Conversations with the body of the other: A three-step dialogical process

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CONVERSATIONS WITH THE BODY OF THE OTHER: A THREE-STEP DIALOGICAL PROCESS

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ABSTRACT
Embodied design ideation methods rely on subjective—first-person—experiences of the designer to bring new ways of designing into being. Shifting the embodied design ideation method to the body of the other, we propose a three-step process that makes the experiences of a dancer accessible to a designer for the ideation of remote intimacies. To support access to the dancer’s experiences, we facilitate embodied, dialogical exchange over three phases: i) observation of embodied explorations between the dancer and tangibles, ii) visual analysis of phase (i) documentation, and iii) a semi-structured interview with the dancer, using phase (ii) outcomes, incorporating drawing as a form of reflection. This reflexive process reveals how incorporating tangibility, ambiguity, and care into a conversation with the body of the other can open a space of possibilities.

INTRODUCTION
The body plays a significant role in building and nourishing intimacy. For people who are close by heart but physically apart—their bodies are geographically separated—intimacy is experienced remotely without shared physicality. Yet from a phenomenological point of view, our bodies are an important medium of emotional perception. Through its resonances, our bodies charge self-experience while often remaining in the background of our awareness (Fuchs & Koch, 2014). Emotions may result from the circular interaction between affective qualities or affordances in the environment and the subject’s bodily resonance, for example through expressive movements (ibid). Therefore, when designing remote intimacies for the far away bodies, an understanding of bodily felt experiences is required. However, when asking ourselves how to design for bodies who experience remote intimacy, we discovered a lack of ideation methods. We developed a three-step process to address this gap in design methodology.

Our process shifts embodied design ideation (EDI) methods (2017) to the body of the other—a person who is not the designer. In our context, the designer, (the first author), lacks bodily expertise. Hence, we focus on placing conversations with the moving body of the other (Svanæs & Barkhuus, 2020), through a three-step process, to gain access to a dancer’s felt experiences with the aim of using their felt experience in design ideation. We approach our process primarily to expand and enrich the ideation process rather than focusing on generating design ideas. We describe how our process contributes to existing knowledge in this burgeoning area of design practice. Following, we present our findings and underline our new understandings on how to approach design ideation for people who are close by heart but physically apart.

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RELATED WORK

Many designers use the moving body as a creative material in design: Márquez Segura et al. (2016) engage bodily experiences early in the design process by inviting people to sketch new ideas with their bodies. Tomico and Wilde (2016) invite designers to leverage personal experience of their bodies in context by draping themselves in a material of interest and then moving around in that context to embody the ideation process. Vallgårda et al. (2015) work explicitly with temporal form in designing computational things by investigating what vibration technology on different bodily locations might suggest, and how varying temporal forms can be experienced. These works rely on both the designer’s and the participant’s subjective experiences.

As Wilde et al. (2017) explain: “[Embodied Design Ideation] practices embody the challenge they present to traditional modes of scientific reporting: to make sense of them, one needs to experience them first-hand, or risk losing extraordinary richness and depth”. Embodied design ideation (EDI), in this way, relies on the first-person experience of the designer. Through this close contact, the method uses four ground concepts: to disrupt usual thinking patterns and destabilise norms, so that new ideas, qualities and feelings can emerge and eventually be embodied in design (Wilde et al., 2017).

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Our process begins with the body, referring to the notion of the “lived body”, as understood phenomenologically, where the lived body is both mind and body, subject and object; the sensory body through which we experience the world and ourselves (Merleau-Ponty, 1996). When designing with and for lived bodies, it is essential to have an in-depth understanding and examination of bodily felt experiences for design use. To access this expertise, we shifted the EDI methodology to the body of the other. We aimed to minimise the risk of losing extraordinary richness and depth. Thus, we collaborated with an Estonian-based Taiwanese movement and dance artist, who would have an embodied understanding of what it means to live close at heart yet far apart from loved ones. This dancer uses QiGong as a foundation for improvisational dance. In their understanding, QiGong is a gentle movement practice that cultivates subtle energy by working with the moving body (Hung, n.d.). During the day of our collaboration, before starting our three-step process, the dancer introduced the designer to QiGong in their studio. The designer got familiar with the practice by participating in a ninety minutes session led by the dancer. This session brought the designer into closer contact with her own body, and contributed to the development of the three-step process that we describe here, for working with body of the other as creative material in a design process.

