

Dear reader, allow me to throw you into this experiment by mistaking you for someone else. I am addressing you as a glaciologist. Perhaps my question about snow will inspire you to talk about a phenomenon you know from your own work. You tell me about whipped cream. From here I might ask you about glacier mass change. In this way, our conversation would meander, move, and transform from within.

I'm a writer and artist, and together with the choreographer Charlotta Ruth we've been experimenting with conversational forms since 2017. In our performances or workshops we invite into situations where language becomes material. Recently we began to *talk with each other apart*. This practice is grounded in my long-term exploration of defamiliarizing language, inventing terms, and displacing vocabularies from one field to another.¹ It is influenced by Charlotta's background in play, participatory art and rule-based strategies for language. Mostly, it is shaped by our shared curiosity in generating environments for live collective thinking.

You may be familiar with the trivial phenomenon of "talking past each other": someone you're talking to thinks you're on the same topic, when you're actually talking about something else. The practice described in this article suggests something different: two people deliberately talk past each other while still listening and responding to each other, but from different places. During this process the threads of a conversation and conceptions of self are being wired differently. By adopting an ignorance in the face of knowing,

¹ See for example the geopoetic series Daus, *Toponymisches Heft 1-3*, 2010-2016.

a strategic misunderstanding is produced: a “third thing” (Stephen Rappaport) emerges between the lines.²

Talking with each other apart (twa) welcomes error, absurdity and free association. It may be useful to test clichés, come up with new words or characters. In the context of my current research *outerwoman*, *twa* is being explored as a form of live (science) fictioning. Using two examples, the following text reflects on *twa* as a process—I’m still hesitant to call it a method—that allows the artistic researcher to enter an interdisciplinary zone of inquiry through score-based improvisation.

Disclaimer: *Twa* is an evolving practice.³ It borrows elements from improvisation, role-playing, score-based art, experimental literature and Socratic maieutics (a dialectical form of questioning) related to philosophical thinking. Rules and roles are described below so that you can try it out for yourself.

1. Roles and tasks

Speaker One—questioning

asks about a specific topic they are curious about. (Important: pay attention to a thing or phenomenon. Curiosity is the basis of the game!) Speaker One addresses their interlocutor as if they were an expert in a particular field—for example, a glaciologist, a midwife, or a professional in another fictional realm. The task is to persevere in addressing this imaginary other; to listen carefully to what they say, to respond, and to ask follow-up questions.

² Actor and workshop leader Stephen Rappaport calls the space that emerges and sustains improvisation ‘the third thing’: “For me, it is where life perpetuates itself. It is the only place where the desired unraveling can occur. Play cannot exist without it.” See: <https://www.stephenrappaport.com/workshop>, last accessed on 6.11.2024

³ Apart from the occasions mentioned in this article, *twa* has been presented and tested in workshops at the SAR conference *Too early, too late* in April 2023 and at the conference *Poetikwissen* in Müzzzuschlag/Austria in September 2023.

Speaker Two—responding

responds from their actual expertise or lived experience, from the here and now. Their task is to try to understand what Speaker One is saying from the perspective of their own situation/practice. If some questions seem “out of place,” they try to translate them into their domain. This includes taking the other person’s words as metaphors. Against all odds, Speaker Two tries to respond from their own world and vocabulary.

Suggestion: try for 10 minutes, then take a break. Repeat. There is no right or wrong. Swap positions.

Note: it is exciting, but very demanding to be immersed in this split reality. Basically, both speakers have to keep track of the other within their respective frames or semantic fields, while at the same time allowing themselves to creatively misunderstand and ride on the meaning it creates for their own narrative.

2. Practice Examples and Excerpts

2.1. Example One

(speaking from the same here and now with Charlotta Ruth)

In Plato’s *Theaitetos*, the literary figure Socrates enters into a dialogue with a young mathematician about the nature of knowledge. The philosopher Socrates compares himself to a midwife and his male student to a pregnant woman. In this classic text, thinking and gestating, questioning and midwifing are analogized. In the excerpt below, Charlotta and I appropriate Socrates’ dialogic technique and give it an extra twist. We refuse to separate the spheres of body and mind as well as of literal and metaphorical language by allowing ourselves to talk about gestating children and ideas at the same time. I speak to Charlotta as if she were a midwife. And Charlotta responds from her realm as an artist and facilitator of artistic processes. From time to time the voice of a practicing midwife is added.

