GEDI SIBONY AND TOM JOHNSON

TOM: Well, there's obviously lots of frailty in your work, at least in my opinion. And there's lots of tenderness and lots of things are very, you know, there's a thesis that it's hard to stand up in the world.

GEDI: It's impossible to stay standing.

TOM: Standing's a conundrum, an act that involves interdependence.

GEDI: I think everything involves interdependence. Everything has to. But it feels like standing is certainly where a lot of energy goes. Standing takes a lot of effort.

TOM: It's interesting because I just recently understood, in terms of massaging people, that there's that sort of goofy, hard rock concept of the master behind the scenes. Not necessarily that we have no agency and we're just puppets of some unseen force—the puppet-master. But I realized that actually there are physical agencies. I'd never quite taken in the fact that our muscles are all strings.

GEDI: Something is pulled.

TOM: Something is pulled, like a string was pulled, and so then the shoulder lifted, you know? And then a string was let go and the shoulder went down. Except of course we are our own puppet-masters, blah blah blah.

GEDI: Yeah. Those realities, the way movement happens, is the way we touch, and the things we make. It's funny to make static objects that have a pose, in a way.

TOM: I guess, yeah.

GEDI: The work is kind of material and involves relationships but everything is resting somehow, which I think generates empathy.

TOM: Oh, huge.

GEDI: And the empathy is that kind of mimicking that the human body does when it sees something that's balanced in a certain way. To say, oh, that's leaning against the wall, that's leaning in the corner, or that's kind of out in the open and fragile.

TOM: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well it's very figurative. Can you say it's figurative?

GEDI: Yeah, I think it's neither figurative nor abstract. It doesn't work in that way. I guess that, in that it evokes human empathy, it becomes figurative.

TOM: And it's often sized toward a person. It's the right scale for one. Either it's me, or it's the person I fall in love with, or it's my friend.

GEDI: Right. Or mother.

TOM: Or mother, yeah.

GEDI: And I think that the thing becomes to make the friend, the mother, and all those sort of bits of the friend and bits of the mother, all those qualities, and then have them work together, so that in the final group there's a wide range of different parts. And some things, the things that are flat, I see them as diagrams in a way.

TOM: You mean like that?

GEDI: No, like the rug with that silver thing. That's an illustration of an action, or something. And then, because it's an illustration, it works in a flat space. It doesn't have to be an object in space. But, it's a little of both, maybe.

TOM: Mm-hmm. If that's an illustration, do you have the thing that it is an illustration of?

GEDI: No.

TOM: Do you ever have that?

GEDI: No, never. The way that I end up with the thing is by moving pieces around endlessly. Parts. And sticking them inside, balancing them in different ways. For the

standing things, and the things that lean against the wall, it's almost like the physicality is inconsequential, and what's left is the engineering or the devices, so that you can say, this is one way to balance these things together, and this is another way. And if you pull that from the work then the work becomes removable props. It's like they're props of themselves.

TOM: Oh, in the sense that it is an illustration or that goes back to that, the particular material facts that those material pieces are illustrating a relationship, then the relationship is the thing that is the subject.

GEDI: Yeah, they're enacting it. They're enacting it. And they have their qualities. And the fact that one thing bends means that it can enact the bend.

TOM: Certain qualities, right.

GEDI: Right, yeah. [PAUSES] **You know, going back to this figurative and abstract, or sort of breaking that down, there's this deconstructivist attitude I like, particularly in Madhayamika Buddhism, the fourfold renunciation—do you know it?**

TOM: No, but I think I'll like it.

GEDI: It's a way to break opposites: things exist, don't exist, both exist and don't exist and neither exist nor don't exist.

TOM: Mm-hmm.

GEDI: Which is interesting because at the end of that, you have a system that's eaten itself. I mean, in terms of language, you kind of eat it away. And then you have to sort of walk over the pieces of it and look at another thing.

TOM: And then peculiarly enough, you don't have to, but it's very hard to avoid not still speaking. Even though the language has just eaten itself all the way away. But actually, if you have incredible discipline, I guess you'd shut up, like you'd never say another word.

GEDI: Well, I think language is still a useful tool, like a hammer or something, to build a shelter. But then when you're done you don't live in the tool. You live in the shelter.

TOM: That's interesting.

GEDI: And if you need to fix the shelter, or go and refine it, you get the tool again. And you change it, because it's a little bit . . .

TOM: Yeah. Yeah. But I mean, in a way, to some degree, that whole renunciation to me implies that if you follow that through, you realize that the tool and the shelter are the same. If it all breaks down, the tool is the shelter. The hammer is the shed and the shed is the hammer, or you know, whatever.

GEDI: To not see them as inseparable is . . .

