

*on the poetry group / automatic writing / languages and identity /  
writing together in a room or Zoom / writing exercises / starting a group practice*

with **Alexandra Paal**

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*an ongoing collective exploration / learning from experiences of togetherness and uncertainty / reflecting on listening – with Alexandra Paal, Matteo Zoccolo – 24 may 2021  
matteozoccolo.net/on\_listening/conversations.html*

**MZ:** What is our starting point and where do we want to go?

**AP:** Maybe our starting point is like the 1+1=3 paper, or the poetry group, which I think is part of the paper. That's also where we met... Actually, we never met in person, but it feels like we know each other!

**MZ:** Yeah, it's kind of the same for me. It's crazy, actually we just met through the project.

**AP:** Yeah. And I was in Linz last weekend to see Bibi and I saw some people from the paper and poetry group. I've never met them in person, and it was crazy.

**MZ:** So, what's going on with this poetry group?

**AP:** We write together once a week, normally on the weekend. We have this Doodle every week to see when people are free and when they want to join. The idea, I think, was to write together in the morning, because it feels like a nice start of the day. At the moment we kind of experiment with different writing ideas or different ways to start writing, to see what you can do with words and what you can do with the things that just come out, without being too focused on producing anything. I feel like it's more about a space we have on the weekend where we just do something without any pressure.

**MZ:** Sounds amazing. I wonder, why is that about writing? You know, because writing is a tool.

**AP:** Yes.

**MZ:** And. So why, for example, is it not about speaking? What can writing bring that other ways of communicating don't?

**AP:** Um... We always start with automatic writing for 7 minutes. So, when you just write and you don't take the pen off the paper. And I feel that when I speak, I edit. I don't just say everything I think. But with the writing, you just follow whatever that is in this moment. And often there can be something that is disturbing you in your room, and this becomes part of the thing you write. And it's not about making sense or producing anything. It feels really like 7 minutes of your thoughts. I find it really magical to also look back on how the different sessions were, and reading what came up. I don't always read it right on that day, maybe I read it a month later. And I feel like sharing this moment where you can just, I don't know, be. And just let out whatever it is, and when it's only, like sounds or parts of words, it feels really like letting go of a lot of things. It's nice to use something that is so free and natural as a starting point for something that is more thoughtful. Yes, I think it's really something pure, and I find that really interesting. Do you ever write?

**MZ:** Actually, you touched my weak spot. It's something I would really like to do... Maybe not enough because I'm not doing it. Somehow, for me, it puts a lot of pressure on me to write something on a piece of paper. I feel this pressure when I really have to think about what to write, because someone will read it, or I will read it. It will stay, you know. You create something that is so personal. I mean, I know how to write, but it's different from writing a list for grocery shopping. When it comes to writing down personal thoughts, to remember an experience for example, then I feel this pressure somehow, and then I stop. I don't even start, actually. But I do believe that writing is an amazing tool that can make you think, and not only puke something that already exists. You create material and thoughts when you write.

**AP:** Yeah.

**MZ:** But actually, I don't know if I agree when you said before that when you speak, you edit what you say, and you write, it's more unmediated. For me, it's completely the opposite. When I speak I can go bla, bla, bla, I can go free. You know, spoken words don't stay. The sound travels and then it's lost. It's just in the memory of someone, but maybe not.

**AP:** Yeah. But I don't talk to myself, I'm talking to you. My words have an effect on you and I'm aware of this. If I write something on a piece of paper, I can just throw it away right after, and it's gone.

**MZ:** You can also speak to yourself.

**AP:** That's true. And that's also something that's... Yeah.

**MZ:** I find it so difficult to weigh the words to use. With spoken words, it comes more naturally. I feel this pressure of choosing the right words. I think it's also an issue of language. Of course, when I write in Italian, I have more vocabulary and I feel more free. But at the same time, I prefer to live my life in English, so that all my friends and people around me can read and access what I say.

**AP:** Yeah, I agree with the language thing. With automatic writing, for me, it's really different to do it in English or to do it in German. It almost feels like I access different parts of me, I guess. It's really different. And also, I have that in English too, to feel blocked and uncertain about which words to use. In German, I don't have it that much. It's just about practice, it takes time.