If you would like to listen to the conversation, please go to our podcast series by following this link:

<https://outerwoman.xyz/#on-midwifing>

Click on min.: 05:05

Cordula (Speaker One):

Which sentence feels most appropriate for you:

1. I work as a midwife. 2. I am a midwife.

Charlotta (Speaker Two):

I am a... a being with process person. So number two.

Co:

When does your work actually start, when should a woman reach out to you at which gestational age for example?

Ch:

I sometimes have students, maybe they need to create something. They have a deadline, whereas the idea is not there yet.

Co:

So it could be that someone has the wish to reproduce, even a couple that has problems to conceive, would that be a moment...

Ch:

Yes, although, when I support collaborative processes the idea is often there. And then my work is about the navigation between the two people. How to support and make sure that their creative minds are... maybe not in correlation, but that they don't hurt each other. Conflicting wishes. I can operate as a mediating...

Co:

It could be that I don't think you're good as parents. Has there been any situation that you saw a couple and you sensed there could be problem with them becoming parents?

Ch:

I would say my job is never to say stop. Once an idea...

As we listened to each other with heightened and divided attention, certain words stood out. They became bait, potential metaphor material. For example, "desire to reproduce" became a metaphor for "idea"; "couple" became a metaphor for "collaborating artists," and so on.

What does it take to practise this kind of speaking? Where/ how can it fail? Let's read and/or listen to the following with these questions in mind.

<https://outerwoman.xyz/#on-midwifing>

Click on min. 11:53

Charlotta:

There are always these moments... these crisis moments, where we know it's there...

Cordula:

...when the baby gets stuck (...) and there is no back or forth?

Ch:

Yeah, we know the idea is there. The premiere is in a few days. Then my technique would be that I say directly what I think (...)

Co:

This is a question of life and death. It's an existential moment. You yourself have given birth. Is that a qualification that helps you to be there in the right way?

Ch:

Well, since I regularly produce work myself it's of course a resource—I also work with other artists. I also work as a dancer. (...)

Co:

I think mortality rates are still very high. I think it's about 3,5 children dying in a 1000 births. (...) These are numbers that apply to Europe. So death can still happen. A child or sometimes even the mother can still die. How many times has this happened in your career?

Later, at min 26:17 Charlotta comments: "Death. To be honest, this is really hard for me to translate into the realm of performing arts (...) Death? That's so real!" On a conceptual level, we had reached a metaphor crisis. On a semantic level, too, our game became unsettling as we began to metaphorize the extremes of life. Interestingly, the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur once argued that when metaphors are "alive," they "produce a new semantic pertinence by means of an impertinent attribution."⁵ Apparently, our game could "fail" if the distance between the spheres was lost. A metaphor has to be sufficiently "foreign" or "distant" to generate something new. Glitches or errors proved to be a great source for a third thing to emerge. The following snippet is an example; here Charlotta forgets that she should not repeat vocabulary (abortion) from my realm: <https://outerwoman.xyz/#on-midwifing>

Click on min. 24:31

Cordula:

How do you react in those difficult processes e.g. leading through the decision process to abort or not?

Charlotta:

I think in pre-corona times the idea to abort, if you had funding... ehm... I'm not supposed to say abort... The idea to cancel was almost not on the map.

According to the rules we had set for our game, Charlotta should have stayed within the lingo of her field, but when she accidentally said "the idea to abort," a strange, hybrid space suddenly opened up. I wondered what would have happened if she had continued to speak, for example, about

⁵ "The metaphor is alive as long as we can perceive, through the new semantic pertinence—and so to speak in its denseness—the resistance of the words in their ordinary use and therefore their incompatibility at the level of a literal interpretation." Ricoeur, p. ix.

the "art of abortion" or about "funded abortion"? Later we continued in this ambiguous sphere speculating about "production rights," "pregnancy commissions," "commission art," "baby artists," "wish art," and "maybies" (instead of babies).

