

**Conversations Across Cultures - Reimagining the Education of the Artist**  
**- What role should the Art School play in developing thriving cultural communities? –**  
**with an assemblage: Café Papillon, a cross-cultural conversation in a doll box**

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12/1/2022

For the Teachers College, Columbia University class A&HA 4860 (November 18-20, 2022),

taught by Dr. Judith Burton

in conjunction with the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary Conversations Across Cultures Symposium,

co-hosted by Teachers College and the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA),

and the Then & Now exhibit at the Macy Art Gallery

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## Assignment

Develop a six-page written paper that presents your thinking about any one of the four questions posed for the symposium and which draws upon the presentations given, and create an assemblage in a box related to the paper.

### The four questions

1. Who are the students now entering this expanding world of the Art School?
2. How is the move towards interdisciplinary and project-based teaching and learning reshaping the Art School experience?
3. What role(s) is the Art School playing in developing thriving cultural communities?
4. To what extent is the education of the artist re-energizing, reshaping, even creating new professional career opportunities?

## The paper

### Introduction

I will start with question 3: "What role(s) is the Art School playing in developing thriving cultural communities?" I will then ask a variant of this question: What role should the Art School play in developing thriving cultural communities?

My most recent sub-field is school food research. I have been involved in the arts in various capacities, but not in art education as a field of study. I have found this course and symposium to be valuable because it has helped me find and articulate several core concepts. This paper lays out and reflects upon these core concepts. Just as important to my ongoing professional development, my assemblage imagines some of my previous work in food in a new-to-me art form, and connects to core art education concepts, particularly positive symbols and sense of belonging.

### **Core conviction: the need for literal conversations across cultures**

I enrolled in this course because I thought it was a course about conversations across cultures, which is a topic with which I have grappled in the past<sup>1</sup>, which I think is important and about which I would like to learn more. (The symposium was about conversations across cultures indirectly, and was more focused on issues in the education of artists and art educators. I knew I was stepping out from my home base of code-driven analysis, so the new was welcome, even if it wasn't quite the new I was expecting.)

If I were to ask about roles the art school should play in developing thriving cultural communities, and if I were to reimagine the education of the artist, I would state with conviction that one core needed for success is literal conversations across cultures.

### **Positive symbols**

Dr. Stacey Salazar, Vice Provost for Graduate Studies at MICA, gave a presentation on "Art school as a partner with/in thriving cultural communities - A view from Baltimore" in which she recommended taking action by "introduc[ing] at least one [(new)] positive image, symbol, or artifact from historically oppressed groups, such as Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples into your curriculum."

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<sup>1</sup> An important part of my work in this regard can be found here:

[https://abramsdata.com/resources/Callaloo\\_as\\_a\\_culturally\\_responsive\\_dish\\_-\\_with\\_preamble\\_2-28-2022\\_smP.pdf](https://abramsdata.com/resources/Callaloo_as_a_culturally_responsive_dish_-_with_preamble_2-28-2022_smP.pdf)

Another example is my prototype conversation menus, made with images of 1890s menu blanks, and which can also be thought of as a kind of assemblage:

<https://sharings.breakfastmeet.com/uncategorized/second-post/>

and

<https://sharings.breakfastmeet.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Conversation-Menu-12-21-19sm.pdf>

For that matter, perhaps a conversation itself is an assemblage?

I would qualify Dr. Salazar's statement by saying that while some groups are historically oppressed, applying just one label doesn't do them justice, nor does it do them any favors. For example, when writing grant proposals to provide services to school communities who can benefit from such services as farm to school taste testing events, I now always say that such communities are both under-resourced and have high potential, or words to this effect. This makes sure that I give community partners positive agency, not just negative agency. Then, we can find the positive images, symbols and artifacts which Dr. Salazar recommends.

Positive symbols that can be produced by artists include, but are not limited to, paintings, photographs, furniture, ceramics, 3D printed objects, clothing, and meals (if culinary arts have a seat at the art school table). All of these can be used to support conversations across cultures, directly or indirectly. See my assemblage for some examples.