As we describe in detail below, we begin our three-step process by using a set of tangibles to place materiality in conversation with the moving body. Then we undertake a visual analysis of this phase. Finally, we return to the body of the other and interview the dancer, while using drawing as a reflection tool to understand the dancer’s felt experiences of moving with the tangibles. The process unfolds in a co-created visual representation between the dancer and designer, which serves as rich material for design development. We translate this visual representation into a set of three commitments that provide a solid foundation to help us move forward in our design research process. These three commitments are: tangibility, ambiguity, and care. The aim of these commitments is to facilitate embodied understanding for the designer when designing for remote intimacies and when looking for design opportunities in the body of the other.

ESTRANGEMENT

EDI relies on estrangement to create new ways of designing. The concept of estrangement builds on the work of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (2011), a philosopher and former dancer who argues that movement is the essence of our lives and beings. Sheets-Johnstone explores the consequences of disrupting habitual movements and proposes that by unsettling the habitual, humans can generate new perceptions. Because the act of experiencing occurs in the moment of perception, the further you disorient or prolong the moment of arriving at an understanding, the deeper or more detailed that understanding will become (Wilde et al., 2017). As a way of enacting estrangement, we use keywords and tangibles to disrupt the habitual ways that the dancer moves. The tangibles add physical and conceptual elements to disrupt the body in motion, and the keywords inform the dancer’s motivations for moving.

KEYWORDS AND TANGIBLES

To develop our three-step process, we were inspired by a cultural probe study undertaken earlier in the same research project (Oktay, 2022). This study collected personal insights into the remote communication experiences of five participants who experience being physically apart from their loved ones. All participants were young adults who—similar to the designer—lived abroad. In this case, they were international Master’s students. Over the course of one week, the study participants were tasked with observing and self-documenting their personal experiences of remote communication with their loved ones. The designer provided the participants with a probe kit that contained prompts for various tasks to be undertaken over the seven days. For example, on day
five, they were asked to have a video call with their loved ones while wearing gloves that physically limited their hand gestures, and to report the emotions they felt during the call. Further details are provided at (Oktay, 2022). The study resulted in quotes, keywords, photographs, and clay pieces by the participants. We took inspiration from 8 self-reported emotions, that we used as keywords:

- loved
- alone
- relieved
- not free
- playful
- energetic
- caring
- curious

The cultural probe study responses further gave us material perspectives that we drew on to inform the development of our tangibles (Figure 1). For example, participants in the probe study mainly used their smartphones to connect to their loved ones. One mentioned how the disrupted sense of space affects their feeling of closeness in virtual settings. Another reported their reflections on her augmented bodily awareness during the study with a focus on hand gestures. Thus, during the construction of our tangibles, we developed tangibles inspired by the size of a smartphone (Tangible 1), the size of a human body (Tangible 2), and the sense of proprioception (Tangible 3).

The keywords assisted us in bringing in emotions, and the tangibles in placing materiality in conversation with the moving body of the dancer. As mentioned earlier, the dancer, like the designer and the cultural probe participants, is living far from many of their loved ones and could bring this experience of remote intimacies into their explorations.

THREE-STEP PROCESS DEVELOPMENT

Our session had three phases: i) observation of embodied explorations between the dancer and tangibles, ii) visual analysis of phase (i) documentation, and iii) a semi-structured interview with the dancer, using phase (ii) outcomes, incorporating drawing as a form of reflection. A visual and tabular overview is provided in Table 1, we describe them briefly below.

For Phase 1, the dancer was asked to sketch the keywords with their body while moving with one tangible at a time in their preferred order. Except for two keywords (not free, and energetic) the dancer chose to move with tangibles in the order of Tangible 1,2,3. For the two remaining keywords, the selected order was: Tangible 2,1,3. For Phase 2, the designer analysed the video recordings, and photographs taken during Phase 1, identifying similarities and differences in the motion and attention of the dancer. This visual analysis was used during Phase 3, when the designer conducted a semi-structured interview with the dancer, incorporating a drawing exercise in response to the visual analysis. The outcome was a visual representation co-created by the dancer and the designer (Figure 2). This representation enabled us to translate the dancer’s felt experiences into the aforementioned design commitments and served as rich material for design development.