What unfolded during our process might be compared to what the biologist Rémy Chauvin described as "the *aparallel evolution* of two beings that have absolutely nothing to do with each other."⁶ At this stage our conversation brought forth all kinds of possible species. It depended on us to choose, to hatch a particular creature. Many metaphors we use in our daily lives prevent us from seeing the world differently and could benefit from an update.⁷

2.2. Aim, research problem and questions

Before moving on to the next example, I'd like to take a step back to give you a brief idea of the wider context in which *twa* has been used. *outerwoman* is a fiction-in-progress and artistic research project that imagines a world where pregnancy no longer has to happen. The aim of the project is to develop a series of language-based and performative approaches that allow for the experimental anticipation of relationships beyond heteronormative conventions of reproduction. To imagine emotions and ways of being that cannot yet be fully known.

Like many writers and artists, I usually create from lived experience. *outerwoman*, which approaches or takes place in an extracorporeal dimension, therefore presents a particular methodological challenge. The intention behind the framework and rules for *twa* was to get in touch with a new

⁶ Deleuze/Guattari cite Rémy Chauvin to describe rhizomatic processes of constant de- and reterritorialization in nature-culture. Deleuze/Guattari, p. 10.

⁷ Usually we say, "That was a difficult birth!", But why not say, "That was a great C-section!"? If you listen to the podcast in its entirety, you can hear how *twa* allowed us to approach hidden dimensions—for example, related to cultural valuation and our own relationship to pain.

dimension of (someone's) experience and practice through a conversational game that allows embodied knowledge to be approached through the lens of another realm and from a metaphorical perspective. Furthermore, the aim was to invite professionals from relevant fields of research—midwives, biologists, neonatologists—to a cross-disciplinary form of live (science) fictioning. We were guided by the following questions: How can a live conversation become a vehicle for a searching narration? How can we design a situation, an environment that allows for an encounter between what is (embodied lived experience) and what could be (fiction)? What is needed to practice it? What kind of metaphors emerge from this co-creation?

2.3. Example Two (speaking from a parallel reality with Katrin)

The following excerpt is part of an improvisation with clinician and neonatologist Katrin Klebermaß-Schrehof



Katrin Klebermaß-Schrehof (front) and Cordula Daus (back). Here we tested a lateral body position to reinforce the idea of speaking apart. When swapping roles, we also changed sides. Personally, I found it helpful not to make eye contact during the exercise, photo: Mimi Schmidl.

that took place during an interdisciplinary workshop this summer.⁸ The premises are different from the first example: here I am speaking from a fictional parallel reality in which people are conceived in cars (*incubautos*).⁹ I address Katrin as if she were a fictional character, a person in a leading position in a future medical company that builds and supervises these cars. Katrin was instructed to stay in her actual field (of neonatal care) and translate my science fiction questions into her reality. My hope was to activate yet liberate my interlocutor's knowledge, allowing it to become this "third thing," a collaborative creation. The following is a rough transcript of our conversation.¹⁰ I understand it more as a research environment for a fiction-in-progress than as a text.

Cordula (Speaker One):

I am curious to know more about the service offered by your company. My family situation is like this: I am 50 years old, my partner is younger. I no longer want to expose myself to the risk of a physiological birth. But I'm also skeptical about the new possibilities... How does the process work? Who provides the genetic material? In which week can we start?

Katrin (Speaker Two):

We have to talk about egg donation, for instance,

⁸ The workshop Experimentelles Ahnen/Experimental Foreboding took place from 19.–20.8.2024 at Zentrum Fokus Forschung, University of Applied Arts Vienna. It was facilitated by Charlotta Ruth and me in collaboration with Sebastian Bark. In addition to Katrin Klebermaß-Schrehof, Barbara Fischer, an evolutionary biologist, and Anna Dobrosovestnova, a scholar of science and technology studies, also took part.

⁹ Note: Charlotta and I could draw on many years of collaborative practice as an artist duo; Katrin and I had never engaged in such an experimental dialogue before. Example One developed around a central analogy, Example Two did not have such a focus. Katrin and I might have both benefited from agreeing on a basic vocabulary beforehand. As the facilitator of the workshop and the experiment, I wish I had given us more time to warm up and immerse ourselves.