#### **Growth of the artist population and approaches to support for artists**

In Dr. Samuel Hoi's presentation as the keynote speaker of the Symposium, he said that "the population of artists is growing and diversifying." This view, that the population of artists is growing, was echoed in the report<sup>2</sup> that was the assigned reading for the course. In parts of the report, it is suggested that everyone in a population could be considered an artist. Another implication from both was that part of the role of art schools, and those who support the role of art schools, is to ensure that artists have economic career viability.

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<sup>2</sup> Creativity Connects: trends and conditions affecting U.S. artists, Center for Cultural Innovation, September 2016.

While I support the idea that everyone can be an artist, if not as a professional artist, then either as a fan or a hobbyist, without a certain amount of gatekeeping<sup>3</sup> the population of artists will become too large to support in a fully livable way. The general perspective of the Creativity Connects report can be interpreted as that artists should be supported by Basic Income (guaranteed income) policies for all of society, in which case it wouldn't matter what proportion of society are artists. The proposals in the report, like Basic Income on any broad scale, are to a large extent liberal-progressive pie-in-the-sky, with a scoop of doom-and-gloom. I happen to agree with the general pie-in-the-sky direction<sup>4</sup>, but political conditions in the United States do not come close to support implementing such policies. One exception in the report is Caroline Woolard's article "Online Platforms Are Not Enough. Artists Need Affordable Space."<sup>5</sup> It is an exception because Ms. Woolard's proposals are at a more practical scale. I would add a hypothesis that support for secondary markets for the art of newer artists would benefit artists in the long run.

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<sup>3</sup> As a long-time dance critic, I wouldn't argue that gatekeeping should be employed to weed artists out. If you are on the dance floor, you are better than anyone who is not on the floor, and deserve respect. You deserve honest coverage calibrated to your status (a new dance company and American Ballet Theater or New York City Ballet are not the same). On the other hand, in the face of limited resources, decisions have to be made.

<sup>4</sup> The doom and gloom part of the analysis is also true, especially in one of my own art forms, photography. See Danielle Jackson's "Can Photographers Restore Their Devastated Business?" in the Creativity Connects report, page 64.

<sup>5</sup> Creativity Connects, page 71-72. The New York City Community Land Initiative and the New York City Real Estate Investment Cooperative seem like especially intriguing, and potentially practical, if almost certainly not easy, efforts to investigate further. I would also like to further explore Ms. Woolard's OurGoods.org and TradeSchool.org: what went well, if they have ceased operations, why? I have been trying to create something similar: to enable the exchange of used goods with less stigma and more respect.

### **Artists' need to create**

In the closing remarks of the Symposium, Dr. Michael Patterson said "There remains a massive cohort of students who have to create and cannot be happy in any other way." I would count myself among this number, even though I am not making a living as an artist. I would also second the idea that many people, including those with an Artist International Merit Badge and those without, feel this fundamental need to create<sup>6</sup>. I support the idea that this need should be supported, or at least validated, for both full-time and part-time artists.

### **Sense of belonging**

Dr. Hoi said that a sense of belonging is linked to lower risk. I would argue that a stable series of conversations, including conversations across cultures, is a key component of what is needed to create a sense of belonging. Art can also help create a sense of belonging for both artists and non-artists alike. As an imagined gathering and space for connection, my assemblage shows, or at least suggests, one potential sense of belonging.

### **Co-construction of knowledge as a duality of teaching and learning**

Dr. Hoi also talked about "co-construction of knowledge with students" as an important part of what art schools do. Co-construction of knowledge is, or should be, a key part of a conversation. Dr. Hoi also said that "people can be both learners and teachers." Training people to be both learners (learning how to learn<sup>7</sup>) and teachers (having schools of education actually teach people how to teach, which sounds obvious, but isn't always the case) can support the making of productive conversations.

### **The importance of conversation in art and art education**

Likewise, Dr. Judith Burton asked that we "invite students into dialogue and discourse." This further supports the idea that conversations are a necessary part of art education.

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<sup>6</sup> And that some other people don't feel this need, and don't fully understand this need as it is felt by artists or other makers.

