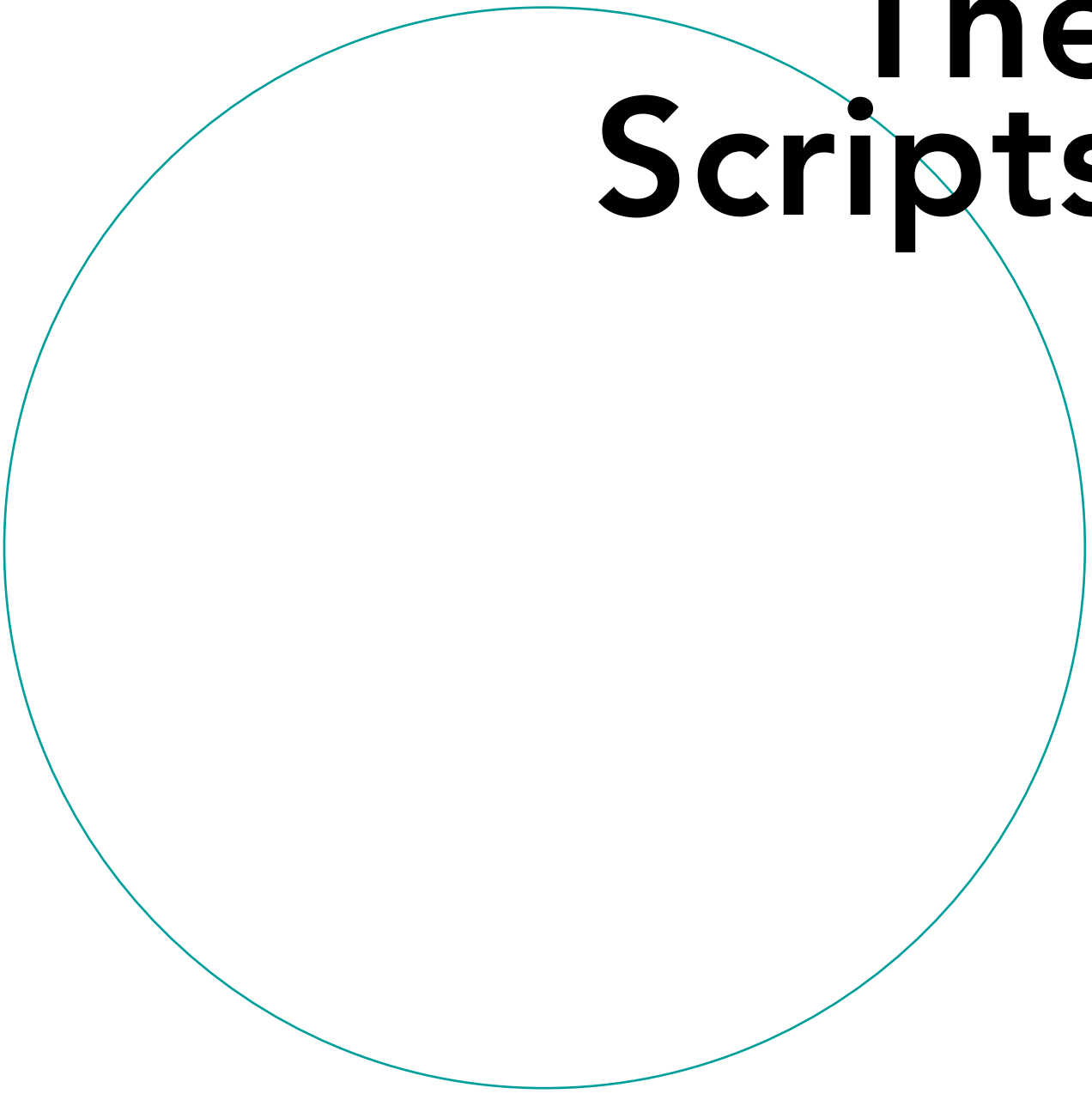
Building Conversation

The Scripts



Building Conversation

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We share our inspirations and ask you to acknowledge them and to include Building Conversation as a source of your inspiration.

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Building
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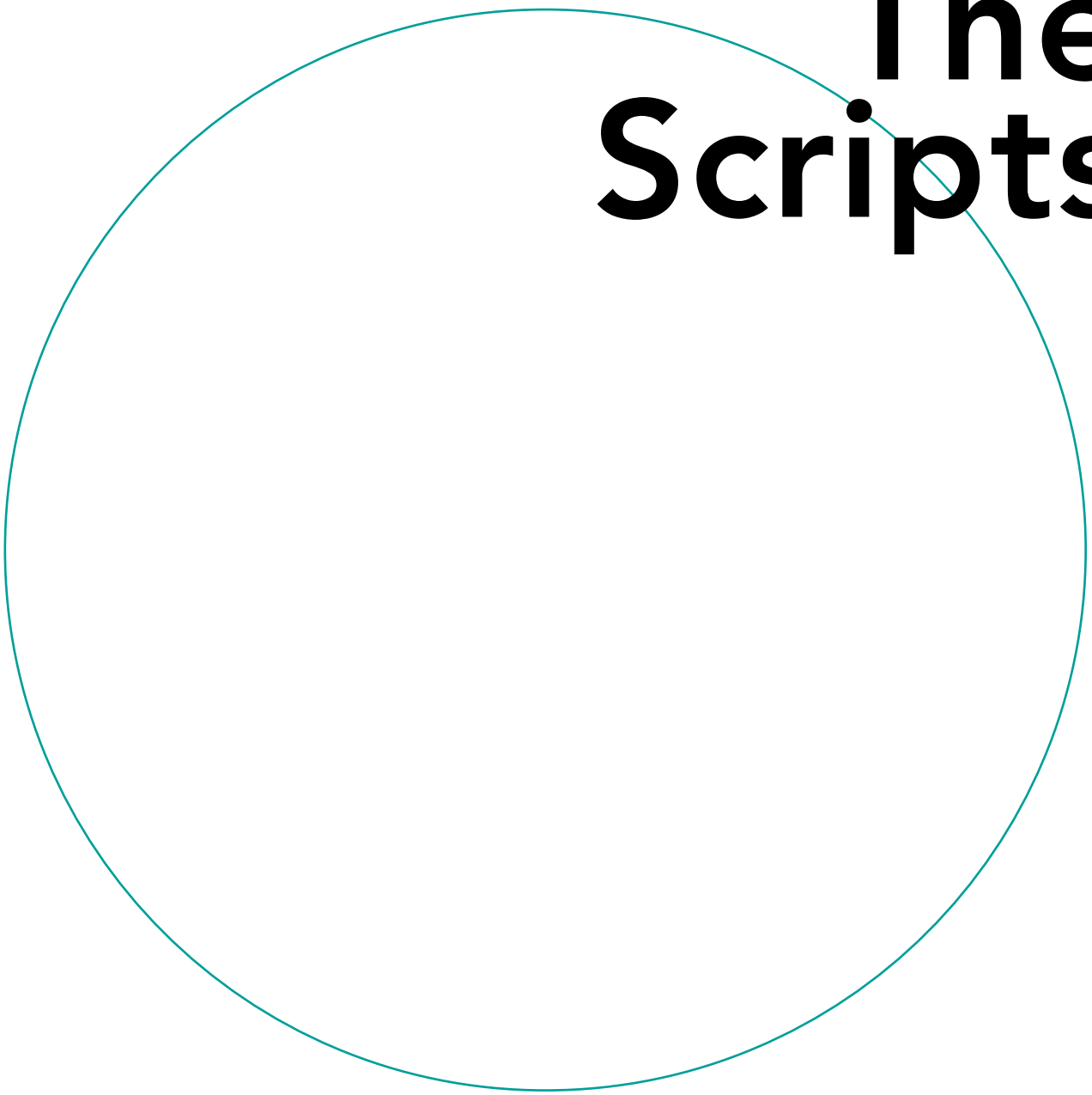

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Temple/The Building Place. Photograph: Daan 't Sas

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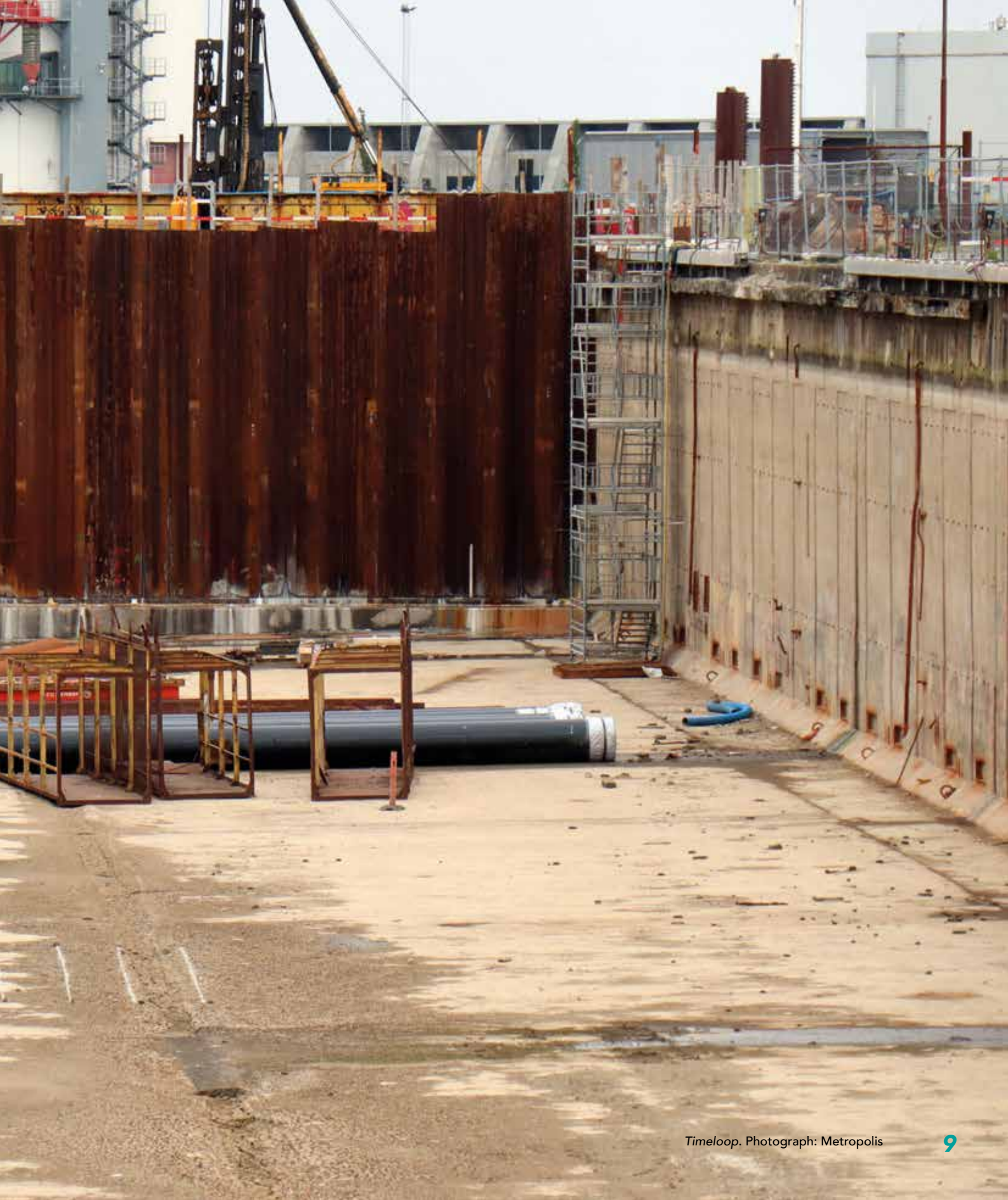
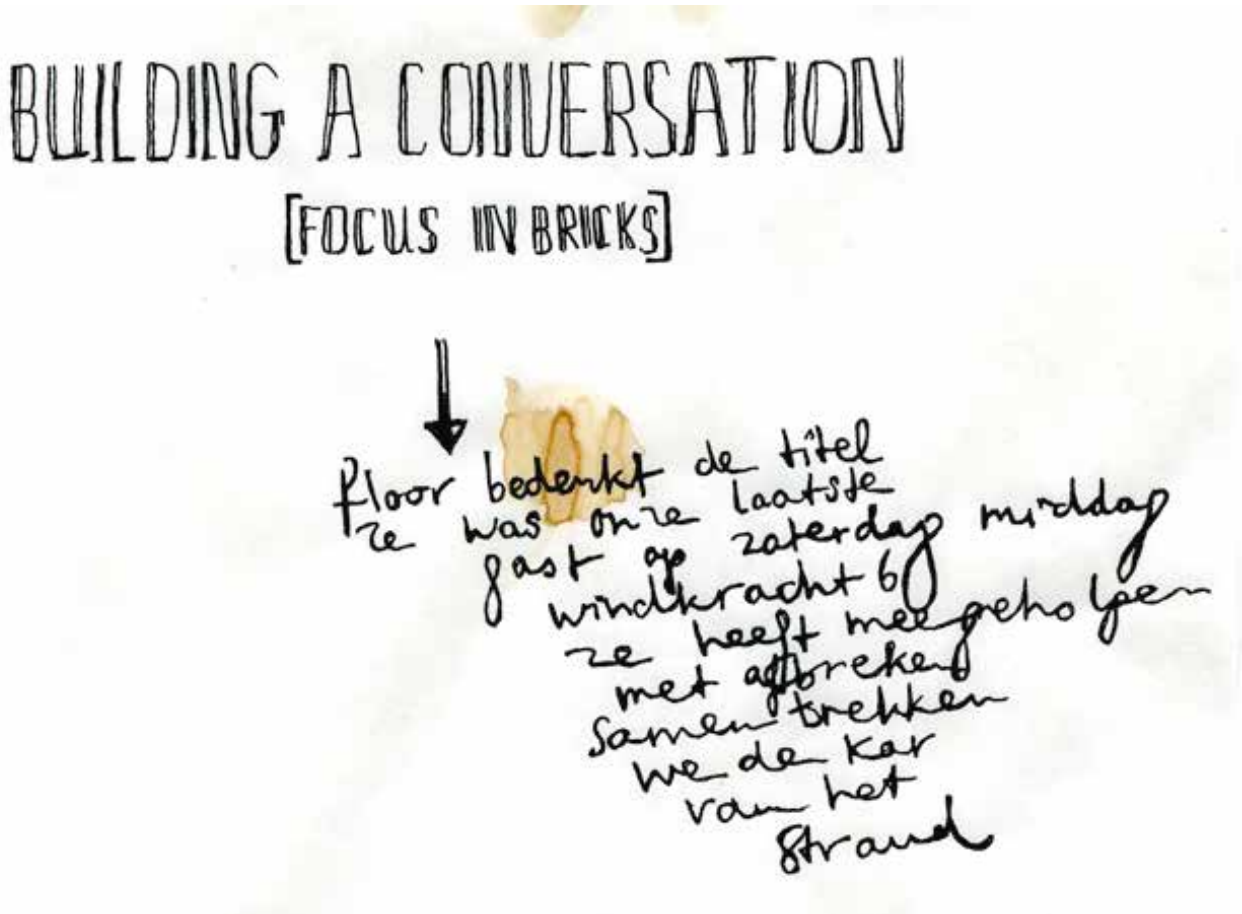
Prologue



Timeloop. Photograph: Metropolis



Temple/The Building Place, Oerol Festival, 2013. Illustration: Ank Daamen

Translation of the Dutch text on the illustration: *Floor comes up with the title. She was our last guest on Saturday afternoon. Gayle force 6. She helped break down. Together we pull the cart off the beach.*

Prologue

Peter Aers, Lotte van den Berg and Daan 't Sas

IF WE ARE GOING to build something together, what will it be? After sharing and investigating this question with a lot of people for ten days during Oerol festival in 2013, on the final day the answer became clear. A woman called Floor passed by, and mentioned that we were not building with bricks. We are building with words; it is like building conversations.

If we try to enumerate the materials Building Conversation has used, as you can with the steel concrete and glass of regular buildings, it would be 968 conversations, a trillion words, even more thoughts and emotions and afterwards 1,001 visions. In all those years, not that many texts appeared. We mainly focused on conversations and live experiences. Now, after our first decade, there is a book.

In this book, we share scripts of six performative conversations we have created over the years. By presenting them here, we put them back out there in the world, for you, the reader, to use, adapt and help guide conversations. We have used these scripts throughout the years to guide conversations ourselves and to guide others to guide as well, to be teachers among teachers, as Bruce Naokwegijig would say. The scripts have been adapted and rewritten in many languages, and discussed by so many people that we cannot believe we alone own them. Words have been chosen with care*, but they are not laws written in stone. We encourage you to feel how the words taste in your mouth, how to guide and participate at the same time, how to practise together.

We share the core of this work to build onwards together.

Will you join?

**An ongoing conversation, explored in the chapter INTROSPECTION, tackles how to acknowledge the inspirations that led to the creation of different conversational performances. We share these and ask you to also acknowledge them and add Building Conversation as the source of your inspiration.*

Introduction

Parliament of Things. Photograph: Suzanne Danig

1.0

Introduction

Sodja Lotker

BUILDING CONVERSATION is a platform for dialogical art, which concentrates on the meeting of art, conversation and society. Since its inception in 2013, nine performative conversations have been developed (two of them online, one for the phone) while a further five dialogical practices were formed. Each conversation has a very specific script, a set of rules that is inspired by different theories and practices from all around the world, for instance those of the Jesuits or indigenous communities in New Zealand and Canada, as well as contemporary quantum physics and agonistic political theory. Building Conversation aims to explore the dialogical capacities of human and more-than-human entities, with the understanding that being is already being-in-dialogue: that we exist in relationship to others and through mental and physical exchange.
The platform opens up a space for exploring and practicing dialogue. How do we speak but also how can we speak differently? The conversations can be perceived as art, as performance but also as socio-political activism.

THESE CONVERSATIONS ARE performed within different festivals, teaching environments and other gatherings. They are led by a guide: a person from the Building Conversation community or a local guide trained by Building Conversation. Some conversations start with instructions given only once by the guide, some include instructions throughout the process. The guide is always part of the conversation as well, someone who both facilitates the instructions and is a participant in the dialogue, just like the others. The understanding that the guide is also taking part is important in building the experiment's power structure. The guide facilitates the preparation and does not impose content or direct or moderate the conversation. In addition to these rules, each conversation has a specific duration. Each conversation unfolds differently depending on the constellation of the participants, their relationships, input and of course content.

THERE IS NO OVERVIEW from beyond the conversations, one can only take part. Everybody present joins. Each conversation is carefully introduced and prepared with the participants. It doesn't start before an important question has been asked that establishes the basic social contract of the dialogue: will you join? Each individual participant answers and, in this way, takes conscious responsibility for their participation. In the dialogues of Building Conversation there is no audience, there are only participants. The participants are not mere consumers of a practice but are actively taking part.

AN IMPORTANT PART of the performativity of Building Conversation is a Meeting Point, a portable wooden structure that acts as a centre for all the conversations' participants. At this place, guides gather with participants and give them information and instructions. Each guide then goes with their group to separate spaces designated for specific conversations. After the conversations are finished, all the participants gather again at the Meeting Point where there is food, drinks and a small library of books that have inspired the conversation. This is the place where participants can reflect. The Meeting Point and walks to and from the place of conversation are important parts of the ritual, as the journey from public space to quiet semi-public space and back, allows participants to take different perspectives on the conversation, giving them time and space to adjust.

THE SPACES WHERE the conversations take place are usually not theatre or gallery spaces. They should allow for the participants to fully concentrate without distraction and be as bare and empty as possible, with windows covered. For refreshment, water and dates are brought from the Meeting Point to the space of the conversation.

THE RITUAL OF GATHERING at the Meeting Point, the instructions and language used, the space where the conversations take place are all carefully prepared to give a specific framing and allow for specific experience of the conversations. The instructions and ritual for conversations were developed over the course of many conversations with different audiences and facilitated by many different guides.

THE PROJECT was initiated in 2013 at Oerol Festival in the Netherlands by theatre director Lotte van den Berg and artist Daan 't Sas. They had observed audiences' desire to participate in an artwork, but with no real place to do so within the festival. The first try-out was a festival location where Lotte and Daan sat, cooked and invited passers-by to join. These try-outs were called Temple/The Building Place. Conversations with passers-by revolved around the question, 'if we were to build something, what would it be?' During the try-out Lotte and Daan realised that it was the conversation itself that was being built and that there was no need to build physical things. In 2016 Belgian artist Peter Aers joined the artistic team.

IN THIS BOOK, you will find six scripts of performative conversations written with all the information necessary for you to do this on your own. The scripts are followed by a glossary that aims to clarify some important words and concepts for Building Conversation. 'Reflections' will give you the chance to read about specific conversations experienced by different participants. And through interviews with Lotte, Daan and Peter, you can learn more about the thinking behind Building Conversation.

PERFORMATIVE CONVERSATIONS developed by Building Conversation include: *Conversation Without Words* (2014), inspired by different theories and practices related to non-verbal communication; *Agonistic Conversation* (2014), inspired by theories of Chantal Mouffe and a Māori practice as told by an artist from New Zealand; *Parliament of Things* (2016), inspired by Bruno Latour's book *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991); *Timeloop* (2016), inspired by indigenous practice at the Great Lakes in Canada as told by Joseph Osawabine, the former director of Debajehmujig; *Thinking Together - An Experiment* (2014), based on the dialogical practice of physicist David Bohm; *Impossible Conversation* (2014), based on Jesuit practice and contemplative dialogue; *Digital Silence* (2020), an online conversation based on *Conversation Without Words;* Watching Pixels (2020), an online conversation based on 'visual thinking strategy'; *Distant Thoughts* (2020), a conversation over the phone, based on David Cooperrider's book Appreciative Inquiry (1999); next to this projects of different formats were developed including *General Assembly* (2014), *We Have Never Been Modern* (2018), *To Care as Caress* (2020), *Washing Hands* (2020), *Constructing a Collective Gaze* (2021), *Rhizome* (2021) and *Dying Together/Futures* (2022). This book pays attention to the performative conversations developed between 2014 and 2016.

IN THE PAST YEARS the artistic leadership of the platform was in the hands of: Peter Aers, Daan 't Sas and Lotte van den Berg.

PEOPLE WHO HOSTED the Meeting Point and produced the work are: Vera Andeweg, Amber Bongaerts, Saar van Bladeren, Antwan Cornelissen, Famke Dhont, Jonathan Offereins, Yola Parie, Jakob Proyer, Hein-Jan van der Veen, Yoka van Zuijlen.

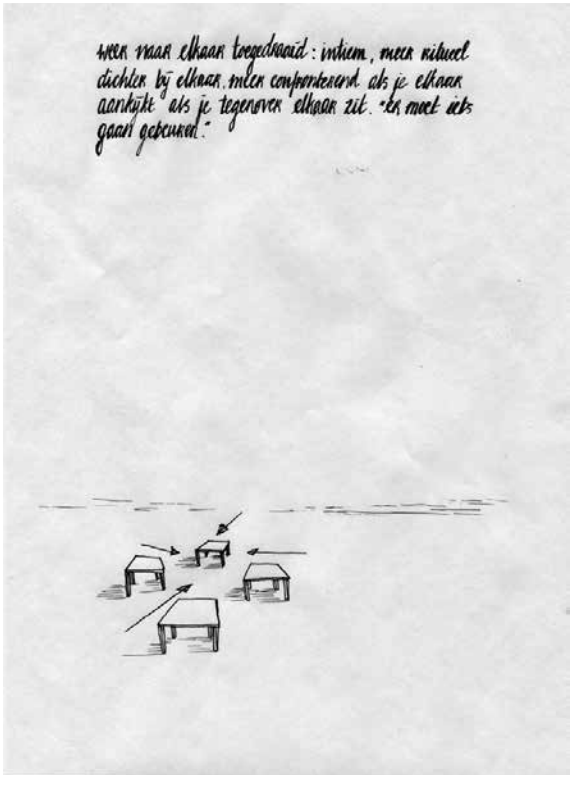
FINANCIAL MANAGERS AND OFFICE MEMBERS have been: Anneke Tonen, Anne Douqué, Esther Eij, Ursula Bouman, Manja Hoedeman. Marketing and communication team have been: Danielle Hielckert, Eline Levering, Eveleen Hamers, Marieke Josselet, Klaartje Wouters, Harmen Van Twillert. Members of the Board have been: Christine de Baan, Anne Breure, Maarten Lammers, Hanna Lara Palsdottir, Thijs Middeldorp, Ellen Walraven, Elif Söylemez.