¹⁰ The original conversation took place in German language.

when we're dealing with genetic material from a third person. Then we can talk about surrogate mothers or incubators. The risk of a physiological pregnancy is significantly higher. But well, we can save ourselves from this process...

Co:

Yes, exactly. There is the Kofferraumschaft ("trunk-ancy"). I would like to know how I would spend this time. How do I get feedback on the child's condition?

K:

...if you take on the role of mother for this developing child, then there is the possibility of supporting it with developmental measures. For example, with the help of the voice...

Co:

My recorded voice would be emitted?

K:

Yes, or you could really sit next to it. And try to be really present. So not just pre-recorded.

Co:

To sit nearby? Please explain, so that I understand: an incubator is a conventional car equipped with a gestational function. Can we speed up the incubation process? Or are we still dependent on the—what used to be called—40 weeks?

K:

What we can do is... offer a different place. (...) But we can't shorten the time because it's biologically predetermined how long the organs need to develop. We can't, how would you say... engineer... time. Because accelerating maturation processes... there's even a disease that does that, and you die from it.

Co:

I see. I read a paper that one should be careful in

the very first few weeks, not to drive long distances. Then again driving very fast was recommended. Also because of the noises. In Germany, we don't have a speed limit on the motorways. What is good for the child's development then?

K:

Well, I don't know...

(Both laugh)

Talking apart makes you say unexpected things. The clunky term "Kofferraumschaft" ("trunkancy") just came to me. The flow of our conversation led us to speculate about connections between car speed and foetal growth that I hadn't thought of before. Being addressed as someone else allowed Katrin to leave behind the ethical concerns that usually guide her as a professional. In a debriefing, she said, "When we talk to parents as doctors, we know it's very important how we phrase things. To be able to play with words, to see what happens when I do that, opened up a new dimension. That was great to experience. (...) Usually (as doctors) we prepare for a scenario. This is what I want to say and I have to use these words. Here you were forced not to be conscious of your words, just to let them flow. It felt like a breather. (...) It was so beautiful to just let it come as it came. We're used to doing gymnastics when we're too tense. We should definitely do the same thing with words."¹¹

3. Conclusions

Why don't you just write a piece of speculative fiction, you might ask. Why bother engaging in live exchanges

¹¹ In September 2022 I accompanied Katrin Klebermaß-Schrehof for a whole day in the neonatal ward of the General Hospital in Vienna. Our first conversation took place in this context. I sent Katrin a transcript which was an important basis to identify common interests. Before the workshop in 2024 Katrin expressed her doubts and ethical concerns.

with scientists? Conversations are landing grounds for my searching narration.¹²

No matter how silly, odd or evil an idea may be, something happens when it's vocalised and put into someone's mouth: It becomes physical as it moves through our bodies. Suddenly, what at first seemed odd appears familiar or vice versa.¹³ When a metaphor strikes with its own particular force, it can produce a shock, a new form of seeing a phenomenon through something else. Rather than thinking of interdisciplinarity as a happy encounter, *Talking with Each other Apart* teases out discursive incompatibilities and subjects in the state of becoming. This may be a useful practice in times when automated intelligence urges us to outsmart each other; to produce only the most probable wor(l)ds.

We have reached the end; dear reader, the glacier has continued downhill. When I asked you to describe the characteristics of a fjord, you spoke of a cracking cake. Your accent was quite thick. You might think we were imitating each other. Instead, something else was happening, a strange becoming, the fjording of a cake and caking of a fjord.

12 My process-based approach has similarities to what my colleague Emma Cocker has described as 'Conversation-as-Material', a practice that unfolds through phases of translation, transcription and condensation, even if we arrive at different results.

13 More than a century ago, the writer and literary theorist Viktor Šklovskij proposed *ostranenie* (остранение; 'estrangement') as an artistic strategy to interrupt perception, to render new what has over-familiar: "And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By 'enstranging' objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and 'laborious.'" Special thanks to Sebastian Bark for introducing me to his concept. Šklovskij, p. 6.

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