**MZ:** Sure.

**AP:** But with the different languages, even if I'm capable of speaking English and I can say what I think, I don't have all the nuances, the in-between shades of meanings. And that's what writing and especially poetry is about, the in

between of things that describes something on a different level. I don't know, it's not just a description of a situation, it's something that you can feel. Do you feel like you are two different people in Italian or English?

**MZ:** Definitely. I mean... Not completely. I'm not like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, I don't have an English dark side. But I do think in a different way. And also, when it comes to dreams, for example, dreaming in English, Italian or German gives you a different taste. If I speak Italian, I kind of feel like Matteo of five years ago, who was still living in a small village in Italy. I kind of enter this mood of being in a safe but 'unbequem' place... How do you say it in English?

**AP:** Uncomfortable.

**MZ:** Right. And when I speak in English, it's more like my new life after starting to travel, moving and doing stuff, meeting people.

**AP:** So, do you dream in different languages?

**MZ:** It happens. Especially with English and Italian, because now I'm basically speaking only English here. Even though I should speak more German.

**AP:** We could do this in German as well!

**MZ:** Oh no, please. But I wanted to ask you, how do you think writing together or alone is different?

**AP:** I feel like there are three different things. So, writing alone, writing alone in your room but with people on the screen, and then writing together. And I feel like all three are really different. Because with the Zoom meetings, it's more like, you know, there's a presence in your room, but you still don't hear the sound of the pen on the paper of your neighbor. You can't compare how people are, how much they're writing, how quick, if they look out of the window... It still feels quite alone.

**MZ:** I can relate.

**AP:** So, when I'm writing on my own I write less, less structured than what we do in our digital meetings, where we start with a warm-up exercise, do something I kind of had in my head and wanted to try, and then share it with the others. That's kind of the structure of the group. I just write and see what happens. And when I was writing with people in the room, when people were sitting next to me writing, it was quite far away, to be honest.

**MZ:** What do you mean?

**AP:** There were no writing meetings or something like this in person, since last year. I didn't do any writing

workshops in the recent past. And of course, it's different from what we do in the poetry group. But I think there's something nice about this digital presence, which makes us still be alone. It feels nice, because it makes it really quiet. I just feel those are really different experiences, it's not good or bad.

**MZ:** Of course. But do you think you can also influence each other through this digital presence?

**AP:** Yeah, it's interesting because Bibi, Marlene and Marie are living together, so they often connect from the same laptop and share the same space, while all the others are in different spaces. But even if we don't share a room, sometimes there are connections in the automatic writing, just because of something we talked about before we started, for example. One time, a lot of people had problems with the Internet connection, so the screens were kind of jumping around because people were logging in and out. We all got disturbed by that while writing, and everyone had this sense of rush, like an irritation, which you could see from our texts. I guess we are influenced by each other and the way we connect, but I guess it would be more in presence.

**MZ:** Cool.

**AP:** Yeah. I'm trying to remember how writing with people in a room was...

**MZ:** Um... Never did it.

**AP:** I think it can be nice.

**MZ:** Actually, we do it! The idea started in the hÖrraum, the other project I'm following. We always make 15 min silence, and then we write about it, all together sitting in a circle.

**AP:** How was that?

**MZ:** It actually feels good when everybody is sitting in a circle, so that everybody can look at each other, and everyone has the same kind of paper, so that the space you can use is the same. But the pen is different...

**AP:** And so, you stay in silence for 15 min, and then you write about it, right?

**MZ:** Yeah, we write about what was going on, the experience, the feeling... Whatever, really, it is very open. And yeah, we wrote a lot about silence trying to figure out what it is. And then we put all the different papers together and randomly distribute them again, so that each of us reads what someone else wrote, with all the interpretations of drawings and ugly handwriting. Writing can really bring something consistent to the discussion. You can really extract the essence of something, in a way, you don't only

scratch the surface. It's a translation of a translation of a translation. You have a thought, you hear it in your head, and your hand is writing it with some signs that we learned when we were kids. I think it's a very mediated experience. And this mediation brings new thoughts and new connections. And suddenly, when you read it again or when you're writing, you discover new connections and you can go with the flow.