Figure 1: Tangibles, photographed in the dancer’s studio:
Tangible 1: A small rectangle that is cut out from machine-knitted polyester fabric. Measures 30 cm, 6 cm, 0.1 cm and weights <10 gr. Tangible 2: A big rectangle that is cut out from the same machine-knitted polyester fabric. Measures 150 cm, 120 cm, and 0.1 cm and weighs 300 gr. Tangible 3: Soft rectangular pillow of the same machine-knitted polyester, filled with leftover textile material, with an elastic rope.
Figure 2: Dancer’s line drawings on Phase 2 composite images, recording from memory the traces of their attention and movements while they were improvising with the tangibles. Composites are provided for all 8 keywords resulting in a visual representation of the attention in action co-created by the dancer and the first author.
Table 1: The three-step process i) observation of embodied explorations between the dancer and tangibles, ii) visual analysis of phase (i) documentation, and iii) a semi-structured interview with the dancer, using phase (ii) outcomes, incorporating drawing as a form of reflection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Data gathered</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Result</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1</td>
<td>Observation of embodied explorations between the dancer and tangibles</td>
<td>Video recordings, photographs, notes and sketches in the research diary</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phase 2</td>
<td>Visual analysis of Phase 1 documentation</td>
<td>Visual analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phase 3</td>
<td>A semi-structured interview with the dancer, using Phase 2 outcomes, incorporating drawing as a form of reflection</td>
<td>Interview recording, photographs, notes in the research diary, drawings on the visual analysis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PHASE 1: OBSERVATION OF EMBODIED EXPLORATIONS BETWEEN THE DANCER AND TANGIBLES

During Phase 1, the dancer conducted an embodied sketching process using keywords and tangibles. Embodied sketching aims at understanding and designing for bodily experiences early in the design process where people sketch with their bodies (Márquez Segura et al., 2016). The dancer was asked to move with the tangibles while sketching the emotions with their body. One by one, each keyword was revealed to the dancer. Then, according to the dancer’s preference in order, they moved together with one tangible at a time using each tangible with each keyword. The process was documented with video recordings, photographs, notes and sketches in the research diary.

The dancer explored, played, performed, and expressed through their body in movement. The designer observed the dancer’s explorative movements with the tangibles and detected various similarities between the motion and the attention of the dancer. These similarities are described in the next phase and can be classified as the tendency to make subtle body-part movements or solid full-body movements, and the tendency to focus inward or outward.

Tangible 1 had the smallest size and weight of the three tangibles, and seemed to scale down the movements of the dancer: “[tangible] one is quite back and forth, like being curious about what is happening or what can be done. But also, curious about not just the object but myself. Like what am I doing with it and what does it become? And I think in ways more ambiguous, especially compared to the third object.”

Tangible 2, being large and flexible, enabled the dancer to stretch and extend their body, thus creating a space for a performative experience: “I was not so much thinking about my own body opening like a bird but I maybe was thinking more of fabric being expanded... But of course, it also relates to the body because stretching the fabric is also stretching the body and the body is more open.”

In comparison to Tangibles 1 and 2, Tangible 3 had a three-dimensional form. According to the dancer, they “wanted to play with [this] the object to explore the potentials of the object and the body”.

Reflecting on all three, the dancer explains: “Second and the third one are playing with something, playing with the object and to explore the potentials of the objects but also the potentials of the body. I think more in the second one. I think there is a feeling of doing something and receiving a response of it, kind of being entertained by the response of it…But the first one, I am not sure, maybe I remember a couple of movements, more subtle.” When taking care of the tangible, the dancer made small movements, this brought the dancer’s body into situations that turn the familiar upside-down by adding a physical element to disrupt the body: “It’s like you have a problem in your hand, and you try to solve the problem in your hand but there is no space or room for anything else because you are trying to solve something in your hands, actually quite literally in my hands”. When the dancer worked with the small tangible, their attention seemed to turn inward. This phenomenon was visible in the results (Figure 2) where we see the dancer looking “focused” and “constrained” while moving with Tangible 1.

PHASE 2: VISUAL ANALYSIS OF PHASE (I) DOCUMENTATION

In this phase, the designer undertook a video and photography analysis of the material from Phase 1. The goal was to gain insights into the motion and attention of the dancer.

