

I am on the west coast of Sweden. You are in Virginia. I imagine the air where you are to be as warm, if not warmer, as where I am. Maybe, you have just started your day with a swim in salt water, as I did six hours ago. I take pleasure in knowing what it looks like, feels like, tastes like where you are. Our distance is large, different time zones making it even larger. But, as always, I feel close. Parallel; entangled; intertwined. Our thoughts; somehow designated to the same lines of fragments.

“Longing, we say, because desire is full of endless distances.”

(Robert Hass)

*I write to you this time to ask if you would like to talk to me.*

I have been thinking lately on what it means to talk to one another, to utter words, to articulate thoughts in a shared space. On what bodily acts we perform when we participate in dialogue, and on how rooms in which we execute them are organized, directed, choreographed.

There is a writer called Sara Ahmed who says that bodies acquire orientation by repeating some actions over others. She states that gatherings – whether a family assembling around a dinner table or a group of people congregating in space to engage in a shared political matter – are not neutral, but directive. When gathering, we are required to follow specific lines.

“Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created. The lines that direct us, as lines of thought as well as lines of motion [...] depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition.”

(Sarah Ahmed)

As we know, lines can take many forms. Vertical, horizontal, circular, straight, bent. If we follow them; if we line up, we most often know where we are. We find our way when we turn both this way and that, we know what to do in order to get to that place or this. We are oriented; resided in space.

The first time I met you, we both inhabited an intense space of recent loss. Trapped because of a hurricane, we shared a place unknown to both of us, together with multiple bodies unfamiliar. I don't know how you felt, but I remember that the flooding that prohibited us from going anywhere and the fallen trees that had cut both electricity and water did not really bother me. I was already lost; the world had already become larger than me; my lack of control already severe. I was far from home, but even when home I had not known where I was.

“Getting lost like that seems like the beginning of finding your way or finding another way.”

(Rebecca Solnit)

As writers, thinkers, teachers, artists, Aries – both traversing that terrain of loss – you and I were instantly drawn to one another. At once we came to speak about pedagogy. A few days later, when roads had been cleared and water had pulled back, we returned to the city. Our two-hour ride took almost seven, and when you dropped me of we had spoken about so much more than pedagogy. Afterward, it seemed that drive back to the city was not about returning, but about turning into something else.

“Lost really has two disparate meanings”, Rebecca Solnit writes in her book *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. Losing things is about the familiar falling away, getting lost is about the unfamiliar appearing. Either way, it is an experience of losing control. Solnit teaches me that

finding

oneself can only be achieved by losing oneself.

The art is not one of forgetting but of letting go, she writes. And in the place called lost, strange things can be found.

Sara Ahmed teaches me that in landscape architecture unofficial paths are described with the term *desire lines*. Those are imprints on the ground, where people have deviated from the paths they are supposed to follow. Leaving their marks, hollows in the ground, alternative and unexpected lines appear. "Such lines are indeed traces of desire, where people have taken different routes to get to this point or that point." Ahmed calls the accumulation of those lines 'queer landscapes', shaped by paths we follow when deviating from the straight line.

*Then, what difference does it make what we are oriented toward? And what has all of this to do with my desire to talk to you?*

Once I spoke on a panel on the topic of a 'feminist language'. The room was small and crammed with people, lined up on rows of chairs facing the front of the room where two other speakers, two moderators and I where placed. We, invited speakers and moderators, talked vividly for fifty-five minutes. I do not recall very much of our conversation, but what I do remember was the last five minutes of that hour. One of the moderators asked if there were any questions amongst the audience. A woman raised her arm. The moderator made a gesture, declaring her right to speak out. The woman was furious. Her point: When we had gathered to talk about something called a 'feminist language', we had done nothing but to reinforce a hierarchy in-between those worthy of talking and those only of listening. For fifty-five minutes, five of us had possessed every space of articulation available in that crammed room, in order to provide five poor minutes for the rest of the sixty or so present. Her anger brought an uncomfortable energy to the room. Some grinned, some wriggled, some sighed. The moderator, quick in mouth and talented in argument, smiled to the woman and simply declared: This is a *panel*. If you would like to participate more inter-actively, I would recommend you to attend one of the workshops later this afternoon.

This moment stuck with me. It posed a question, still ringing in my head: Why do we so rarely break away from norms and conventions concerning *how* we talk about breaking norms and conventions?

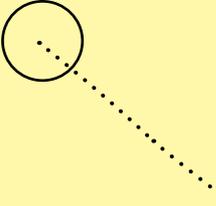
Sara Ahmed asks us to think about the 'habit' that can be found in the 'in-habit', when she states that public spaces take shape through habitual actions of bodies.