<sup>7</sup> Learning How to Learn (1984), Joseph D. Novak and D. Bob Gowin, Cambridge University Press. Dr. Novak was my mentor at Cornell University, where I earned my Ph.D. in Education.

A thought experiment would also support the importance of conversation. Imagine going to an art gallery, twice. In the first instance, you visit by yourself, view the art, talk to no one, and leave. In the second instance, you visit with friends, or make new friends at the gallery, view the art, have a conversation about the art, and then leave, possibly to go to dinner with your (new) friends. The art in both instances is the same. I would argue that the second instance, with conversation, is more likely to leave you with a positive feeling about the experience and the art, and is more likely to induce you to purchase some of the art (assuming the art in question is within your budget).

Dr. Patterson of MICA, a Symposium presenter, worried that the ability to be in dialogue, and to be discomfited is declining. "We need to be able to be in a space with someone we disagree, and still be safe and challenge each other, and listen." While I feel there is a need and role for safe spaces, I also think we need more safer spaces or brave spaces. And honestly, a non-trivial part of the real world is flak, or worse, so it is also important to both develop a thick skin so we can take the flak and keep moving forward, as well as to learn to move using the motion of the flak against it as a metaphorical Aikido<sup>8</sup>. One necessary way to learn to have such safer dialogue is to have conversations, over and over, sometimes with real time guidance<sup>9</sup>.

It is also important to remember that people in parts of our world are literally in a war zone. We have been grappling with the why of war using art at least as far back as *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes (411 BC), a production of which I directed as a student at Stanford University in 3 BE (Before Earthquake). Art will always have a role when confronting the horrors of war, but sometimes we should focus on providing food, shelter

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<sup>8</sup> In *Creativity Connects*, page 47, Bill T. Jones, the well-known choreographer, is quoted, "You better have a thick skin and a big open heart and an agile mind".

<sup>9</sup> See Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development.

and medicine, with art and art supplies being a smaller part of our care package. (A care package might also be an assemblage, and thus an art form in its own right.)

(Pause)

### What if... ?

Dr. Karen Watkins in her Symposium remarks asked us to ask a powerful "What if... ?"

I ask...

What if there was a course specifically on conversations, in which students could practice different kinds of conversations, within their own affinity groups<sup>10</sup> and across cultures, started with shared breath, framed by art, broken with bread, and hopefully resulting in co-created knowledge – plus perhaps a little more peace and deep beauty than was present before the conversation commenced?

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<sup>10</sup> And not just within racial or ethnic affinity groups. For example, I would happily join an affinity group organized around dance, food, child-friendly carpet and other interior design components (tea and tile, anyone?), photography, fishkeeping, ...



## **Café Papillon: My assemblage, fully assembled – full page photos**

Plus two rows of small photos to fill the available space with additional perspective.

Front view



Top view



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## Appendix A: Description of my assemblage – Café Papillon

My assemblage, Café Papillon, is a three dimensional envisioning of a conversation across cultures, inspired by my paper "Callaloo as a culturally responsive dish"<sup>11</sup> (Abrams 2022 & 2018).

Inside of a box<sup>12</sup>, two dolls<sup>13</sup> are eating a Pumpkin-Chocolate-Callaloo cake or pie and drinking a bottle of Sparkling Anxiety<sup>14</sup> at the Café Papillon in Paris, France. (Pumpkin can be one ingredient in Callaloo. Keep in mind that there is more than one version of Callaloo, the dish. Callaloo is also the name of a plant, which can be used in Callaloo, the dish.)

The woman is from Scandinavia and the man is from the Caribbean. The wicker chair represents the Caribbean and the wood chair represents Scandinavia, so each person is sitting in the other person's culture.