Through her analysis, the designer identified the active body-part and full-body movements of the dancer. The aim was to determine whether the motions were subtle and consisted of body-part movements, or if they were solid and consisted of full-body movements. Then, she looked into whether the dancer’s attention was directed internally/within themselves, or if it was directed outward, either to the tangible or the room itself as experienced through the tangible.

To analyse the motion and attention of the dancer, the designer sorted the video stills and photographs from Phase 1 and coded them into two sections for motion (A, B) and two for attention (C, D) (see Figure 3). A represents subtle movements, B solid movements, C inward focus, and D outward focus.

From the analysis, we see that the complex nature of Tangible 3 enabled the dancer to explore both solid (full-body) and subtle (body-part) movements and they tended to focus outward during the exploration. The expandable nature of Tangible 2 invited the dancer to make full-body movements predominantly and their attention tended to slide outward while moving with this tangible rather than being focused inward. The delicate nature of Tangible 1 resulted in subtle body-part movements and attention was directed internally.

Following the visual analysis, the designer created composite images (Table 1, Phase 2 Result) for all 8 keywords highlighting the similarities and differences in motion and attention of the dancer. The resulting images served as material for the semi-structured interview and as a base for a drawing activity. In this way, Phase 2 prepared the ground for Phase 3.

PHASE 3: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW WITH THE DANCER, USING PHASE (II) OUTCOMES, INCORPORATING DRAWING AS A FORM OF REFLECTION

Embodied sketching is an in-the-moment activity, the sketches obtained are ephemeral (Márquez Segura et al., 2016). A challenge for this activity was to enable the dancer to remember, document, and articulate these ephemeral sketches, in ways that would give the designer access. We achieved this through various methods: visual documentation during Phase 1 was analysed during Phase 2, to prepare the ground for a
Phase 3 interview and sketching activity that we now describe.

Using the Phase 2 visual analysis as a starting point, the designer formulated a series of questions for a semi-structured interview with the dancer. The questions were complemented with a drawing task that invited the dancer to engage directly with elements of the visual analysis by annotating the focus of their movements and attention. The aim of these interwoven activities was to gather a deeper understanding of the dancer’s felt experience during their embodied explorations with tangibles undertaken in Phase 1.

First, the dancer was invited to verbally articulate their experience of Phase 1. This discussion enabled us to collect specific data on bodily experiences while making room for surprises (Kvale, 2007). Next, they were asked to visualise their experience of the Phase 1 embodied sketching with tangibles, and to annotate their attention and movements onto the provided visual analysis (Figure 4).

It should be noted that if the designer had undertaken the Phase 1 exploration themselves, she would have a first-person perspective on what was emerging. The three phases together are a carefully designed attempt to gain access to the felt experiences of the dancer, so that what emerges might be identified and eventually embodied in future designs.

| Figure 4: Dancer annotating their movements and the position of their attention on the visual analysis from Phase 2. |

**REFLECTION**

If we return to the EDI methodology, we can see that the reflexive process described here disrupts the body by asking it to move with unfamiliar tangibles. With the addition of interview and drawing activity, this combination destabilises where the attention is placed and thus what may be possible in daily use of body-close probes for remote intimacies. What emerges are new understandings of designing for remote intimacies. Our three-step process thus embodies the dynamic and expressive potential of bodily engagements with materials (such as tangibles and keywords), impacting a person’s ability to engage with their emotions, in our case in the context of remote intimacies. The process results in new understandings in moving forward in design ideation for people who are close by heart but physically apart. We translate our new understandings into a set of design commitments that guide us forward in our design space: tangibility, ambiguity, and care (for).

**TANGIBILITY**

Tangibility is the commitment to move forward with our design research process with the attribute of being touched and sensed. Due to EDI’s subjective nature, the adaptation of EDI methods requires reliance on articulating what is tacitly understood. To work with this “unimaginable act of translation” (Wilde et al., 2017), we used tangible interactions, which value moving bodies and make use of the relationship between physical objects and humans’ motor abilities, as well as their sensory sensitivity to the rich expressiveness of physical objects (Djajadiningrat et al., 2007). Through this process, we discovered that the expressive-sensorial dimensions (Rognoli, 2010) of the tangibles were crucial to disrupt usual thinking patterns through embodied explorations with the moving body.