TOM: A mistake.

GEDI: And that's like thinking that language and reality are the same.

TOM: Mm-hmm. Would you say that they're similar?

GEDI: I don't know. It's easy to sublimate experience into language. It's a way to exert control and maintain calm, or something. But then to see it as a thin sheet that covers everything and it's not that there's depth but just that it's . . .

TOM: Could we say that language is part of reality? We can say that.

GEDI: Sure.

TOM: Language is in reality.

GEDI: I think language is both in reality and not in reality. Neither in reality or not in reality. [CHUCKLES]

TOM: Which of course, we can also say unreality, right?

GEDI: Yeah. [CHUCKLES]

TOM: There are lots of semantics in your work.

GEDI: You see that in the work?

TOM: Yeah. I do.

GEDI: And that means language play?

TOM: I guess what I mean is that there are lots of things where a question is asked of the viewer as to whether or not two things are the same thing.

GEDI: You mean, identical to one another? Or part, or parts of a complete?

TOM: Or expressions. No, not like are they the same thing, as in they are both parts of one larger thing. But are they two versions of another thing? Or are they actually the same thing? Because there are lots of things where there's a curved diagonal line, you know? And it's in cardboard. And then there's a curved diagonal line, but it's in the plastic film. But they're both curved diagonal lines. And their material proof, as material proofs go, is basically a very gentle assertion. One's just fucking colored board, and one's just fucking shitty plastic. So neither of those assertions is very strong. But the assertion of the curved diagonal line is quite strong, you know? So in a way there's this balancing of—what's the primary being-ness? You know, if the thing I'm showing you as a sculpture is an occurrence in reality, then the question is posed inside the sculpture, what is the primary occurrence that I'm showing you?

GEDI: Right. Right. Right, exactly.

TOM: Is it the occurrence of a curved diagonal line? Is that what's happening here? Or is it a kind of bland-colored carpet next to a kind of bland-colored [CHUCKLES] piece of plastic? So that's what I meant when I said semantics. There's lots of parsing.

GEDI: Mm-hmm.

TOM: And it feels like there are a lot of fine lines. Like the whole thing, it's a fine line between this and that, you know? So there's a lot of fine lines.

GEDI: Like running in between two things, so you're not touching either side.

TOM: You're not touching either thing, but you're damn close. And in fact, you're feeling both, you know? And it's flat enough so that when you're standing with your feet in the water, you're still feeling the beach, because you're standing on the beach. But the beach technically is just over there, on the other side of the water, but actually you're on the beach. It's just that the beach is under the water.

GEDI: The tide moving.

TOM: Yeah, the tide moves. So then are you on the beach still, or not? [CHUCKLES] You know? So that's what I mean by semantics. I don't know if that's really the way you use that word or not. I don't know the real way to use the word.

GEDI: I don't know either. But it seems like a good way to use it. If you look at the way the stuff is folded, or treated, or joined, or balanced, you know that's where the decisions are.

TOM: Right.

GEDI: And the materials are sort of handy and useful because they bend or twist or stay straight.

TOM: Right.

GEDI: And then they can carry those figures.

TOM: Yeah. Well, in a way you're looking at nothing. There's an assertion that in a way the materials are nothing to look at. That's not totally true, because they're all totally consistent. But there's an assertion of just what you said, that it's what's done with them.

GEDI: Yeah. It's like the pegboard piercing through the garbage bag—you do have the qualities of black and white, and the whole pegboard and the triangles. But you also have the fact that there's a sack that's holding weight. And the weight that's stretching the sack is giving shape to the piece. And without the weight, there would be no rectangle. And without the rectangle, those things wouldn't be able to suspend themselves.

TOM: Yeah.

GEDI: So there's a kind of mutual agreement there. And then there's also a picture that's created in the end, which has its own value, which happens to be, in that case, a bit of a straightforward and loud sound, or something.

TOM: Yeah, yeah.

GEDI: And that straightforward and loud sound—which is the effect of a certain combination—is put in opposition with something that's frail, maybe. So then the sounds have a relationship.

TOM: Mm-hmm. To me, that piece is different from some of the other pieces, just because—this is a goofy thing to say—rectangles are so powerful for me visually. And I don't feel like you give definitive rectangles very often. You don't, really. I think that's the only one I've ever seen.

GEDI: I like that there are rectangles and then there are also curves.

TOM: Yeah. I just remember feeling like, when I saw that downtown at that big loft space, as I remember it, it was not unlike the end of a sentence.

GEDI: Yeah. Punctuation.

TOM: Right? Because, as I remember it, there was quite a long floor piece.

GEDI: Yeah, sort of a corridor.