The wood table to the man's right is from Michael's<sup>15</sup> to show the difference in quality between a mass market product and the specialty market products from Tiny Doll House. Also, Michael's had very little in the way of doll house accessories. The spool of thread is to

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<sup>11</sup> [https://abramsdata.com/resources/Callaloo\\_as\\_a\\_culturally\\_responsive\\_dish\\_-\\_with\\_preamble\\_2-28-2022\\_smP.pdf](https://abramsdata.com/resources/Callaloo_as_a_culturally_responsive_dish_-_with_preamble_2-28-2022_smP.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Purchased at The Container Store. (<https://www.containerstore.com/>)

<sup>13</sup> Purchased at Tiny Doll House. (<https://www.tinydollhousenewyorkcity.com/>)

<sup>14</sup> See the included script by the same name in Appendix D below. I thought it was appropriate to include because it is a recent example of one of my primary art forms, and could serve as a starting point for co-authored scenes about anxiety in art and art education. (I am also at the starting point of a project on statistics anxiety.) The script is also one conversation that might happen in this doll box.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.michaels.com/> - and a word to the wise: when shopping at Michael's, always look on their website for coupons first before buying items.

show the kind of everyday object that is often used when making tiny houses for dolls or animated mice. (I could have tried to make dolls and furniture out of popsicle sticks and such, but I have the arts and crafts abilities of an advanced six year old. I decided to favor an assemblage made at least partly out of other people's art – the dolls and furniture, both since it would make my own vision clearer, and would highlight ways that art students could market their own art – including in cafés, doll house stores, and mass market stores like Michael's.)

The tree with the apple falling from it represents the discussion in the symposium of an apple falling from a tree, with a contrast of quantum versus Newtonian change. Dr. Bill Gaskins proposed this image, often associated with Isaac Newton, in his Symposium presentation.<sup>16 17</sup> During the Symposium, I had asked the questions, Who planted the tree?, and How does the apple taste? I had originally envisioned a clear wire holding the apple from the tree, but I couldn't find clear wire, and didn't have a good way to attach it to such even if I had. Instead, I used two strands of copper wire to form a "basket" to hold the apple, and represent it in mid-fall. The four upper ends of the wires are wrapped around branches of the tree.

For me, Who planted the tree? gets to the idea of lineage in art. Who came before me as an artist, whose work enabled the work I do now? Who taught me so I can do the work I do now? As Dr. Salazar remarked, "A person or community without knowledge of the past, is like a tree without roots." Deep and wide roots help art and artists be stable, and through them, help communities be stable. So, when you look at the trees in my assemblage,

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<sup>16</sup> I worked with related material in the science education film I made with friends in high school, "Isaac Newton: the man and his laws".

<sup>17</sup> Yaw Agyeman, a sound artist and a member of the Black Monks of Mississippi, in Creativity Connects, page 51, wrote "I have merely been a recipient of a beautiful generosity. I have moved in the art world by a reaching of hands and the warmth of hearts. A seed planted and watered bore fruit. I bear witness."

imagine who might have planted them, and imagine the roots reaching through the one box, deep into the earth.

For me, How does the apple taste? gets to the idea of the response of the audience to the art.<sup>18</sup> <sup>19</sup> If the apple falls in the forest, while it can be okay if the apple doesn't fall far from the tree and if no one eats it, it is better if the apple is eaten. In a modified version of what my food colleagues and I often tell elementary school students, "You don't have to like the art, but you should try it."<sup>20</sup> And then, the seeds in the apple's core that are exposed when the apple is eaten can grow into new apple-art trees when tended by new apple-artists.<sup>21</sup>

The apple also represents the art being made. I was originally going to also have a work of art falling from the tree, but the box ended up being too small. I leave that to your imagination.

Dr. Gaskins also said "I wasn't there, when the apple fell." The audience's response to the art can exist without knowing what the artist intended. It can be helpful, though, for the

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<sup>18</sup> The development of taste testing methodology is one of my research specialties. See "Garden To Café Taste Test Report - An analysis of 'components of taste' and 'willingness to try new foods' results from the May 14, 2019 taste test of a green salad with vegetables using the Mid-reflective Taste Test Survey conducted at a public elementary school in NYC", [https://abramsdata.com/resources/RobertAbrams\\_GTC\\_TasteTest\\_WTT\\_1-13-22\\_Final\\_smP.pdf](https://abramsdata.com/resources/RobertAbrams_GTC_TasteTest_WTT_1-13-22_Final_smP.pdf) for one example, and track back to AbramsData.com to find more.

<sup>19</sup> I have conducted audience research projects for dance companies.