The body is 'habitual' not only in the sense that it performs actions repeatedly, but in the sense that when it performs such actions, it does not command attention...

In other words, the body is habitual insofar as it 'trails behind' in the performing of action, insofar as it does not pose 'a problem' or an obstacle to the action, or is not 'stressed' by 'what' the action encounters.

(Sara Ahmed)

For Ahmed, it is not so much the bodies that acquire the shape of habits, but spaces that acquire the shape of the bodies that 'inhabit' them, which makes some people feel in place, or at home, and others not. Hence, orientations affect what bodies can do – they are straightening devices. Phrased differently: spaces are oriented around the normative body, such as the straight body, the white body, the male body, which allows that very body to extend into space. *This* is the starting point, the point from which the world unfolds.



If we return to the room of the panel, a room of knowledge production and reflection, such lines, orientations, and habits become most noticeable. When we enter such a room; designated for artistic and political dialogue and termed as a ‘panel’ or a ‘seminar’ or a ‘lecture’, we know exactly which and what to ‘trail behind’. The room is organized according to linguistic acts, such as to speak or as to listen, and depending on which of these acts you have been assigned – prior to entering the room – you know what lines to move your body along with; what choreography to follow. Where to walk, how to sit, when to speak, how to be silent. When talking, you are expected to be clear and concise, to stick to the subject, to not be too personal or too explicit, to wait on your turn, to be engaged but not to be too emotional. Rules are rigid; choreography strictly hierarchical.

That woman, in the end of our panel on the topic of a ‘feminist language’, performed her body in a way that posed a problem. When questioning the format of our dialogue, a panel, her body did not only deviate from lines familiar in such a room, but also it commanded attention. It did not ‘trail behind’. And when things came out of line, the effect was uncomfortable, awkward, queer. In order for things to line up, the queer moment had to be corrected.



If we began instead with disorientation, with the body that loses its chair, then the descriptions we offer will be quite different.

(Sara Ahmed)

So, for the occasion to which I am inviting you to talk to me, I would like to talk about how one – we – can talk in other ways. Can we, and if we can how can we, take other directions when gathering for artistic and political dialogue? If we intentionally choose not to ‘trail behind’ modes of conversations oriented around the normative body, the ‘here’ from which the world unfolds, then what spaces can we generate?

What happens if the room is organized differently? If points for seating or standing are shaped in deviant formations; if bodies are choreographed not to sit or stand but to walk or to lie down or to dance; if we are to discuss while eating or while cooking or while playing a game; if the dialogue lacks a moderator or if every one is asked to moderate; if lines are refused through proposing a room without rules or if lines are emphasized through explicitly rigid rules; if we must interrupt one another when we talk or if we are prohibited to talk at all?

Can we, and if we can how can we, document such an event, again in ways unfamiliar? What happens if everyone present would document the event while it takes place; if documentation can only be based upon one's memory; if the outcome of the event must be described before the occasion itself has taken place; if documentation must only be analogue, if hearsay can be the only source; if documentation can be neither text nor images but only audio?

*How would we move, perform our bodies,  
in a room choreographed to such skew lines?  
Would we become disoriented, and if so what  
directions would we take?*

Like ruins, the social can become a wilderness in which the soul too becomes wild, seeking beyond itself, beyond its imagination.

(Rebecca Solnit)





The hope of changing directions is always that we do not know where some paths may take us: risking departure from the straight and narrow, makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer.

(Sara Ahmed)

My purpose of posing all these questions is not to find a path to answers. Rather, I long for the simple act of how to go looking for it; of how to travel according to a map with the desire to get lost; of how to explore possible and impossible modes for artistic and political dialogue. In the company of you – and a communion of likeminded – I would like to stage a collective attempt to translate these questions into an unfamiliar mode for how a room, bodies and linguistic acts can be organized, designed and choreographed. The effects of disturbing the order of things are uneven; things might even get quite uncomfortable. Yet discomfort allows things and bodies to move. When talking we might fail, and when doing so me might also gain.



You in the night, learning to unlearn the world.

(Nelly Sachs)

I am not quite sure what we would talk about, on the occasion of talking, but I am guessing you might have suggestions. Recently you told me that you had found the word *failing* within the word *falling*, and the importance those both terms play in your life. Maybe, you would even title your upcoming book *Falling: A Memoir*. As always, I feel close to your thoughts; parallel; entangled; intertwined. Did you know that in German the word for ‘a fall’ can be found inside the word for an idea? Einfall – ein fall.

*Would you like to tell me more about your thoughts concerning this?*

*Love, Hanna*