TOM: Yeah. And then it closed that. And that level of closure, and the fact that it was a rectangle doing the closing, felt more definitive than stuff I've seen.

GEDI: Yeah. I think that in the world, there are things that close.

TOM: Yeah.

GEDI: They may not be the most elastic things. They're not, by definition.

TOM: They're not, yeah.

GEDI: They prevent something. That piece is a stop sign.

TOM: Yeah. It's a cool stop sign. You know that guy Thomas McEvilley? He writes about this tradition of people who've made art about the black square.

GEDI: And what does it mean?

TOM: Well, I think to him the thing that it means, or what he understands it to mean to the people that he's talking about, is it represents the kind of final encapsulation or evolution of a space that basically represents death. You can talk about it abstractly in the sense that it's the kind of final culmination of the conflation of the materialization of the picture plane.

GEDI: Right, yes.

TOM: But simultaneously, because it's black, it's also like an infinite space.

GEDI: A void.

TOM: So it's the final lockdown of that Modernist evolution. Where it's like infinity and yet a flat-out, straight-up thing. And then from a psychological point of view, it's a void and it's a space that is therefore both a sort of offering of infinite potential and also of death. That's the way I experience it. I really do.

GEDI: OK.

TOM: One drawing I made that's one of my favorite drawings—I should show it to you sometime—is essentially like another version of that piece you showed down there. It started from the floor, and it had a little inference triangle, and then it was all paper, and it went along and then up the wall and then got smaller and smaller, and kind of fucked up and anthropomorphic. And then it's little fingers just locked onto this big black charcoal square.

GEDI: I think that the end is such a tempting idea. But it's pretty bogus.

TOM: It turns out it's bogus.

GEDI: Yeah. It turns out we want it.

TOM: At least as far as we can tell.

GEDI: Yeah. All indication is that the black square is an act of controlled defiance of something that's not ending.

TOM: It's like a Romantic fantasy.

GEDI: Do you think that any process that serves to arrive at a solution ultimately has that shutting down?

TOM: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

GEDI: Deleting opportunities.

TOM: Yeah. The thing that I got when I was reading those Hindu scriptures . . .

GEDI: *The Bhagavad Gita*?

TOM: Yeah, and then a lot of the earlier ones. And you know, I can't actually claim any kind of religious belief, but that stuff was the stuff that I felt . . . Well, that's not true. There have been various Christian things that I've read that have just rocked my world. You know, the intense complexity and, you know, it's just . . . Anyway, so I'm going to retract that comment. But one of the sentences that I feel relates a lot to your work that kept coming up, and that you probably know, in those scriptures, was "this is that." You know? And that sentence, they repeat it ad nauseam. "This is that." And actually, that's in your work all the goddamn time.

GEDI: Hmm. Yeah.

TOM: All the time. It goes back to that semantic thing. Because it's like, wait a second, isn't that that? Or where's that line where this isn't that? Or that piece stands up, and then that other piece cuts through it. And by cutting through it, it creates a line in the first piece. So does that line that gets created belong to the first piece? You know? Or does it belong to the second piece? All of those kinds of things . . .

GEDI: Because I think that "this is that" inherently says that this is not this, or that this is this and it's not this. It's only, I mean, the whole dialectic is that you can't have yes without no.

TOM: Right.

GEDI: Chuang Tzu writes about this and that too. There's this whole passage in there where he says that if you think that this is this without that . . .

TOM: Right, you've made a mistake.

GEDI: You've made a mistake.

TOM: Yeah.

GEDI: There's this whole other thing about cause and effect in those writings, which is that you can't say that the cause is just the cause and the effect is just the effect, because actually, the fact that there is an effect creates the cause.

TOM: Mm-hmm.

GEDI: So the effect is also the cause of the cause.

TOM: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

GEDI: And the cause only exists because of the effect. So they're inseparable. You know, they're not identical things and they're not different things. They're just, I don't know.

TOM: Yeah, yeah, yeah. They're one. They're the same thing.

GEDI: Yeah, they're parts of the same thing. Everything has to exist relationally like that.

TOM: And then the weird thing about that Hindu thing is that then there's the step where they say, and it's all the self, you know? That's why it was so weird when I was doing that "Talk to Me" thing out on the street, and people would come up and talk to me. I can get really into these ideas, and really enjoy it, you know? And then this guy came up to me, Jason. And he'd been in jail. He'd been convicted of being an accomplice in a murder. And he'd been in jail for twelve fucking years. And he'd gotten out a week before. And he was so moving to me, because he was back in that area, around Madison Square and he was trying to find some of the people that he used to hang out with. Because they used to hang out in that area. And the best way that he had of finding those people was just to go back to that area.

GEDI: Right, after twelve years.

