A well-placed table is a bridge to move.

Designing spaces that open up for empathic and moving conversations that mediate the emergency and inform agency.

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Abstract

The design project examines collaboratively what transformative climate-communication can look like, and whether conversations can be a possible form of activism. Stemming from a concern that extreme forms of activism and their depiction in media have the potential to highly polarize civil society, the project explores the navigation and negotiation of spaces of communication and interaction in empathetic and connective ways.

In the project I look at conversations as an additional or alternative way to disruptive protest forms of activism, within the non-violent liberal civil-disobedience movement and explore how to design for empathy and agency in the context of facilitating and curating spaces, tools and methods.

The project recognizes the importance of conversations in the context of shaping opinions, changing perspectives and influencing behavior, and thus their relevance in the context of mitigating and communicating the climate emergency.

During the project different conversation tools and methods have been designed, tested and developed in the framework of several gatherings.

Key words

transformative climate-communication, mediation, dis/connection, conversation, systemic transformation, framework, design for empathy, design for agency
like the wind
gently shaking the trees
reminding them to
grow.

Thanks

Thank you, Anna and Merete, for carrying chairs and tables up and down the hills.
Thank you, Anna, Merete and Jule, for grounding me
in warmth, inspiration and reflection.
Thank you for making bridges with me.

Thank you, Vera, for seeing the threads of the bigger fabric and your warm being.
Thank you, Anthony and Åsa, for the guidance in text and classroom.
Thank you to the Hungry Collective and all the ones sitting around tables with me.

To the ones adding wind and movement.
WHERE WE MEET.

Germany, spring 2023, activists.
Glued hands meet asphalt.
A foot meets a belly.
Aggression meets despair.
Resistance meets resistance.
...and I am asking “how do we meet?”

The Family-table.
Different realities meet different beliefs.
Disbelief meets not wanting to believe.
Cognitive dissonance.
Tears meet emotional disconnection.
Resistance meets resistance.
...and I am asking “how do we meet?”

Decisions are made indoors.
Opinions are formed,
futures discussed and decided.
Sterile and closed off. Where do we meet?
‘Knowing’ wants to move into ‘feel-knowing’.
Stagnation wants to move into agency.
Polarization into connection.
...and I am asking

“How can we make bridges
At the table?”

---

1 I use the term feel-knowing because I believe there is a difference between knowing something intellectually and being aware of it; a difference between knowing the facts and feeling the facts. Feel-knowing as an emotional way of knowing something.
A well-placed table is technically a bridge.
A well-placed table is a bridge to move.
A well-placed table is a bridge to be moved.
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PROLOGUE

Current responses to the social-ecological status quo which emerge from the Climate and Ecological Emergency (CEE) are social movements and activist groups, like Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future or The Last Generation. The groups follow different tactics and act on different radicality levels. While Fridays for Future mainly practices announced peaceful strikes, the Last Generation sees the need for much stronger and radical protest forms, such as roadblocks or sit-ins in combination with gluing oneself to the streets or throwing food onto famous paintings. However, these more extreme forms evoke very divided opinions and reactions amongst civil society. The activist’s dilemma describes the question whether to protest in a moderate way or in an extreme way. While protesting in a moderate way may seem too weak given the current status, extreme protest actions can reduce popular support for social movements and can negatively impact the public opinion on climate action (Feinberg, Willer, and Kovacheff 2020). I agree with Annika Rittmann, spokesperson of Fridays for Future, who argues that in this state of emergency society needs to find and form solutions and different ways of living together, and these solutions will not be found by turning people against one another in daily life (ZDF 2023).

The design project “a well-placed table is a bridge to move” explores conversations as an additional or alternative way to disruptive protest forms of activism, within the non-violent liberal civil-disobedience movement. It departs from a polarized and divided society and in the understanding of a much-needed system change. Because different addresses respond differently to diverse ways of communication, I ask for an alternative way of engaging with the general public, when it comes to behavioral change and opinion forming.

The guiding question explored through design and design methods is:

“How can spaces be designed and curated to open up for empathic and moving conversations which mediate the emergency of the climate and ecological crisis and inform agency?”

Note:
The text is written in a ‘subjective-objective’² and a subjective voice which invites experiences and personal thoughts into the text. These passages of the subjective voice are indicated through italic writing.

² I use the term ‘subjective-objective’ to point out that the claim to objectivity (and thus factual, unbiased, free of feelings) takes place in a subjective context.
DISMANTLING THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The following graphic shows what the question and the individual words already indicate in themselves and how it can therefore be understood.

‘How’ inquires about the manner or way something is done. Thus, it does not ask whether it must be done but focuses on the fact that conversational spaces exist and can therefore, be designed or redesigned and rethought.

