]ven in its rudimentary forms, it contains the promise of that delightful perception which is esthetic experience" (1934/2005, p. 19). Pask takes a similar position but initiates a shift in how aesthetic experience is grounded in everyday life by stating that it is a *conversation* that holds the potential for aesthetic experience (Westermann, 2020). With conversation defined as a particularly rich form of interaction, we leave the realms of a philosophy grounded in ontology. Pask's *conversation* can be linked to both pragmatism and process philosophy, but in its recognition of recursion as the basic structure, it is cybernetic. It includes a domain of practice and one of reflection (cf. Glanville, 2014). They are related in recursion and bound to time as experiential time. It is not by accident that anthropologist Arturo Escobar has (re-)linked cybernetic and Colombian indigenous ways of thinking (Escobar, 2018). There are striking parallels as both favour a process-bound circularity that foregrounds experiential time as a basic unit of conception, and both embrace plurality. Within the context of conversation, the two can easily be seen as connected as the embrace of plurality, in its radical openness to other views, initiates learning time. The following section shows ways of conceiving in traditional Chinese thought that resonate with what has been stated above. The presentation then concludes in the last section by giving an overview of a public art installation that the authors realised in the late spring of 2024 in a rural context in China, providing an example of conversation as an aesthetic learning experience.

## Zoetology

According to Roger T. Ames, a leading scholar in comparative Chinese and Western philosophy, the primacy of persistence in ontological ways of thinking is a “source of security” that has served Western societies well for millennia (2020). It is the basis of science. With its primary modes of thinking based on deduction and induction, “substance ontology” serves to justify given hypotheses and has become the dominant view in what is generally considered to be the Western world (Ames, 2023, p. 81). It is important to note, however, that substance ontology is not a universal mode of thinking. The desire for justification that is so present in Western societies, according to Ames, is not primary in all cultures (2023). In ancient Chinese culture, for example, such striving for justification played no essential role (Ames, 2023). It is grounded in a generative logic that is unlike the logic of identity, on which ontological thinking is based (Ames, 2023). Generative logic is the logic of co-creation. Roger T. Ames suggests that an appropriate name for this way of thinking that focuses on dynamic life – *zoe* – in contrast to ontology’s focus on immutable essences is *zoetology*. *Zoe*, an ancient Greek term for life, is typically contrasted with *bios*, likewise an ancient Greek term for life. *Bios* is political and intellectual life; the concept focuses on how human life differs from non-human life (Arendt, 1958/1998). *Zoe* is animal life; it foregrounds life as dynamic, and as it refers to what is common to all living beings, it is connective (Agamben, 1995/1998; Dubreuil & Eagle, 2006; Braidotti, 2006; 2010).

In Eurocentric contexts, the intellectual and discursive *bios* is given primacy. Ames’ choice for *zoe* is thus programmatic and indicates the degree to which he sees Chinese traditional thought differing from the ontological philosophy in the ancient Greek tradition. *Zoetology*, understood as the art of living, shifts the focus of enquiry from entities to dynamic relations and offers an opportunity to radically rethink sustainability in architecture and design as inherent to systemic practice. *Zoetology* is relational philosophy; it emphasises participation in the ephemeral and foregrounds abductive reasoning over deductive and inductive reasoning (Ames, 2023; cp. Westermann and Gupta, 2023). Conceived by Charles Sanders Peirce, the term abduction indicates explanatory or presumptive reasoning:

Abduction is the process of forming an explanatory hypothesis. It is the only logical operation which introduces any new idea, as induction does nothing but

determine a value, and deduction merely evolves the necessary consequences of a pure hypothesis. Deduction proves that something must be; Induction shows that something actually is operative; Abduction merely suggests that something may be. (Peirce, 1934/1960, p. 106)

According to Ames, abductive reasoning is of particular importance for cultures that give primacy to process and dynamics over persistence (2020, p. 32; The Royal Institute of Philosophy 2022, 00:26:00). Abductive reasoning produces new meaning:

Perhaps the most interesting reading of Peircean abduction is that it is the unbounded process of making productive correlations, generating new meaning, taking as its only boundaries the limit of our imagination.

(The Royal Institute of Philosophy 2022, 00:27:00).

### **Symphony of the Everyday – Sunset Sonata**

Inserted into the entrance to a small courtyard inhabited by four families in Haiyan village, Kunming, China, the work *Symphony of the Everyday – Sunset Sonata* (2024) could be seen to actualise and confirm the relevance of both *Conversation Theory* and *Zoetology* for a socioecological reconceptualisation of the relations that define place and community. These relations concern the living of humans with other humans and other-than-human-beings; they concern the living of humans in and with environments and their technicity as part of their living that has since the beginning of times led humans to create languages and things – technology in the widest sense.