TOM: After twelve years. He didn't have any phone numbers. I just felt like, that's a fucking disaster. You

know, that's a disaster. And he said to me—it was interesting—I remember him saying, "I'm a creator and I'm a destroyer." And I was like, oh. So then we began talking. And he had started meditating in prison and all this stuff. And, I don't know if I can finish this now, but I remember feeling immediate kinship with him. And then I remember also feeling completely depressed, because I remember him saying something like, yeah, but people . . . I basically remember feeling depressed because I felt like this thing that I experienced as namely the kind of power myth—that he is both a creator and a destroyer. Or that I am the same as Kofi Annan and myself. You know, I am this world leader and I am just this schmucky, Brooklyn, Atlantic Avenue-based artist. You know? Like that's my little power myth? And I believe it. But on the other hand I just feel like it's fucking so lame because it's like a power myth born out of my experience of weakness. So sometimes I get saddened by that. And I don't quite know what the answer is. Because there are obviously so many people in the world who are just going out there and grasping the hard, shiny, brass rod and smashing. They're smashing the frail things that make clear the interdependence. You know?

GEDI: Yeah. I think that idea of grasping or groping is linked to fleeing. You sort of grasp and flee simultaneously.

TOM: That's interesting. Grasping is not the same as groping, is it?

GEDI: No, it's not.

TOM: They're two different things.

GEDI: Very, yeah.

TOM: OK. Aside from the fact that this is that.

GEDI: Groping is more blind.

TOM: Yeah, yeah. And tentative. Or not necessarily tentative. It's more blind, definitely.

GEDI: Yeah. Maybe it's more related to fleeing. It's the things that you want, you chase. And in that chasing the things that you want, you're fleeing from not having to want those things.

TOM: Yeah, yeah.

GEDI: You know, there's that beautiful Buddhist thing.

TOM: Can you say that once more?

GEDI: By chasing the things you want, you're fleeing the idea that you don't really want them.

TOM: That you don't really want them.

GEDI: It's that act that gives meaning, in a way, that gives direction.

TOM: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. And the other fundamental thing is that suffering arises out of desire.

GEDI: Right.

TOM: And then, essentially, the next realization is that suffering is a result of mistaken understanding around desire.

GEDI: Yeah.

TOM: This is interesting, actually, because when I wrote things down about your work before, I wanted to know—if we get down to this question about desire and stuff like this—what's the work that Gedi thinks is sexier than his work? If there's work that actually takes on that space inside of lust, you know?

GEDI: Hmm.

TOM: Do you feel like your work is able to handle—you know, like that thing that Jimmy Carter said, "I have lust inside me," or whatever that was, that famous quote—I assume from a certain point our work should be strong enough to handle our desire to grasp. Because basically we're trying to, whatever, medicate ourselves, or treat ourselves, or help ourselves, right? By making the work? So I was thinking about that with you. Do you feel like your work needs to be protected from certain parts of you?

GEDI: I think that I protect myself from certain parts of me. And that is allowed to come out in the work.

TOM: That act of protecting.

GEDI: The act of protecting, yes, but also what I'm protecting.

TOM: Oh, that's interesting.

GEDI: Ends up creeping out. The work that has the effect on me, to say that that's an encapsulation of certain tensions or energy in my life, because it contains either sadness or a certain kind of erotic . . .

TOM: Right.

GEDI: It's simultaneously afraid, sad, erotic, and protected. But I think that then taking the pieces and putting them in narrative formats, or in relation to each other so that they are narrative, I guess, or parables maybe, without being specific, that's creating situations that I feel like I find are the general situations that I'm in, in life.

TOM: Yeah, yeah.

GEDI: The situations that I put myself in. You create a way that you deal with the world, and you push it away, and it gives you satisfaction, but . . .

TOM: Mm-hmm. You say you'll take care of it, and they say OK, but then they say it's a deal, you have to not be yourself if you take care of us, and whatever.

GEDI: And then to see that in the work is a huge relief. Because I feel like, ah, the thing that I can't get out is coming out. And someone can read it. People can read it, and they can know me in a way that . . .

TOM: And it's OK for you that it comes out in this very abstract form? Not explicit?

GEDI: Right. I don't think that I'm capable of being explicit. I don't think that I can gather any discreet information and say that this is the information that describes it. I think I have to use these things that don't have immediate recognition to generalize it.

TOM: Right. Right. Right.

GEDI: Because it's about dancing through situations in life. It's about how you move effectively through the world, cutting all the ropes that bind you, fluidly. And then understanding what you're doing to tie yourself up, too.

TOM: Yeah, yeah. As you're doing it. Yeah.