In using the word space and not place, the focus is on another dimensionality and not just the manifested form of a physical place. It looks not only at tangible artefacts and matter but also at intangible things like language, emotions, and beliefs.

Mediate is described as intervening in a situation, or the act of transmitting something. I define it as the act of connecting two or more parties with the help of something else - this can be a person or an object which holds an intervening, mediating, informing or peace-making position.
Curate comes from the Latin word ‘curare’ and translates to caretaking. It describes the action of organizing and selecting artefacts but also refers to ‘selecting people’ and bringing people or a group together.

Whilst design asks for ‘creating’ and is connected to a certain notion and idea of ‘new’, curating refers to ‘space-holding’, values, organizing and selecting artefacts and people.

to open up for empathic and moving conversations and ecological crisis and inform agency?

Both adjectives show the involvement of emotions. While empathy is a very connecting feeling, ‘moving’ indicates that something is in motion, which can be internal as well as external. The words imply that emotions must be involved for something else to happen (e.g., to inform agency).

Informing agency, instead of ‘creating agency’, shows that there is already some sort of agency, the ability to act and that this agency is influenced by something else, in this project the space and the conversations.
In the mid-14th century conversation meant "place where one lives or dwells" and "general course of actions or manner of conducting oneself in the world" (Harper 2019), following the words origin, a conversation is directly linked to how we behave in the world.
conversation almost as a place to live in or rather a place from and through that we shape life. This is the starting point of the project.
HOW DO WE MEET?

Contextualizing the what is and the what if-state.

“TEN THOUSAND YEARS OF GOOD WEATHER IS OVER”
(Starke et al. 2013, p. 353).

The crisis that we are facing can also be referred to as a wicked problem—a problem which, in its complexity and multi-layered nature, is difficult to grasp cognitively. In addition, it is emotionally draining and has no easy solution. Psychological mechanisms and lobbyism add to this complexity and often cause stress and the feeling of powerlessness. We perceive and construct reality differently, and therefore also feel differently when it comes to feelings of emergency and urgency. Knowing more does not automatically lead to more action, therefore it is about rethinking how we communicate, to find entry points for collective action and agency and build resilient and connected communities.

Fig. 2. Graphic contextualizing the project alongside other actions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘radical’ inactions, ‘business as usual’, ignorance</th>
<th>regular voting</th>
<th>rather peaceful demonstrations, like the ones from Fridays for Future</th>
<th>‘radical’ actions (provocative, polarizing) like throwing soup on a Van Gogh painting, or large-scale road blocks (Activist’s dilemma)</th>
</tr>
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<td>rather low agency and low energy input, no to low positive impact</td>
<td></td>
<td>high energy input, high agency-level</td>
<td></td>
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WHAT IS?

There is a state of urgency and emergency. There is lobbyism and polarization. There is emotional disconnection, fear, ignorance, stress. There is the “throwing soups onto paintings” and the activist’s dilemma. There is the need for radical action.
WHAT IF?

What if we were to continue like this?

OR WHAT IF?

We move collectively to a place of empathy and connection. We find entry points to wicked problems and agency.

Fig. 3. “Finding entry points and agency”, Timm, 2023.
HOW DO WE MEET?
Contextualizing the what is and the what if-state.

WHERE AND HOW DO WE FORM OPINIONS, DECIDE ACTIONS, AND NEGOTIATE FUTURES?

As the opening poem (p. 4) describes, today's conversation spaces are diverse. They range from dinner table discussions to meetings of policy makers, to activism and communication on the street when glued on bodies speak of despair. While we share the same basic needs (security, recognition, sense of belonging and connection), most of us are not trained in (nonviolent) communication and spaces often create 'walls', a 'the other' and an 'against'.

Where does the project come in and how does it differ from the ‘known’ situations? In order to give a brief overview of the current situation and the aspired situation, I will outline these three different contexts exemplarily.

THE FAMILY TABLE
Familiar people meet.
Different generations, different bubbles,
but emotional and historical connection.
A familiar environment.
The wish for exchange and the need for connection.
Personally, often associated with incomprehension,
despair and helplessness.
Rather debates than an empathetic connection.
It is precisely in this context that the spiral of silence
(Petersen, 2015) often takes hold
Staying quiet in order to preserve peace;
for fear of being in the minority with one’s opinion,
and thus, of social exclusion.

So, what if
We meet around the table.
We meet in an unfamiliar environment
To stimulate new thoughts and emotions.
We break the spiral of silence with tools nd methods.
We connect empathically.
It is important to talk empathically and in a meaningful
way about the climate emergency because that leads to a
better understanding and fosters faster action and
agency from the bottom up (Hayhoe 2019, 16:28).
It is important to meet and talk.