*Symphony of the Everyday – Sunset Sonata* is a site-specific public art installation. It was set up in April 2024 in the village of Haiyan, a traditional fishing village located at the Dian Lake (Dianchi), China's largest freshwater lake. Fishing was the main occupation of the people living in the villages surrounding the lake, which features a 150 km coastline, but since the lake has been severely polluted, fishing has been forbidden, and Haiyan has had to reinvent itself. A pier into the lake serves tourists who want to watch the famous sunset over the picturesque scenery of Dian Lake.

*Symphony of the Everyday – Sunset Sonata* is a contribution to the Dianchi Art Season, a public art and design festival that took place at several locations around the lake between the summers of 2023 and 2024 (Kunming Municipal Government, 2024). The

authors of the installation, Yiping Dong, Lei Feng and Claudia Westermann, were tutoring work for the Dianchi Art Season's Student Garden Construction Festival in Wulong village in the summer of 2023, some of which was presented at RSD12 (Liu et al., 2023, pp. 20–22). Site visits for the work in Haiyan village and conversations with the local government and the inhabitants took place in the summer of 2023. The entrance to a small traditional courtyard house inhabited by four families was given to us as a potential site. During our site visits, the entrance and courtyard presented an image of the inhabitants' everyday lives. Many objects, some of them seemingly discarded, appeared to be witnesses to this everyday life. They gave an impression of the limited conditions, but they also told stories of past times, memories, desires and hopes. In our proposal for an installation, our focus was on revealing the aesthetic dimension of everyday objects and materials through subtle interventions in the form of light, sound and kinetic objects and, with it, the beauty of the many things and events no one ever pays attention to because they belong to daily life.

Technology is often seen to be in competition with heritage and tradition, frequently threatening them to the point of elimination for a new, smarter world. *Symphony of the Everyday – Sunset Sonata*, however, suggests that technology can be employed to spark a conversation on the meaning of heritage in everyday life. The installation takes the setting sun, which has become so important for Haiyan village, as one of its themes. A large LED light, mimicking the sun in form and colour, is installed in the small entrance hall, positioned on the wall opposite the courtyard house's main entrance door. It bathes the formerly dark entrance in warm light and invites visitors from the street to enter (Figure 1- 4). At the entrance, visitors are greeted by a symphony played by the hammers of a piano mechanic on the everyday found objects (Figure 5–8), revealing their sonic qualities and, with it, new aesthetic dimensions of daily life. Activated by the movement of the visitors, pushed by small motors, playing in the presence of the setting sun, the kinetic objects engage in a new conversation on the possibilities of technology to nurture a community's heritage and values (Figure 1–9). In its reflective and aesthetic dimensions, the installation is didactic, a learning technology in the Paskian sense, initiating a conversation between the visitors and the technology and revealing the value of everyday bare life (*zoe*) that is dynamic and vital, and of which all the objects and things are part to which we never pay attention.





Figure 1. *Symphony of the Everyday – Sunset Sonata*. The setting artificial sun lightens up the entrance to the courtyard in Haiyan. A group of five people passes by. Photo: Lei Feng, 2024.



Figure 2. *Symphony of the Everyday – Sunset Sonata*. The setting artificial sun lightens up the entrance to the courtyard in Haiyan. A group of five people passes by. Photo: Lei Feng, 2024.



Figure 3. *Symphony of the Everyday – Sunset Sonata*. Interior view. The setting artificial sun lightens up the entrance to the courtyard in Haiyan. Photo: Lei Feng, 2024.





Figure 4. *Symphony of the Everyday – Sunset Sonata*. Interior view. A child in front of the installation's large light/sun. Photo: Lei Feng, 2024.



Figure 5. *Symphony of the Everyday – Sunset Sonata*. Interior view. Two frames installed in front of objects discarded by the inhabitants of the courtyard house. The two frames each hold part of a piano mechanic, which is activated by visitors' movements via sensors and driven by small motors to play the bike and bucket behind. Photo: Claudia Westermann, 2024.





Figure 6. *Symphony of the Everyday – Sunset Sonata*. Interior view. A frame holds part of a piano mechanic, which is activated by sensors and small motors to hit the bicycle behind. Photo: Claudia Westermann, 2024.



Figure 7. *Symphony of the Everyday – Sunset Sonata*. Interior view. Close-up. A frame holds part of a piano mechanic, which is activated by sensors and small motors to hit the bicycle behind. Photo: Claudia Westermann.





Figure 8. *Symphony of the Everyday – Sunset Sonata*. Interior view. Two frames holding part of a piano mechanic were installed to hit an earthen wall and a timber wall panel. The piano mechanics are activated by sensors and small motors. Photo: Yiping Dong.



Figure 9. *Symphony of the Everyday – Sunset Sonata*. Interior view. Small speakers in wooden cups, and a frame with introductory text in front of the brick wall of the entrance to the courtyard. Photo: Claudia Westermann.

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