<sup>20</sup> Unless you are allergic to apples, or equivalent. It is a real concern that food researchers have to keep in mind.

<sup>21</sup> If you are a grass farmer with livestock, the equivalent might be butter sculptures at State fairs. If you are looking for a different kind of conversation across cultures, you could subscribe to The Stockman Grass Farmer – no need to own livestock.

(<https://www.stockmangrassfarmer.com/>)

artist to describe the creation of the art (the apple growing on and falling from the tree). Knowing how the apple grows and falls can be as important as the art itself to the continued renewal of art and art education.<sup>22</sup>

The blue pot holds two short stalks from bamboo I was growing on my balcony. The "log" in front of the people is a branch from either a boxwood or a holly that I was growing on my balcony, but had to move indoors due to construction. Those plants didn't make it. The bamboo isn't quite the beautiful it was when I hauled it back from Brooklyn on the subway<sup>23</sup>, but it has survived. Spring will tell.

The pictures on the walls of the café are, from left to right, photos from a food photography workshop I took at Fotocare<sup>24</sup>, costume designs I made in a class during my freshman year at Stanford University<sup>25</sup>, and a trading card of my daughter. This fits into the then and now theme of the symposium's art exhibition, showing the art on the walls as my past work, and the assemblage itself as my current work. The then and now of my assemblage is also a reveal of some of my artist self in transition, some of which may be a long spiral back to revisit earlier stages.

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<sup>22</sup> None of this discussion in my paper has gotten to the primary question about the apple as raised in the Symposium: about Newtonian versus quantum change. I will save that topic for a future paper. Related to this is the idea that real things – like light – can be particles and waves at the same time. This may also apply to made-up things – like art, shoes, windmills, our perception of beauty, ...

<sup>23</sup> I was standing on the subway platform in Brooklyn, when a person came up to me and said, "That's a really beautiful bamboo."

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.fotocare.com/>

<sup>25</sup> The costume designs shown in the assemblage are of Romeo and Juliet, part of a full set of costume designs for the play, with gender role reversals. The designs were lost for about 20 years, and recently resurfaced.

The item behind the woman is a gold Smile Dollar, drawn upon by the owner of Communita, and signed both by her and me. Communita is a teahouse/café in Long Island City, Queens<sup>26</sup> that is a great space for entrepreneurs to work, and that often hosts local artists' work on its walls. Smile Dollars are one of several related products I have developed to commemorate in-person connection, reward good deeds and facilitate the circular economy.

The lamp has no special significance, other than I thought dollhouse furniture that works is fun, and might give the photos more interesting light. I photographed the assemblage with my Sony RX100-M2 camera and my Samsung Galaxy S20 phone. The two food photos within the assemblage were shot by me with a PhaseOne camera during a workshop organized by Fotocare and led by Bill Milne<sup>27</sup>, with lighting assistance from Fotocare staff. One food photo is of Jeff Hirsch's hand (the owner of Fotocare) pouring milk on a berry tart at Lafayette<sup>28</sup>, an everyday and grand café and bakery in Manhattan. The other food photo is itself an assemblage of my photos from the Milne workshop, titled "The Eyes are the Pastries of the Soul" (I made both photos into jigsaw puzzles). The soccer photo in the trading card was shot with a Nikon D500. (There is also a full set of soccer trading cards with other photos, not all of my daughter, to illustrate the art of the trading card.)

I added the butterflies mostly to be decorative. I did, though, raise a butterfly as a kid. The butterflies in the assemblage might acquire more meaning later. Simultaneous solidity and transience? People using art therapy to overcome their fear of insects? For that matter, perhaps art schools should offer or teach art therapy?

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.communita.net/>

<sup>27</sup> Bill Milne is a truly awesome photographer and teacher; and a character. If Fotocare offers another workshop with him, I would take it again. Teachers College and MICA might want to hire him to teach workshops. (<https://www.billmilne.com/>)

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.lafayette.ny.com/>



The white strips are white paper tape from Fotocare. They denote the path to and the doorway into the doll box.

