



Seeking Sparks

Did Buckminster Fuller ever build a dome to house a community singing group? This odd question was posed to D.W. Jacobs, writer and director of the play *R. Buckminster Fuller: The History (and Mystery) of the Universe*. The answer was no, but it led to some unanticipated revelations about the expression of the human spirit through physical structures.

Jacobs was a presenter in Mixed Taste: Tag Team Lectures on Unrelated Topics, an ongoing series at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver that stages conversations between paired experts in disparate fields. His partner was Adam Lerner, the museum's director and a connoisseur of community singing.

"It was a playful question," Lerner recalled, "but it got Jacobs talking about Fuller's commitment to democracy." And that's when the ideas started bouncing. Lerner noted the egalitarianism of community singing. Jacobs cited Fuller's interest in geometries. Lerner responded that those geometries were not theoretical but tangible.

"We kept handing the microphone back and forth," Lerner said. "Sparks were flying. We were elated to be making these associations, and the audience felt it, too."

We go to lectures and panel discussions to hear the smart and inspirational thoughts of people we admire. Not surprisingly, the speakers are likely to have prepared and rehearsed, or at least have a clear concept of what they want to put forth. But isn't there more? How can we, the audience, witness creative minds in action? How can we see the spark?

For Mixed Taste, the answer lies in conversation. The series pokes at the untapped potential in exchanges between people, striving to create a paradigm where unexpected paths of thought can emerge. It begins with a conducive format: After a wine reception, each expert presents a twenty-minute talk on his or her specialty, and then the audience asks questions. During the presentations, speakers are told not to make connections between the topics. During the Q&A, Lerner said, "That's when the magic happens."

"The magic," he explained, "is that by pairing arbitrary principles, you allow the mind to find new ways of thinking, right in front of the audience." The results are often unforeseen, even thrilling links: Buckminster Fuller and community singing, blood sausage and urban spelunking, Bigfoot and Carl Jung. Sometimes the connection is so poignant, the magic

so visceral, that the audience bursts into applause. But it's more than a connection. "A third entity arises," Lerner said. "We push the speakers to go beyond where they had been thinking, to actually advance their understanding of their subject. It evolves out of the mobility of the mental process."

Richard Saul Wurman, renowned as the creator of the TED conferences, has long been focusing on advancing understanding. He is currently directing some of his energies to the promises inherent in dialogue. His newest endeavor is the www.www Conference, which, according to its website, "will celebrate improvised conversation in its most informative manner." Wurman calls it "intellectual jazz."

www.www is a bifurcated project. Part one, to take place in September, is a three-day gathering of invited guests who will participate in live conversations about premises initiated by Wurman. Among the guests are highly accomplished individuals including Eric Fischl, Frank Gehry, Julie Taymor and Steve Wozniak. The conference will be recorded to generate content for part two, an app that Wurman hopes will supersede conventional archive modalities, and that, as described on the site, "will allow for expansion and sharing of ideas."

At the September event, aside from the participants, the real audience will be Wurman himself. Wurman serves as a stand-in for the rest of us. "If I'm interested," he said during a recent call, "I know historically that others will be interested, too."

Speakers will be asked to face each other. They will be sitting in customized chairs "designed for that moment," Wurman said. "I'm trying to set up a construct that allows the participants to feel the greatest edgy comfort they can, so they can approach the creation of new patterns and ideas, and tell the truth."

Institutions across the country have turned to conversation as a presentation vehicle, recognizing its power to dig beyond what's been said before. Those who have succeeded know that inspired public dialogue involves a balance of prodding and stepping back. And that the spontaneity an audience seeks cannot be coerced. As Wurman said, "You don't create it. You give permission for it to occur."

When it occurs onstage, we see an exchange that unearths novel concepts and connections impossible to predict. And if we're lucky, we witness brilliance in real time. **CA**

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