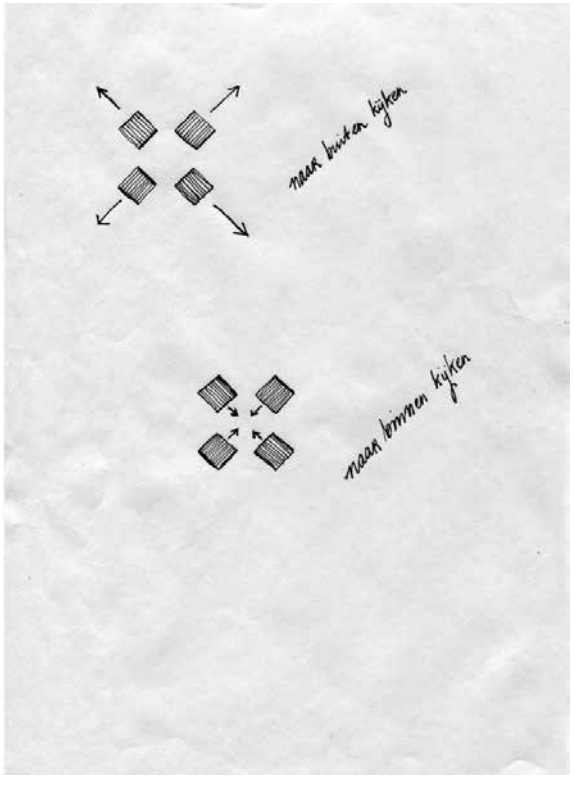
PEOPLE WHO CREATED and/or guided the conversations are: Mette Aakjaer, Peter Aers, Ana Agua, Milena Ajdukovic, Lea Aymard, Andreas Bachmair, Farina Becker, Lotte van den Berg, Mijs Besseling, Katrien van Beurden, Matteo Bifulco, Henriette Blakstad, Ewout Bomert, Tanja den Broeder, Zephyr Brüggen, Nahuel Cano, Bart Capelle, Maja Kristine Christinsen, Juliane von Crailsheim, Coen Dijkstra, Katja Dreyer, Marthe Sofie L. Eide, Esther Eij, Maja Ejrnaes, Angelika Fink, Jörgen Gario, Shëkufe Tadayoni Heiberg, Sophie Valérie Janssen, Bendik Johannesen, Gerindo Kamid Kartadinata, Camiel Kessel, Maja De Kleva, Oleg Koefoed, Emma Krakehl, Basak Layic, Tomas Leijen, Anneleen Lemmens, Annika Lewis, Fleur Lock, Lukas von der Lühe, Marlena Lüneburg, Sebastiaan van Loenen, Sodja Lotker, Oliver Maxwell, Vera Meader, Laura Mentink, Dennis Molendijk, Salomé Mooij, James Ray Moore, Jan Henri Müller, Maximilian Müller, Mara van Nes, Ana Pavlic, Tiril Pharo, Krista Peters, Tone Petronelle, Flavia Pinheiro, Jakob Proyer, Satchit Puranik, Josefine Rahn, Jurriën van Rheenen, Heiki Riipinen, Nanna Rosenfeldt, Peter Rombouts, Wouter Roos, Bart van Rosmalen, Catarina Salgueiro, Daan 't Sas, Annika Serong, Elias Simonse, Ligia Soares, Rens Spanjaard, Urska Sterle, Guillaume Straatjes, Marija Sujica, Ariane Türk, Obiozo Ukpabi, Ana Luiza Ulsig, Julia ter Veld, Doris Vervuurt, Bram Vreeswijk, Vicente Wallenstein, Joel Wardenga, Leon Weller, Justyna Wielgus, Kas Wouters, Samar Zughool, Humberto Schwaab

SINCE 2014, BUILDING CONVERSATION has taken place in: Academie voor Bouwkunst, Amsterdam (NL); AHK, Bergen aan Zee (NL); Al Kantara festival, Lisbon (PT); Almost Summer Festival, Kortrijk (BE); Architectuur Centrum Nijmegen, Nijmegen (NL); Art centre 404 & Rest for the Wicked, Ghent (BE); Art centre 404, Ghent (BE); Art centre BUDA, Kortrijk (BE); Artez Academie, Arnhem (NL); Artez, Zwolle (NL); Artis, Amsterdam (NL); Atoll Festival, Karlsruhe (DE); BASE, Farout festival, Milan (IT); Basisschool de Koningslinde, Vught (NL); BIND, Zaandam (NL); Buikslotermeerplein, Amsterdam (NL); Carmelschool, Hengelo (NL); Casco, Amsterdam (NL); CBK, Amsterdam (NL); Centrale Fies Festival, Dro (IT); Cirqu' Aarau, Aarau (NL); City of Women, Ljubljana (SI); Club Interbellum, Amsterdam (NL); Comhert College, Gouda (NL); Congé, Kortrijk (BE); Cordius College, Amersfoort (NL); Crossroads Festival Prague (CZ); CSG Cormenius Marienburg, Leeuwarden (NL); Culturele Zondagen Utrecht, Utrecht (NL); Culturele Zondagen, Utrecht (NL); Cultuurloket, Brussels (BE); DAMU, Prague (CZ); Dansbrabant, Tilburg (NL); Danswerkplaats, Amsterdam (NL); De Balie, Amsterdam (NL); De Kazerne, Amsterdam (NL); De Meeuw, Amsterdam (NL); De Nieuwe Liefde, Amsterdam (NL); Demerstrand, Diepenbeek (NL); Deutsche Hygiene Museum, Dresden (DE); Dienstencentrum Ledeberg, Ghent (BE); Droog Design, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (NL); Dutch Design Week, Eindhoven (NL); Eltheto kerk, Amsterdam (NL); Europe Days, Maastricht (NL); Fab City, Amsterdam (NL); Festival Boulevard, 's-Hertogenbosch (NL); Frascati, Amsterdam (NL); Gerrit van der Veen College, Amsterdam (NL); Gnz Novi Festival, Zagreb (HR); Gymnasium, Amersfoort (NL); Gymzaal, Amersfoort (NL); HAU, Berlijn (DE); Hembrug terrein, Zaandam (NL); Het Bolwerk, Vilvoorde (BE); Het HUIS, Utrecht (NL); Het Imaginaire Eiland, Oerol, Terschelling (NL); Het Veem Theater, Amsterdam (NL); Het vierde Gymnasium, Amsterdam (NL); HKU Utrecht, Utrecht (NL); HOGent, Ghent (BE);Hogeschool van Amsterdam, Amsterdam (NL); Hoog Catharijne, Utrecht (NL); Hull Truck Theatre, Queens Gardens, Hull (UK); Humboldt Forum, Berlin (DE); Imagine IC, Amsterdam (NL); Impulse Festival, Düsseldorf (DE); Integrart, Zürich (CH); Internet of Things, Rotterdam (NL); Isaac Beeckman Academie, Kapelle (NL); Javaplein, Amsterdam (NL); Joke Smit Academie, Amsterdam (NL); Jonge Harten Festival, Groningen (NL); KAAltheater, Brussels (BE); KAAP, Bruges (BE); KABK, Antwerp (BE); KASK, Ghent (BE);

KHiO, Oslo (NO); Klimaattop, Leeuwarden (NL); Københavns Internationale Teater, Aabenraa (DK); Københavns Internationale Teater, Aarhus (DK); Københavns Internationale Teater, Bornholm (DK); Københavns Internationale Teater, Copenhagen (DK); Københavns Internationale Teater, Guldborgsund (DK); Københavns Internationale Teater, Møn (DK); Københavns Internationale Teater, Randers (DK); Københavns Internationale Teater, Roskilde (DK); Københavns Internationale Teater, Silkeborg (DK); Københavns Internationale Teater, Skagen (DK); Københavns Internationale Teater, Aalborg (DK); Koninklijk conservatorium, Antwerp (BE); Kreativcamp, Hamburg (DE); Kunstenfestival des Arts, Brussels (BE); La Strada, Graz (AT); Le Revest les eaux, La Seyne-sur-Mer (FR); Les Lieux Publics, Marseille (FR); Let's Gro, Groningen (NL); LUCA School of arts, Ghent (BE); LUX, Nijmegen (NL); Maison de la Culture, Amiens (NL); Maltafestival, Poznan (PL); Masereelfonds, Bruges (BE); Matchbox, Neustadt-an-der-Weinstrasse (DE); Matchbox, Weinheim (DE); MAVO Centraal, Rotterdam (NL); Meervaart, Amsterdam (NL); Mirror Centre, Amsterdam (NL); Mosplein, Amsterdam (NL); Munchner Kammerspiele, München (DE); Museum Hof van Busleyden, Grond der Dingen, Mechelen (BE); MUTIK, Essen (DE); Nationaltheater, Schillertage festival, Mannheim (DE); Nederlands Theaterfestival, Amsterdam (NL); New Theatre Institute of Lativa, Riga (LV); Non-Stop Festival, Moss (NO); Noorderzon Festival, Groningen (NL); Odeon De Spiegel, Zwolle (NL); Oerol, Terschelling (NL); Open Coop, Amsterdam (NL); Openbare Werken, Ghent (BE); Independent Dance, London (UK)); Ostfold Internasjonale Teater, Asker VGS (NO); Ostfold Internasjonale Teater, Briskeby VGS (NO); Ostfold Internasjonale Teater, Drammen VGS (NO); Ostfold Internasjonale Teater, Fredrikstad (NO); Ostfold Internasjonale Teater, Glemmen VGS (NO); Ostfold Internasjonale Teater, Greåker VGS (NO); Ostfold Internasjonale Teater, Kirkeparken VGS (NO); Over 't IJ festival, Amsterdam (NL); PAFFF/Arcadia, Leeuwarden (NL); Pantarijn Scholengemeenschap, Wageningen (NL); Parking des Casseaux, Limoges (FR); PARTS, Brussels (BE); Pauluskerk, Rotterdam (NL); Performatik Festival, Brussels (BE); Phoenix Vrijplaats, Utrecht (NL); Plaça Anton Borrell, Reus (ES); Placcc, Budapest (HU); Plantage Dokzaal, Amsterdam (NL); Pleysier College Westerbeek, 's-Gravenhage (NL); PNEU festival, Salzburg (AT); Pronomade, Arbas (FR); Psychiatriecafé, Amsterdam (NL); Pulchri, 's-Gravenhage (NL); RASL, Rotterdam (NL); Rich Mix studio, London (UK); Rotterdamse Schouwburg, Rotterdam (NL); Royal Festival de Spa, Spa (BE); Sånafest, Hølen (NO); Sandberg Instituut, Amsterdam (NL);Schauspielhaus, Bochum (DE); Sick! Festival, Manchester (UK); Simmerdeis Festival, Smallingerland (NL); Singapore International Festival of Arts, Singapore (SG); Sint-Janshospitaal, Bruges (BE); Sportpark De Beeltjens, Westerlo (BE); SPRING Festival, Utrecht (NL); Stadskantoor, Utrecht (NL); Stadsschouwburg, Amsterdam (NL); Stadsschouwburg, Utrecht (NL); Steinerschool, Lier (BE); Stichting Internationale Spinozaprijs, Amsterdam (NL); STRP, Eindhoven (NL); Summerschool UGent, Ghent (BE); Szene Europa, Dresden (DE); TAAK, Amsterdam (NL); Tbs kliniek, Utrecht (NL); Teatergarasjen, Bergen (NO); teaterhøgskolen Oslo, Oslo (NO); Teatro Stabile Dell'Umbria, Terni (IT); Theater ins Blau, Leiden (NL); Theater na de Dam, Amsterdam (NL); Theater na de Dam, Utrecht (NL); Theater Rotterdam, Rotterdam (NL); Theaterfestival, Amsterdam (NL); Théâtre de Privas, Privas (FR); Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers, Paris (FR); Thinking Planet, Utrecht (NL); TKC, Hurdegaryp (NL); Tolhuistuin, Amsterdam (NL); Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam (NL); Universiteit van Utrecht, Utrecht (NL); UvA, Amsterdam (NL); Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam(NL); Warming Up Festival, Amsterdam (NL); We Live Here, Amsterdam (NL); Week van de Dialoog, 's-Gravenhage (NL); Whole Child Development, Amsterdam | Winters Binnen, Amsterdam (NL); Wolfert Tweetalig, Rotterdam (NL); Woordnacht Rotterdam (NL); Zetmeelfabriek, Ter Apel (NL); ZID Theater, Amsterdam (NL). •

Temple/The Building Place, Oerol Festival 2013. Illustration: Ank Daamen
Translation of the Dutch text on the illustration: Conversation in the space. Different forms of conversation. Together build the space in which we speak.

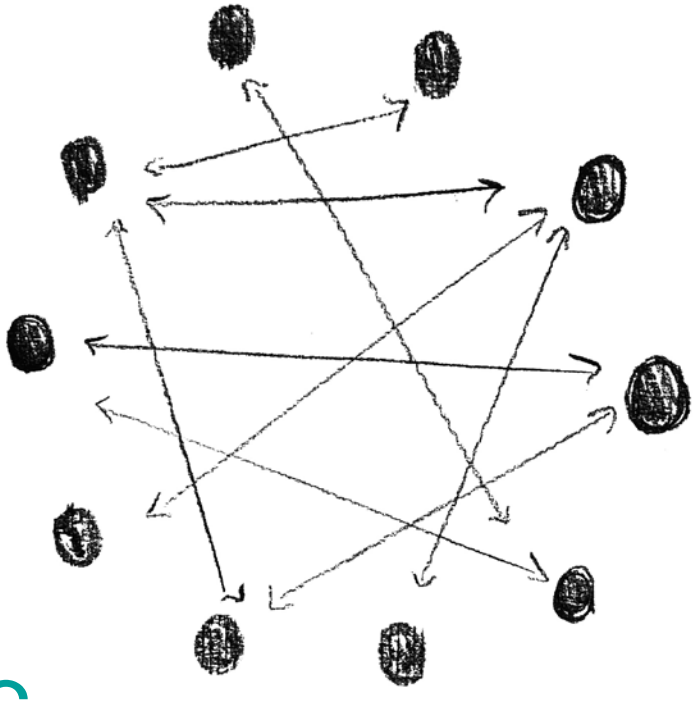




Temple/The Building Place, Oerol Festival 2013. Illustration: Ank Daamen

Scripts

Parliament of Things. Photograph: Jannes Linders



CONVERSATION WITHOUT WORDS

We were inspired to create *Conversation Without Words* after being told an anecdote by Rutger Emmelkamp about indigenous gatherings in which people communicate with each other in silence*. The form of the conversation was developed by Lotte van den Berg in collaboration with Floor van Leeuwen and Daan 't Sas. First try-outs were done with students from Minerva Groningen and a participating audience at INS BLAU in Leiden. The work premiered in June 2014 at the Oerol Festival and has since been performed by participating audiences at locations including Amsterdam, Brussels, Ljubljana, Weinheim, Arbas, Mechelen, Berlijn, Prague. People who guided the performance and translated it to local contexts include Peter Aers, Andreas Bachmair, Lotte van den Berg, Katja Dreyer, Floor van Leeuwen, Ana Pavlic, Krista Peters, Tone Petronelle, Daan 't Sas, Rens Spanjaard, Justya Wielgus.

Reflection made by a student from the Academy of Architecture in Amsterdam during *Architecture of Conversation*. Collected by Tjallien Walma van der Molen

* *We never found clear reference to the actual existence of these gatherings. Obiozo Ukpabi found an interesting resource online, compiled by Elijah Tigullaraq, bilingual language consultant at Qikiqtani School Operations in Nunavut, Canada, describing how non-verbal communication, using facial expressions and body language is an important part of traditional Inuit communication techniques.*

PREPARING FOR CONVERSATION WITHOUT WORDS

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

5-15 people

WHAT YOU NEED

LOCATIONS

Meeting Point: a place to meet before and after the conversation, which is walking distance of the Conversation Space. This is preferably a space that is open to others. It can be a public space and/or outside.

Conversation Space: an inside space that feels safe and comfortable, where you will not be interrupted by others and where you are not distracted, for example a room, studio, empty shop or an attic.

MATERIAL

At the Meeting Point: cups, glasses, bowls and cutlery; a little library with books that inform and inspire.

In the Conversation Space: chairs (as many as there are people); simple chairs, plain wood and metal, that can be stacked up.

CATERING

At the Meeting Point: drinks to share at the start and food and drinks to share afterwards.

During the conversation: dates and water.

PREPARING THE CONVERSATION SPACE

The space needs to be as empty and free of distractions as possible. Put furniture and décor away. Close the curtains and/or cover the windows and mirrors. Stack the chairs on one side, against the wall.

THE ROLE OF THE GUIDE

The guide is responsible for the preparation of the meeting and the conversation. The conversation is a space for collective practice, in which communication and interaction are explored. During the performative conversation the guide participates, just like the others.

ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The guide invites participants and ensures they understand that they will be asked to take part in a conversation. The guide also asks participants to join in with its preparation if possible. Everything is geared towards joint responsibility for the course of the conversation. The earlier the participants are involved the better.

PERFORMING CONVERSATION WITHOUT WORDS

AT THE MEETING POINT

Share drinks and wait for everybody to arrive. Give a general introduction based on the script below.

Guide: *Building Conversation is a constantly changing collective of people, all in their own way fascinated by what happens when we come together in conversation. Building Conversation is performed all over Europe, in many different contexts: in art spaces, schools, during conferences and outside in the woods. We explore how we talk and could talk with each other. Today we invite you to join this exploration.*

We'll walk to the performance space together. Once in the space, I'll give an introduction to the conversation and guide the preparation needed. After the conversation we'll come back here, share food and reflect upon the experience.

We won't do formal introductions, so if you want to get acquainted with who you will be talking to, now is a good time to do this, during the walk.

WALK

Ask people to help carry the dates, water and glasses.

INTRODUCTION AND PREPARATION IN THE CONVERSATION SPACE

Ask people to put bags and jackets to one side. Give an introduction to the conversation based on the script below.

Guide: *I'll give an introduction to the conversation and explain something about the theory that inspired us. Then we'll prepare the conversation together. After that we'll have a short break, with time to go to the toilet. After the break, we'll have the actual conversation. After the conversation, we'll leave the space as we found it and walk back together.*

It's actually very simple: a conversation without words is a conversation... without words. Research has shown that 60 to 80% of our communication is non-verbal.

Today we leave out the words and focus on that part of the conversation that often occurs unconsciously. We are going to look at each other. And we will be looked at by each other. The question is, what does that do to us? What do we see, what do we project on the other and what is projected on us?

To prepare ourselves for this conversation, we need to decide on two things, related to time and space. Let's start with time. We need to decide the conversation's length together. Everyone has one 'joker' that can be played when you like, that is, one

moment during the conversation to leave the room, go to the bathroom or do something else. You may decide for yourselves how long you stay out and how to spend that time. You can always come back. Knowing this, how long shall our conversation be?'

Give space for people to respond.

Note on deciding upon time: The group decides, take your time, as this is an important part of the preparation and a tool to engage everyone. Make sure you've paid attention to all the participants. In case people tend to choose a very short time-slot you can add: 'From our experience, we know something changes after one hour' or 'remember that this will probably be one of the only occasions in your life that you will get the chance to do this'

Guide: *Now let's look at space. We need to decide how close or far we sit from each other. What's the right distance with this group?*

Note on deciding upon space: First suggest to sit as far away from each other as possible. Ask how it feels. Pay attention to the different ways people experience this position; some will like it, others not. Then ask people to sit as close to each other as possible. Ask how it feels. Pay attention to the different ways people experience this position; some will like it, others not. Then ask them to find their own preferred distance as a group, looking for a way of being together that is both challenging and comfortable.

Guide: *I will now explain how we will begin and end our conversation. After this explanation, we'll have a short break outside this room. During the break, I will set an alarm on my phone for the duration of conversation that we just decided upon. The conversation begins (for you) when you enter this room again after the break. From that moment, you will no longer speak. When the alarm goes off you do not have to get up and leave straight way. You can choose your own moment to finish your conversation and leave the room. Please do so in silence as others may not have yet finished. Once you're outside, the conversation has ended for you and you can speak again if you want. We will wait for each other in he corridor.*

Are there any questions?'

Give space for people to respond. Answer clearly and concisely. Keep it practical. Do not lose energy.

Guide: *Now that you know what we are going to do and what we are going to talk about, I have one more important question: will you join?*

Give space for people to respond and also answer yourself.

Guide: *I will join too.*

Note on will you join: Ask all people present to answer, one by one, 'yes' or 'no'. If people are in doubt give them a bit of time and ask them what they need to make the decision. If people only want to participate halfway, have to leave early or want to watch, be clear about the fact that that's not possible. If someone doesn't want to participate, they can go. Don't make this a problem. Invite them to share food at the Meeting Point afterwards. If someone leaves and thus makes a strong personal decision, it makes it more palpable that the people who stay are committed.

Guide: *I propose that we take a break and all go out to prepare ourselves. When you are ready, you choose your own moment to come back in and sit down. Once you are in the space, you have started.*

BREAK

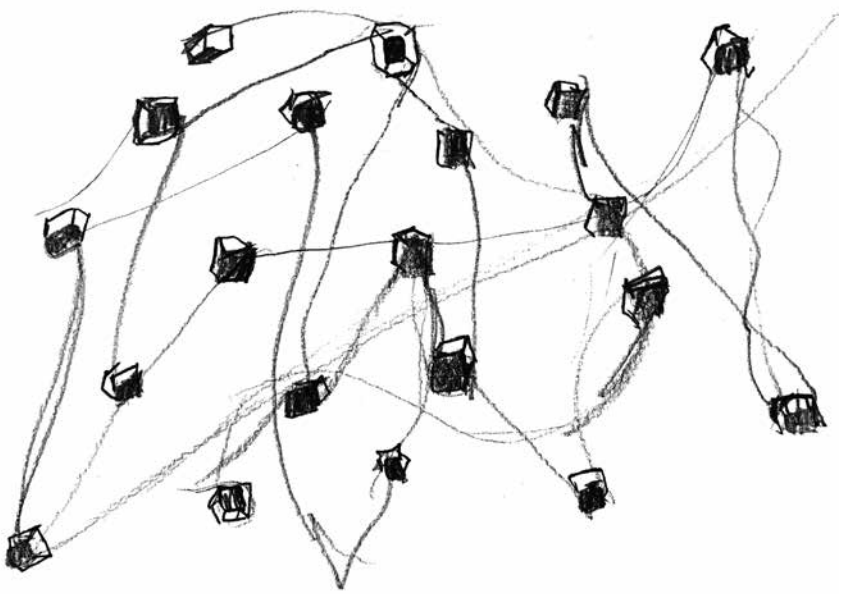
THE CONVERSATION TAKES PLACE

WALK BACK

THE MEETING POINT

Share food and drinks in an improvised way and be open to any people passing by. Don't formalise this moment too much. Leave space for people to reflect and share as they wish. Make sure you do not have to rush. Take time to tune out.

Conversation Without Words. Photograph: Bea Borgers



THINKING TOGETHER – AN EXPERIMENT

We were inspired to create *Thinking Together - An Experiment* by Humberto Schwab, who first connected us with the work of David Bohm. The form of the conversation is further developed by Daan 't Sas in collaboration with Lotte van den Berg and Dennis Molendijk. First try-outs were done with a participating audience in Amsterdam, at a disused church in the woods and at the atelier of Cathelijn Schilder in collaboration with Amsterdam's innovative theatre, Frascati. The work premiered in June 2014 at the Oerol Festival and has since been performed by participating audiences in locations including Neustadt an der Weinstrasse, Amsterdam, Essen, Zaandam, Poznan, Ljubljana, Prague and Ghent. People who guided the performance and translated it to local contexts include Peter Aers, Andreas Bachmair, Lotte van den Berg, Angelika Fink, Camiel Kessel, Sodja Lotker, Vera Maeder, Dennis Molendijk, Salomé Mooij, Mara van Nes, Jurriën van Rheenen, Daan 't Sas, Urska Sterle, Bram Vreeswijk, Leon Weller and Kas Wouters.

Reflection made by a student from the Academy of Architecture in Amsterdam during *Architecture of Conversation*. Collected by Tjallien Walma van der Molen

PREPARING FOR THINKING TOGETHER – AN EXPERIMENT

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

10-30 people

WHAT YOU NEED

LOCATIONS

Meeting Point: a place to meet before and after the conversation, which is walking distance of the Conversation Space. This is preferably a space that is open to others. It can be a public space and/or outside.

Conversation Space: an inside space that feels safe and comfortable, where you will not be interrupted by others and where you are not distracted, for example a room, studio, empty shop or an attic. The size of the group dictates how big the space should be. For 20 people 8 x 10 m is the minimum space required.

MATERIAL

At the Meeting Point: cups, glasses, bowls and cutlery; a little library with books that inform and inspire.

In the Conversation Space: as many simple wooden stools as there are people and which can be piled up; optionally, a few blankets and cushions; a simple alarm clock or a phone with an alarm clock.

CATERING

At the Meeting Point: drinks to share at the start and food and drinks to share afterwards.

During the conversation: dates and water.

PREPARING THE CONVERSATION SPACE

The space needs to be as empty and free of distraction as possible. Put furniture and décor away. Close the curtains and/or cover the windows and mirrors. Stack the stools on one side, against the wall.

THE ROLE OF THE GUIDE

The guide is responsible for the preparation of the meeting and the conversation. The conversation is a space for collective practice, in which communication and interaction are explored. During the performative conversation the guide participates, just like the others.

ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The guide invites participants and ensures they understand that they will be asked to take part in a conversation. The guide also asks participants to join in with its preparation if possible. Everything is geared towards joint responsibility for the course of the conversation. The earlier the participants are involved the better.

PERFORMING THINKING TOGETHER - AN EXPERIMENT

AT THE MEETING POINT

Share drinks and wait for everybody to arrive.
Give a general introduction based on the script below.

Guide: *Building Conversation is a constantly changing collective of people, all in their own way fascinated by what happens when we come together in conversation. Building Conversation is performed all over Europe, in many different contexts: in art spaces, schools, during conferences and outside in the woods. We explore how we talk and could talk with each other. Today we invite you to join this exploration.*

We'll walk to the performance space together. Once in the space, I'll give an introduction to the conversation and guide the preparation needed. After the conversation we'll come back here, share food and reflect upon the experience.

We won't do formal introductions, so if you want to get acquainted with who you will be talking to, now is a good time to do this, during the walk.

WALK

Ask people to help carry the dates, water and glasses.

INTRODUCTION AND PREPARATION IN THE CONVERSATION SPACE

Ask people to put bags and jackets to one side. Give an introduction to the conversation based on the script below.

Guide: *Welcome. We're going to do 'the thinking together experiment': a free-flowing, non-directed conversation. An experiment. This is a dialogue, a form of communication in which listening is just as important as speaking. Before we sit down over there and start the conversation, I'll give a short introduction and will tell you about the technique that David Bohm developed.*

The basic principles of the experiment are:

- *There is no predefined purpose: the course of the conversation is the result.*
- *There is no subject.*
- *There is no moderator: each of us will be equally responsible for the course of the conversation.*
- *The time is fixed: our experiment today will last three hours.*
- *We speak our own thoughts (no wisdom from books).*
- *We speak as transparently and openly as possible.*

In the beginning, this will be chaotic, uncomfortable, unsafe, frustrating – which is normal. So why do we do it? This becomes clear when I tell you more about David Bohm.

- *David Bohm was an eminent physicist and published the book Quantum Theory in 1951. Two words that sum up his work are 'chaos' and 'invisible order', that is, the invisible order that lies hidden beneath apparent chaos.*
- *When he was young he noticed a mechanism that fascinated him. It was a cylinder filled with a transparent thick fluid, a simple stirring rod and three drops of black ink floating in the fluid. When you stirred the rod, the drops would become stripes and if you continued stirring they would slowly disappear and only the transparent fluid would remain. Then, if you stirred the rod in the opposite direction, the stripes would come back, slowly turning into the drops again.*
- *In the 1970s Bohm started working on his book On Dialogue. It was finished after his death in 1996. Bohm's premise in On Dialogue is that the way we think about* problems creates further problems. Bohm writes that we have a good self-perception when it comes to our bodies; if I move my arm I know what makes it move, if you push my arm I know what makes it move. But we don't know when our thinking is being influenced from the outside or when we create new thoughts ourselves.
- *Our thinking is a mechanism that we use very intensively every day and according to Bohm, our thinking needs maintenance. That's why we're doing this experiment. The Thinking Together Experiment is a proposal for a form of investigation into how we think and speak with each other. Is there an invisible pattern or field of influence and how do we find that out?*
- *Bohm introduces a technique called 'suspension' to conduct this investigation. He posited that it is possible to suspend the impulses that arise from your own assumptions and basic values. When for example you think someone is an idiot, 'suspending' means that you refrain from declaring this out loud and simply accept the thought, without telling yourself that you shouldn't think such things. In that way, the effects of the thought 'he is an idiot' (anger, frustration, irritation) are free to go their own way. The idea is to perceive these effects and impulses without entirely identifying with them. In other words, 'suspending' an impulse and a reaction means that you do not suppress that reaction, but you also do not immediately carry through with it. Instead, you give it your full attention.*

What do you think suspension is?

Give space for people to respond.

Guide: *In chemistry, a suspension is a fluid with floating particles. Paint is a good example, here are color particles floating in turpentine. They do not go up, nor down, they float, with a certain tension in the fluid. Consider this: the more intense the impulse, the stronger the assumptions that lie behind it. And the more intensively your entire body reacts. Your entire body participates. These intense reactions are precisely what we can learn from. What does it mean when I react so strongly? That's also why it's so important for Bohm that we don't suppress these impulses. You must let them be, but in a way that you can look at them. It's not only about considering the content of the thought, but the process that has evoked it. As individuals, we do this through*

'suspension' but in Bohm's vision, we also do this as a group. Perhaps you will find a way to present an intense impulse like 'you are an idiot' to the group so it 'floats' in the air between you and you can all look at it and investigate it together.