GEDI: Yeah. And it's a freedom. The cheap materials and the quantity that can be worked through makes it so that I don't ever feel like I have to stop and hold something in place. Because I feel like that's the fun part. When you grow you say, oh I've been holding onto this black pit for so long, let's break the black pit down and see what's . . . let the other things flow around it.

TOM: Yeah.

GEDI: And the conundrum, like what we were talking about with your work in your studio, is to say that this is a final articulation of something. Because you can't seriously have a final articulation of something that's about the complexities of fluctuation. Of indeterminacy.

TOM: Right, right, right. I'd sort of like it if actually at the same time that this was happening, that you were making this kind of work, you were also secretly polishing one gleaming black glass or brass rod every day, and burying it. You know, at the same time.

GEDI: I think the version of that is this kind of compounded conceptual problem, which is the object that is the opposite of identity.

TOM: Yeah, it is.

GEDI: That's the crystal.

TOM: It's the space that gives no ground.

GEDI: Right. It's the flat, dry . . .

TOM: Well it's the black square. Isn't it, kind of? It's like a space that won't yield.

GEDI: Right. Because it refers to itself in some kind of infinite regress. It's that ouroboros thing, you know, the snake eating its tail. It's a perfect, enclosed, disintegrating, collapsing structure.

TOM: So that means in a way we get to have both, in theory, right? If the work works well, we get to have both the rendering of interdependence, and flux, and semantic shifting across that line, some thread line, but at the same time we also have that crystal space of, not lockdown, but of unyieldingness.

GEDI: Well, where is that space of unyieldingness? To me, that unyieldingness is the default space of learning.

TOM: That's just the human condition, isn't it?

GEDI: The conundrum.

TOM: Yeah.

GEDI: To find the conundrum, where you don't escape from . . . it's the black hole.

TOM: Yeah.

GEDI: But in art, it's so satisfying. I mean, in my formal training the satisfaction was in the collapsed conceptual moment. And it's funny that somehow—I don't know how to really articulate what that was—the question is: is the quotation of the thing, is the nod to the thing a thing?

TOM: Yeah.

GEDI: So you say the nod to the thing is its own different thing. Which is great.

TOM: Yeah, yeah.

GEDI: So there. You know? So let's have things that are things and nods to things.

TOM: Yeah. That oscillate.

GEDI: That oscillate.

TOM: And then McEvilley talks about it a bunch around Duchamp, but in the book he talks about it a lot around, um, the Dutch guy who painted the hats and the pipes and "this is not a pipe" . . .

GEDI: Oh yeah, Magritte.

TOM: Yeah, Magritte. He talks a lot about it around that. You know, the picture of the pipe with the writing that says, "this is not a pipe."

GEDI: Right. Well the quintessential failure of semiotics is located in Kosuth's chair.

TOM: Yeah, yeah.

GEDI: There's your black cube, you know? So, fine. Now I can treat the image of the chair, the actual chair, and the word "chair" as three separate, linked, distinct entities. And now I can go, chair, table, and tree, and we can talk about . . .

TOM: Yeah. Now you can just have chair and tree, and you can say, "well, isn't that my chair?" while you look at the tree.

GEDI: Right. [CHUCKLES] **You could say that this chair only exists because of that tree.**

TOM: Right.

GEDI: And then you have to figure out how the tree only exists because of the chair.

TOM: Right. [CHUCKLES] Which is hard.

GEDI: But it might be the same. [CHUCKLES]

TOM: And then I read this *After Theory* book, by Terry Eagleton.

GEDI: I don't know that one.

TOM: I liked it. I mean, it's not that well-written; it's kind of written like a page-turner. And I actually wrote him a letter.

GEDI: You mean with sex and violence in it or something?

TOM: There is quite . . .

GEDI: Affairs between secretaries and . . .

TOM: I wish . . . Lots of cheap lingerie and . . .

GEDI: Yeah. [LAUGHTER]

TOM: I'm just going back to that thing about weakness, you know, compared to the people who are willing to grasp the brass rod and smash things. He says, yeah OK, all this stuff is revelatory. However (and this is why he says it's after theory), we've got to deal with the fact that the people (and he's basically writing politically) we're going up against these days are working, and are motivating people at a much more primitive, essentialist level. And we're on the losing side, by the sort of sophistication and semantic lengths that we're going to, you know? And we're cutting the ground out from under ourselves. And we've got to fucking deal with that, you know?

GEDI: Right.

TOM: Because we're fucking losing. We're like pissing it down the toilet. You know?

GEDI: Does that have to do with the lack of integration that art has in a social realm?

TOM: I think that's one way of thinking about it, yeah. If these things are so beautiful, why is it so marginal? If it's so true, why is it so weak?