**AP:** Yeah, it's really interesting what you said about these different stages. It feels like a thought comes and you think it, you hear it while it's traveling till it actually arrives on paper. During our last session, we did automatic writing and then we were reading it to each other. And then, after we listened, we had to remember things. And that became a new text about a text. We all did it, so we had four different versions of one text that was remembered through listening. It felt like the new texts had almost like another layer on top, but still kept the essence. It was kind of compressed, but everyone compressed it in a different way.

**MZ:** Are there other exercises that you proposed to the group?

**AP:** We used a picture as a starting point. Another task was to pick three random books, open a random page, and then just pick one noun, three verbs and one adjective, and then we wrote poems using those words only. It's really restricting and frustrating, but at the same time, I thought that the texts that came out gave so much room for our own endings. And then I thought it would be nice to have a theme over a few sessions. So, we related it to different senses: smelling, hearing, feeling and touch. We tried how this can be in a text. And then recently, I saw a poem that was multiple choice, where you could kind of pick your ending, that's what I want to try soon. I don't know, different things.

**MZ:** What is the reason why you started this thing?

**AP:** I don't really know! I don't really remember how it happened. There was a 1+1=3 paper meeting. I remember it, and I remember people talking about writing and poetry and text. And I thought it was really interesting what people said. I enjoy writing, but it's really different when it's a thing you do as a group, it almost feels like a ritual, we meet every week. It's a nice thing, it's like a space. Yeah, I think it came from this paper meeting on Zoom. Why can we not do something as a practice together? I think I just emailed everyone who was in the Google doc and asked if they were interested in text and poetry. I never email people, but that was the only contacts I had. I remember that I was scrolling down the shared document and collecting all these email addresses, they were everywhere on this Google doc. And after the first session, we created a WhatsApp group, and then we just continued since then.

**MZ:** So cool!

**AP:** Yeah, and it's nice that it continues. We only missed one week!

**MZ:** Wow...

**AP:** And it's also nice with the  $1+1=3$  paper. There were moments when I didn't feel I was ready to lead the group, and other people would jump in and organize the next session. This is not my thing, I'm not an expert at all in writing, I guess I just gave a starting point, and from there, everyone is bringing whatever and we are writing about it. It's like the  $1+1=3$  paper.

**MZ:** Yeah, the vibe is that.

**AP:** I hoped that. I want to meet everyone once, at least once. How did the  $1+1=3$  idea come up? I remember that I received a voice message from Bibi...

**MZ:** I think the idea came up the same way your idea to make the poetry group inside the paper came up. There was a quarantine everywhere and we couldn't do anything, we just wanted to be with people. Already in France, Bibi and I were speaking about this room we wanted to open in Linz, with a kitchen, books and people. An open space, let's say, where things could happen. Of course, then the second or maybe fourth lockdown came. So, it was not really possible, and then we said, "OK, well, if it's not possible in a physical space, then let's do it on paper!" And meeting after meeting the thing got established.

**AP:** We started in January, right?

**MZ:** Way before, we started in November!

**AP:** Oh, wow. Yeah, true, the poetry group started in January.

**MZ:** Yeah. And the third issue is cooking! It's an excuse in the end, you know, to produce a magazine. It's nice to meet, it's nice to think together, it's nice that people know each other and they maybe discover new things, it's nice that we learn from each other and we don't feel alone. And I think that's why we are doing that.

**AP:** Yeah. I love your kitchen as well. I want to have a Treffpunkt like that, where I can meet with people.

**MZ:** Yeah, if we want to open the kitchen topic, we will end at midnight.

**AP:** Oh my God, kitchen floors are the most amazing thing. Just sitting on a kitchen floor has an effect on everything.

**MZ:** I'll try that!

**AP:** Yeah, go and sit on the kitchen floor. And look at the ceiling, that will change a lot of things.