A quote from Bohm in On Dialogue is as follows: 'When participants in the group have the feeling that some expressions or subjects are not appropriate or are even shocking, it's important that they introduce these thoughts into the dialogue. Not a single subject or feeling should be blocked. It very often happens that after the dialogue is over the participants start gossiping and only then do they express their dissatisfaction and frustration. But it is precisely this material that offers the most fertile ground for bringing the dialogue into a deeper layer of meaning and coherence. Precisely when you go beyond superficial 'group thinking', beyond good manners. Beyond political correctness and small talk.'

Summarising;

- *We are going to talk for three hours. We don't have to work towards a result. There is no goal. Every subject, every impulse, every feeling can be in the dialogue. During the experiment, we are simultaneously participants and investigators. We can use the technique of suspension.*
- *There's no moderator. This is what the alarm sounds like now* (Ring the alarm). *When I punch the clock in a moment, I will be one of you. A participant. I've already talked so much that there is a good chance I won't say very much to begin with.*
- *The fact that I'm not moderating makes all of us equally responsible for the course of the conversation. And as far Bohm goes, we will have to use the information we've now got. I've told you what I wanted to share.*
- *In a moment, we'll enter our 'free' space. Choose a spot and an arrangement that feels good. I suggest we leave our bags here. We'll take the water with us.*
- *When the alarm goes off three hours from now, the last speaker can continue talking as long as they want to. However, the other participants will no longer react. The conversation will then be over.*

After that, we'll put everything back, leaving the space empty behind us. Then we'll walk back to the Meeting Point together and share some food. Before I push this button and we start, I have one more important question: will you join?'

Give space for people to respond and also answer yourself.

Guide: *I will join too.*

Note on will you join: Ask all people present to answer, one by one, 'yes' or 'no'. If people are in doubt, give them a bit of time and ask them what they need to make the decision. If people only want to participate halfway, have to leave early or want to watch, be clear about the fact that that's not possible. If someone doesn't want to participate, they can go. Don't make this a problem. Invite them to share food at the Meeting Point afterwards. If someone leaves and

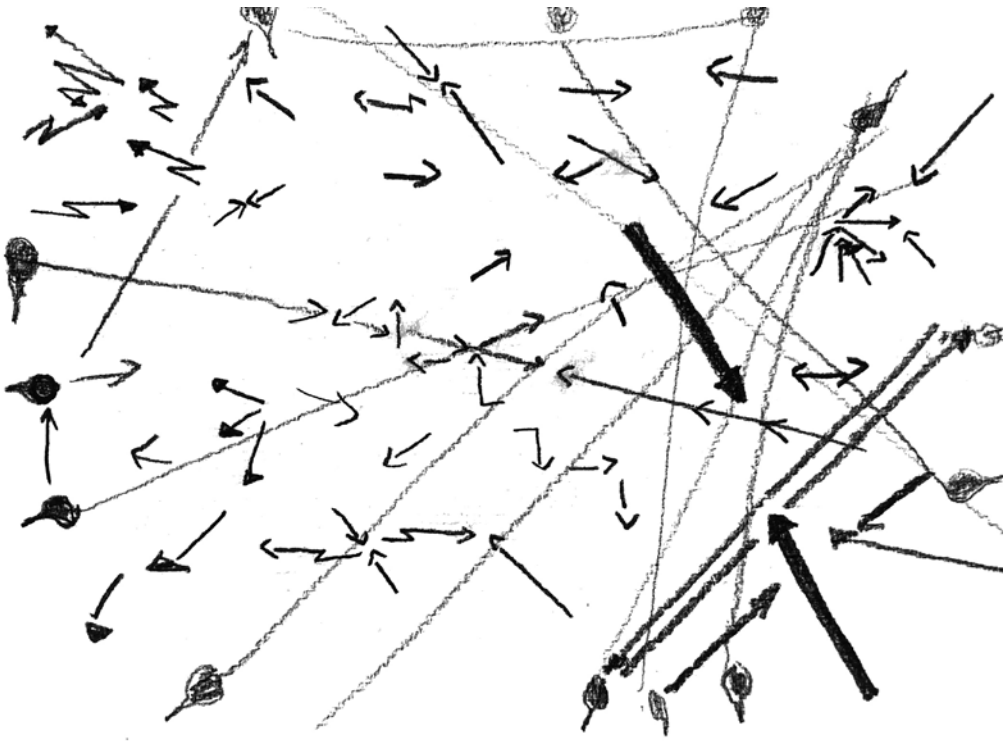
thus makes a strong personal decision, it makes it more palpable that the people who stay are committed.

THE CONVERSATION TAKES PLACE

WALK BACK

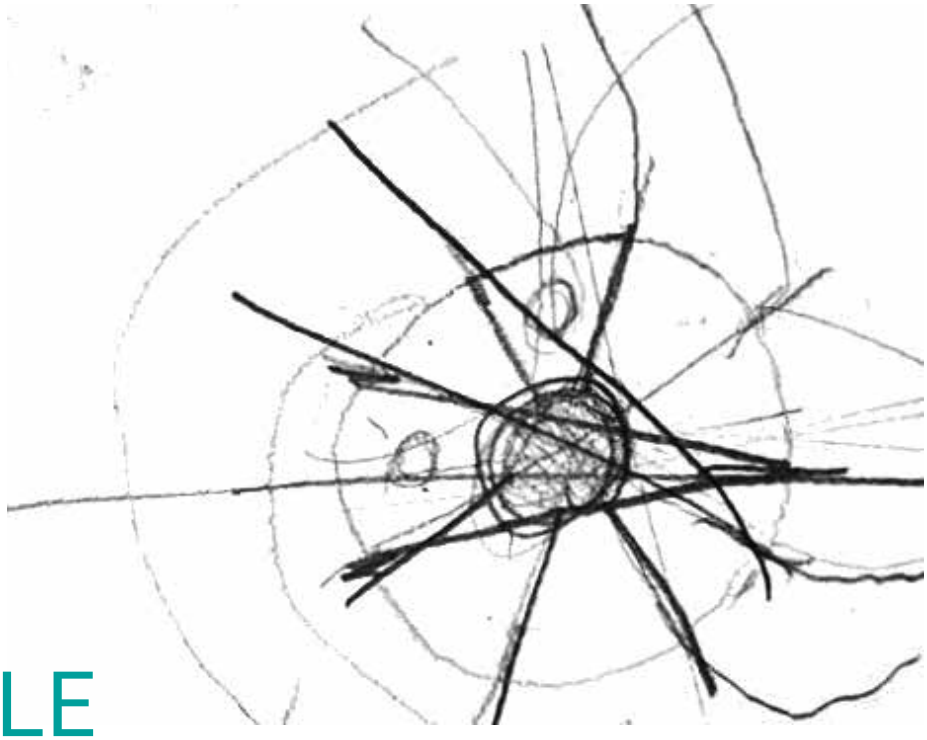
THE MEETING POINT

Share food and drinks in an improvised way and be open to any people passing by. Don't formalise this moment too much. Leave space for people to reflect and share as they wish. Make sure you do not have to rush. Take time to tune out.



Reflection made by a student from the Academy of Architecture in Amsterdam during *Architecture of Conversation*. Collected by Tjallien Walma van der Molen

Thinking Together. Photograph: Paulien Oltheten



IMPOSSIBLE CONVERSATION

We were inspired to create *Impossible Conversation* by the contemplative dialogues of Jesuit Monks. The form of the conversation was further developed by Bart van Rosmalen in collaboration with Lotte van den Berg. Its premiere took place with a participating audience at the Oerol Festival in June 2014. The work has since been performed by participating audiences in locations including Dresden, Budapest, Ljubljana and Singapore. People who guided the performance and translated it to local contexts include Peter Aers, Andreas Bachmair, Lotte van den Berg, Katja Dreyer, Angelika Fink, Maja de Kleva, Anneleen Lemmens, Annika Lewis, Sodja Lotker, Dennis Molendijk, Salomé Mooij, Jan-Henri Müller, Mara van Nes, Satchit Puranik, Daan 't Sas, Obiozo Ukpabi, Joel Wardenga and Leon Weller. Topics of Impossible Conversations have included love, hope, home, racism, the future, white privilege, care, the stranger, decolonisation, judgment, risk, heritage, trust, magic, damage, endings and more.

Reflection made by a student from the Academy of Architecture in Amsterdam during *Architecture of Conversation*. Collected by Tjallien Walma van der Molen

PREPARING FOR IMPOSSIBLE CONVERSATION

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

5-20 people

WHAT YOU NEED

LOCATIONS

Meeting Point: a place to meet before and after the conversation, which is walking distance of the Conversation Space. This is preferably a space that is open to others. It can be a public space and/or outside.

Conversation Space: an inside space that feels safe and comfortable, where you will not be interrupted by others and where you are not distracted, for example a room, studio, empty shop or an attic.

MATERIAL

At the Meeting Point: cups, glasses, bowls and cutlery; a little library with books that inform and inspire.

In the Conversation Space: simple wooden stools (as many as there are people), 20 wooden boards (size +A4), A4 paper (50), rubber bands, ballpoint pens (20).

CATERING

At the Meeting Point: drinks to share at the start and food and drinks to share afterwards.

During the conversation: dates and water.

PREPARING THE CONVERSATION SPACE

The space needs to be as empty and free of distraction as possible. Put furniture and décor away. Close the curtains and/or cover the windows and mirrors. Place the stools in a circle; connect two folded sheets of A4 paper to each wooden board with rubber bands; place these with pens somewhere in the space.

THE ROLE OF THE GUIDE

The guide is responsible for the preparation of the meeting and the conversation. The conversation is a space for collective practice, in which communication and interaction are explored. During the performative conversation the guide participates, just like the others.

ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The guide invites participants and ensures they understand that they will be asked to take part in a conversation. The guide also asks participants to join in with its preparation if possible. Everything is geared towards joint responsibility for the course of the conversation. The earlier the participants are involved the better.

PREPARING TOPIC AND QUESTION

Impossible Conversation lends itself well to difficult subjects. Leading up to the talk, it is important to choose your topic carefully and to craft the question you will ask the group. The question opens up a thematic landscape and relates to personal experiences of the participants. Make sure you have a comprehensive understanding of why this conversation asks to be performed within a certain context as this will add up to an in-depth topic and inspiring question.

PERFORMING IMPOSSIBLE CONVERSATION

AT THE MEETING POINT

Share drinks and wait for everybody to arrive. Give a general introduction based on the script below.

Guide: *Building Conversation is a constantly changing collective of people, all in their own way fascinated by what happens when we come together in conversation. Building Conversation is performed all over Europe, in many different contexts: in art spaces, schools, during conferences and outside in the woods. We explore how we talk and could talk with each other. Today we invite you to join this exploration.*

We'll walk to the performance space together. Once in the space, I'll give an introduction to the conversation and guide the preparation needed. After the conversation we'll come back here, share food and reflect upon the experience.

We won't do formal introductions, so if you want to get acquainted with who you will be talking to, now is a good time to do this, during the walk.

WALK

Ask people to help carry the dates, water and glasses.

INTRODUCTION AND PREPARATION IN THE CONVERSATION SPACE

Ask people to put bags and jackets to one side. Give an introduction to the conversation based on the script below.

Guide: *Welcome, to the Impossible Conversation on (topic)*

I will first give you an introduction to the conversation, who inspired it and how we will conduct it. Then we will have the conversation.

The conversation we will have together is inspired by a practice that was developed by Jesuit monks living together in monasteries. Although the Jesuits believed in the same

god and while they were used to a belief system that is based on lived experiences, they noticed it was difficult to have concrete and committed conversations about concepts such as God, love, the future, and so on. Therefore they developed a practice in which writing from personal experience, reading and listening play an important role.

Inspired by this practice, we have developed a conversation in three rounds:

1. *Writing, reading aloud, listening.*
2. *Writing about what you heard from the first round, reading aloud, listening.*
3. *Talking together about what we have heard during the first two rounds.*

Today we will have a conversation on (topic) from our personal experiences.

Before we start, I want you to bring your attention to a personal experience, a moment in your life in which you (question). An experience so intense, when remembering it, you can still feel it in your body.

Note on question: The question you raise to bring the participants' attention to a personal experience should be an attempt to highlight different possible perspectives on a topic.

- Phrase the question in such a way that opposite experiences are possible e.g. I ask you to bring your attention to a personal experience, to focus on a moment in your life where you had a strong sense of magic, or a strong sense of the absence of magic. An experience so intense that when you remember it, you can still feel it in your body.
- Someone can have different roles, perpetrator, victim, witness, active, passive, and so on e.g. I ask you to bring your attention to a personal experience, a moment in your life where you or someone else has caused damage, or a moment in your life where you witnessed the infliction of damage. An experience so intense that when you remember it, you can still feel it in your body.

Guide: *We will have some time to think about this, but before that I have an important question: knowing how we are going to have the conversation and what it will be about, will you join?*

Give space for people to respond and also answer yourself.

Guide: *I will join too.*

Note on will you join: Ask all people present to answer, one by one, 'yes' or 'no'. If people are in doubt give them a bit of time and ask them what they need to make the decision. If people only want to participate halfway, have to leave early or want to watch, be clear about the fact that that's not possible. If someone doesn't want to participate, they can go. Don't make this a problem. Invite them for the food sharing at the Meeting Point afterwards. If someone leaves and thus makes a strong personal decision, it makes it more palpable that the people who stay are committed. Answer yourself.

Take some time to answer the questions participants might have regarding the topic, and the choice of an experience, but do not take responsibility for them to find an experience.

THE CONVERSATION TAKES PLACE

Guide: *We will now take some time to focus on a specific experience. While doing so, pay attention to details, e.g. what season was it, where were you, what objects were involved, was it cold or hot, rain or shine, what did you smell, who was with you or were you alone? We will take about five minutes to focus on this experience. You can walk around, or sit down somewhere, whatever feels good to you.*

After five minutes.

Guide: *Please take a writing board with a pen and sit down.*

We will begin the first round in which we will write, read and listen. First we will write down our experience. It is important to write in full sentences and not to use isolated words. Remember that you will read this aloud later. Use as much detail as you can. We will take ten minutes for this.

After ten minutes.

Guide: *Now I'd like to ask you to read what you have written, aloud to each other, one after another, when you are ready for it. Give it some time. We do not speak in between or respond to what is read. And please read the words on your paper, don't make additions or correct yourself. For the listeners, also pay attention to the words and if you feel like it, you can make a note.*

After all participants have read.

Guide: *We begin our second round where we will write, read and listen. We will write down, again in full sentences, what resonated or has left an impression on us from what we've heard. What resonates can be from one or more stories. For this we take another ten minutes.*

After ten minutes.

Guide: *Now we are going to read what we have written to each other, one after another, when you are ready for it. We do not speak in between or respond to what is read. Please read the words on your paper, don't add or correct yourself.*

After all participants have read.

Guide: *In the last round we will talk about what has been shared, what we have heard and read. And we will continue speaking from these shared experiences. This will take 45 minutes.*

After approximately 43 minutes.

Guide: *We will soon end our conversation. Is there anyone who wants to say something that hasn't been said yet?*

Give space for the participants to respond.

Guide: *Thank you for this Impossible Conversation on (topic). We will now go back to the Meeting Point where we can share some food.*

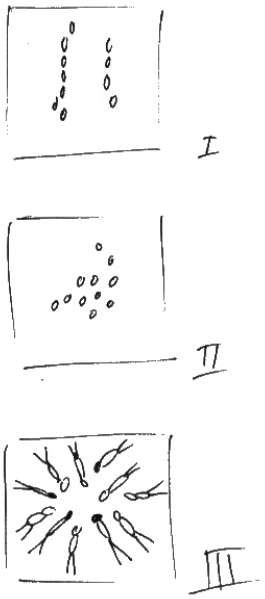
WALK BACK

THE MEETING POINT

Share food and drinks in an improvised way and be open to any people passing by. Don't formalise this moment too much. Leave space for people to reflect and share as they wish. Make sure you do not have to rush. Take time to tune out.

Impossible Conversation. Photograph: Paulien Oltheten

AGONISTIC CONVERSATION



We were inspired to create *Agonistic Conversation* by the books of Chantal Mouffe and by an artist who told us about Māori meetings she attended in New Zealand. The form of the conversation was developed by Lotte van den Berg in collaboration with Daan 't Sas and Bart van Rosmalen. The work premiered in June 2014 at the Oerol Festival and has since been performed by participating audiences in Moss, Amsterdam, Groningen, Salzburg, Lisbon, Zagreb and many other places. People who guided the performance and translated it to local contexts include Peter Aers, Lotte van den Berg, Henriette Blakstad, Marthe Sofie L.Eide, Fleur Lock, Sebastiaan van Loenen, Sodja Lotker, Tiril Pharo, Daan 't Sas and Leon Weller. Topics of Agonistic Conversations have included Europe's borders, abortion, climate change denial, gender quotas and apologies for slavery.

Top: Reflection made by a student from the Academy of Architecture in Amsterdam during *Architecture of Conversation*. Collected by Tjallien Walma van der Molen

Below: The three positions of *Agonistic Conversation*. Illustration: Lotte van den Berg

PREPARING FOR AGONISTIC CONVERSATION

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

7-20 people

WHAT YOU NEED

LOCATIONS

Meeting Point: a place to meet before and after the conversation, which is walking distance of the Conversation Space. This is preferably a space that is open to others. It can be a public space and/or outside.

Conversation Space: an inside space that feels safe and comfortable, where you will not be interrupted by others and where you are not distracted, for example a room, studio, empty shop or an attic.

MATERIAL

At the Meeting Point: cups, glasses, bowls and cutlery; a little library with books that inform and inspire.

In the Conversation Space: a little table with around ten wooden blocks of 5 x 2 x 1 cm; blankets (as many as there are people); a watch for the guide.

CATERING

At the Meeting Point: drinks to share at the start and food and drinks to share afterwards

During the conversation: dates and water.

PREPARING THE CONVERSATION SPACE

The space needs to be as empty and free of distraction as possible. Put furniture and décor away. Close the curtains and/or cover the windows and mirrors. Pile up blankets on one side. Give the table a place in the space and install the wooden blocks on it.

THE ROLE OF THE GUIDE

The guide is responsible for the preparation of the meeting and the conversation. The conversation is a space for collective practice, in which communication and interaction are explored. During the performative conversation the guide participates, just like the others.

ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The guide invites participants and ensures they understand that they will be asked to take part in a conversation. The guide also asks participants to join in with its preparation if possible. Everything is geared towards joint responsibility for the course of the conversation. The earlier the participants are involved, the better.

PREPARING THE TOPIC

Agonistic Conversation deals with conflicting and polarising topics that are at stake in the group itself or in the social political context the participants are part of. To make sure everybody in the group is committed to dealing with a certain conflict, it helps to propose three topics and give space to the group to make suggestions and decisions. If the conflict at stake is clear to everyone, propose it directly. Make sure the topic is proposed in a polarising way from the start, fuelling the first part of the conversation where extreme positions and arguments will be explored. Trust that in the second and third part of the conversation arguments will change and a softer approach to each other and the topic will be found (while taking into account that extreme positions are part of the spectrum and should be acknowledged). When proposing a topic. share the two sides of the conflict e.g. abortion should be prohibited, always; abortion should be possible, always. Leading up to the talk, it is important to choose your topics carefully. Make sure you have a comprehensive understanding of why this conversation needs to be performed within a certain context as this will result in an in-depth topic and inspiring question.

PERFORMING AGONISTIC CONVERSATION

AT THE MEETING POINT

Share drinks and wait for everybody to arrive.
Give a general introduction based on the script below.

Guide: *Building Conversation is a constantly changing collective of people, all in their own way fascinated by what happens when we come together in conversation. Building Conversation is performed all over Europe, in many different contexts: in art spaces, schools, during conferences and outside in the woods. We explore how we talk and could talk with each other. Today we invite you to join this exploration.*

We'll walk to the performance space together. Once in the space, I'll give an introduction to the conversation and guide the preparation needed. After the conversation we'll come back here, share food and reflect upon the experience.

We won't do formal introductions, so if you want to get acquainted with who you will be talking to, now is a good time to do this, during the walk.

WALK

Ask people to help carry the dates, water and glasses.

INTRODUCTION AND PREPARATION IN THE CONVERSATION SPACE

Ask people to put bags and jackets to one side.
Give an introduction to the conversation based on the script below.

Guide: *I'll give an introduction and together we'll prepare the conversation. After that we'll have a short break, with time to go to the toilet. After the break, we'll have the actual conversation. Afterwards, we leave the space as we found it and walk back to the Meeting Point together.*

To start with the title Agonistic Conversation. What does that actually mean? Chantal Mouffe, a political scientist, reintroduced the word agonistic. An agonist is something other than an antagonist, which means enemy. An agonist is an opponent. Opponents have a shared system of values, they stand on common ground. They agree upon their main values, although they can disagree upon the definition of these values. Antagonists, enemies, stand on two different islands, shouting at each other, they do not share basic values.

Chantal Mouffe talks about the importance of conflict in the democratic arena. The democratic arena should be used as a place where we share basic values and as such we can be each other's opponents. Sometimes it seems as if there is only consensus or war, but there is a wide range of possible opposing positions in between these two extremes. We should dare to be each other's opponents, relate to each other in agonistic spaces, states Mouffe.

Today we will experience different kinds of opposition, different ways of dealing with conflict, inspired by the practice of Māori communities from New Zealand.

Within their communities, Māori have a place for gatherings. It's a big open space, with a wooden floor, some cushions and blankets. When there is a conflict within their community or between communities, they meet in front of this space. Before entering, they stand opposite each other, in two groups, for a welcoming ritual in which they acknowledge the differences between them. Then after a while they approach each other acknowledging that despite all the differences, they breathe the same air. Only then do they enter the open space where they lie down together. While lying down they talk about how to deal with their conflicts and differences.

Inspired by this practice we will talk today from three different positions:
- *standing opposite each other*
- *approaching*
- *lying down*

Please come and stand around this small table and I will show you what to do. We will move from one position into the other, while talking. It's a simple choreography yet it needs to be explained thoroughly now. Once the conversation starts I will join the group as one of you and I will no longer guide this conversation. Please tell me now if anything is unclear.

Guide: *I will now show you how we will proceed, using this table as a maquette of this space. After that we'll jointly decide on the conflict of our conversation and the groups that will make up its two sides. Then there will be a short break after which we will meet in two groups like this…*

Use the wooden sticks to show the first position of the choreography: two groups opposite each other.

Guide: *We begin with two groups standing opposite each other. The groups should not be of equal size. Standing like this we begin with a few moments of silence. After some time, someone will start to speak. It doesn't have to be me. In this position, we will state the differences between the groups e.g. you are all pro-abortion; we are all against it, or you are always late; we are always on time. We'll make things black and white and thus polarise.*

Always state differences using sentences that begin with 'we' or 'you'. Always speak from group to group. From we to you. That is a rule. Do not discuss what the others say. Listen to it. Leave it there. It's not a game of ping pong. Drop the ball after it hits you. Investigate what it does to you. Don't throw it back. There can be silences in between. We polarise and explore what that does to us. Also, if someone in your own group says something you do not agree with, drop it. Part of polarisation is that your group becomes more and more strictly defined. Explore what this does to you.

We will do this for half an hour. After that I'll say "time's up" and ask if anyone wants to have the last word.

Bring the wooden blocks together forming a group again, while talking.

Guide: *The movement we do next is called 'approach', leading up to a position in which we become one group again, knowing that despite all differences we breathe the same air. Explore for yourself in what way you wish to approach the people from the other group. Sometimes to approach them you need to first step back, to be able to look. Sometimes an approach is a simple touch, one step forward. Do what feels best to you. We will do this for a couple of minutes, in silence.*

Slowly start laying down the blocks, while talking.

Guide: *The last position we take is lying down. We take a blanket over there and find a place in space. Lying down, we start with a few moments of silence and after which someone will start to speak. Again, it doesn't have to be me.*

In this position, you can speak from your own personal perspective, using 'I'. Explore how this changes your arguments and your relation towards the arguments of the other group. In this position, lying down, looking up, we speak about how to deal with our differences.

Guide: *We will do this for an hour. After that I'll say "time's up" and ask if someone wants to have the last word.*

Are there any questions?

Give space for people to respond. Answer clearly and concisely. Keep it practical. Do not lose energy.

Guide: *We'll soon have a short break and after that we'll start the conversation. But first we have to decide which conflict we're going to deal with. I'll propose three and you can add one or two. Out of these we will chose one, together.*

I propose:
1. *(conflicting topic)*
2. *(conflicting topic)*
3. *(conflicting topic)*

Does anyone have a strong feeling about one of these propositions? Or do you want to add another conflicting topic?

Listen to preferences. Take your time because a shared group choice is important for commitment, but do not lose momentum because this is part of the preparation. If you feel there is a strong preference for a certain topic, make a final proposal.

Guide: *Listening to all this I propose that our conflicting topic is (topic).*
Is there someone who has a strong argument against this?

Give space for the participants to respond and based on that decide or make a new proposal.

Guide: *The conflicting topic we are going to deal with is (topic). We now divide the group into two parties. You can still take a bit of time to decide on which side you want to stand. It is possible to choose a side you are not normally on. You can use this conversation to explore extreme positions alien to you.*

Demarcate two places in space opposite each other. Give people some time to move from one side to the other. Then let them make a final choice. Standing in between the groups or remaining on the sidelines is not an option. Make a choice yourself and show it to the group.

Guide: *Before we have a break, and now that you know what we are going to do and what we are going to talk about, I have one more important question: 'will you join?'*

Give space for people to respond and also answer yourself.

Guide: *I will join too.*

Note on will you join: Ask all people present to answer, one by one, 'yes' or 'no'. If people are in doubt, give them a bit of time and ask them what they need to make the decision. If people only want to participate halfway, have to leave early or want to watch, be clear about the fact that that's not possible. If someone doesn't want to participate, they can go. Don't make this a problem. Invite them to share food at the Meeting Point afterwards. If someone leaves and thus makes a strong personal decision, it makes it more palpable that the people who stay are committed.

BREAK

Guide: *We will take a short break and start in five minutes. You can use the break to connect with your group and look for arguments.*

THE CONVERSATION TAKES PLACE

Guide: *Please stand on two sides. We start with a few moments of silence.*

The conversation unfolds

After 30 minutes.

Guide: *Time is up. Is there someone who would like to have the last word?*

After the first round the two sides of the group approach each other. If nobody begins you can take the lead. After a few minutes get some blankets and share them as a gesture to lie down for the third round.

After 60 minutes.