GEDI: Well, I think that Jeff Koons challenged that, and said we'll take the blow-up monkey and shine it up. And then all the grandmas would come in and say, ooh, that's so cute and nice.

TOM: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

GEDI: You know, that's fine. But there is a certain point we've reached with technology, let's say language as technology, where we've become so dissociated from having a physical relationship with our land and our bodies and our beings, and the clock, or whatever.

TOM: Yeah.

GEDI: For me it's a comfortable thing to gather the local elements and put them together and make meaning. And to say these things together are an encapsulation, whether they're interactions that you have in the world with Kofi Annan's wife, or whether they're a sock, a paperclip, and a thing; and you say, this came from here, that came from there, this came from there. They've met in my experience. And they've passed through me like electromagnetic fields. And then they've interacted with my emotions. And they've made me feel something.

TOM: Yeah. And it's real.

GEDI: It's real.

TOM: It really is realness.

GEDI: Right. It's real and it's a stand-in for real. It has real qualities and it has fake, not-real qualities. Because it becomes—what is that? What would you say?—a cipher, or a linguistic entity? It becomes a theatrical prop for the thing.

TOM: Right.

GEDI: That it's showing.

TOM: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Or it becomes a symbol.

GEDI: Yeah. But it's also the thing that's being symbolized.

TOM: Right.

GEDI: Because I think that the things that it's representing are not things that are fully determinable. That's why it can't be the real.

TOM: Right.

GEDI: And its meaning is also generated by its relationships to other things, and to the human being.

TOM: That goes back to what we were saying about abstraction. When you say that, in a way, it's more real and more useful, essentially when it's slightly generalized.

GEDI: I think so. Specificity is a plague.

TOM: Yeah. But it's interesting, because you started out by saying that actually, in a way, the thing that needs to be done is to attend to the specificity. You know, and present that. Like, here's my real specific relationship with this. You know, and here's Tom's specific relationship with Kofi Annan.

GEDI: **In this instance.**

TOM: In this instance. It's like very specific, but then out of that it essentially developed into a space of non-specificity. Of destructive abstraction, or of relevant generality, or something, right? That's interesting.

GEDI: **Right. The idea of abstracting is an idea of generalizing. Even art is generalizing.**

TOM: Yeah. Because that's what it started out as. Like, OK, here's the picture of the farmer. But oh look, you can abstract it into two triangles on top of each other. I always liked that thing. It's like, here's the abstract painting, and then, what is it an abstraction of? Because then you get to the point where it becomes . . . Then I started doing those things where there's just this thing called abstraction.

GEDI: **I think figurative painting is a massive abstraction also.**

TOM: True.

GEDI: **New York City is an abstraction. It's a complete abstraction of how we exist as a group, the earth. There's this part of the *Mahabharata*, which might be what you were reading too. It's a story of the fight for the kingdom between two brothers, and the *Bhagavad Gita* takes place inside it. There's one part where Draupadi, who's the wife of the five brothers . . .**

TOM: She's a wife to all five?

GEDI: **A wife to all five, yeah. All the five god-brothers . . .**

TOM: That's a big job.

GEDI: **Oh yeah, she is matriarch.**

TOM: She must be quite a woman.

GEDI: **She's quite a woman.**

TOM: Yeah. [CHUCKLES]

GEDI: **But they lose her in a game of dice to the other family, as they're losing the kingdom.**

TOM: Yeah.

GEDI: **Of course it's like, first he lost himself, and then he lost her. And she makes an argument, if you've lost yourself, how am I yours?**

TOM: How can you lose me? Yeah. [CHUCKLES]

GEDI: **And so she gets dragged out into the court. And as they're pulling her by the hair out of her cell, she says, oh Krishna on the high mountaintop, come save me.**

TOM: Mm-hmm.

GEDI: **And so she's getting dragged and she's like, where the fuck is Krishna? And she gets thrown in front of the warring brothers, and they spit at her, and she's having her period, and they humiliate her. And then finally they start to pull her sari off. And the sari keeps coming and coming, and it's endless. And then they say, oh forget it. And she says, Krishna, why did you wait so long? And he says, because you summoned me from the mountaintop. If you had summoned me from your heart—if you had summoned me from you—I would have been here, automatically.**

TOM: Yeah, yeah. Because he's already there.

GEDI: **He's there.**

TOM: He's already there. What do you mean, you've got to summon me?

GEDI: **And why did you stick me on the mountaintop?**

TOM: Yeah, what are you—I don't even like mountains. Like, come on . . . [CHUCKLES].

GEDI: **It's a funny way to work, to say, how the hell am I going to make these decisions from scratch with these objects? Where do I start?**

TOM: Right.