Fig. 4. “Where do we meet?”, Timm, 2023.
POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING
People in power meet. (S)elected people with privileges.
Still, most of the people with male-presenting bodies.
They meet indoors. Behind doors. In parliaments or city-halls.
Not all bodies have access to these spaces.
They speak a language of power and of hierarchies.
Decisions are made from within the system, from the context of an orthodox economy.

So, what if
We meet around the table. Who is affected by the decision to be made?
We invite. All stakeholders are being considered. Mayors, cultural centres, activists,
conversation groups, citizens meet. Plus, a mediating host. We meet at a place that
matters, or that is in connection to the issue discussed.
There are tools and methods that help and shape how we come together.
Decisions are made for stakeholders; for species, for places.
Decisions come from place and people; future-oriented and future-creating.
“Why do we talk about the future of agriculture in closed-off, indoor spaces and not outside on the fields where the poison makes the field look as if it has bleached hair?”
Why don’t we talk about energy transitions, and the opening of new mines right next to the hole that is swallowing whole villages and their stories?”

Fig. 5. “Where do we make futures?”, Timm, 2023.
Bodies & Privileges

The body and the country I was born in, and the socio-economic and political context I was born into endowed me with privileges that are directly related to responsibility: What do they allow me to do and how do I handle them? Am I aware of them or am I actively contributing to injustice by not reflecting on them?

I try to be aware of the privileges with which I move within different spaces. Compared to the countless activists who put themselves in great danger when they strike for climate justice and a livable future, striking would be safe for me in my country of origin. I do not call myself an activist at this stage and yet I think it is important to be aware of these privileges and to have them in the back of the mind when formulating this project, as well as reading about it.

Language

Within the project and the written manifestation of it I took and take into consideration that English is not the mother-tongue of most people I was in contact with and that English as a language comes with its own history in connection to colonization. As well as having in mind that the language we use highly influences how we perceive something and behave (TED Talks, 2017, 01:38).

My role as a designer

In this project I see myself as a designer, working with elements of curating and hosting. My role is, depending on the different stages of the process, the one of the facilitator, bridge-builder, knowledge-holder, or communicator. In the project I am working site-specific and then continue to place the site-specific findings in a bigger context.
Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance is the state of mental discomfort caused through having incompatible cognitions (e.g., beliefs, values, opinions, perceptions, behavior). To relieve the tension of discomfort people, or the mind, tend to ignore or reject information or avoid new information (Duignan 2023).

Psychological distance

Psychological distance can be described as the gap between oneself and other people, the present and the future, a physical location and a distant place, experiencing something and imagining something else. This cognitive separation from persons, events, and temporalities plays a huge role in how we perceive the climate emergency and thus how we behave (Baltatescu 2014).

During the project I asked myself what the means and methods are to bridge this psychological distance. How can we, with our emotional body, feel the effects of the crisis that we are not yet affected by, but other people are? How can we connect to futures not yet lived? With people we do not know? With species that feel and perceive differently than we do?

Spiral of Silence

A theory formulated in the 1970s by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann that offers explanations for sways in public opinion.

As social beings we fear exclusion from the group and social isolation. However, the avoidance of public dissent can result in us keeping our views to ourselves, if we think they are too controversial or part of a minority position – we remain silent. This silence in turn contributes to and shapes public opinion (Perterson 2015).

For example, while lobbyists or other people on one side loudly proclaim their opinion (e.g., in the social media or mass media), the other party may keep their opinion to themselves for fear of social exclusion or social pressure. This distorts the public image on a particular issue and sets the “spiral” in motion. This often happens with emotionally charged issues.

Just talking about the climate, in its symptoms and roots, can therefore be very effective in interrupting the phenomena.

HOW TO BRIDGE THESE GAPS & DISTANCES TO EVOKE ACTION?
COMING TOGETHER
Contextualizing the project in inspiration

Climavore

The research project "CLIMAVORE", by Cooking Sections featured the installation of an oyster table at an intertidal zone in Scotland. At high tide the table was swallowed by the sea and became a multispecies home, while at low tide the table arose and functioned as a table for performative meals and workshops (Cooking Sections 2015).

What was inspiring to me visually was the placement of the table in the water, and seeing a group of different people eat in an unfamiliar setting. In terms of content, the collaboration and the coming-together of different stakeholders, such as residents, politicians, researchers were very inspiring to me and how the project worked and interacted with the environment (place, restaurants, etc.).

I was also inspired by the powerful work of the many activists, as well as the work of organizations such as Climatemind that combines climate psychology and climate communication and offers training, advice and courses.