Guide: *Time is up. Is there someone who would like to have the last word?*

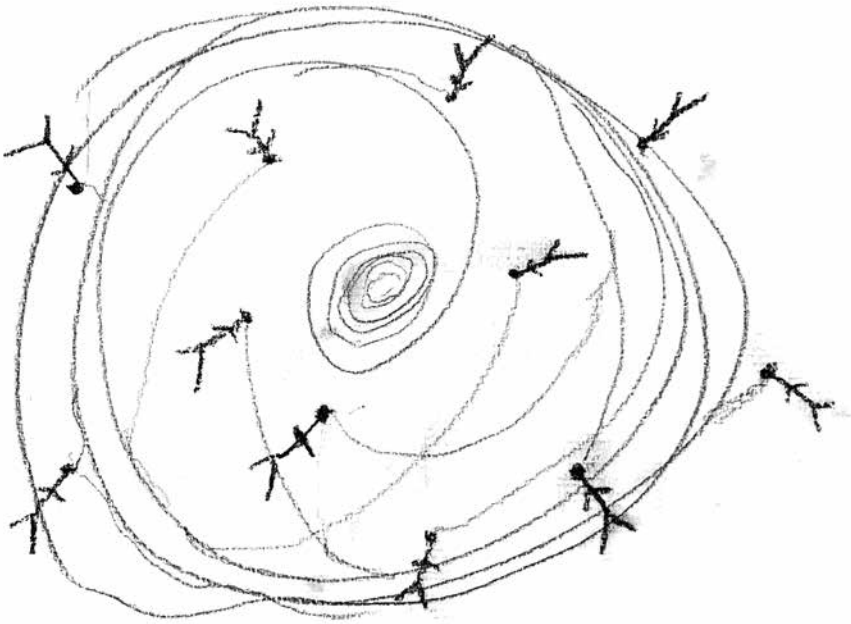
Give space for participants to respond.

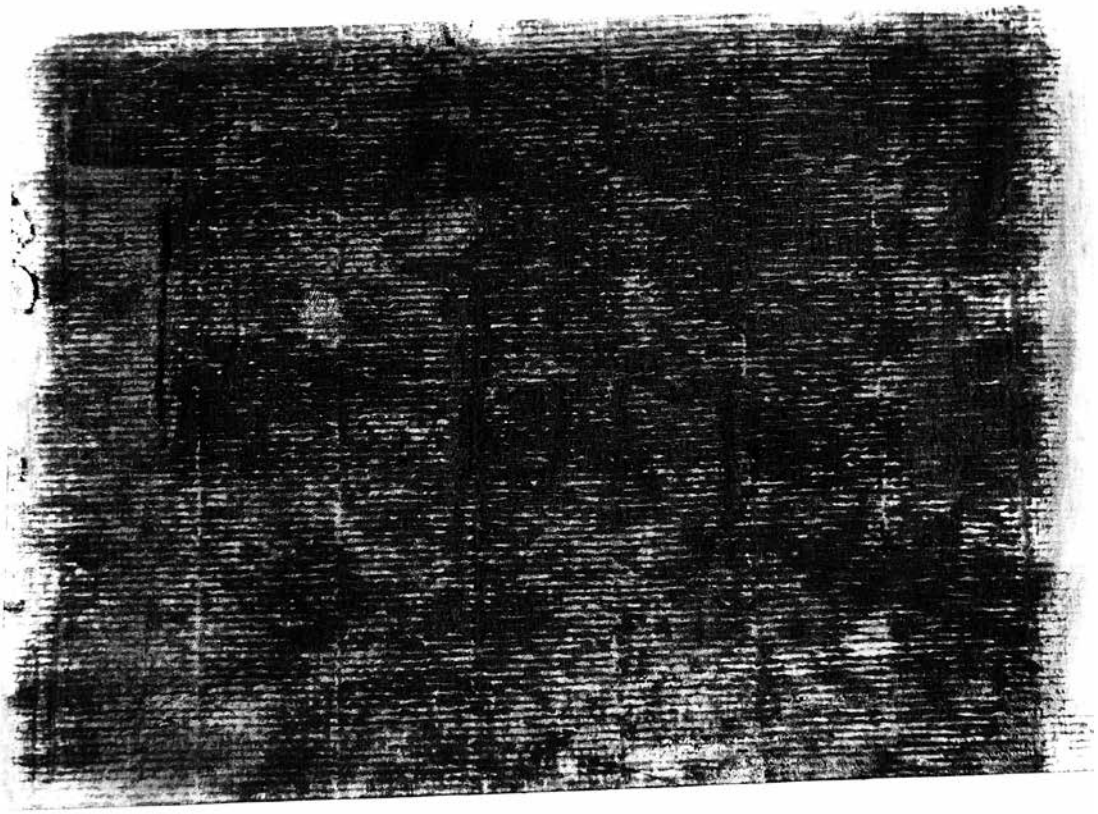
Guide: *This is the conversation we had.*

WALK BACK

THE MEETING POINT

Share food and drinks in an improvised way and be open to any people passing by. Don't formalise this moment too much. Leave space for people to reflect and share as they wish. Make sure you do not have to rush. Take time to tune out.

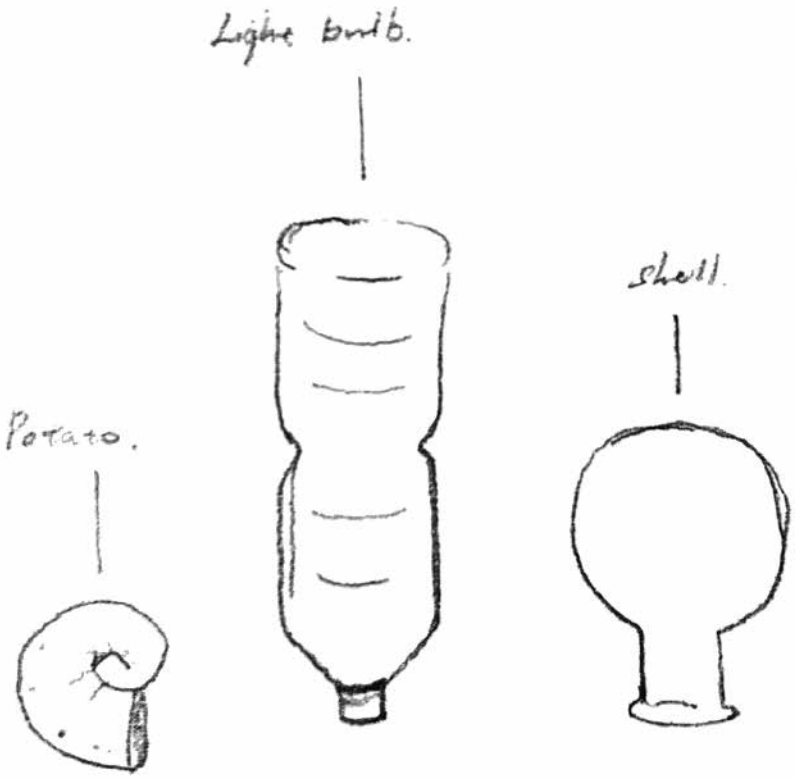




Reflections made by students from the Academy of Architecture in Amsterdam during *Architecture of Conversation*. Collected by Tjallien Walma van der Molen

Agonistic Conversation. Photograph: Marieke Josselet

PARLIAMENT OF THINGS



Reflection made by a student from the Academy of Architecture in Amsterdam during *Architecture of Conversation*. Collected by Tjallien Walma van der Molen

We were inspired to create *Parliament of Things* by Thijs Middeldorp, who first connected us with the work of Bruno Latour. The form of the conversation was developed by Lotte van den Berg and Daan 't Sas in collaboration with Dennis Molendijk and Peter Aers. First try-outs were done with students from different schools and universities in Amsterdam. The work premiered in June 2016 in Amsterdam and has since been performed by participating audiences in locations including Utrecht, Ghent, Lisbon, Poznan and Terni. People who guided the performance and translated it to local contexts include Peter Aers, Lea Aymard, Lotte van den Berg, Mijs Besseling, Coen Dijkstra, Bendik Johannesen, Oliver Maxwell, Laura Mentink, Mara van Nes, Tiril Pharo, James Ray Moore, Heiki Riipinen, Nanna Rosenfeldt, Marija Sujica, Shëkufe Tadayoni Heiberg, Julia ter Veld, Daan 't Sas, Samar Zughool. Topics of the Parliament of Things have included the legal position of rivers and mountains, the possibility of another planet, the ownership of trees and many more questions in which human-made and more-than-human-made processes intertwine.

PREPARING FOR PARLIAMENT OF THINGS

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

7-20 people

WHAT YOU NEED

LOCATIONS

Meeting Point: a place to meet before and after the conversation, which is walking distance of the Conversation Space. This is preferably a space that is open to others. It can be a public space and/or outside.

Conversation Space: an inside space that feels safe and comfortable, where you will not be interrupted by others and where you are not distracted, for example a room, studio, empty shop or an attic. The size of the group dictates how big the space should be. For 20 people 8 x 10 m is the minimum space required.

MATERIAL

At the Meeting Point: cups, glasses, bowls and cutlery; a little library with books that inform and inspire.

In the Conversation Space: simple wooden stools (four more stools than there are participants); one wooden rectangular table; one wooden round table; 35 to 40 objects you can hold in your hand. They should be diverse, crafted and found on the street or nature, ranging from plastic to metal to wood to stone.

CATERING

At the Meeting Point: drinks to share at the start. and food and drinks to share afterwards.

During the conversation: dates and water.

PREPARING THE CONVERSATION SPACE

The space needs to be as empty and free of distraction as possible. Put furniture and décor away. Close the curtains and/or cover the windows and mirrors. Place the stools in a circle, enough for each participant with four left over. Place 30 objects on the rectangular table. Place the wooden round table in such a way that people can stand around it.

THE ROLE OF THE GUIDE

The guide is responsible for the preparation of the meeting and the conversation. The conversation is a space for collective practice, in which communication and interaction are explored. During the performative conversation the guide participates, just like the others.

ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The guide invites participants and ensures they understand that they will be asked to take part in a conversation. The guide also asks participants to join in with its preparation if possible. Everything is geared towards joint responsibility for the course of the conversation. The earlier the participants are involved the better.

PREPARING THE CASES

Parliament of Things can open up different perspectives on urgent and concrete dilemmas in which the position and voice of more-than-human entities is at stake. Leading up to the talk, it is important to choose your cases carefully. Make sure you have a comprehensive understanding of why this conversation asks to be performed within a certain context as this will add up to an in-depth topic, and an inspiring case and gathering. For example, a *Parliament of Things* that we organised in Denmark, concerned plans for an artificial island to house 35,000 people and protect the port of Copenhagen from rising sea levels, and gave voice to many more-than-human entities in the sea's ecosystem.

PERFORMING PARLIAMENT OF THINGS

AT THE MEETING POINT

Share drinks and wait for everybody to arrive. Give a general introduction based on the script below.

Guide: *Building Conversation is a constantly changing collective of people, all in their own way fascinated by what happens when we come together in conversation. Building Conversation is performed all over Europe, in many different contexts: in art spaces, schools, during conferences and outside in the woods. We explore how we talk and could talk with each other. Today we invite you to join this exploration.*

We'll walk to the performance space together. Once in the space, I'll give an introduction to the conversation and guide the preparation needed. After the conversation we'll come back here, share food and reflect upon the experience.

We won't do formal introductions, so if you want to get acquainted with who you will be talking to, now is a good time to do this, during the walk.

WALK

Ask people to help carry the dates, water and glasses.

INTRODUCTION AND PREPARATION IN THE CONVERSATION SPACE

Ask people to put bags and jackets to one side. Stand at the table yourself. Give an introduction to the conversation based on the script below.

Guide: *First, I'll give an introduction and together we'll prepare the conversation. After that we'll have a short break, with time to go to the toilet. After the break, we'll have the actual conversation, followed by a short reflection. Then we leave the space as we found it and walk back to the Meeting Point together.*

Guide: *The word 'thing' originally meant a gathering of people, and a place where they would meet to resolve their affairs. We find the word thing in Thingvellir, which was the site of the annual parliament in Iceland until the end of the 18th century. Our Parliament of Things, our gathering, on the other hand is a gathering not only of humans, but of things, and for this we turn to Bruno Latour.*

Bruno Latour is a French philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist. His work is not easy to reduce to one scientific domain and that's not what he wants, either. For Latour, everything exists in different domains and by creating domains or concepts we divide ourselves and things. He advocates taking away these divisions.

All this is argued very clearly in his book We Have Never Been Modern (1991). In it he writes that with the concept of being modern we separated ourselves from nature. Furthermore, Latour thinks the concept doesn't really mean anything as we are still a part of nature. We are not ruling over nature, we are not managing it, we and our cities are no different from the bird and its nest. He explains this by developing the 'actor-network theory'. We, humans, exist and act in a network of things. Things like... this table. This table is acting because it makes us stand in a specific way, it makes a difference. The wind is acting, the sun is constantly acting (...). Sea is a thing, a bird is a thing, a human being is a thing. So, we exist in a network of things that also act; he calls them 'actants'. For example, a potato exists in a network of things. A farmer put the seeds in the ground, but many other factors are part of this network of actants, which make a difference to the potato. What else is part of this network?

Give space for people to respond. Ask others what they think are in the network as actants e.g. rain, sun, soil, seeds, field mice, Bayer, capitalism and so on. Concepts can also be actants as they act on human behaviour and as such act on the environment.

Guide: *In order to face our world's challenges, we should not only look to ourselves but also to the network that we exist and act within. We should listen to all things that are part of that network. We should speak with all the things that influence us and that are influenced by us. Latour is very serious about this. He speaks about the fact that our politics should be the politics of the cosmos, the 'cosmopolitics'. At the COP 21 in Paris in 2015 he organised a shadow conference, a Parliament of Things, with students who invited the oil that's still in the ground to speak, amongst other things.*

Of course, Latour is not the first to consider this. Other cultures listen to and communicate with things. Today though we want to take up his challenge and raise a Parliament of Things as he proposed. In order to be able to do this we have to prepare something together: we'll have to decide what we will invite. It's up to us to decide which voices will be heard today. For this it is important to think about the topic we feel is necessary to address.

INTRODUCE CASE

Guide: *I'll propose two examples and you can add one or two. Out of those we choose one, together.*

1. *(case)*
2. *(case)*

Note on choosing the case: introduce two examples to engage the group e.g. should the river in this city become a legal entity in the way that New Zealand granted legal personality to the Whanganui River in 2017? Once one specific case is clear and has been chosen, create the network of things which the group thinks it is important to invite.

Guide: *Relating to (case), what's the first thing or actant you would like to invite for the gathering?*

Give space for the participants to respond. Ask clarifying questions and make sure everybody understands which thing is invited and why. Then ask the participant who made the proposal to choose an object that will stand for the thing proposed.

Guide: *Please choose an object from that rectangular table that, for you, stands for (the thing proposed) and give it a place here, on the round table.*

Note on choosing the objects to symbolise the things: This part is important for the participants to build the network together. With each thing proposed, take time to understand what has been chosen before placing the object on the round table. Be strict about participants speaking one at a time and that each object must be placed on the table before another one can be brought. Choose four more objects than there are people present. On the round table the constellation of objects stands for the network around the case you are dealing with. Encourage the replacement of objects on the table, as their spatial arrangement highlights certain perspectives and relations within the network. As a guide, you can also suggest and choose a thing to be invited. Stay concrete and keep the number of concepts to a minimum. Too many concepts might turn the gathering into a more abstract conversation.

Guide: *Now we have chosen the things that will speak and be heard today in our gathering in the Parliament of Things, we will have a short break. During the break I will give place to the different things we have invited, they will all get a stool.*

After the break we all choose one of these stools. Sit down and take the thing in your hands. From that moment onwards you speak as that thing. You give voice to the thing.

As you can see, there are four more things invited than we are people here. This means you can shift places and give voice to another thing too.

The gathering will last 75 minutes. I set an alarm and when it goes off, the last thing speaking can finish at its own time. No thing will respond after this.

Guide: *The meeting will not have a fixed agenda nor a chairperson. We decided about the case and the things present. From now on it is up to the things to decide how they wish to speak with each other while relating to the case.*

Before we have a short break, and now that you know what we are going to do, what we are going to talk about and with whom, I have one more important question: will you join?'

Give space for people to respond and also answer yourself.

Guide: *I will join too.*

Note on will you join: Ask all people present to answer, one by one, 'Yes' or 'No'. If people are in doubt give them a bit of time and ask them what they need to make the decision. If people only want to participate halfway, have to leave early or want to watch, be clear about the fact that that's not possible. If someone doesn't want to participate, they can go. Don't make this a problem. Invite them for the food sharing at the Meeting Point afterwards. If someone leaves and thus makes a strong personal decision, it makes it more palpable that the people who stay are committed.

BREAK

During the break, set the alarm and give all objects a stool.

THE CONVERSATION TAKES PLACE

When the timer sounds, let the last thing speaking finish. Round off the conversation cordially.

REFLECTION

Invite everybody to come and stand around the round table for a short reflection of about 15 minutes. Leave the objects on the stools.

Guide: *What did the Parliament of Things tell us?*

Give space for people to respond. Reflection provides an opportunity for sharing different perspectives present in the group. Conclusions are not necessary.

Guide: *Is there anyone who wants to say something that hasn't been said yet?*

Give space for people to respond.

Note on the reflection: The reflection is not an instrument for coming to final conclusions. Do not reflect on the format but on the content. If participants do this, bring them back to the question, 'what did the Parliament of Things tell us?' Explain that reflection on the format can happen afterwards, at the Meeting Point. A remark on how the position of being human makes it difficult to have different perspectives can also be content.

Guide: *Thank you for this Parliament of Things. We will now go back to the Meeting Point where we can share some food.*

WALK BACK

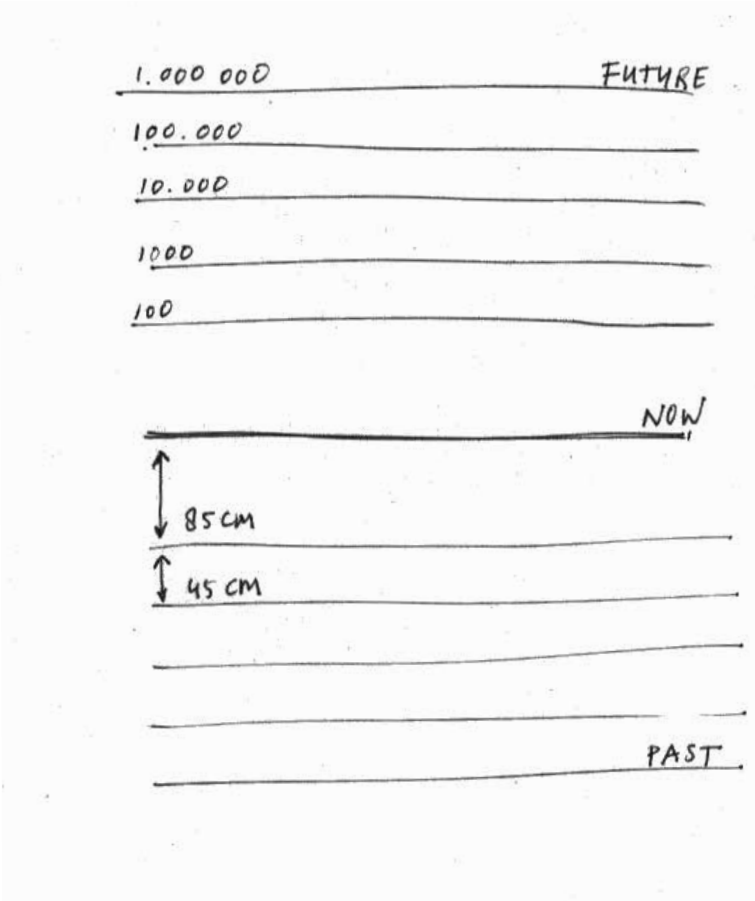
THE MEETING POINT

Share food and drinks in an improvised way and be open to any people passing by. Don't formalise this moment too much. Leave space for people to reflect and share as they wish. Make sure you do not have to rush. Take time to tune out.

Parliament of Things. Photograph: Jannes Linders

Parliament of Things. Photograph: Peter Aers

Parliament of Things. Photograph: Henk Claassen



TIMELOOP

We were inspired to create *Timeloop* by a story told to us by Joseph Osawabine, the former director of Debajehmujig, a theatre group of native storytellers from the Great Lakes in Canada. The form of the conversation is developed by Lotte van den Berg in collaboration with Peter Aers, Ewout Bomert, Bart Capelle en Daan 't Sas. First try-outs were done with a group of people leading family constellations in Utrecht and with a participating audience at BUDA in Kortrijk. The work premiered in August 2016 at Festival Boulevard in Den Bosch and has since been performed by participating audiences in locations including Amsterdam, Tilburg, Copenhagen, Brussels and Zagreb. People who guided the performance and translated it to local contexts include Peter Aers, Lotte van den Berg, Maja Ejrnaes, Ana Luiza Ulsig, Vera Maeder, Salomé Mooij and Daan 't Sas. *Timeloop* topics have included sustainability, border control, education, community building, childcare and more.

Reflection made by a student from the Academy of Architecture in Amsterdam during *Architecture of Conversation*. Collected by Tjallien Walma van der Molen

PREPARING FOR TIMELOOP

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

7-20 people

WHAT YOU NEED

LOCATIONS

Meeting Point: a place to meet before and after the conversation, which is walking distance of the Conversation Space. This is preferably a space that is open to others. It can be a public space and/or outside.

Conversation Space: an inside space that feels safe and comfortable, where you will not be interrupted by others and where you are not distracted, for example a room, studio, empty shop or an attic. The space should be open, without pillars or other obstacles. The size of the group dictates how big the space should be. For 20 people, 8 x 10 m is the minimum space required.

MATERIAL

At the Meeting Point: cups, glasses, bowls and cutlery; a little library with books that inform and inspire.

In the Conversation Space: as many simple wooden stools as there are people and that can be stacked up; 20 A4 wooden boards, 40 sheets of A4 paper, rubber bands and 20 ballpoint pens; a one-hour hourglass; white gaffer tape; a small table; a few wooden blocks of 5 x 2 x 1 cm.

CATERING

At the Meeting Point: drinks to share at the start and food and drinks to share afterwards

During the conversation: dates and water.

PREPARING THE CONVERSATION SPACE

The space needs to be as empty and free of distraction as possible. Put furniture and décor away. Close the curtains and/or cover the windows and mirrors.; Connect two folded sheets of A4 paper to each wooden board with rubber bands; place these with pens somewhere in the space. Make a pattern with lines on the floor using the white tape, following the drawing on page 64. Repeat the pattern on the little table, which will serve as a maquette of the space. Place the wooden blocks on it, representing people in the space. Place the hourglass in the space, visible to everybody.

THE ROLE OF THE GUIDE

The guide is responsible for the preparation of the meeting and the conversation. The conversation is a space for collective practice, in which communication and interaction are explored. During the performative conversation the guide participates, just like the others.

ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The guide invites participants and ensures they understand that they will be asked to take part in a conversation. The guide also asks participants to join in with its preparation if possible. Everything is geared towards joint responsibility for the course of the conversation. The earlier the participants are involved the better.

PREPARING THE TOPIC

Timeloop can open up different perspectives on urgent and concrete dilemmas. Propose the topic in a simple and general way, preferably using an active verb e.g. building a house, learning and teaching, letting in strangers. Just before the conversation starts, participants will be asked to formulate the questions that are at stake for them in relation to the topic e.g. *'which material should I use to build my house?' 'Should I homeschool my kids?' 'Do I open my house to refugees?'* Relating these presumably simple questions to people living thousands of years before and after us, it immediately becomes clear how time-related these questions are and that many different answers are possible. Leading up to the talk, it is important to choose your topic carefully. Make sure you have a comprehensive understanding of why this conversation asks to be performed within a certain context as this will add up to an in-depth topic and inspiring question.

PERFORMING TIMELOOP

AT THE MEETING POINT

Share drinks and wait for everybody to arrive.
Give a general introduction based on the script below.

Guide: *Building Conversation is a constantly changing collective of people, all in their own way fascinated by what happens when we come together in conversation. Building Conversation is performed all over Europe, in many different contexts: in art spaces, schools, during conferences and outside in the woods. We explore how we talk and could talk with each other. Today we invite you to join this exploration.*

We'll walk to the performance space together. Once in the space, I'll give anintroduction to the conversation and guide the preparation needed. After the conversation we'll come back here, share food and reflect upon the experience.

We won't do formal introductions, so if you want to get acquainted with who you will be talking to, now is a good time to do this, during the walk.

WALK

Ask people to help carry the dates, water and glasses.

INTRODUCTION AND PREPARATION IN THE CONVERSATION SPACE

Ask people to put bags and jackets to one side.

Give an introduction to the conversation based on the script below.

Guide: *I'll give an introduction and together we'll prepare the conversation. After that we'll have a short break, with time to go to the toilet. After the break we'll have the actual conversation, followed by a short reflection. Then we leave the space as we found it and walk back to the Meeting Point together.*

Timeloop is inspired by a meeting between Lotte van den Berg, a member of the Building Conversation community, and Joseph Osawabine, a storyteller from the indigenous theater group Debajehmujig based in Manitoulin Island, in Northern Ontario, Canada. Osawabine explained how he consults with his ancestors from seven generations ago and descendants seven generations ahead when making important decisions in life. While it may be a common practice to consult past and future generations in some cultures, it seems to be less present in the westernised world. His story inspired us to practise collectivity in a widespread time spectrum, opening up a time-space to think in. To explain how the conversation works, I would like to invite you to come and stand around that little table.

Stand around the small table.
Use the table as a maquette during your explanation.

Guide: - *The lines represent time. The middle line is now. On one side there is the past. On the other side, the future. This line is 100 years in the past and from here it multiplies exponentially: 100, 1,000, 10,000, 100,000, 1,000,000 years in the past. And the same on the other side. This line is 100 years from now and then 1,000, 10,000, 100,000, 1,000,000 years in the future.*

- Timeloop *is a conversation that takes place from different perspectives in time. In other words, you speak from a point in time and not about time.*
- *To begin, each person in the group chooses a position in this time-space, standing in the place of a person who has lived or will live. You then speak and listen from the perspective of this person. You can do this by drawing on what you know or imagine about people living in that era. You can also use the physical experiences and feelings you have while standing in a certain position in time. Make contact with that place and its people in a way that suits you.*
- *During the conversation you can move to another position in the time-space; to the place of another person and therefore change the perspective from which you are speaking. Make sure to take enough time to connect to another place and another person.*
- *The conversation will be about (topic); about the individual and communal dilemmas that are currently at stake for us in relation to (topic).*

- *The people who are standing in the present are responsible for introducing the questions that we'll craft together later. They will be asking for advice from their ancestors and descendants. If you feel that the conversation needs new input you can go to the middle line and sharpen the questions at stake.*
- *Those standing in the place of people living in the past and the future respond to the questions that are raised with direct advice, a teaching or a story about the way they deal with certain questions themselves.*
- *The conversation lasts one hour. I will turn the hourglass when the conversation starts.*

Are there any questions?'

Give space for people to respond. Answer clearly and concisely. Keep it practical. Do not lose momentum.

Guide: *We will now prepare the conversation together. First, we'll craft our questions in relation to (topic). Then we'll explore the time-space together. Please take a wooden board with paper and a pen and sit down.*

Sitting on the stools with paper and pen.

Guide: *In the coming conversation, we'll have the chance to consult ancestors and descendants. Please write down the challenges and dilemmas that you find important in relation to (topic). Try to boil it down to a few concrete questions that can be shared. We will take a few minutes for writing.*

A few minutes later.

Guide: *Please read aloud your questions one by one.*

Give space for people to respond and make sure you also share your personal questions, as you will be a participant during the conversation too.

Guide: *Listening to all those questions, what's at stake for us in relation to (topic)?*

Give space for people to respond and take a few minutes to talk it through. Do not go in depth yet, since it's still preparation.