**AMBIGUITY**

Ambiguity is the commitment to move forward with our design research process with the attribute of opening up spaces for meaning-making, supporting engaging and thought-provoking experiences. The tangibles used in Phase 1 had no clear purpose. This ambiguity allowed the dancer to imagine and invent their use. Through our tangibles, we discovered that ambiguity supported new forms of embodied sense-making for the dancer. The ambiguity thus became “a resource for design” (Gaver et al., 2003) that can be used to encourage close personal engagement with probes or other artefacts to be designed further in our design research process.

**CARE (FOR)**

Care (for) is the commitment to move forward with our design research process with the attribute of creating bodily awareness while taking care of something. With its delicate nature, Tangible 1 brought awareness to the bodily experience of the dancer while seeking care from them. Place (2022) describes care as a feeling, an environment, an action or inaction. She explains: “to care may be to be charged with protection, welfare or maintenance of something or someone. It can be framed as a burden, as a responsibility, or as a privilege. It can feel good, or it can feel bad.” (ibid). In our case, the dancer cared for the Tangible 1 as “a problem in their hands”. This bodily experience invited the dancer to focus inward and nurtured their felt experiences. We see the ways that caring for can be used as an estrangement tactic by unsettling the habitual movement, and supporting the creation of new perceptions.
DISCUSSION

Following the estrangements in EDI methods, during Phase 1, we used tangibles to bring the dancer’s body into situations that turn the familiar upside-down as a means to enable reflection on the intimate and the tacit (Wilde et al., 2017). Critically, we then added two processes: a visual analysis conducted by the designer, and the subsequent semi-structured interview with the dancer. These two additional steps made it possible to undertake embodied design ideation with an other, and be well-positioned to leverage this person’s experience. Furthermore, the pre-step of the dancer introducing her practice of QiGong to the designer allowed the designer to become closer to her own body. This closeness supported the development of the three-step process and enabled the designer to approach the subsequent processes in a more informed manner.

Our process underlines how incorporating tangibility, ambiguity, and care into a conversation with the body of the other could allow a space of possibilities. When observing, analysing, and discussing the dancers’ experience with Tangible 1—the most delicate, smallest and lightest tangible—we see that ways caring (for) can be used as an estrangement tactic to unsettle the habitual, and support the creation of new spaces for new perceptions. Following, during the interview, the dancer expressed their experience of moving with the keywords and tangibles: “My way of approaching these words and objects is to bring into my mind what this being loved is like, what this experience is like for me, so to recall some experience from my memories and then see if any of the objects would help me express that. I think that was my basic approach in the process.” In this way, we can see that the dancers’ own experiences with being close at heart yet far apart informed their explorations; the keywords were essential in framing their explorations with the tangibles and the tangibles provided the necessary space for meaning-making. Gaver et al. (2003), describe the role of ambiguity in design as leaving space for meaning-making. The tangibles were ambiguous, and through their different shapes and affordances, left different kinds of spaces for embodied exploration and thus, through sense-making, meaning-making.

The keywords assisted the dancer to shape their efforts to fill the space left by this ambiguity. In “Doing things backwards: The OWL project”, Wilde and Andersen (2009), provide keywords after participant’s embodied explorations with tangibles. In our case, providing the keyword in advance, enabled us to shape the exploration in line with the larger goals of our research project. If we look at the EDI method, we can see that our process creates a necessary space for new ideas, qualities and feelings to emerge, perhaps because we are working with an expert mover.

This form of ideation could be expanded to people to exchange experiences of living in different bodies and experiencing abilities or limitations that the authors don’t have in their daily lives (see Wilde & Underwood, 2018; Beuthel and Wilde, 2017). Furthermore, the more-than-human approach could guide this method, inviting designers to imagine what non-human may be experiencing. Expanding the application of the method could thus open up new ways to build towards connections, entanglements or rising awareness in connection to others. The Phase 1 ideation session could also be implemented in an XR setting, “combining multi-user VR and motion tracking, where one is conceived and perceived simultaneously as both subject and object and becomes a partial figure of the spatial configuration” (Güzelis et al., 2022), again expanding the approach taken by Wilde & Underwood (2018).

Our conversation with the body of the other contributes to design research that affords exchange between a designer and a person who is not the designer. In our three-step process, the dialogical exchange makes the felt experiences of a dancer richly accessible to a designer. In situations where the designer cannot, or desires not to rely on their first-person experiences, our three-step process provides means for designers to begin with the body of the other in design ideation.

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