GEDI: **Let it happen and then when it feels right, stick with it, when you feel it.**

TOM: Right. I've actually thought about this a lot, and it was quite moving to me [CHUCKLES]. When we were playing ping-pong and I would say, semantically, thinking about the idea, because Anthony would keep every serve, I wouldn't really be able to return it very well. And then I said, "I can't understand his serve," you know? I was confessing this desire for ideas. Analytic ideas that would help educate me so as to be able to return his serve better.

GEDI: Calculate his speed or . . .

TOM: Yeah, a bit like, OK, so, I needed to read his spin. Because he was telling me that he reads spin, and he knows how. I remember him asking me, do you read the spin? And I don't read the spin, you know?

GEDI: You have to feel the spin.

TOM: But you kept telling me, trust your game.

GEDI: Yeah. Trust your game.

TOM: Trust your game. [LAUGHTER] So then I was like, oh, OK. I mean, I guess I've just got to trust the game, you know?

GEDI: Yeah. You beat me?

TOM: No, I beat you. That was it.

GEDI: Oh man, Anthony's easy to beat. You just have to get in his head.

TOM: I know, but see, I'm not good at that getting-in-the-head thing. You're very good at it. It's interesting.

GEDI: Oh, it's so strange.

TOM: Because you play, and certainly you present yourself as a fairly straightforward nice guy. But then, you've got lots of, sort of, mind-fuck in you too.

GEDI: I can get really stuck in my head. And I'm wicked upset about it.

TOM: Mm-hmm. Right.

GEDI: So I try to throw it the other way. I mean, let the work be my path into life. The other thing is an intense analysis of all the factors that happen in the world. Which is a fun thing. It's an observation.

TOM: Yeah.

GEDI: But then to describe . . .

TOM: It's very tiring and it's very trying, because it can feel very isolating and lonely.

Because you feel far away. And you feel like you're never sure you're really feeling. That's the other thing. You're never sure you're really having the feeling. You know, am I really loving her? Am I really angry? Am I really desirous? It's that space of never knowing if you're actually present. When I was little, I used to have this thing where, well, I remember my mom telling me that when I first went to kindergarten, or maybe nursery school, I spent the first two weeks just sitting in a chair on the side of the classroom just watching, not getting involved at all. And then, later on, like when I was nine or something, I used to have this thing where, and it was interesting, because it was simultaneously totally abstract and conceptual, and also very physical, I can remember being on the hill outside of our house. And it was just like that standard thought loop of like, I was thinking of myself thinking. And then I was thinking of myself thinking that I was thinking. And it actually felt trapping.

GEDI: Right. And then there's the other thing where you feel like you're thinking about thinking, and you want to tell somebody. You look forward and say, I'm going to describe to somebody that I was thinking about thinking. And then you think, but then I have to describe to them that I was going to describe to them that I was thinking about thinking. And then at what level, how many describing of describing of describing . . .

TOM: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

GEDI: And that is a weird mechanism.

TOM: It is a weird mechanism.

GEDI: I became lost in those loops too. And I started doing capoeira, that Brazilian dance, because you're

using your body, you're working with somebody, and trying to get as close to them as possible without touching them, and flirting with them, and twisting and turning over them, and all you can do is use your body. Ultimately it's just about being with the person in that kind of movement. Because otherwise, you're thinking about discussing with them that you were thinking about discussing it with them.

TOM: Yeah. There's a lot of that in art, obviously. I find that when I'm making drawings, I'll have an idea, right? And then it'll occur to me, I'll think, oh, the right-hand side of the drawing should all be black stripes, you know? So then I'll get maybe three black stripes down . . .

GEDI: Right. And then . . .

TOM: And then . . .

GEDI: And you lose interest?

TOM: And then it's all over. But you have to know there's that moment when actually you haven't finished the idea. Because you haven't gotten the whole side done with the black sides. But you've gotten some of them done. And then, should you make all the black stripes? Or should you just do the three and then move? You know what, I feel like you should just make the three and then move.

GEDI: I feel like the key is the interruption of the plan.

TOM: Yeah. That moment.

GEDI: If you have the plan and it's about to be interrupted by whatever, you have to let that interruption be the decisive force in it.

TOM: Exactly. Yeah.

GEDI: And the only way to get somewhere is to develop a plan as you're going, and then let it break, let it break, break, break, break, break, break, break. And then, at a certain point during the breaking, you stop.