Guide: *These are the questions we want to ask our ancestors and descendants. Remember we are all equally responsible for bringing the questions into the conversation. Please return the stools and writing boards.*

Please, come and stand on the middle line, in the present, facing the future. Close your eyes if you feel like it. We will take some steps, backward and forward together, sharing our associations. I'll guide you.

- *Take one small step backwards. You are now standing in the place of one of your parents when they were your age. Connect to their life and perspective. What dilemma is at stake here in relation to (topic)? If you have a clear feeling, image or thought, please share it.*
- *Take another step backwards. You are now standing in the place of one of your grandparents. Connect to their life and perspective. What dilemma is at stake here in relation to (topic)? If you have a clear feeling, image or thought, please share it.*
- *Take yet another step backwards; to the next line. You are now standing in the place of one of your great grandparents, three generations and roughly 100 years ago. Connect to their life and perspective. What dilemma is at stake here in relation to (topic)? If you have a clear feeling, image or thought, please share it.*
- *Take a big step to the next line, 30 generations and 1,000 years ago. You are now standing in the place of one of your ancestors living in that time. What dilemma is at stake here in relation to (topic)? If you have a clear feeling, image or thought, please share it.*
- *Take a big step, to the next line, 300 generations and 10,000 years ago. You are now standing in the place of one of your ancestors living in that time. Connect to the life and perspective of one of them. What dilemma is at stake here in relation to (topic)? If you have a clear feeling, image or thought, please share it.*
- *Take a big step to the next line, 3,000 generations and 100,000 years ago. You are now standing in the place of one of your ancestors living in that time. Connect to the life and perspective of one of them. What dilemma is at stake here in relation to (topic)? If you have a clear feeling, image or thought, please share it.*
- *We will not step further backwards, but know that there is even more time-space to discover.*

Open your eyes and walk back to the present line.

- *Take one small step forward. You are now standing in the place of one of your children or a child related to your community. Connect to their life and perspective. What dilemma is at stake here in relation to (topic)? If you have a clear feeling, image or thought, please share it.*
- *Take another small step forward. You are now standing in the place of one of your grandchildren or of a grandchild related to your community. Connect to their life and perspective. What dilemma is at stake here in relation to (topic)? If you have a clear feeling, image or thought, please share it.*
- *Take yet another step forward. You are now standing in the place of one of your great grandchildren or of a great grandchild related to your community. Three generations and 100 years from now. Connect to their life and perspective. What dilemma is at stake here in relation to (topic)? If you have a clear feeling, image or thought, please share it.*
- *Move to the next line, 30 generations and 1,000 years from now. You are now standing in the place of a descendant living in that time. Connect to their life andperspective. What dilemma is at stake here in relation to (topic)? If you have a clear feeling, image or thought, please share it.*

- *Move to the next line, 300 generations and 10,000 years from now. You are now standing in the place of a descendant living in that time. Connect to their life and perspective. What dilemma is at stake here in relation to (topic)? If you have a clear feeling, image or thought, please share it.*
- *Move to the next line, 3,000 generations and 100,000 years from now. You are* now standing in the place of a descendant living in that time. Connect to their life and perspective. What dilemma is at stake here in relation to (topic)? If you have a clear feeling, image or thought, please share it.
- *We will not step further forward, but know that there is even more time-space to discover.*

Open your eyes, turn around and walk back to the present line.

Before the break, and now that you know what we are going to do and what we are going to talk about, I have one more important question: do you join?'

Give space for people to respond and also answer yourself.

Guide: *I will join too.*

Note on will you join: Ask all people present to answer, one by one, 'yes' or 'no'. If people are in doubt give them a bit of time and ask them what they need to make the decision. If people only want to participate halfway, have to leave early or want to watch, be clear about the fact that that's not possible. If someone doesn't want to participate, they can go. Don't make this a problem. Invite them for the food sharing at the Meeting Point afterwards. If someone leaves and thus makes a strong personal decision, it makes it more palpable that the people who stay are committed.

BREAK

Guide: *We will take a short break and start again in five minutes.*

THE CONVERSATION TAKES PLACE

Guide: *Please choose a place and a few moments in silence to tune in to that pecific place in time and a person connected to it.*

Turn the hourglass. The conversation unfolds.

REFLECTION

When the hourglass is finished the conversation ends.

Guide: *The time is up. This is the conversation we had.*

Invite everybody to take a stool and sit down for a short reflection of about 15 minutes.

Guide: *What did the* Timeloop *tell us?*

Give space for people to respond. Reflection provides an opportunity for sharing different perspectives present in the group. Conclusions are not necessary.

Guide: *Is there anyone who wants to say something that hasn't been said yet?*

Give space for people to respond.

Guide: *Thank you for this* Timeloop *on (topic). We will now go back to the Meeting Point where we can share some food.*

Note on the reflection: Do not reflect on the format but on the content. If participants do this, bring them back to the question, 'what did the *Timeloop* tell us?' Explain that reflection on the format can happen afterwards, at the Meeting Point. Of course, that it is difficult to connect to future perspectives can also be content.

WALK BACK

THE MEETING POINT

Share food and drinks in an improvised way and be open to any people passing by. Don't formalise this moment too much. Leave space for people to reflect and share as they wish. Make sure you do not have to rush. Take time to tune out.

Timeloop. Photographs: Maja Kristine Christensen, Kris Dewitte, Thomas Seest

Timeloop. Photographs: Maja Kristine Christensen

Glossary

Conversations on the Street. Photograph: Devanté Notopawiro

Glossary

ACTUAL PARTICIPATION

Lotte van den Berg

To take part. To be a part of something bigger than yourself. To be one of the parts. A particle in a whole that cannot be viewed in its entirety, or controlled by you alone. To still feel able to take responsibility for this setting and the relationships you have within it.

With Building Conversation, we try to open spaces in which actual participation can be practised. For this we feel it is important to be transparent about the setting, frame, rules and expectations. To make this possible we decided to pay a lot of attention to the preparation and introduction of the performative conversations we organise. Reading the scripts in chapter two, this immediately becomes clear. Everything is there to construct the frame in which the work takes place. The actual conversation gets little to no attention in the script. 'The conversation unfolds' it says, as this is something we can't and don't want to control or predict. We hope to set the stage for it to take place, for people to feel safe enough to be willing to join in. And that it is daring enough to challenge people to do so.

Since actual participation doesn't allow for managers, directors, artists or other bystanders or overseers, we created settings in which the person initially guiding the group can participate too. When practising participation, you can only work together, be it with audiences, artists, programmers, journalists and researchers. More than that, you are invited to be present with everything you are and to let go of certain roles or responsibilities. We have to be willing to take part with the stumbling, uncertain, irritated, fearful and over-enthusiastic parts of ourselves.

ACTUALIZATION OF THE CONVERSATION; CONTENT, FORM AND RELATIONSHIP

Lotte van den Berg

Imagine a group of people in conversation. One of them is talking about power. They share their knowledge and give valuable examples on abuse of power and injustice. Imagine someone raising a hand after listening for a long time and saying: "I would like to say something, but I do not feel I have the space to do so. You seem to have a lot of power over this conversation." Imagine this moment of learning, for the person talking and for the people listening: the sudden realisation that they are not only talking about power, but also manifesting it by doing so.

When organising a conversation, a lot of attention is given to crafting the right questions to begin with. We often think that a conversation is mainly built through its words. What we talk about seems important. How we talk about things is often underestimated. But in the end the words, the form of the conversation and the way people and things relate to each other gives the dialogue its actual meaning. As artists working at the Meeting Point of art, dialogue and society, we aim to create forms in which all people present become aware of the fact that they do not only talk about something but also actualise and perform that content on the spot. Finding the right balance between content, form and the way people relate to each other is the work.

CREATIVE SPEAKING

Sodja Lotker

Through speaking we create realities. By naming we are formatting – designating, categorising and framing. Language exists as a tool for sharing, building and changing realities. Speaking is naming, for others and with others. The presence of other people, and animals and things, not only motivates us to speak but also influences us to speak in a specific way, dependant on how a situation is defined in social, cultural and other ways. And so we can say that both the language and the presence of others is formative of reality.

We can think of speaking in itself as being a creative act, since it includes naming, choosing, editing, composing… When speaking one can purposely focus on this aspect of language and use the creativity to play, be critical, explore, create, build or share.

DOCUMENTARY GESTURE

Peter Aers

Within Building Conversation, the position and knowledge of artists and performers guiding conversational performances within a group is purposely fragile. As they are creating, experiencing and joining the framework of a conversation and its subject, they hold a different position. A dialogue can be regarded as a relationship between one person and another and the surrounding space, which requires a specific way of relating. It is not simply information transmitted between individuals but a reciprocal process of co-construction.

We teach new performers learning how to guide a group, to work towards a position I describe as 'documentary gesture' (following the Belgian film critic Patrick Leboutte). It is a gesture of dialogue and performance that not only intervenes in the world, but also documents it through conversation. It articulates what is happening and thus bears witness to it. The guides try to forget everything they have learned about the subject in preparation. In this way, a new relationship can emerge from the dialogue and action (performance) itself. It allows for surprises within a framework of theatrical performativity. The conversational performance conceived in such a way is that which simultaneously documents the world, the performance, and, ultimately, the participants of the dialogue.

FOOD

Daan 't Sas

When you arrive at the Meeting Point there's lemonade, water, coffee and tea. You can help yourself. There's sugar somewhere, and fresh mint for your tea. The atmosphere is easy and welcoming.

When the performative conversation is over and everyone returns to the Meeting Point, food is ready. The host at the Meeting Point encourages you to help yourself to a big bowl and choose from warm vegetable soup, bread, dips and salad. All that is needed is there. You can give a bowl of soup to the person standing next to you, who once was a stranger. After the soup, the same bowl can be used for the salad and then washed.

The time during the meal also provides an opportunity for you to linger, talk to others and reflect together.

When we began Building Conversation, this vegetarian menu was devised by Else and Silvie from Studio Buik, and it has never been changed. Since then, a local cook, or when abroad, a local caterer has been invited to prepare this specific menu.

There is enough food for all participants and for casual passers-by. It happens often that people join for lunch or dinner and get acquainted with Building Conversation, the participants and the stories shared. The food and drinks function as welcoming invitations.

JUMP INTO BELIEF

Peter Aers

In Krzysztof Kieślowski's TV series Dekalog (1988), 12-year-old Pawel falls through ice while skating on a frozen lake and dies. I cannot watch this first episode without being moved to tears. How can I sympathise? I know that the child who dies is 'played', but I still feel distraught.

Once, when I was performing at a prison, an inmate told me it was important to eat fruit. Unfortunately, she didn't like kiwis and at the prison was offered one every day. However, she had found a way of dealing with that. She said, "If I say 'Yay for a kiwi' five times, then after the third time I will believe that I am happy with a kiwi, and after the fifth time I can eat it."

The founder of general semantics, Alfred Korzybski, interrupted one of his lessons to take a packet of biscuits wrapped in white paper out of his bag. He ate one of them and also gave some to his students in the front row, who said they liked them. Then he tore off the paper, and the students saw a drawing of a dog and the words 'DOG COOKIES' on the packet underneath. Some were angry, others ran to the toilet to vomit. "You see,"

Korzybski observed, "I have just demonstrated that people don't just eat food, but also words, and that the taste of the former is often outdone by the taste of the latter."

In 1817, the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote in his Biographia Literaria (1817): "It was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith." J.R.R. Tolkien on the other hand, refuted this idea and spoke of a secondary belief.

I want to take it a step further and not distinguish between primary or secondary beliefs. I know that the child who dies was 'played', but I still feel distraught. Although the prisoner knows she does not like kiwis, she 'plays' liking them and ends up believing it. In both cases, I think we should speak of a jump into belief. We surrender to the event and are willing to let ourselves be changed through the process.

PHYSICAL THINKING

Lotte van den Berg

Standing close to you, too close, my gaze is blurry. I can't think. I want to close my eyes and disappear. Taking a step backwards helps. Another one. I can look at you now. Thinking becomes possible. It's clear that for us to be together we both need our own space.

I feel my feet rooted to the ground. I'm standing in a white gallery with six other people: two at my side, four opposite us. As I see it, the floor is muddy. The mud is thick and black. This is where I've lived all my life. I own this place. This place owns me. I belong here and will defend the land with everything I am. Talking about the borders of Europe, I connect to a position that is alien to me. The feeling of ownership roots deep within me. My body inspires my thinking. My thinking makes my feet sink even deeper in the mud that is not there.

I feel a hand on my shoulder and can breathe again. The tension that filled my body disappears. I'm softer now. In my thinking and feeling there is a place again for understanding and love towards everyone around me.

POLYPHONY

Peter Aers

The Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin introduced the musical term polyphony to the study of literature in relation to Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels. According to Bakhtin, the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's work is "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" as he writes in Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics (1929). Bakhtin believed that truth could not be contained within a single consciousness but comes into existence when diverse consciousnesses meet. This is an open-ended dialogue, in contrast to a monologue, which Bakhtin describes as the single adequate form for "verbally expressing authentic human life". In it "a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium." Building Conversation's performative conversations challenge both consensus and dissensus, and are dramaturgically designed to create a space for polyphony.

RELATIONAL THINKING

Sodja Lotker

Thinking always happens in relation to something. We are thinking about things, events, people, phenomena and so on. Our thinking is influenced by everything we have heard, seen and experienced before; it is influenced by all the books we have read, all the art we have experienced, all the news we have seen. Our thinking is not only influenced by the thinking of our families, cultures or friends but also by the structure of language itself. We can never say that a thought we have is completely original or completely ours, since it is born out of a dialogue with many situations, words, thoughts and people.

Quantum physicist David Bohm says that we are aware of our arm being moved by others, but have no or little awareness of how our thoughts are moved by others. Our thinking is already relational, constantly moved by others, but we have little awareness of it.

In Building Conversation, this aspect of thinking is amplified and purposely given focus – so we can think with others consciously and understand how it enhances or stifles our thinking. Ideally the presence of others, be they people, more-than-human entities or ancestors, allows us to change our mind, to see things differently, to explore other points of views – truths born out of different experiences.

RESPONSE-ABILITY

Sodja Lotker

Responsibility is how we hold ourselves accountable for what we do and how we live. On the other hand, 'response-ability' is not just duty, it is an ability to interact, to perceive and react appropriately. It is a question of how we engage with the world around us. We are part of the world and as a part of the world we are in constant relation to other parts, people, things, animals, plants, situations, etc.

Our bodies are made of things we eat and drink and the air we breathe. Rice, a plant, becomes our body when we eat it and the energy it provides is stored as fat or muscle, after it is harvested, for instance. We are in constant physical exchange with the world. We do not live in the world: we are one with the world. The same way our mind, our emotions, consist of situations we were in, people we met, words we have heard or read. We are in a constant mental exchange with the world. Our mind is not in the world, it is one with the world. Response-ability is about paying attention to this aspect of our being. Its core is in this oneness, the exchange, the flux.

ROLE FLUIDITY

Lotte van den Berg

In the 1970s the psychologist Arnold Mindell explored and studied social dynamics within groups. He concluded that certain roles are at stake within a group including leadership, fellowship, being late, taking care, drinking coffee and feeling guilty. Each group has its own constantly changing set of roles. Those roles belong to the group as a whole and are not and should not be attributed and fixed to certain people in that group. When saying 'she's the leader', or 'he's always late', you fix a role to a person. By doing so, you downsize both the role and the person and furthermore, you take away the possibility of change within the group. She's more than a leader: also a friend, a daughter, a neighbour, a cook, etc. And the leadership role can be filled in by many others too. When exchanging roles fluidly within a group, the social culture within that group becomes more dynamic, flexible and healthy, Mindell claims.

In the polarised landscape we are part of, it seems important to pay attention to the capacity of people and groups to exchange roles dynamically. We are more than just one thing and have more than just one political standpoint, emotion or aim. To practise different roles, viewpoints and identities through conversation can enable a more fluid, less defined image of yourself in the group and creates possibilities for other relationships, collaborations and societies.

SAFE AND BRAVE

Marije Nie

Is it safe to be brave? Can it be brave to feel safe?

Marginalised and oppressed communities in the US have created 'safe spaces' since the civil rights movements of the 1960s. In their essay, From Safe Spaces to Brave Places: A New Way to Frame Dialogue Around Diversity and Social Justice (2013), Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens proposed the additional term 'brave spaces' to clarify a different set of needs, specifically for use in educational institutions and public spaces. Although coined and developed in the culture and history of the US, the concepts of 'safe' and 'brave' have proved valuable in other areas of the world and in the context of dialogical spaces in general.

The complex experiences of feeling safe and being brave are not only emotional and personal, but also social and context-related. In a dialogue, they are constantly in flux and in dynamic tension with each other. Besides establishing basic levels of trust

and respect, the concepts of safe and brave invite a group engaged in dialogue to collectively and individually examine and reflect on patterns of power and privilege or their absence. The technique of suspension, as described by David Bohm in his work On Dialogue (1990), is an effective way to make space for this process by implementing an amount of time between an impulse and the resulting action.

It is interesting to consider the difference between feeling unsafe and feeling discomfort. Feeling unsafe is often connected to an imbalance of power, violence or exclusion and, left unsolved, it can obstruct the flow of a dialogue. Experiencing discomfort on the other hand, is common when engaging in a difficult process, challenging topic or conflict. It needs to be examined and faced, but not necessarily solved or soothed.

The ability to stay present and engaged while experiencing discomfort is one of the most powerful challenges of dialogue and it is here that the value of 'safe' and 'brave' is foregrounded.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Lotte van den Berg

She is bored. She expected something else. She walks away. The people she was talking with look at her. They wonder where she is going. She has already turned her back on them. Not interested. Over an hour ago all 23 of them agreed together to stay, to commit and to explore what happens if you have a three-hour conversation without a given topic, leader or goal. Now she has ended this social contract, without any explanation. The group continues the dialogue, sitting in a big wooden shed with no walls in a forest near the sea. She walks back to the Meeting Point close to the beach to see if there is something to drink, someone to talk with. Slowly it dawns on her: 'Did I give up too early?' At the Meeting Point she drinks water, eats a sandwich and decides to wait, for almost two hours, for the group to come back. When they finally arrive, an older man walks straight up to her and asks, "What on earth were you thinking? You walked away, without explanation. We agreed to do this together. You thought it was boring? It was. So what? You could have changed it. You could have invested yourself into it. But you didn't. You walked away like a spoiled child. As a consumer. Consuming us. We were not entertaining enough, so you left?"

SILENCE

Lotte van den Berg

Silence holds us, it carries us, our words and bodies. The silence is always there. When things are loud and spaces are full you can always go back to silence: between the words, below the sounds, within our bodies.

To be familiar in silence together as a group, is one of the most important things to learn when being in dialogue: to feel the possibility of staying in contact when words don't come or are harsh; to relate to a moment of silence as a gift, as space, as possibility and not as a problem. If silence becomes a comfortable space, enduring difficulty, aggression and sadness becomes possible.

THE POSSIBILITY OF NO

Lotte van den Berg

You can only say yes, if there is the possibility of saying no.

THIRD TERM

Peter Aers

In his book The Emancipated Spectator (2008), Jacques Rancière connects his ideas about universal education, shared production and knowledge exchange to the way works of art operate. He defends the idea of a "material thing", what he calls "the Third Term", as a mediator in knowledge production, uniting people as equals: "There is intelligence where each person acts, tells what he is doing, and gives the means of verifying the reality of his action. The thing in common, placed between two minds, is the gauge of that equality, and this in two ways. A material thing is first of all the only bridge of communication between two minds."

The position of the guides who introduce the framework of the performance is crucial, as they are not moderating the conversation but joining it. By explaining the principles and guidelines of the

conversational format, they put something in the middle, between them and the participants. They say, "look this is our proposal. Will you join? Let's begin and see what happens next." The guides cannot know what the cause and effect of the artwork is; rather their position opens up a space of not-knowing.

TIME

Sodja Lotker

By expressing the time-frame for each conversation, we call special attention to the act of speaking and give license to regard ourselves, the participants in the conversation, with intensity. It creates awareness of stepping in and out of the frame as stepping in and out of a time-space. As such, when the time is up, we are able to look back on what we have experienced and done, as we would look at a canvas we had just made.

Time takes care of things we cannot control.

WALK

Peter Aers

Brussels, 23rd May 2019, *Conversation Without Words*. From the Meeting Point in a public space, a group of 14 people head towards a studio space. Before leaving, the guide of the conversation asks the group to turn off mobile phones and to help carry bottles of water, glasses and boxes of dates. And, she adds, "We won't do a formal introduction once we are in the space, so if you want to get to know each other, during the walk is a good moment."

All walking is discovery', writes Hal Borland in his memoir *Country Editor's Boy* (1970). Some walk in silence, others take the hint and start talking. The guide enters into a conversation with someone in the group, and avoids leading them as a teacher might. The group strolls in a somewhat scattered way along the canal towards an unknown space in Brussels where they will have a conversation for over two hours. From an outside perspective, we see one large group divided into smaller units of two to three people who are focused on each other. Walking slows their conversations down. Walking with bottles of water and one red crate of glasses.

Later that evening, the group returns and walks in silence along the canal as a swarm. We no longer perceive any smaller units.

Note: These walks serve as an informal transition between the space of the Meeting Point and the time-space of the conversation and last about 10-20 minutes. The walk establishes a (re)connection with the city or your surroundings.

WILL YOU JOIN

Daan 't Sas

This is the moment where roles are changing and all the people in the room, including the guide, are becoming participants. There is no audience left. It is a moment of transition between the introduction and the actual conversation.

After the introduction to the framework of a conversation, the guide asks every individual, everyone in the room, one after the other, "will you join?" Giving them full attention, when raising the question. Sometimes someone hesitates, and space is given. It is possible to decline the invitation. When someone is asked why they refuse to participate, something they've been finding unclear may come up, or they might share reasons that others in the room can also relate to.

It should not be taken for granted that people present in the room also want to participate. To be explicit about this commitment is to leap into the unknown, together, being aware of becoming a temporary community.

The question raises some other questions to consider: is this really what I want to do; do I want to participate in this; do I actually want to contribute to this experiment? •

Timeloop. Photograph: Kris Dewitte

Reflections

The Gathering. Photograph: Kris Dewitte

4.0
Reflections

IN WHAT FOLLOWS, we share eight reflections that each shed different light on one of the conversations and/or practices of Building Conversation. The authors write from the perspective of being a participant or the guide of one of the conversations. The Meeting Point, on the other hand, has been written from the perspective of the host at the Meeting Point. We want to thank them for allowing us to publish their contribution. *Lost Words, Tentacular Thinking, and A Possibility for Friction* have previously been published in *Performance and Posthumanism, Staging Prototypes of Composite Bodies* (pp.195-233), being part of the essay by Christel Stalpaert: *Tentacular thinking-with-things in storied places: 'Parliament of Things' (2019) by Building Conversation.*

4.1
The Expressivity of Silent Bodies on Conversation Without Words

Laura Karreman

THE FIRST 15 MINUTES GO BY with giggling, coughing and sometimes laughing. In the silences in between, everyone is staring at each other in bewilderment. We are apparently, actually going to do this: collectively remaining silent for two hours and call it a conversation. I glance around the circle and mentally invent names for the seven other women and nine men: Céline, Timo, Karel, Maartje, Bram, Eva, Erik, Mathilde and so on. The impulse surprises me, but I realise it's a challenge to see this meeting as a conversation. To my mind, the first thing we should do is introduce ourselves.

Conversation Without Words feels more like a game than theatre. At first it may seem like a harmless, innocent venture, with all these friendly people, but that is only a pretence. This is a subversive game. Participants deliberately distance themselves from speaking, which usually facilitates contact in daily life even if it might dilute some intensity between people. Talking is practical. What consequences does removing it have?

At first, our conversation is a bit like speed dating: staring into each other's eyes unabashedly as you might with people you 'want' something from. It shows a cheeky interest that is far from neutral. I am reminded of a documentary about a young American man on death row who apologises to the Dutch journalist he is talking to. He is so overwhelmed by her eye contact that he finds it hard to get his words out. He explains that he has forgotten how to look people in the eye. On death row, there is an unspoken code to avoid each other's gaze. Any eye contact is seen as an act of aggression and will provoke a violent reaction.

As I become more aware of the situation we find ourselves in, the main question becomes apparent. We want to start a conversation with each other, but how do we approach it without words? We have to explore what other vocabulary we have in our bodies. It makes for an

almost adolescent situation. We are like a bunch of high school students who have just met on a weekend away and are staring silently at a campfire. It's clear that as a group we depend on each other, but everything is strange and new. It occurs to me that this association with high school might also have to do with the awkwardness of exploring your body's boundaries and your relationship to the others, while your own body is still undergoing transformation.

As Nick Cave puts it in the film *20,000 Days on Earth* (2014), childhood memories are so formative because the cogs of your heart are still in formation. Language is the tool with which we so cleverly and quickly shape our own identity during new encounters. As, adults, to have language taken away from us, means that we are suddenly thrown back into a hyper-physical world of experience. It feels uncomfortable to suddenly have to rely on the expressiveness of our silent bodies.

Not speaking evokes associations that go back even further: to kindergarten, where we take our first steps learning to speak and listening to each other. How many times has a teacher reminded us to let another person finish talking before we say anything ourselves? Conversation is a discipline we are taught early on. All kinds of courtesies find their way into our language. How old are we when we learn to speak 'with two words'? And now, in the studio of an anonymous visual artist, somewhere in the Jordaan in Amsterdam, where there is only the hum of the fluorescent lights above us, in this silent circle we are thrown back to an awkward state, where we can make no use of our thoroughly civilised language skills.

At first, as non-verbal communication goes, it feels like 'coarse artillery', but those who dare to stare unabashedly at the unknown others for seconds, sometimes minutes. Even though we are not death row inmates, it is difficult for us too not to experience this as aggressively crossing one's comfort zone. New bursts of laughter ensue. The situation is funny, not to say hilarious. But is it only funny? Laughter betrays other emotions: doubt, helplessness, stress, irritation, misunderstanding. How can we then enter the conversation silently? Is there some sort of middle ground between looking and not looking? In any case, this process is by no means boring. Rather, there is an overload of impressions. At times it seems to be too much for some people. I see the boy I called 'Bram' close his eyes and put his hands in his lap. Others occasionally follow his example. But when I myself close my eyes, it doesn't really feel like rest. If anything, I feel even more watched and soon open my eyes again. Everyone is still there. It wasn't a strange dream.

Silence, I realise, does represent a democratic starting point for conversation, or at least an anti-hierarchical one. In conversations with words it is usually the case that the person leading a conversation feels a heightened responsibility for its course. In *Conversation Without Words* there is no clear leadership. No one here has the 'last word'. Everyone bears some responsibility for our exchange. What that responsibility is, we are trying to find out. As time goes by new perspectives arise about what sitting silently in the circle evokes. Sometimes I get a feeling that I often have in a meeting with a large group. There is a certain attention to each other, but not everyone is equally engaged in the conversation at all times. Sometimes someone stretches or sits down. Someone pours a glass of water. People pay attention to others, but also want to make their own point. Sometimes they make a joke. With no one speaking out loud, will I discover something different about the people in the group than if I had listened to their reactions to items on an agenda?