The cornucopia is there because Callaloo has multiple ingredients and is sometimes represented with a cornucopia. A cornucopia is often used to represent abundance. My daughter's previous school, The Shefa School<sup>29</sup> (shefa means abundance in Hebrew), did a wonderful job helping my daughter learn to read, understanding how to teach students with dyslexia and other language based challenges. A good conversation should leave everyone with a feeling of abundance.

If you feel moved to have a conversation about my art, your art or someone else's art, let me know. The first round of coffee<sup>30</sup> is on me.

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.shefaschool.org/>

<sup>30</sup> Coffee here refers to an inherently platonic/professional beverage and gathering. It doesn't literally have to be coffee, although, in Stanford-speak, the beverage is usually an EANAB (Equally Attractive Non-Alcoholic Beverage).

## **Appendix B: My assemblage – the parts and work in progress**

When working with dolls and dollhouse furniture, be very careful as you set the doll into the furniture. Some of the furniture can be delicate.

The two champagne glasses are secured to the table with removable glue dots. Nothing else in the assemblage is secured this way, so it has to be transported very carefully. If I were to exhibit my assemblage, I would most likely secure more of the components. The art on the walls of the box are also secured with the glue dots. After I had placed the art on the walls, I tried to reposition some of it, but the attachment of the glue dots was so strong, I was afraid the art would tear, so I left it as is. In real life, art is often hung slightly askew. I'm working on being okay with that. (And if you want to reduce the anxiety in your art hanging life, try Floreat hangers, the German picture hooks that don't bend when you drive them into the wall.)



## **Appendix C: My assemblage, fully assembled – more photos**

Because my assemblage is a clear box with solid objects within it, even two large photos do not reveal everything in the box. To help the viewer see inside the clear box, I have provided this additional set of photos. I have other photos as well, which I can share if there is interest.

Angled front view



Top view



Close up: couple eating Pumpkin-Chocolate-Callaloo Cake with glasses of Sparkling Anxiety



Close up: the apple falling from the tree, the moment caught by a basket made from two strands of copper wire



Top view, angled to focus on the man



Top view, angled to focus on the woman



Front view



Close up of the tree and the apple





Front view, with the lid closed



Side view: back of trading card-style business card



## **Appendix D: Sparkling Anxiety, the play or movie – one possible conversation in the Café Papillon doll box**

This is one scene from a work in progress play or movie called Sparkling Anxiety. I include it here since it is one possible conversation that could happen in the Café Papillon.

If anyone gets the urge to be a playwright or screenwriter, and wants to co-create more Sparkling Anxiety, I would welcome that.

**SPARKLING ANXIETY**

**By Robert Abrams**

**4/28/2022 Draft**

(This is intended to be a live stage performance.)

(The phrase "Sparkling Anxiety" and the first scene was inspired by a post by "Brooks !" in ARTland.)

SCENE 1 - EXT. A ROMANTIC CAFE IN PARIS.

MAN and WOMAN sit down at a table on the sidewalk, note that any genders may be substituted as desired. A WAITER approaches.

MAN

(to WOMAN)

You are as beautiful as your profile picture.

WOMAN

Thank you, provisionally.

WAITER

Can I get you started with a drink?

MAN

I'll have a glass of 1978 Chateau de Frédéric Chardonnay, chilled.

WOMAN

In this moment I feel like sparkling anxiety. One glass, for now. Yes, that should make me feel alive. Or angsty.

(to MAN)

We'll see.

WAITER

An excellent choice, Mademoiselle.

(Pause)

Sparkling anxiety is only available by the bottle.

WOMAN

(to MAN)

You know what they say?

MAN

What do they say?

WOMAN

Drink deeply or not at all.

MAN

Actually, what Alexander Pope actually wrote in his often-misquoted "Essay on Criticism", published in 1711, was: A little learning is a dangerous thing; Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring: There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain, And drinking largely sobers us again.

WOMAN

(to WAITER)

Don't mind him. I know from his pre-date text chatting that he loves quoting the Washington Post.

(to MAN)

To be explicit, that's one reason I agreed to go out with you. So cute.

(to WAITER)

Bring us a bottle of your finest sparkling anxiety.

(glances at the menu)

And the cheese plate! For two!

BLACKOUT.

(To be continued.)