TOM: But then there's the weird thing, which we were talking about earlier, where I feel like I can just get broken all the way out of any action. The plan just breaks down to the fact that I'm just like . . . Like I remember when I was in art school, I was like, well OK, so what is a drawing? You know, is the drawing looking at the figure and making these marks? Is it the thing that I'm drawing? Is it the figure? Or is it the thing on the page? And then I remember thinking, well, OK, I'm going to test this by just looking at a blank white wall—that's the act of looking that I'll do. And then I'll make a drawing of that act. So I was going to eliminate the figure and just have this . . . So then I spent a long time [CHUCKLES] looking at a white wall. And it was sort of hard to get past that point, you know? This is obviously an age-old . . .

GEDI: Dilemma.

TOM: Dilemma. There's a lot of it in that book. Because McEvilley talks about how, in his opinion, there are these cycles through Western civilization of ages of certainty and ages of doubt. And he feels like the ages of doubt go back . . . . He feels like there are very kindred traditions of doubt throughout the world. But he goes back to this one particular Greek philosopher.

GEDI: Pyrrhon?

TOM: Yeah.

GEDI: Yeah. The thing about Pyrrhon, I think, is that he treated all things as equal in a way.

TOM: Yes.

GEDI: So there is no morality. Every event is equal to every other event. Which I think is a doctrine of non-discrimination.

TOM: Yeah.

GEDI: Which, I think, is really what Chuang Tzu talks about in that whole book too: if all things are equal, then you're fine.

TOM: I've never read it; I've only just been reading this book that talks about it. But he says that, again, it came out of looking for a solution to what seemed to be a problem, in the same way that Buddha was looking for a solution to the problem of suffering. And then Pyrrhon, the solution

he had was essentially one of indifference to either the A or the B. I guess, in a way, I find it deeply appealing. But there are also certain moments in it where I can't agree, because, if I read it correctly, what they advocated was to just cooperate in a comparatively indifferent way with the dominant norms of the society. And not worry about it, you know? Maintain a kind of nonchalant indifference where you went along with them.

GEDI: Right. I think a better part of the philosophy is the mindfulness part of it, where ultimately what's being advocated is to enter every situation present and conscious, and to act mindfully in that situation, so that you don't go for one instead of the other. So it's about being and about being content. What you're saying is that it leads to a kind of ambivalence, or social stagnation, or something.

TOM: Yeah. Or vulnerability.

GEDI: Right. But I think that the thing is written for rulers too, so that they can act in a certain way. *The Bhagavad Gita* has the same thing.

TOM: Totally.

GEDI: Basically what it is, is detachment.

TOM: Mm-hmm.

GEDI: Don't think that anything is good or bad, but trust your intuitive moves, and move with your body as you move.

TOM: Oh, that's interesting. I didn't realize that.

GEDI: I think so. And I think that what you get in the end is, avoiding moral doctrine. Because you can intuit, you understand these things. If you're not goal-oriented, if you're not going for A, that means anything's possible. Buster Keaton is a perfect example. As he's going through this cascade of events, and slipping and losing his thing, they become opportunities. Opportunities come to him. Which is allowing these things to happen without being morally invested.

TOM: Yeah. The *After Theory* book is pretty interesting from this point of view. Actually, you might find it really interesting.

GEDI: I want to read it.

TOM: Because he talks a lot about the body, and about experiencing the body as the sort of . . . In my opinion, logically his arguments don't hold up, which doesn't mean I don't believe in them. [CHUCKLES] I do. [CHUCKLES] But it's very easy to take them apart logically or philosophically. But he kind of posits the body, or not even the body, but he posits our subjective experiences of our own physical vulnerabilities as the theoretical basis by which one could advance a shared understanding of ethical behavior. In the sense that, fuck, I know what it's like to not be fed. Therefore I understand that I should make sure that person gets fed, you know? It's totally straightforward. But then he also talks a lot about the difference between that holding space that is understood as wealth in our society, which is really about a kind of holding of resources . . .

GEDI: Yeah, storing energy.

TOM: Storing energy and not allowing that energy out, but trying to control it. And actually, he said, the thing about people who are conservative is that what they're actually worried about is things changing. They get scared actually of change itself, of events themselves: the idea that something would change is the thing that people are trying to avoid. You know? So, in a way, the thing that they're not doing is they're not willing to risk a release of those resources, because if you release those resources they begin to mistake the controlling of those resources for being itself.

GEDI: Yes.

TOM: And if you make that mistake, if you think that the control of resources is the same as being itself, you've made this incredibly fundamental and destructive misunderstanding. If you release yourself toward, or if you release those resources, you essentially accept the idea of a kind of non-being. You release yourself towards a kind of non-being, which kind of in a mythic way goes back to that black square promise of [MAKES NOISE] . . .

GEDI: It feels more like you're left with free and easy wandering.

TOM: Yeah, you're left with free and easy wandering. Yeah. There's a lot of this stuff, but it's all over the place.

GEDI: Yeah. It's all over the place.