Once the biggest bursts of laughter have floated by, I engage in longer and longer

'dialogues' with people. Those dialogues begin through glances that snag on each other. I start to see the question of what it means to engage in a conversation this way as the starting point for an experiment. I try to open myself to the impression the others are making on me, through their expressions and posture. As my gaze lingers on 'Maartje', I see her light brown eyes shining with fun, framed by lashes that want to touch the sky. I imagine her taking selfies with her boyfriend in the sun on the beach. The puppy she got from a shelter dances around their feet. After high school, she went on a trip to South America with her best friend. She has been living in Amsterdam for years, in a small room, but in that small room she thinks big thoughts and realises the first steps of the biggest plans. Maartje blinks her eyes and for a moment she bares her teeth in a smile.

Then 'Erik'. His eyes suggest a certain resignation and a lot of life experience. I see how he stands in his kitchen in the morning and leans against the marble countertop waiting for the coffee-maker. He looks through the window at the garden where autumn leaves slowly cover a green lawn under a threatening sky. It doesn't matter: he doesn't like a raked garden, just as he doesn't think shaving every day is necessary. A man has better things to do. In my mind, books pass through his hands and he cycles through rain along the canals.

Then Erik's head bends slightly to the left and my head imperceptibly bends with it. It is hard to tell exactly what is happening in his face, but with a minute shift of muscle tension, his expression changes from slightly amused to more serious. Though I can picture him with a bucket and spade, the days of innocent boyishness are long gone. The man before me has not managed to escape life's suffering either. That much is clear to me. The questions come naturally. Tell me then, what exactly was that like, with your parents' divorce? Did your hands close over your ears to avoid hearing their arguments? Or was it a silent battle and your dad was suddenly gone, while afterwards you felt guilty because you hadn't realised anything was wrong. When your mother told you what had happened, would you have been just as happy with that new dirt bike you got for your seventh birthday, which made your friends jealous? Or would you like to tell me about what happened later? When your best friend in high school got involved with the girl that you'd been secretly in love with for years? There was a school party when she suddenly looked at you - over his shoulder – in a way that didn't lie? That there was so much in that gaze that you felt you would be able to draw on it for at least a year? And that twenty years later, on a Wednesday afternoon in March, you bumped into her in the Albert Heijn supermarket on Elandsgracht - Elza! My god, Elza! - and she was lashed to a buggy and that life was life. You could see that she remembered and that she knew you remembered too, but that you only exchanged some platitudes about how funny it was that you had both ended up in Amsterdam and, yes, both in the Jordaan too?

Erik's gaze has grown still. Suddenly, he thrusts his chin forward slightly and folds his arms. A quick smile draws across his face like a wink. Is that it? Do you want to know something about me too? If you really want to know something about me, I would tell you that when I could barely walk, I liked to run away around the street corner, because I was curious. And I would show you how, ten years later, I sat on the edge of my first boyfriend's bed and it took two hours before we dared to kiss each other. Then I would take you to the sand dunes in Death Valley, early one morning in January when the sun casts long shadows over the dune tops. Can you feel how the cold is hidden in the windless, dry air and how the salt crystals of the Devil's golf course crackle under our feet? Pleased to meet you, Erik. I too have had my heart

broken several times - who hasn't? - and now that heart is a glued-together mess. But wouldn't you agree with me that there is a beauty in that? These days I cycle along the canals you also know so well - weather or no weather - and our paths must have crossed there more than once, albeit unseen. Erik smiles. Is he nodding understandingly or is it my imagination? Did we really have this conversation? I turn my head away in confusion.

Finally, I cast a sidelong glance at 'Céline', the young woman sitting next to me. Her eyes are focused on someone else and suddenly fill up. A moment later, I see the tears on her cheeks. I can't ask her what's wrong, though she sees that I'm watching her. It feels inappropriate to touch her and instead I look at my hands in my lap. Through my eyelashes I look around and in one quick glance I see that everyone has noticed her tears and is reacting in the same way. Céline has our attention. She is speaking to us. Yet we struggle to understand her.

4.2 Making Visible on Conversation Without Words

Siebren Nachtergaele

IN A *CONVERSATION WITHOUT WORDS*, we look at each other as audience participants, and are watched. The questions we can ask here are: what do we see of the other, what do we project onto the other and what do we communicate ourselves? I believe there is a beauty and fragility to making connections with people you have just met, and doing so without words. It is an example of 'relational aesthetics'. There is something very physical and affective about the experience where you begin to test your physical relation to others, and in which exchanging glances and reading each other's looks, proves crucial to connecting with each other. Exchanged expressions are essential, as they are in everyday life, where, according to communication researchers, a large percentage of our interactions are non-verbal. The discomfort this initially creates is remarkable. Once this agonising awkwardness passes, I find myself in a soothing state of mind that allows me to connect with those sitting around me. The intensity that comes from looking at each other but not saying anything is very powerful. The sight of the other provides an opportunity for empathy and recognition of vulnerability. We don't have to stay in the chairs, as we had agreed beforehand. At one point, along with other participants, I decide to sit on the floor, at a self-selected distance from the others, which for me offers a certain redemption or freedom.

In *The Politics of Perception* (2017), Ann Cooper Allbright writes: "Perception is the place where vision and sensation merge to produce embodied meaning, the crossroads where individuals meet or miss one another - either connecting in good faith with a shared experience, or stumbling through missteps that can result in a defensive posture or a sense of distrust of others. It is through individuals' bodies that perception meets up with politics."

According to Peter Aers, in those so-called missteps or experiences of failure, in which the relational dramaturgy does not always fully 'work' for participants, there is an aesthetic experience. Taking inspiration from Gilles Deleuze, we can call it an 'aesthetics of failure' or an 'aesthetics of stumbling'.

That there is time to discuss this in an informal way in a different space following

the *Conversation Without Words* appears to have a positive effect on participants. There is a sense of (re)recognition in the experience and meaning we give to the moment we have just shared. Individual experience is transcended and I get a sense of shared meaning-making, which feels especially enriching. It involves collectively recognised vulnerability. The otherwise private individual meanings are made public. Together we determine the traces the work will leave in each of our memories.

In the follow-up discussion, it transpires that a *Conversation Without Words* lets participants see and experience the basis of human contact and brings groups together in a very direct way. As such this performance is a form of perspectival viewing, or making visible what we do not notice in everyday life. Language usually seems to overwhelm daily interactions, while it is only a (relatively) small part of our interactions.

4.3 A Possibility for Friction on Thinking Together

Christel Stalpaert

THE CONVERSATIONAL PERFORMANCE *Thinking Together – An Experiment* urges participants to pay attention to the way we speak and to practise conversation. The performance of this kind that I participated in, gathered a group of approximately 30 people who volunteered to convene in a circle, for a considerable period. Time is in fact the only pre-set condition: out of sight of the participants, a timer with an alarm is set that will indicate the end of the conversation. The participants are unaware of the time during the performance, as they are asked to set aside their watches and mobile phones before starting the conversation.

After we have been welcomed with tea, each volunteer is asked to take a chair and find a place in a circle, in the middle of a room, selected for its neutral appearance. The room should have as few distracting elements as possible, with posters, paintings or furniture removed. Each individual is asked whether he or she wants to participate in the conversational performance, thus the volunteer is 'contracted' to become an engaged participant. The group is requested to pick up, in random order, small cards that are spread out on the floor, and to read aloud the text written on them. Alternatingly, and without a given order, we inform each other about practical and procedural matters of the dialogue process, as well as the theoretical underpinnings of this conversational gathering, which follows David Bohm's dialogical world-view. We hear for example that there is no moderator, and no pre-set agenda or topic. The group is to chart its own course.

During this initiation, some key concepts by Bohm are mentioned, stretching our understanding of the possibilities of a conversational practice. One of these key concepts is 'suspension'. A text on the card explains how Bohm urges us to suspend our assumptions in the context of a dialogue.

After this introduction/initiation, the dialogue starts.

(...)

A long silence fills the space.

Going into an undirected inquiry without a pre-set topic is confusing and unsettling to me,

and probably to the other participants as well. The group remains silent for quite some time. The absence of a pre-set agenda or a pre-established purpose or topic means everyone in the group hesitates to speak up. However, the silence is also beneficial. Indeed, the unnaturally long silence in a room with hardly any other meaning-making material triggers my senses. Stretching time and space engages my attention. Only in this state of heightened awareness can I trace the subtle implications of my own assumptions in conversation, while sensing similar yet different assumptions in the group.

Suspension does not mean that one has to suppress awareness of anger, frustration or eagerness to oppose an idea, but to linger at the obstacles that prevent us from saying what we just suspended. Bohm's strategy of 'suspending assumptions' is a matter of suspending judgement in order to become fully open to the legitimacy of others' ideas, even if they are different from our own. As such, I become aware of my own hostile reaction when confronted with other's views. Instead of instantly countering, I allow the thought to be suspended for a moment, feeling what blocks my assumption. I do not suppress it, but I also do not proceed with it, giving my full attention to this feeling of hostility. I realise that scientific thought is too often guided by individual ambition, with feelings of flattery blocking true intelligence in co-operative endeavour. I remember how Bohm observed that scientific research is often infected with personal ambition, in a way that the influence of flattery often blocks an openness to the legitimacy of others' ideas. It leads to 'fragmentation' in our perception of the world, breaking things up that are not really separate, including – I become aware – our entanglement with things in a more-than-human-world, preventing us from truly participatory thought. Bohm's Dialogue is hence also a critique of the 'authoritative structure' in scientific knowledge.

Time allows for friction to emerge between contrasting ideas and values in *Thinking Together – An Experiment* and, more importantly, to trace this friction back to assumptions that are active in the group, myself included. Experiencing the presence of these assumptions and giving these thoughts my full attention, I also acknowledge the obstructing nature of my own thought process like my defensive posturing, which is grounded in scientific thought. Rather than talking about something, for example climate change, the conversation gradually becomes something else; an 'awakening of some other sense of what thought is', through genuine attention. I realise that I tend to think of scientific research as defining a problem and a method of how I wish to deal with the problem, systematically working towards a solution. In this *Thinking Together – An Experiment*, knowledge exists in the realm of relationship. In this undirected conversation, the group charts its own course. I cannot maintain any position during the conversation. No one can. This also upsets my assumptions about what art should be. In fact, Peter Aers – the artist I commissioned – does very little. As a facilitator, he does not talk much and he delivers no arguments, he only makes subtle interventions from time to time, indirectly reminding us of the framework of the conversation that we agreed on as a group. During the sustained timespan, social conventions of speaking begin to wear thin. In this free-flowing experiment suspending my preconceived assumptions, I cannot hold on to my fixed position of professor or scholar. In fact, nobody does or can, not even 'the artist' Aers, and I experience a new kind of mind-set. Letting go of any fixed position, I also let go of my urge to constantly defend my position. Slowly, I allow meaning and knowledge to develop from constant transformation in the process of dialogue. A new dynamic relationship unfolds beyond the fixed positions of 'artist' and 'spectator', 'student' and 'teacher', engaging the grou in another kind of

conversation, and I enjoy experiencing the possibilities of dialogue in transforming the relationship between people.

This feels like a way out of the conversational deadlock I have often experienced during heated debates when discussing solutions for climate change. During *Thinking Together – An Experiment* I do not experience my 'self' to be positioned in opposition to another person, nor do I experience my 'self' to be interacting with like-minded thinkers. I rather experience my 'self' to be participating in a constantly developing and changing network of thought and meaning. Thinking through the dissensus of the group, we tolerate and accept each other as adversaries, moving beyond any fixed position of an opponent or enemy to be destroyed or silenced. Bohm calls this the practice of a 'creative dialogue', seeking to unfold the potential of creativity to reveal the deeper structures of conversational. Acknowledging these obstacles is in his view a first step in unfolding a 'participatory thought', practising our ability to listen and speak freely. To listen and speak freely is to engage in thoughts, paying attention to the dialogical process and not only to the content of what has been said. Scientific thought too often works at the expense of curiosity and creative participation.

4.4 Lost Words on Impossible Conversation

Christel Stalpaert

A METICULOUS 'WORDCRAFT' experiment was conducted by the British writer Robert Macfarlane, in the children's book The Lost Words (2017), for which he collaborated with Jackie Morris. She made watercolour paintings for a number of lost words that Macfarlane hopes to (re)generate in the English language. The lost words are common words that have fallen from common usage, and are symptomatic of an increasingly detached relationship with nature as the virtual worlds of games like Pokémon and Minecraft have become central to childhood experience.

In the conversational performance *Impossible Conversation*, Building Conversation urges participants to try to find words for the unthinkable and indescribable. While the unimaginable scale of climate change renders us speechless, populist discourse seeks to squeeze the climate change whodunit into a binary logic of crime and punishment: it attempts to separate 'those who are to blame' from 'those fighting the enemy'. But this is a futile endeavour, as all human beings are in numerous ways implicated in the crisis. Building Conversation urges us to address the problem of articulation and to persist in trying to find appropriate words to imagine the unimaginable. During the conversational performance of *Impossible Conversation* we were asked to write about a personal experience that relates to the abstract and complex theme of 'nature', to feel a personal connection with it and, from that connection, share what we had written. Stumbling and stuttering through words, linking personal memories with raised attention and recalibrated vocabulary, we explored our diverse and ambivalent relations with 'nature' in the current context of climate change. 'Re-localising the global' in a particular, personal context, we traced matters of concern from our own relationship with a specific, local environment.

We relayed knowledge in creative uncertainty, as we could not mechanically proceed from the kind of scientific facts that might have provided us with rhetorical confidence.

Reading out loud and listening to what we had written was a performance in itself. Listening to the manifold word-struggles to describe an ecological stance that is experienced within the personal everyday, and the diverse ordinary doings of the participants, we 'let go of nature', in the sense that we let go of the abstract, romantic idea of one, lost ideal order of nature. Instead, as Bruno Latour would say, we provided mental space for the "progressive composition of one common world". Sharing particular contexts with the participants of the *Impossible Conversation*, we generated an ever-ongoing constitution or composition of the world as nature-culture, resurging speech in the unutterable.

4.5 A Feathery Future? on Timeloop

Lotte van den Berg

TIMELOOP is a conversation in an unorthodox form. Its participants speak from different temporal perspectives, from 100 to one million years in the past or the future.

Three men stand on the other side of the room. For a moment, they have moved into the perspective of people who lived 100,000 years ago: Neanderthals.

"When strangers approach, we see it immediately," one man explains. "A decision has to be made quickly. We include them in the group if we can use them. If not, there are two options: fight or flee."

"Who decides?", asks a girl, speaking from the year 2016, more than 3,000 generations later. "The leader," a Neanderthal says firmly.

A woman, who has given herself the perspective of a Brabant peasant woman living 1100 years ago, is, like the three men, decidedly direct about the question being addressed: "Do I let strangers into my house? No. Not just like that. We are alert. Always. A lot of people come walking in here. You never know what they will bring. We are not protected by the city walls. We have to protect ourselves. We are on our guard."

It is late July and hot. In a room where tables, computers and cupboards have been pushed to one side, fans are on and windows open. We are guests at the children's cultural institute, Bureau Babel's office at the arts centre Verkadefabriek, in Hertogenbosch in the Netherlands. In the run-up to its experimental theatre festival, Festival Boulevard, we are conducting preparatory 'test' conversations with different groups of people from the city. Several participants from our Building Conversation staged there the previous year, have signed up as hosts. They invite people including colleagues, friends and acquaintances and arrange a space. Together, we are working on creating a new form of conversation, the *Timeloop*, which will eventually premiere during Festival Boulevard.

On the floor, the time-space from 100 to 100,000 years in both the past and future, is marked out with simple lines. In the middle, a line marks the year 2016. Earlier, the topic of conversation has been established with the stipulation that it should concern everyone. Unanimously, the group decides that it should be about refugees in Europe. To make this more

relevant, they focus on The Netherlands, and to engage them personally, it includes the probing question, 'do you open your own house to refugees?'

SHAME

Throughout the conversation, an elderly man who refuses to believe that you can time-travel in your imagination, remains near the 2016 centre line, close to what he knows for sure. Others traverse the space, looking at the question from as many different perspectives as possible.

A young girl joins the old man in the present for a moment. "We don't see the people coming, who want to enter our house," she says to the three men in the distant past. "With us, no clear decision is made. It can take years before we admit someone or not. It is a process I am ashamed of. I don't trust our country's leader."

"That is not possible," the three men shout in chorus. "If the leader is no good, you either fight or leave. You can't live under the leadership of someone you don't trust."

From different times and perspectives, those in the present receive a barrage of questions. There is doubt, confusion and growing gridlock.

"I'd like to let strangers into my own house, but I don't," says the elderly man. "I don't agree with the decisions being made, but I don't change them."

In the summer of 2016, we conducted about 20 conversations with more than 300 people taking part in the *Timeloop*. Some participants spoke from experience, others let their imaginations run wild. Some articulated what the idea of a specific time evokes physically. Again and again, a conversation emerged in which a specific question was illuminated in many ways and people got to know themselves and each other anew.

TO HAVE

"It's light here," says a woman who imagines what it will be like 10,000 years from now. "It's like I'm floating. I am connected to everything around me." The dreamed future is without weight or boundary. Many imagine that in a few hundred years we will exist beyond our bodies as pure consciousness.

What has often emerged in our conversations, is a vision of the past as earthy, while the future is light and heavenly. It is assumed that in the past, no one experienced guilt or shame over owning and defending property. Meanwhile, a future is imagined where property has been completely eliminated - including one's own body. We share everything, is the simple adage of this far future.

How we intend to make the transition from our present crises and confusion to this feathery problem-free future has not become clear. No one has a picture of it. The unrest, inequality and struggle, according to participants, will continue for a few centuries or even millennia to invariably end in a violence-free and sexless world where everything is one.

On the one hand, is a world rooted in clay, decisive and simple. On the other, one enlightened, serene and connected to everything. Conversations have taught me that a longing for either of these ways of being pulls us apart. The thought gap turns us into doubtful beings who fail to take action. Time and again, I have witnessed all doubt attributed to the now and all clarity projected onto the distant past and the distant future.

SMUG

We talk about boundaries, property, technology, the body and caring for each other. 'Should I care for my parents?' is a question we discuss in Patrick's studio. During the conversation, more and more people come to the now-line. They talk to each other: about the individualism they say they despise but simultaneously embrace; about the autonomy they don't want to give up; about their parents not wanting to be a burden.

In the distant past, a number of women stand. Silently they watch the conversation taking place in the present. One woman raises her voice and the others follow: "You say you don't know. You say you are confused. But you are not asking us for advice. Talk to us and give us the respect we deserve."

A few times the women try to change the direction of the conversation, but it always ends in squabbling on the now-line, a point that seems inward-looking and complacent. In retrospect, even those who were themselves in the present will say that they failed to move out of the impasse. "Do you have a mother?" someone asks of a man standing 1000 years in future. He thinks for a long time. "A mother? No. I don't believe so."

KNIFE

Many conversations have surprised, touched and also shocked me. That we can shift our gaze for a while gives me hope. At the same time, I am shocked by the crippling state of our present moment. In our thinking about the past and future, we imprison ourselves. The dreamed, feathery future we imagine - sharing everything, being connected to everyone, limitless, without struggle and without possessions - makes us flabby. Demanding this of ourselves can only lead to disillusionment. We stiffen with guilt and shame because we can't do it. We feel we are not good enough. Instead, we project healthy decisiveness onto the past and deprive ourselves of it. But it is precisely this decisiveness that we desperately need.

A girl who imagines herself in the future argues for being-without-possession. I am standing in the distant past. I feel myself straightening my back as I listen to her. There is something to defend here, the value of possession itself is at risk. My right arm stretches along my body, the hand clenched around an imaginary knife. "I have a knife, it's my knife," I shout through space. They are simple words. They echo for a long time. The knife I imagined in my hand was not just a thing: it was an extension of myself. In another conversation, a boy who imagines he has lived just over 1000 years ago suddenly says, out of the blue, "this is my home. This is my land. I built it myself. I worked it myself. There is a fence around it."

CHOOSING

After dinner conversation on the terrace with a glass of beer. "You looked like a group of asylum seekers shouting," someone says to three men who worked together during a conversation and, funnily enough, are still sitting next to each other. One of them beams. He has visibly enjoyed putting himself in a different perspective for a while. "I have more respect now for that position," says someone else.

I too have often realised how wonderful it is to take the position of someone who is proud of himself, his property, ways and ground. "What can I learn from that?" I ask myself driving home. "How can I speak clearly and make clear choices, stand for my own views and promote my values without losing nuance and denying the other person's values?"

"You shouldn't be so doubtful," people on the middle line, in the present, were told during the conversation.

"Just do what is right for yourself. Dare to choose what you need."

"Is that allowed?" I still ask myself.

"Can I choose for myself? Choose what I need?"

4.6 Tentacular Thinking on Parliament of Things

Christel Stalpaert

IN SEPTEMBER 2019, as part of a week-long summer school on climate change, I invited Building Conversation member, Flemish philosopher and theatre-maker, Peter Aers, to facilitate some conversational exercises. These culminated in the co-created conversational performance *Parliament of Things*.

Before tackling any parliamentary question, we had to decide what we would invite to a Parliament of Things, that is, which things will speak. We selected our quasi-objects, as Bruno Latour describes, or the things that have to be represented while discussing this question, and with which the Parliament of Things gathers henceforth. In this parliament things are given the same rights as people. This meant that things that are affected by people's decisions have a right to have a say in making the decisions.

The parliament's topic was 'trees'. It took some time for the group to agree on this parliamentary question, or rather before the things themselves decided what they wanted to talk about. After discussing whether we should choose one tree, or a forest, we decided that 'trees' embraces both the autonomous agency of one tree, and the interconnectivity of a forest. The parliamentary question became: should trees obtain legal rights? The parliamentary question did not tackle a particular climate case; it tackled a general question of attributing rights to trees, in which other quasi-objects had a say. Instead of focusing on the content of the debate, it is the conversational that lies at the heart of this performance. These quasi-objects have properties that 'astound us and whose network extends from my refrigerator to the Antarctic by way of chemistry, law, the State, the economy, and satellites,' as Bruno Latour writes. In our parliament, the question of whether trees should obtain legal rights, was tackled by a variety of objects: furniture, represented by a wooden plank; underground insects, represented by a weird, indefinable plastic worm-like object; humans, represented by money; time, represented by a clock; the state, represented by the Belgian national flag; air represented by an open glass bowl turned upside down; optimism, represented by sunglasses with pink lenses; trees, with their demand for legal rights, were represented by a huge branch.

Aers requested that participants display the objects they had brought with them on a table. After explaining their personal bond with what they had brought, participants could then remove objects that they felt they were too sentimentally attached to. Representatives were then chosen from what remained. All the things that were invited to the parliament were given a stool. When the parliament began, we each chose a stool, took one thing in

our hands and gave a voice to it. As there were more things than participants, we shifted places and hence shape-shifted between different things.

When the displayed objects became representatives of quasi-objects, my mind-set was recalibrated. These objects carried with them a personal story that they shared with their owner, but they also had a story of their own. An endless network of interconnectivity unfolded in my mind. The quasi-objects shocked me 'into recognition of the inescapable interdependencies and shared contingencies between our species and the millions of micro- and macro-organisms with which we share both a gene pool and a planetary ecosystem' as Wendy Arons and Theresa J. May write in *Readings in Performance and Ecology* (2012). A stone on the table, for example, not only functions as a holiday souvenir of one of the participants, it has also departed from a larger rock. It suggests a deep time that scatters the narrow timescales I am accustomed to thinking within. I think of the nature writer Robert Macfarlane's words, in his book *Underland* (2019):

> "We tend to imagine stone as inert matter, obduratein its fixity. But here in the rift, it feels instead like a liquid briefly paused in its flow. Seen in deep time, stone folds as strata, gouts as lava, floats as plates, shifts as shingle. Over aeons, rock absorbs, transforms, levitates from seabed to summit. Down here, too, the boundaries between life and not-life are less clear."

The storytelling with things also traces my own 'fundamental *nonseparatedness* from the more-than-human-world'.

> "We are part mineral beings too – our teeth are reefs, our bones are stones – and there is a geology of the body as well as of the land. It is mineralization – the ability to convert calcium into bone – that allows us to walk upright, to be vertebrate, to fashion the skulls that shield our brains."

Even though trees did not speak for themselves, *Parliament of Things* provided an opportunity for listening to the trees' stories. Acknowledging our reciprocal relationship in a more-than-human-world, I opened up to the arboreal language. Throughout *Parliament of Things*, I was struck by trees' generosity in their entanglement with the-more-than-human world (trees provide oxygen to air, shade to soil, nutrition to underground insects, wood to furniture) and by their kindness in relating to the other and respecting the other's ecological space. So many other quasi-objects were sharing the space with trees, including other trees. It was only later that I learnt that this kindness has a botanical term, crown shyness, 'whereby individual forest trees respect each other's space, leaving slender running gaps between the end of one tree's outermost leaves and the start of another's', as Macfarlane puts it. I now find it hard to imagine these arboreal giants in terms other than tenderness, generosity and even love.

I no longer consider trees or other things as mere instrumental tools or artificial intermediaries. This ' allows objects to emerge as mediators, side-stepping their usual instrumental function in 'a theatre of proof'. This animates another production of knowledge. Despite the fact that we were gathering in the context of a summer school, with experts in diverse fields such as performance studies, sociology, literary studies, engineering and bio-engineering, the parliament never resulted in a defence of scientific knowledge about an object, as we quite easily adopted the perspective of that object. Looking through what Donna J. Haraway calls an 'art-science worlding' lens, (bio)engineering, philosophy, sociology, etc. integrates with art. This art-science worlding is more than mere interdisciplinary scientific

research, as another production of knowledge is at stake. It is rather a resurgence of knowledge through a tentacular thinking-with-things.

The conversational performance *Parliament of Things* was a mind-bending exploration that expanded my habits of listening and my habits of speech, enabling a vibrant journey into a miraculous web of interconnectivities and intra-actions. It had me looking deeper, paying in-depth attention to thingly intra-actions. Looking again, trying to see how something is, how it really is and acts, not how I thought 'it' was , the understor(e)y of my life resurged.

4.7 The Unspoken Conversation

Lotte van den Berg

TWENTY FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLD KIDS are standing in two groups across from one another. One group chants "close the borders, close the borders". The other speaks in cautious terms about peace. There is deadlock.

We are working on Building Conversation at a vocational middle school in Purmerend, a small provincial town to the north of Amsterdam. Many of the original residents of Amsterdam moved to surrounding towns like Purmerend after life in the city became too expensive. They're a plucky bunch of people. Building Conversation is a project I started three years ago with the metalworker and artist Daan 't Sas. In the meantime, the project has grown into a varying collective of artists and kindred spirits, all of them fascinated by conversation.

We see conversation as a joint creation, a collective improvisation, a work of art. We had walked with the kids from their school to the local theatre. Their teacher, Pepijn, also came with us. He and Daan are participating in the conversation and I am guiding it. In an empty theatre space, a black box without bleachers, we and the class are performing 'the waterfall of values' developed by Humberto Schwab, a former philosophy teacher who grew so disappointed in secondary school education that he stopped teaching. In this exercise, you first converse in groups of two, then four, then eight, etc. The smaller groups keep doubling until you are standing in two groups across from each other and the entire company is participating in the same conversation. Whenever two groups merge, they have to agree on five values that they share. We have come to the last step. The conversation is being conducted while we move around within the theatre space. If you agree with someone, you move closer to that person; if you disagree, you move away, so the conversation is a kind of spontaneous choreography.

The class quickly agrees on the first four values: family, communication, sustenance, and freedom. Both groups put 'close the borders' in fifth place, surrounded by question marks, exclamation points and words like barbed wire, peace and shutting gates. It's clear they haven't worked this one out yet. A tall skinny boy raises his arms above his head, striking the middle and index fingers of both hands against each other: "hashtag close the borders". Others follow his example while crying, "barbed wire, barbed wire". Some of the girls who have spoken out for peace form a group opposite them, saying, "when there is peace, you don't need borders." "That's exactly what I mean," replies the tall skinny boy. "Closing the borders means peace." The only Moroccan-Dutch boy in the class is the last to choose a side. Contrary to what everyone expects, he does not stand next to his good friend, a big Antillean girl who argues

that there should be fewer foreigners in the city. He joins the group of cautious girls. They look at each other. This is getting serious. Everyone can feel it. Daan and Pepijn have also joined the girls. Deadlock. Nobody will budge.

A boy from the group that is defending borders tries to qualify their standpoint: "Borders are also there for you to protect yourself. For instance, you can say, 'now you're going too far, now you're stepping over my border.' That's important." The group that stands for peace agrees, but this is not enough for them to want to move. Walking over to the other side is too dangerous.

Pepijn breaks the impasse saying "I'm going to stand on a different spot." He moves away from the group and takes a third position by himself. "I think this is about security. Security is important – for me, for you, for everybody. I care about you. I also care about other children, other kids just like you. When I see images on the news of adults and children in the mud behind barbed wire, my stomach ties up in knots. I can't bear to look at them." He describes in detail what he has seen. Children in mud up to their ankles. Scratches on their faces. A plastic bag to keep out the rain. As he speaks to the class, tears come to his eyes. He doesn't try to hide them and continues his story. Everyone has fallen silent. Slowly, one by one, they go and stand behind him. A small blond boy is the last to walk over to him. Step by step, he walks toward the big group of classmates who are now standing together. "Are you hesitating?" I ask. "No," he replies. "It's just that I walk a little slowly."

When everybody has come together in a single group, the tall skinny boy moves away. He stands opposite the group and slams his fingers in X marks above his head. "I want to say one more thing. Fewer people. Simply that. Fewer people." Then he stops. His long arms now hanging by his side, he looks at everybody. "I'll come and stand with you again," he says self-consciously, and joins the group. Security.

Theatre is a platform for conflict. As a theatre-maker, but also as a person, I am used to digging into painful areas. I focus on exposing conflict, making it visible, so that I can observe conflict together with others. Settling disputes or solving problems is not my goal. The only goal is close observation. Conversation can also serve as a platform for conflict. A place where people can collectively examine, endure and experience the chafing differences between themselves.

Several moments in this conversation with the young people are precious to me, such as the sight of a grown man openly crying in the midst of a group of teenagers, or the little boy walking agonisingly slowly toward the group. And of course, the tall boy's display of bravery, facing his classmates alone, hands above his head, striking his fingers against each other to make Xs. And then his arms hanging down by his side in despair. Sights only seen by the participants themselves. Three adults, twenty kids; we all saw it differently, we all saw something else. But we all saw it, from the inside out.

With earlier work, Rumour (2007) for instance, I introduced frameworks in urban public spaces in order to be able to look at those spaces and the people moving around within them in a different way. Now, with Building Conversation (2013-), we are offering a framework – the time-space in which the conversation occurs – that not only gets people to interact but also makes their interactions visible. The forms of conversation are like empty spaces in which an unspoken conversation can be held. Actions and thoughts slide over one another. As participants, we have become our own spectators and the arts are our rehearsal space, the place where we can practise ourselves in relation to others.

4.8

The Meeting Point

Yola Parie

THE MEETING POINT

As soon as it is set up, something happens. You cannot escape it. Not as a passer-by nor as a participant. Every time, it is a place that invites you to come together, be together, be there.

All it takes are four wooden crates placed against each other in a square block, in an outdoor public place. On top of the crates are, in no particular order, books on dialogical art, a coffee pot, a tea jug, drinking glasses, lemonade bottles, fresh mint and ginger, a small wooden chest with drawers filled with chalk, pens, writing paper, a wooden cutting board, a washing-up bowl, a tea towel, glass jugs filled with drinking water, a carving knife, soup bowls, spoons, knives, forks, a large pan of vegetarian soup, a hot plate, wooden stools scattered all around, a large parasol next to it and a host present to welcome people.

BEING A HOST

Trust that the place works and that people will come naturally.

For some it's inviting, for others it isn't. Let it happen. It is there, but never fully fathomable.

Offer someone a drink and see what develops. Want to talk further as a host? You can; try it. Does the other person want to ask or tell you something? Listen and answer or ask further. Pouring drinks helps with this.

Let the other person do it themselves. An action, being physically engaged, can produce a first sentence.

Silence is okay. Asking something is okay. Being there is okay.

We do it together. We discover how we talk to each other. It's not just about who you are, but who we are. Together in this place in this moment.

———

Over five years, I have been with Building Conversation in various places in the Netherlands, Germany, France, Slovenia and Belgium. It is impossible for me to summarise in one piece what the experience of participating and being in conversation with each other around the Meeting Point, can be like. After all, every time is different. No wonder: the composition of people is always different.

GATHER, BEGIN, START / COMING TOGETHER

Arbas, village square.

Together with the conversation guides, I wait for the first participants or random passers-by to come. We stand with our Meeting Point in the middle of the quiet square of a small village in southern France. Because of the silence around us, I notice that my curiosity is incited. As soon as the participants arrive, it begins.

The first participants are enthusiastic, but also a bit uncomfortable. They find it exciting because they don't know what to expect. Everyone is busy pouring drinks for themselves. Sensing the excitement of the group, I try to welcome everyone personally. One woman tells

me that she prefers to know everyone who she enters into a group conversation with and that she is not so sure how to engage with a stranger. I realise it works differently for me. On the contrary, I love talking to someone whose name, work and interests I don't immediately know. You can then start a search together for what you can and want to talk about. You can let yourself get carried away with what words and thoughts come.

Here in Arbas, at this spot, the woman and I are not sure how to continue the conversation. We stand together for a while, silently, both searching for the right attitude or a new phrase. Actually, we get to know each other a bit better this way.

Nijmegen, station square.

We are standing on the station square. It is a lively place. Many people walk by to catch a train or bus. Many come to me for a cup of coffee to have a chat. One man, with no fixed abode, says it is his best day in ages because he is offered a hot drink and people are listening to him for once. Two women join me in a conversation about the future of the station and what that means for them as taxi drivers. They are happy that people are finally listening to them. At the same time, a man sits on one of our wooden stools proudly talking about his neighbourhood café. Normally these people walk past each other. Today, they take the time to listen to each other's stories. Later I will watch them all walking away in different directions and wonder, are they taking something from today into tomorrow?

MEANTIME, WAITING / NEW ENCOUNTERS

Weinheim, Hauptstrasse.

The participants have left for different meeting rooms. It is quiet for a while at the Meeting Point. Until a gentleman cycles past, curious. The man cycles past again and again. Something about this spot makes him return, but what?

A little later, the man comes to the Meeting Point and proudly shows me a newspaper from 1978. It contains articles about the politics of this German town. It seems these texts are important to him, because he shares them with me at length. His eyes shine, his body shows how excited he is to discuss this with someone. Meanwhile, we drink coffee, which he has poured himself because I am too busy listening to his story. Besides, I don't really know what else to do. Convenience and discomfort meet here for me.

Zaandam, Hembrug site.

While *Conversation Without Words* is still going on, a man steps out of the conversation early. I notice that it has been intense for him, because I see he is frowning and that he is busy gesticulating back and forth with his arms and hands. He needs ten minutes to blow off steam. He remains somewhat agitated after that, but he does stop by the Meeting Point to talk to me and passers-by. He talks flat-out about his experience of the conversation and why he walked out. He thinks no one should venture into a conversation without words. For him, it is too direct and intimate to look people directly in the eyes.

The casual passers-by at the Meeting Point enjoy listening to this man's stories. So do I. The man expresses his curiosity about the experiences of all the participants who are still engaged in the conversation. He is eager to keep waiting for them to return from the conversation, as he needs something to wrap it up for himself. For over two hours, he waits with me. Occasionally

we are silent and look at the buildings around us. I dare to look at the man. He does not dare look at me.

Then the participants come back and join him in the exchange of experiences. I see that he is still part of this group. He belongs.

RETURN, REFLECTION / COMING TOGETHER

Amsterdam, Java square.

It is not often that the group does not come back as a group after a conversation but it happens on this occasion. The participants of the Thinking Together conversation return to the Meeting Point divided. I notice that they are coming out of an intense conversation and are actually still stuck in it. There is loud chatter. Some argue while others try to mediate. Everyone stays for food, but above all for whatever it takes to make sense of this conversation for themselves. Or at least attempt to.

Brussels, Manchester Street.

From all sides, participants return from different conversation spaces. They have all participated in a Conversation Without Words. I feel a tension in both the group and myself. A tension that is released as soon as people arrive at the Meeting Point and see that there is soup. How welcome a physical act can suddenly be: serving and eating soup together. And judging by the participants, they are recovering, and they want to talk about the experience mainly with their own group.

There is no conscious focus on the food but rather a focused attention on each other, on the group. Everyone has a need to express to each other what they have felt, said, expressed, shifted just by looking at each other during the conversation.

In what way can I get involved? For the first few minutes I am searching , trying to keep myself busy pouring soup and lemonade for myself. Then I realise that in this moment I can also eat, watch and wait. My curiosity about what people have experienced is high, but I park it for a while. Who knows, maybe someone will want to tell me something? •

'Deeply impactful.' Illustration based on the reflection of a participant: Laura Mentink

BUILDING
CONVER
SATION

The Meeting Point. Photograph: Devanté Notopawiro

Conversations on the Street and *The Meeting Point*. Photographs: Sarah Hähner, Devanté Notopawiro

Introspection

The Waterfall of Values. Photograph: Paulien Oltheten

TRAVELOGUE OF A CONVERSATION IN PROGRESS ON KNOWLEDGE AND INSPIRATION

Obiozo Ukpabi

On Board

When I got involved with Building Conversation in 2019 as a conversation guide, I was fascinated by the formats used to explore how we speak to each other and how we might do so differently. I was also curious about insights and approaches from different knowledge sources and disciplines that had somehow served as inspiration in designing the conversation forms.

Over the years I have been active in inclusive dialogue, justice and conflict transformation. A recurring aspect of my work, as a researcher in dialogics of justice, is helping colleagues and other stakeholders become more aware of their biases and blind spots. In doing so, I prefer to use approaches where parties on all sides (in enquiry, action or learning) are participants in a reciprocal process.

You could say that I have developed a sensitivity for identifying blind spots, especially in those situations where our good intentions might make us careless and we do not give the self-reflection necessary to avoid causing harm with our behaviour, our words or even our thoughts. In my field, this can lead to an increased risk of conflict or violence, or the (inadvertent) reproduction of patriarchal, racist or colonial patterns.

Perhaps it was naive, but I did not expect to encounter such carelessness when I joined Building Conversation. Was it because it was my first time working in a creative, artistic environment? Or because Building Conversation is dedicated to the examination of our patterns of interaction and expression, while trying out alternative ways of engaging with each other in what I understood as a radical attempt to imagine new futures for ourselves?

As I immersed myself in the conversation formats, via Building Conversation's website and listening to the oral introductions that my colleagues made to participants and trainees at the start of each conversation, something struck me about the way sources of inspiration were referenced in the process. Whenever the cultural knowledge of indigenous people (practices of Inuit, Māori and Canadian First Nations that had inspired *Conversation Without Words*, parts of *Agonistic Conversation* and *Timeloop*) was mentioned, the words of Building Conversation suddenly became vague. Instead of acknowledging these sources, the origins of the theories and practices in question were obscured or even misrepresented.

When I shared my reflections during a team meeting, I was once again taken aback. Instead of a defensive reaction, my colleagues told me that they also felt uncomfortable about the way certain sources of inspiration were mentioned and acknowledged. Instead of quickly switching to a less uncomfortable topic, we talked further about this discomfort and questions around appropriation and representation that had also been raised earlier by some participants. For some time my colleagues had felt a desire to do something with these questions, and they welcomed my suggestion to take concrete steps.

This 2019 team meeting and the process that followed showed me that Building Conversation does not just talk about the need to discuss difficult, uncomfortable topics, reflect deeply on your own behaviour and learn in (sometimes confrontational) dialogue with others. The collective is willing, eager even, to put it into practice. For me, this 'learning journey' only began at that particular team meeting: it was the moment I felt I really wanted to get on board with Building Conversation. It is an ongoing conversation that I am hopeful will take us further into more thoughtful meetings, real dialogues and sharing stories in ways that do justice to all of us.

Into Our Blind Spots

Perhaps you shouldn't think of a blind spot as an obstacle, like a faulty lens. Framed that way, it easily becomes an excuse to legitimise our ignorance of things we have the luxury of not being aware of. What if we think of it as a corridor? One that we choose time and again not to enter. By not entering this corridor, to meet those for whom our blind spots are gaping wounds, and to critically and responsibly examine and situate ourselves in relation to what we observe, we keep our blind spots in place. Our blind spots don't happen to us, like the rain or a birthmark. They are things we learn, and repeat, until we begin to unlearn them. So let's walk down this corridor, and begin a process of learning from what and who we encounter here.

Transition: To Be Continued

Jaky Troy, professor of visual arts education and an Aboriginal Australian of the Ngarigu People (Pama-Nyungan), describes the concept of "collaborative inspiration" in the guide *Engaging. A Guide to Interacting Respectfully and Reciprocally with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, and their Arts Practices and Intellectual Property* (2015). This concept is explained and concretised in relation to copyright and traditional cultural knowledge through a set of practical guidelines as an alternative to practices that reproduce colonial patterns of "exploitation, plunder and disempowerment". Collaborative inspiration is characterised by "cooperation and engagement" in the use of traditional, cultural knowledge.

As we know, becoming aware of our blind spots is not enough. Like me, my colleagues felt that action is needed. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith asks in her book *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999), how do we as researchers become more ethical, respectful, reflexive and critical in our dealings with knowledge? And can this be done

without losing the playfulness inherent in our practice as creators, makers, experimenters and imaginers?

The argument is sometimes made that too much awareness leads to fear of making mistakes, stifling creative expression and avoiding risk. But Building Conversation participants will know that being more mindful, and taking responsibility for how you proceed, does not lead to a loss of playfulness – quite the contrary. Allowing mistakes to be part of the process, and being willing to listen to and act on feedback does not preclude risk-taking. It only increases the chance that the outcome of such a process will be valuable and meaningful to more people, and do less harm.

The conversation continues and I will continue to make space for it within Building Conversation and with our wider network of participants, co-makers and inspirers. My colleagues recognise and emphasise with me though that the responsibility for this commitment does not lie with one person. Instead, it is a shared commitment that requires each of us to make our own contribution in self-reflection and to initiate uncomfortable conversations through which we increasingly recognise how we too, sometimes inadvertently reinforce the very systems we so desperately want to dismantle.

Addendum Through Dialogue

Peter Aers

It feels uncomfortable: being confronted with criticism of our blind spots. Still, this discomfort and our mixed emotions should not stop us addressing and allowing change in our work as artists. This change comes through revising texts and being in dialogue with participants and guides about why we use certain words and references. I have been training others to guide conversations in their mother tongue for the last six years, and in this handover of ideas many discussions have arisen. I remember lively discussions about appropriation with a group of Danish guides in Copenhagen after which we decided to change sentences in *Timeloop's* introduction. There were emotional talks on safe spaces and performance art in Ljubljana at the City of Women festival, which led us to change our general introduction too.

Obiozo's reflection and introspection made me and others within our group aware that reciprocity, with regards to indigenous practices, was absent in our work. On her suggestion we decided to invite Bruce Naokwegijig, artistic director of Debajehmujig Theater Group in Canada, to address the inspiration for *Timeloop* with us. Finally, in October 2022 during The Gathering in Amsterdam, we shared storytelling and were all enriched by the context and approach.

For sure, challenging our blind spots and being attentive to reciprocity, can be stifling within creative work. But only if we stick to discourse. When practising and allowing for the possibility of the failure of this reciprocity, it turns out to be an enriching and playful encounter. New stories come to life and, as Bruce poignantly described, these stories travel the world through the winds and the sky, and we want them to be truthful and blue. •

The Gathering. Photograph: Kris Dewitte

Interview

The Meeting Point. Photograph: Devanté Notopawiro

6.0

Interview

THE FOLLOWING CONVERSATIONS took place online during spring 2021 at the end of a long lock-down. They allowed time for thinking and mapping some important ideas around Building Conversation that are not necessarily verbalised while working on the performative conversations. These are some excerpts from much longer conversations that took the form of loose dialogues. Special thanks go to Laura Jimenez who has transcribed the dialogues carefully and patiently. The conversations were prepared and edited by Sodja Lotker, a dramaturg, teacher and curator from Prague and one of the guides of Building Conversation and Skye Sherwin, writer and editor.

On risk, trust, tensions and attitudes: a conversation between Peter Aers, Lotte van den Berg, Sodja Lotker and Daan 't Sas

Sodja Lotker [SL]: Maybe we can start with the difficult points in Building Conversation, the challenges and the risks.

Lotte van den Berg [LB]: Risks are connected to safety. You can trust things like the frame, or each other, the care, attention or time that is there… But you're also asked to take a risk, and not only in relation to difference,the 'otherness', other people and things. For me it is really important to ask people to challenge themselves in how they think or how they speak or don't speak: to break their patterns in a way, to do it differently than you're used to. This is challenging or risky both for yourself and also the group, and also daring.

Peter Aers [PA]: I think it has to do with dramaturgy, or the framework we create that shapes the question 'will you join?'. And when people join, after an explanation of the framework, they know what they enter into and there's no hidden agendas. We're open about what we're going to do. Also, the framework challenges you to avoid your own patterns. For example Conversation Without Words. The silence is not something you're used to doing.

LB: I think risk and trust are two sides of one coin, you have to trust to take a risk. Because you dare to risk, you also find differences within yourself. You're asked to step out of a pattern. You understand that: 'you can think this, but you can also think that.' You allow yourself to be different from what you think you are. You sit opposite somebody else in the group who has other ideas from you, and say, 'Ok, now we have to start dealing with these differences'. You don't have an entrance into the dialogue. But if you feel the possibility of something different within yourself, actually maybe you also sometimes can do it right. I think that this is the whole idea of deep democracy, no? This is the raw fluidity of the democracy that is between us in the bigger collective, like the different voices that are there and should be able to be heard, but also within you. And I think it is something that we try to evoke.

Daan 't Sas [DS]: I think that safety is being created with the introduction or the framework we propose, and this space that people enter. But there's also a certain tension being created, and this also allows people to take risks or make a difference. And I note, for example, we worked at STRP festival last month and there was an introduction made by others, and it took away a certain tension, and that really makes people feel too safe or too comfortable so they don't make an effort. We begin many conversations

without a formal starting point so when people get involved, they're not sure what's going to happen. It's very important to protect this in a way. I think people also start to look for this tension, or differences of risks because of the duration of certain conversations. In *Thinking Together* duration is really important because people start to get bored. That's when they create tension or look for risk, and I think this happens too in *Conversation Without Words:* you start to look for, 'What is actually happening? I'm getting sleepy now, let's turn on.' In *Agonistic Conversation*, you raise the tension when people sit next to each other, and you make a polarising black and white proposal.

PA: But would you say, Daan, is the tension connected to performativity, for you?

DS: Yeah, it makes people aware of their presence. You also make it performative in a way, so you think, 'Ok, I feel something within my body. I want to give space to this tension but also to change the course of the conversation or to interact.'

LB: There's tension from the beginning, no? By immediately installing tension, as a group you learn that you can deal with it, so maybe after an hour it really gets difficult. You already learned that you can deal with silence, with awkwardness, with actually behaving differently than you're used to with emotions going up and down. The way the space is organised can really help you to endure things that you don't find easy.

DS: Sometimes you also see recognition of being able to accept this duration and endure this tension. People become silent with the whole group, for like two minutes and then they accept it: 'Ok, we can do this together.' But it's also the way spaces are organised, that you're sitting on stools, which create tension because they're not comfortable. There's no distraction, which raises tension too.

LB: You offer tension to people and trust that they can carry it. I think that's something really important, no? To give a very sharp knife to a kid of three and to say, 'Well, yeah, it's sharp but you can do it'.

PA: If I don't trust the person who's guiding a work, I cannot fully enter because I know there's a kind of manipulation.

SL: Maybe we can define this trust as the difference between dialogical art and other participatory works where the trust can be broken for the sake of aesthetics?

DS: But in most of the conversations the guide participates and then also says, 'Ok, I will join as well.' You're not an outsider and you're not going to watch how people are going to participate. Like with the child and the knife: you would be there cutting together with this kid rather than standing on the side.

LB: There's the whole idea that there's no possibility of outside: you're always in it. You're part of it and you're affected, which I think is an interesting critique on theatre itself, like, do you install the spectator as somebody who watches what happens on the stage? That's quite an interesting response to the world as we find it now. I think it's important, politically, to actually state that there's no possibility of sitting outside of something, in the dark, and watching it. Stepping in yourself and acknowledging, 'I was now a bit of a leader but I'm also just a person like you. I maybe have a bit more experience but I'm also still learning, and I'm willing to risk myself', relates to a super important political challenge. It's a big idea for the whole of society, that you can control, observe, stand outside and manage things without joining.

SL: Sometimes in participatory performances the spectator becomes so entangled with the fact that it's happening, they have to do so many things that they do not have time to reflect, perceive…

LB: [In Building Conversation] you're breathing between doing and reflecting. And this is also connected to the duration Daan is talking about, because it's dull. You feel that you cannot be there with your full focus constantly, so you go in and out.

SL: Yeah, you're breathing.

LB: Igor Dobricic said in the process of making you're breathing between doing, acting, and reflecting. And

I think it's very beautiful, and that also you feel that when you sit in *Conversation Without Words*, no? You want to be there constantly, but then you just, 'Whoo! I was away.'

DS: It's not only watching the others but also watching what's happening inside yourself, observing your own emotions and position.

PA: In *Impossible Conversation*, in the second round you relate to what you've heard. First you write from your position, what you've experienced, but then you make this jump to the other. You can't stay a spectator because you have to relate to what was said again, with your own body and knowledge.

SL: That takes me to the second topic. There's something about what we do in contemporary theatre that provides the possibility of new attitudes to each other and the world. I think that it is something really crucial in teaching. We're not teaching theatre students the tools, craft or aesthetics any more, but some kind of critical artistic attitude to the world, which for me is tightly connected to the spiritual and the political. How do you relate to others? How do you relate to animals? How do you relate to objects? Who are you in the world? You know?

LB: This relating, in many different ways, is something you can practise.

DS: If you try to provide a space for new attitudes, for yourself and for others, it's centering the person, the subject itself. You're experimenting with different possible attitudes within yourself, exploring how you can relate differently, to find different reactions physically and in your thinking. In conversations like *Parliament of Things*, for example, you're really trying to dive into this relational aspect. How do we see the relations and interactions between different subjects? You try to let go of your own position and find out what the network is and how it behaves. *Impossible Conversation* is about creating different attitudes and knowing how to relate differently to a given topic. And, with *Parliament of Things*, you're really trying to let go of your own position and really try to find out what's the network actually, and how does this behave.

LB: It's interesting that you make this distinction between attitude and relation. You can say ' how do I relate? And then, in this relation, how do I act? What is my attitude within this relation? So, how do I deal with this?' So, there's different 'how's', but in a way, it's all about, 'how do I do it? How do I relate? How do I behave?'

DS: Within *Parliament of Things*, in a relational exploration, you start to see the whole network of interactions, and how your contribution is actually shifting all networks. So, your point of reference is not within you but it's on the network, and you try to become aware of how many different things start to move when you act in a specific way. The point of reference is not solely your physical or mental process. It's outside of that and it's all centered.

LB: Another thing that's interesting that you bring in, Daan, is this moving from individual to collective. You not only reflect upon yourself within the group, but also reflect upon the group.

DS: That group awareness is what's exercised in Thinking Together. You see how the whole consciousness of a group is being affected.

LB: Yesterday, for the first time in our kids' school we celebrated the end of slavery, the moment in the Netherlands on 1 July, 1863 slavery was forbidden. We organised it with two other mothers. The school principal said, "we're there to teach kids how to realise their full talent." So, it's very individual minded. So, the schools are saying now: 'Here you can become yourself! Here you can learn your talents! Here you can…' And I was thinking, it's important that you find your own place or your talents, but it's as important to see how this is related to the rest of the people, and things around you; to bring those two more into a balance.

DS: Also there's individual responsibility, which is also being proclaimed within schools, you become yourself, and if you don't become yourself within our school, you did something wrong.

SL: It provides another place where you learn how to be part of a group, to find your place in a group, and how to be together, and how to learn from each other.

LB: I come back to this 'role fluidity' where the starting point is that a group has certain roles, or qualities, or characteristics and that these characteristics are really owned by the group, and not by individuals. So, the moment you are part of a group, you are a group. How to be both individual and collective? Both aspects are always there.

On being on the inside, being-with, responsibility and control: a conversation between Sodja Lotker and Lotte van den Berg

SL: How did you start your work on dialogue and dialogical art?

LB: With the spectator or the act of spectating, watching. As a theatre-maker, as a director, it became more and more important to invite the spectator into the action; and to acknowledge the spectator as part of the action. A few years before the start of the *Building Conversation* project, the spectator had a very important role in how I thought about my work. For performances like *Wasteland* (2004), *Rumour* (2007) and *Agoraphobia* (2012) I started designing, developing and creating through the spectator's role. I was designing the place of watching, the seats, the way spectators were seated or standing. I made Agoraphobia in 2012 with one performer. He is outside on a square, and an audience member is invited to go to the square, to dial a number on their phone and listen. A voice talks about how they would like to speak out but don't dare. And then slowly the audience member recognises that they're listening with many more people who slowly recognise each other. They're suddenly with 100 people, all of them with their phones to their ears, and they start following this homeless person (the performer). There is a moment when we turn off the connection, so the audience members must come closer because otherwise they won't hear, and they must commit to listening closely. That is a very important moment in the performance. And although it is a monologue, I really perceive it as a dialogue, because it is through the act of listening that this person changes from a homeless, confused person that is nowhere to somebody that stands in the middle of the square with hundreds of other people around them, listening. Before that moment people don't acknowledge the homeless character. They would pass by them while shopping. Suddenly he or she becomes the king, the guru, the centre.

SL: You are acknowledging the commitment of both the audience and artists and their influence on each other, right?

LB: Yes, and that immediately has a lot of political implications. As an audience are we consumers of the performance? Or are we somehow co-creating? Because if there is no one watching the show, there's no show. In *Rumour* the audience is sitting in a closed box with a big window and outside you see the city. First, you think that it's about the performers in the city. But then the performers disappear among the other passers-by. First you think: 'now we can go home because the performers disappeared,' and then, 'oh, but there's a lot to see.' Then, listening to the soundscape you find out that how you see things depends on what you think and what you feel. If you hear romantic music, you see people being romantic or in love. If you listen to rain, you imagine rain and wind. And you start noticing your own thinking, your own position.

SL: You're not directing the audience's perception towards different things on stage, but you're facilitating an understanding of perception itself, in a way? And creating space for their perception…

LB: Yes, I'm inviting people to be self-reflective. Not only on the level of perception, but also to question, 'what does it mean for me to be part of a group here? Why do I want to watch this?'

In *Wasteland*, the audience sits 102 metres away from some people in a deserted space killing each other. What does it mean to sit here and watch? To keep watching? Why do I want to watch this? It is about acknowledging your own presence and the importance of your presence, and of course, the smallness of your presence. But this process of perceiving, watching, of being there, acknowledging yourself in relation to others and also watching the work itself, for me that process became more and more important.

For me the most important thing is not the notion of dialogue, but joining or participating. It goes back to being in Kinshasa in Congo in 2010, where we worked for four months with different artists. We were outside, in an open atelier in a suburb of the city. We asked ourselves ´can you watch with the eyes of another?' There was this idea that we would make ourselves strangers.

I went there as a director, somebody who is used to watching the stage from a distance, who watches things happening, which you organise. You control it; you're on the outside. And being there, in this constant chaos, in the public space in Kinshasa, it became clear that I was not able to watch in the same way because I was constantly watching and observing myself! I couldn't be the fly on the wall, the outside observer, the director controlling, because there was no inside or outside.

With a few Congolese actors we made little scenes performed on the street without announcement. We called it 'invisible theatre'. They did simple interventions, some fighting or watching the sky. We followed how people responded. And then, we made a small tribune, while our production leader wrote down, 'Podium pour les douze chaise.' So, I wanted to make a tribune – a stage - for 12 chairs. For me, it was also about turning around the stage itself. The auditorium was on the stage.

It was simply made, about 3 x 4 metres, with white plastic chairs and we could move it from place to place. We would watch ordinary life, sometimes with the intervention of spectators. It was a performance we were constantly trying out and experimenting with. It was very difficult to find people who wanted to sit with me on the chairs' stage. And, if there were people sitting there, they would immediately leave as soon as something was happening. If there was a scene happening further away, they would move closer, to be in it. Most of the people had no desire to sit and to watch, which for me is an especially important thing to do. Instead, there was a desire to be part of the action, to be close. You can think that from a distance, you have an overview. But you can also feel that you have to be in it to know what is happening. Not only to watch with an overview, but to immerse, to be part of… you have to smell, feel and breathe with the action. It is a totally different way of connecting.

It is an understanding through bodily experience. I was directly confronted with this white western perspective that often prevails, where we think that you learn, that you understand, that you see if you have overview, if there is a 'neutral' position, if there is distance.

On the island of Terschelling, during the Oerol Festival in 2013 we created a simple settlement, every day anew, sometimes with some cover against rain, or sun, or wind, and we had tea and coffee, and we could bake eggs for people. We had this place, and it was on a really very huge field, where there was nothing. People would come by because they were out walking or had seen it from a distance. They would say, "What are you doing?" And we would say, "We're sitting here and we're thinking about projects for the following year,"and asked them, "If you joined us, what would we do?"And we had all-day discussions. A lot of possible projects came up: houses, vegetable gardens, boats, a lot of things that could be built. We called it 'Temple the Building Place' or 'The building place the Temple'. There was something about spirituality but also something very concrete about the process of building. We really thought at the end of the ten days that we are going to build something next year, and that it was about the act of building. But we always ended up with the question: 'do we really need it?' And that broke it down again. We felt that it was nice that the place was empty. And then it became clear that the conversation itself, this talking and watching, and imagining a common future, in this simple way, was what it was about. The conversation itself was the building.

The next year, we did the first experiments for Building Conversation. It started from this question of participation. What kind of frame should you, as an artist, propose? Should you design a frame that allows for the possibility that others can join you? And how to actually take responsibility for yourself, to acknowledge the fact that you are a part of a bigger whole? From all this the dialogue appeared.

For years I had invited spectators in as participants, and in the first week of performing *Building Conversation* at Oerol I suddenly realised that I was inviting myself in. And not only as a director but as a participant too.

I always felt that as a director I was the first spectator. When sitting, when directing, when making, somehow, I was always perceiving myself as a spectator. I was making something for other spectators to watch with me. When we invited spectators to join in, I was in a way inviting myself to join. That's where I decided not to stick to the white distant observing position but to try and to step in and be a part of.

SL: I think there are some contradictory things in that because you're creating the space in which you are to be together with the audience, but you're still the one that frames it and you're still the one that makes the rules, right?

LB: Yes, that is a constant question. But it is the same question connected to leadership, and fellowship. Daan always chooses to really participate. But I am also a director. I really love setting the frame. I'm good at it. I choose not to give up that space or that role completely, but I choose to also step out of it. I want to be able to step back. This is becoming more clear to me.

SL: Again, the most important thing there is acknowledging what you need and that this is where you are, to the audience. Being transparent about your position: "This is how I operate and these are the rules," and t can then choose to join or not.

LB: Daan and me, we talk about curiosity and control a lot. There is a wish to be curious, to be [inside the conversation or performance] and to feel. And there is a wish to control. And, how to combine them? I think Building Conversation really grew from the fact that we, Daan and I, are quite different in that.

SL: Because taking control is also taking responsibility for something, right?

LB: How to negotiate the openness and the control is a constant struggle. And it is at the core of Building Conversation. Also playfulness, and not-knowing, and really trusting the fact that everybody who's there is there, it is what it is. I think that self-reflection happens because of the frame, which you need to watch yourself in.

SL: What still surprises you the most about the conversations?

LB: The surprise of people joining and being surprised how easy it is. Before that there is maybe a fear of dialogue or a distrust in the possibility of it, a fear of its impossibility. When the dialogue happens it provides a sense of relaxation. It surprises the people, and it also provides a sense of trust in others. What surprises me is how easy it is to do it. Or maybe not easy but simple.

SL: That's my experience also. It is simple to have open creative dialogue.

LB: Not only the cosy, harmonious dialogue. There is a place in between where there is dissent, agonism. And that we can be agonistic and endure it. For the new project, *Rhizome*, we want to create a dialogue where it's not only the human voice that speaks and sets the tone. We made *Parliament of Things* within Building Conversation where we, together with the participating audience, invite the voices or perspectives of others more-than-human. Still, in the parliament they must speak through human words. That is starting to irritate me a bit because you still push these more-than-human entities into a human frame that is so boxed and separated, no? Words work through separation.

SL: Yes, our languages are about distinguishing, separating and categorising. Or at least this is what they were mainly used for, for hundreds of years.

LB: We are now looking for ways to install a setting in which words are not the main thing. I was at the [old factory in Ter Apel] where we sometimes work, and there's a huge inside area which is totally falling apart with a lot of sounds: rain, wind, things squeaking, dropping and moving; wood against wood, metal, water. All different kinds of sounds, so it's wood against wood, it's metal, it's water. And somehow, there was this moment where I thought, 'maybe this is the conversation. And, what would I say if I joined it?' It's so fragile, and you feel that words could also destroy it. I could only say things like, 'What if I eee-ooo-aaaaah.' I'm busy now working out how we could acknowledge our human voice as one

of the sounds. To not perceive the place where we are as a landscape, the backdrop to our existence, to not hear its sounds as at back of our talking. How to step into this broader collective of things and entities, and how to give yourself a place in there.

SL: I think it's important to understand that the dialogue is already happening on so many levels – just by us existing. We think that we are in charge of objects, but it's not true because we have to look after them, wash or iron them for instance.

LB: Yeah, it's this whole notion of being-with. Maybe first, it was about joining, like me, as an outsider and observer. Now I wonder how to be-with all the more-the-human entities too. How do we come to understand, to acknowledge, that we are together already?

On roles, confrontations, being humble and long conversations without words: a conversation between Sodja Lotker and Peter Aers

SL: You studied philosophy, right?

PA: Yes. I also studied theatre in Brussels for three years, at a school that followed the Jaques Lecoq method. That was one of the 'satellite' schools and the teachers came from Paris. After that, I worked a lot with the Spanish visual artist Dora García, and for me, it opened up how theatre can be or what it could be like, in daily space.

One of the works was *The Beggar's Opera* performed at Skulptur Projekte, Münster (2007), and that was a three and a half months kind of theatre piece, influenced by Bertolt Brecht. As a performer, you were a character – a beggar - once you left your apartment and entered the street. I think I was outside for 12 hours a day in this role. I started having talks with people and I was somebody else with different perspectives. That role gave me an opportunity to talk differently. This made me realise, as I was trained in theatre to pretend to be somebody else, I always felt I wanted to have this, 'is he the actor behind it? or is he…' you know? There were a lot of moments where people on the street were asking, 'yeah, but are you real?' That's where the play began, for me. There was also a series of different artistic performances, *Exercises in Disappearing* (2005-2014). The last in the series was a trilogy about dying called *Light, Medium, Strong* (2013). We worked for two years with people who were dying, undergoing palliative care, etc. and interviewed many, many people. There were people who had worked in mines, for example, how they looked at death, compared to people working as a nurse. And then, while creating the performance, we realised that the dialogue we had with people during those two years was very important, and we wanted to share it, not as a transcript but to do it again. In the third part of the trilogy, Strong, we had a 45 minute conversation about dying with people who joined us at a table in a bar. We scripted it with questions and perspectives on dying. After the conversation, they had to go into an art installation: a room that had very strange perspectives, with a bed and a heartbeat that gradually slowed down. It was your own heartbeat that was controlled with a computer. After that performance, I realised that the conversation with the audience was the most interesting for me. I wanted to continue the conversations as an artwork, as a kind of scripted/non-scripted kind of interaction.

SL: Can you tell me what still surprises you in your work with dialogue?

PA: Being present together with people surprises me: what they say, sure, but more how they say it and how they are together. It lifts me, gives me energy. When for example families come together there is a very free-flowing conversation but it has no focus. With *Thinking Together* there's this focus, and even if it's a method, a principle that is applied, you still feel it, we're all behind this principle, so we're working towards it. This kind of presence and focus I really love, that we do this together.

SL: And people get into this focus very quickly?

PA: Yes, it's because of these codes that you install. I compare it to theatre codes, like when you enter the space, the lights go out, you shut up. The curtains open, the rhythm of the stick, "tack-tack-tack," and you know there's

a character entering the stage… I love this kind of focus and presence.

SL: I think people can get close to each other much quicker than we think. People intuitively look for common ground, actually. But I think confrontation can actually turn out to be something very productive.

PA: People are confronted with the way they speak or what they are saying. I think, for example, outside *Thinking Together*, in daily space people won't react to this. For example, if somebody says something to me I don't agree with – a racist remark or something – then this stays with me for a couple of days. I ask myself, 'why didn't I react? Why wasn't I sharp enough?' So you rehearse this kind of dialogue further on in your head, but in *Thinking Together* you have the opportunity to take time and go into it. It's very confrontational but also healing, in a way. That you find this moment now, otherwise you have to do it in your bed on your own as an imaginative repetition of what you've said or you wanted to have said. But in *Thinking Together* you can work on it at that moment.

SL: Yes, that's something I apply a lot in my teaching and in my everyday meetings with people. When I see that somebody's nervous or that something is wrong I press at it, until they speak about it in front of me. I learnt from *Thinking Together* that if you take [the feeling] away with you it turns into something cancerous, and if you speak about it right away it can be resolved.

PA: Sometimes, yes. There's a Dutch saying, translated as 'soft healers make stinking wounds'.

SL: Yes, but it's also the way you go for it, if you're not aggressive, if you're just insistent.

PA: If it becomes a power issue then it goes wrong. But if you want to help people or you realise that they're putting themselves down then you can help to lift them up.

A lot of people see somebody is uncomfortable in front of them and they start acting like they're uncomfortable or trying to put themselves down. Kendrick Lamar raps, 'I won't fake humble because your ass is insecure.' I've done it too, like smiling too much… I'm like, 'oh, Peter, come on'. I was raised in a grocery store so I always had to be welcoming when I entered the store. Even if I had a really bad morning or a fight with my brother or whatever, I had to enter the store shining. So I'm really trained to be very polite.

SL: I wanted to go back to the idea of acting and your presence in these dialogues. The burden is to be part of the dialogue and to facilitate it. How do you balance that?

PA: I have been training people internationally, to guide conversations in their own language, in Norway, Denmark, Portugal and so on. I stress that this is something that I can't teach them to do, just like this, immediately. It's something you find out by practising a lot. 'Ok, now I'm a little bit in the conversation too much the artist or I'm now totally the participant.' I think it is a balance you learn just by doing a lot. How attentive you are towards it, to feel when you're more the artist and more the participant, depends on what kind of work you're in. For me, I learnt a lot working with Dora García, like 'Oh but you're the actor, you're not a real beggar.' [While doing that project] I was invited to a dinner and I was Peter and not the role, and there was disappointment for the person who invited me. And then I learnt, 'Don't let go of your role.' And then continued again. But by doing it all the time you kind of find a balance. And allowing yourself to make mistakes. Being an artist and explaining it is also a role. Being the guide is a role. Some roles we play we're so used to that we don't think they're roles anymore. Being a daughter or a son. Even the role of being a man.

SL: In *Thinking Together* you let go of guiding completely.

PA: Yes, because it's scripted for the guide to let go. I think *Conversation Without Words* has this difficult balance in the beginning because the group looks at you like, 'how do we do this?' Twice I had a conversation with only one person during the whole conversation. Afterwards somebody told me, 'It was kind of weird that you, as a guide, were talking to only one person.' I responded, 'I know, but I really felt the need to not let go of this specific conversation.' So

they challenged my actions in the conversation as being a guide, while I wanted to be a participant all the way.

SL: We had a long 1:1 conversation without words in Poznan, remember? I remember feeling guilty for taking you away from others.

PA: Do you remember that you said you fell apart or something?

SL: Yes, I almost fainted. It was like meditating together or something.

PA: I remember that my feet and legs were giving up. It was like they didn't work anymore. And I was going down. Once, with *Conversation Without Words*, we were doing it every week. The same people came back again and again. And they saw it as a kind of therapy and started claiming the conversation. That's not the goal either.

SL: It cannot become one thing, right? It has to be multiple things.

PA: Yes, at that point you can go to other places that are dark or interesting I think. And you almost can't describe it afterwards.

SL: For me, creative and critical thinking are now almost exactly the same.

PA: In what way?

SL: Because I think you can only be critical if you're standing in uncharted territory.

PA: I agree because what's critical thinking now, or what it's supposed to be, is very, maybe this is a strong word but, conservative.

SL: I'm reading Paul Feyerabend and David Bohm, and you really understand that scientists, or anyone that's moving thinking forward actually, is thinking quite randomly, creatively or in very different ways, not predetermined.

PA: For me, it was an eye-opener that the way scientists create is so different from the way they present the work afterwards, as being a very logical thing. That is because scientists 'clean' it, and it's like this beautiful line, this step and then this step. But while doing it, the creation itself is like, 'Pfff!' I mean, sometimes it is just a walk they take, and they don't know where it comes from, and then they have to trace it back. That's when it becomes a theory. But the creation itself is fantastic.

SL: You said that when you start a dialogue you're in a role. So can you define that a bit more for me?

PA: I felt it mostly because of the preparation I did before entering a conversational performance. I was preparing myself like I used to before going on stage, this concentration. It was more about what you allow people to see in you and what you don't. For example, in The Beggar's Opera, I wouldn't talk about my private life while I was in the role because that was somebody else. So it was more like a preparation of where to go.

SL: And, why weren't you talking about your private life?

PA: Because then it wouldn't be the performative work. It is the role, the persona you take on, that will always be related to the work, to this framework you're in. What's personal doesn't have to be private. It's like being on stage and playing Hamlet. It's not my words, but they become my words, they go through me. But it's still different than if I start using words to talk about something in my life. I think I'm very conscious of that. I sometimes use more personal thoughts to open the conversation to lead us somewhere. When I do it, I realise I'm more the artist than just the participant, or the guide. A storyteller. And at a certain point I also understood that having conversations is storytelling.

On the beginning, clouds of thinking, elephants and common grounds: a conversation between Sodja Lotker and Daan 't Sas

SL: How did it start?

DS: At the Terschelling Festival, Oerol, I thought that it would be interesting to make something without a clear division between artist and audience. To take away this division and to create something together. At this festival, people always talked a lot after seeing the performances, and then a lot of ideas and opinions came up, and they sat at the cafés and drank wine and beer and talked about this, but they talked about it like spectators being outside of the work and not being part of it. And I had the feeling that people

got really inspired and very interested, and also wanted to be part of it. But there wasn't really a place for staging these expressions. So, I initially got quite triggered by this inspiration and thought it would be so interesting to do something with this, to take away this division and to create something together with people. There wasn't space within the festival program for anything like this. We created an alternative space on the island where the festival takes place, with a shelter and tea and coffee. And what became clear was that what we were actually already doing – coming together in the space, thinking about how we speak to each other, our roles and how this influences the future we are creating together – were the elements that we could develop in the next phase.

That year we began rehearsing *Conversation Without Words* and *Thinking Together*. We trained with Humberto Schwaab on socratic dialogue. He mentioned David Bohm's work *On Dialogue* (1990), which he considered, "the core of so many conversation techniques and thinking about dialogue.". We started reading these texts before having a conversation. Then we also shifted roles, so you were reading a little bit of introduction, and then I was, and so it was circulating in the room. And then we did it. *Thinking Together* lasted three hours and was in a huge chapel. We realised something was happening, when you do an introduction, choose a space and sit together, focus on this specific format for duration, share this duration together, and then reflect upon it. It became clear that we had a process in hand that was actually a kind of work. We also did this with the socratic dialogue and with *Conversation Without Words,* making spaces for conversations, specially designed for people to come together, and also looking at where you actually pay attention and how this influences the meeting.

When it started I hadn't a clue, I would rather build things and I was actually not that interested in having endless conversations with people.

SL: There's something addictive about Building Conversation dialogues and the way they give you another dimension of humans, interaction and what life is. I started needing more quality time with other people, I think.

DS: Yes, it is. Sometimes you get another insight or you get a feeling, and then you think, 'Bloody hell! I'm starting to understand things in another way.' And that's great. It sometimes happens and I also think it's addictive because you know it's possible to achieve another understanding, another way of being together in a group, of creating another community.

SL: Yes, and it's a kind of wealth. You have more information, experiences, and emotions available through others, in a way.

DS: Also to be able to explore something together. To explore together it's important to do some interventions, to create direction and take people along, pointing out, 'this is what we have done'. Then continuing together, having the conversation, exploring and developing it. But also seeing the value of people joining from all different backgrounds, so to align people in a way, to create a kind of, well, togetherness from the start, to share this is what we're doing together, so there's a sense of belonging in this. I was thinking about the book I'm reading. It's about how people come to moral judgments and it's doing a kind of research on how our thinking works in different traditions, in Western philosophy, and what I find very interesting in this book, and it makes quite a statement is the idea of David Hume, it's that the rational mind is just the servant to our passions. And our passions and what's happening in our body. Rational thinking is making words of it, and emphasising it, and creating arguments to justify what we are actually doing, but… When crafting with material you try to understand the material. It can seem that the sculpture was already within it. I only had to look and find it to get it out; it was there already. It's finding a way to direct these things working together.

SL: Yes, I think there's a dialogue with the material, but also with the environment where you're creating and where the artwork lives. It's super important to actually reverse it, in the sense of spectators, which Lotte calls 'being with'. I think it's urgent for us to understand that we are existing with things, and that we're creating with things, that we're not separate from

anything. And that we're not existing rationally and irrationally, that we're also thinking with the whole body.

DS: Exactly. It's like embodied thinking, and it's embodied not only within the body but also within the space where you are. And it's great when in conversations people suddenly realise how the space is moving them in a specific thinking pattern, how they interact. You realise what you're thinking is directly shared, it's like strings pulling you, in a way. It's very important to be aware of these borders we make to be able to have an overview, so we make abstractions and also create boundaries, no? 'This is my concept and and that's how I put it into the world,' and 'this is what scenography is doing,' and 'this is the dramaturgy.' 'This is what you can do here, but this is what we can't do.' So we create kinds of territories by certain behaviour or permitted actions. It's crazy.

SL: That system of boundaries and safety, on the other hand, creates this other danger that when I'm with others, I have to be fully and constantly available. It goes from extreme to extreme, and we don't understand that there's a balance, that I am influenced by everything around me but I don't have to be constantly available at all levels.

DS: There's so much material. Every time you go somewhere else you get fed again, you get new insights. Someone makes you think 'Jesus, that's so interesting! That's exactly what I was thinking about.'

SL: It's like a cloud of knowledge. But we tend to think of ourselves as completely separate from the world in contemporary society.

DS: There is a question about mechanisms of othering and how we use them. More work on it is needed because if we 'other' people, 'other' animals, or plants, or the place where we are, it's a way of creating a boundary and cutting something from you, but also within you.

SL: But it's a matter of perception.

DS: It's amplified in our language as well, how we organise social space. It's many things. It's possible to make the switch, to break this mechanism of othering and make a more inclusive move. There are patterns that occur, and once they become clear, it takes a while within a group for everybody to go along, and the patterns are quite hard to break. It's also scary to break them because you don't know what's coming next. It surprises me, but it's also understandable that in a group a pattern is also safe, it's something people hold on to, and myself as well sometimes. You're really getting to something else together, and then you see it's possible to create new thoughts, new thinking.

SL: Those patterns sometimes become completely blinding, you don't even see anything outside of them. It's just so nice to be inside them, so relaxing and so safe. That also points to the fact that humanity needs synchronicity with other people. We need harmony with others, knowing that they will take care of you and that you are not alone, no matter how fake it is.

DS: It can work the other way around: by being and thinking together we are cutting ourselves off. We harm ourselves by othering or excluding ourselves from other things happening. In choosing, I really have to be in my office today and cut myself off to be able to concentrate, and do harm to other needs within myself, but also within my environment.

We are developing a project called *Rhizome* [this premiered in November 2021], addressing how we perceive and what our position is within the world, environment, and ecology. We are trying to see this in a broader perspective of time, to see traces of the past but also become aware of possible future traces. We're developing the work in this old factory in Ter Apel, where the space puts more emphasis on other voices, the impulse of the plants and animals living there, or the processes of the little fungi, weeds, and moss. And to see how they are finding a way within this… like what they are always doing, but is less visible because other manifestations, like humans, are more dominant. In my thinking and my perception, my attention often goes to a big building, new architecture, or something that has been created and it's mostly human-related. I like it when this is absent.It's relaxing in a way, the lack of human competition, of who can build the best or whatever.

SL: I think this idea of competition is also crucial for my experiences of dialogue, that it always erases the competition, which means that it erases quick judgements, so then you start relating completely differently.

DS: Yes, I think that's the track we all allow. There's an anxiety of not being able to manifest.

SL: I now teach dramaturgy at the Prague Academy of the Performing Arts. I do this through relationships with everyday objects, for instance gloves, cans, keys, hats… anything. I love the objects because they're man-made, but they're so inhuman, familiar and the most unfamiliar at the same time, beyond our comprehension in so many ways. I love thinking through objects, because there's something meditative about something so peaceful, that doesn't change so much, you know?

DS: I was reading about new materialism for *Rhizome*, how materials also have agency and how they act. Bruno Latour, Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway also go in this direction, becoming aware of what materials are actually doing and how they are visible and prominent.

SL: We also do strange things like figuring out how an object folds and then we try to fold like that object, or sometimes try to become the object. Someone might spend half an hour as a hat. It gives you a lot of knowledge about objects, but also about humans.

DS: We started a project in a school in Rotterdam to create a space within a classroom to talk about our prejudices. It's related to the murder of the French secondary school teacher Samuel Paty [by an Islamist terrorist], that took place in Éragny-sur-Oise, a suburb of Paris last year in October. We thought, 'ok, this is really heavy', so much aggression after having a conversation in a classroom. We wanted to create a space within a classroom to talk about these prejudices and unspoken things. How can you become aware of this and try to find a way to, well, find common ground in this as well.

SL: Maybe people look for common ground too quickly and then assume that their ground should be more common than the other ground. We are not used to just establishing the difference first, like in Agonistic Conversation, where first, you allow the other person their point of view, and you somehow acknowledge it. I think we very quickly dismiss the other person's point of view. That's where the problem with the dialogue starts because the other person feels that they're not heard, and they're not in the dialogue.

DS: We need to create more space for uncertainty, rather than claiming the common ground and saying, 'why are you making it so difficult? Just come to my island.'

SL: Yes. 'I'm the leftist. I'm progressive. In my island, there's room for everyone, except the racists.'

DS: Exactly. How can you be humble about this and say 'I'm not the one who knows'? A teacher said to me, 'understanding is something other than accepting.' It's very important to try to understand and inform yourself, and to listen to the other position, but you don't have to accept it, it doesn't imply that you have to accept it.

SL: Acknowledging that somebody has the right to their position. But to be honest, it is a bit different for me as a female. It took me a lot to understand that just because I'm acknowledging the rules of the game that somebody else is playing, I do not have to submit to it. I have a T-shirt that says, 'I understand. I just don't care.' Just because I understand, I don't have to be part of it.

DS: It is also about sensing the space to form something yourself and to change something, you don't have to follow or submit yourself. •

Epilogue

Parliament of Things. Photograph: Henk Claassen

'This is as far as I've gotten.' Illustration based on the reflection of a participant: Laura Mentink

Letting Go

Peter Aers, Lotte van den Berg and Daan 't Sas

IF A KING SAYS 'we are a participatory society', can he remain king? If a theatre director says 'I'm creating participatory art', will she remain a theatre director? The conviction that it is possible to only create a framework for others and to take up a neutral position once facilitating, moderating or leading the action, is an illusion. You're always part of it. The neutral position doesn't exist. In the field of science, politics or art, while having a dialogue within family life or amongst friends, you're present; you have influence. You are part of a constellation even when you're waiting outside with doors closed, whether you like it or not.

Exploring the complex combination of roles that we move between is part of practising participation. Making space for others to step in is, in the end, also about making space for yourself to step in. Not as the director who oversees and controls, not as a fly on the wall, a passer-by, a guest. But simply as one of the people present. The movement of creating a space and stepping into that space with others is a challenging one: To set the frame and to enter the frame are two completely different actions. When creating the frame, you can change it, make it bigger, smaller, exclusive or inclusive. Once you step inside it you can no longer change it like that. You can bounce against it, love it, hate it, be irritated by it or with others. You can influence it from within.

The work we've created in the last ten years has changed us. It still challenges our understanding of our profession. It's demanded that we create firm and solid frameworks on the one hand, and on the other, to be humble, fragile, stumbling participants. Moving between those two roles has become like a dance and it has become the work: to construct, to let go; to construct, to let go.

Sharing the scripts of this work with you seems to be the next step. This book is our proposal to you with a hope to inspire, to make possible and to let go once again. It's a proposal to build conversations with friends, family members, colleagues or strangers, while hoping one day to receive an invitation to come and join you at your place.

If we are going to build something together, what will it be?

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