Non-violent Communication (NVC)

NVC is a linguistic method, developed by clinical psychologist Marshall B. Rosenberg. The method was developed specifically for conflict situations and conflict transformation (Michel 2018). It describes a sequence of four steps in communication for a peaceful and authentic exchange, empathic listening and an honest connection. These steps consist of:

1. observing a situation,
2. naming the feelings that were evoked,
3. sharing the underlying need, and
4. concluding with a request or wish to the other person.
Languaging was an important aspect within the project and its communication, and the way words make worlds. The relationship between words, their sound and connotations, grammar structures influences how we perceive and act on them - a powerful co-evolving and co-shaping between the language we use and how it ‘uses us’, how we think and behave (after Maturana and Varela 1987).

I define it as the practice of acknowledging and being aware of the relationship between the language we use and how it shapes the way we perceive things, thoughts and life around us. Languaging means actively creating new words, putting existing ones differently together (e.g., feel-knowing), or using known words in new contexts to shift perception and/or influence behaviour (e.g., naming a recycling centre “Goldmine”).

The Somatic Lab

The Somatic Lab proposes an additional way to epistemological and ontological ways of knowledge-making and -perceiving when it comes to researching – and that is bodily ways. In the Somatic Lab, introduced to our study by Vera Maeder, bodily responses and knowledge were explored and how body-knowledge can inform design decisions.

Writing as a method

I consider the act of writing an important working-method that helps to unravel the thoughts and informs the making. Thoughts are slowed down through the act of writing and can also be looked at visually. The acts of writing down, rethinking, reformulating, and placing ideas in a context help me a lot in developing projects.

Social Acupuncture

Social acupuncture is a term that was coined by Darren O’Donnell (O’Donnell 2006). It can describe the process of breaking down a complex social system, while seeing it in its totality and intervening at the spots where different layers and tensions come together. For example, one intervention or ‘acupuncture spot’ within the social system of communication and interaction can be the spiral of silence.
Holistic Sustainability
The four spheres and Metadesign

To approach sustainability holistically I have worked within the framework of the four spheres of sustainability and Metadesign. Metadesign is a tool and concept opening up for a systemic and holistic approach (Tham, Ståhl, and Hyltén-Cavallius 2019) (see figure 5).

The four spheres of sustainability help to break down the ecological complexity and serve as the framework for approaching sustainability holistically. They consist of the areas: social, ecological, economic and cultural (see figure 6).
Fig. 7. Products, systems, paradigms, 2023.
The following list gives examples of the different levels in the Metadesign nest, in connection with climate communication:

**PARADIGMS**
- Growth paradigm
- Stories of trouble vs. staying with the trouble (Haraway 2016)
- Climate protection as a ‘life-style’
- Norm of being an ‘informed’ citizen
- Now over future generations
- Techno-solutionism
- Capitalism and Patriarchy
- Climate emergency

**SYSTEMS**
- Language (the use of words like ‘climate-terrorists’, creation of new words like ‘winter droughts’ and methods like NVC)
- Lobbyism (power hierarchies, money)
- Activism
- Education and accessibility
- Health care system is influenced by climate anxiety
- Where and in what context do ‘important’ conversations take place? (parliament/street/households - the individual place is connected to an influencing system)
- Psychological mechanisms

**PRODUCTS**
- Media and electronical devices
- “Climate Mind” (educational program)
- Hormones, e.g. stress hormones like adrenaline or cortisol
Fig. 8. The four spheres as a framework for holistic sustainability (Tham, Ståhl, and Hyltén-Cavallius 2019), contextualizing the project and its different aspects, 2023.
EXCERPTS AND EXAMPLES
From the Design-Process

The path to the project consisted of many conversations, interventions, talks from Extinction Rebellion and Last Generation, small experiments, and rethinking. In the following, I will give three brief examples of events and practices that took place over the period of the project development, to illustrate how the final project and outcome of a process and proposal for possible climate-communication emerged.

1. **Communicating through foods and poetry**
   The journey of the project included a dinner-event where we *The Hungry Collective*, a design-student collective, looked at the intersection of communication, food, connection, and poetry. The event was part of the conference “Environmental Emergencies across Media” which took place between 16th and 18th March, in Kalmar.
We created a dinner that evolved around a certain topic and introduced it with a text that was rather poetic (see p. 28). I was interested in exploring what rhetorical tools and rhythms can help us to communicate differently and therefore also perceive something differently, opposed to hearing known words, with a known structure and rhythm. Therefore, to not only communicate through the different foods, we also used poetry as a playful way of communicating complex topics such as a crisis. The signs that stood next to the individual dishes also attempted to anchor the food in the context of climate change. A framing was created with the help of the signs, which communicated the introduction, the ‘main act’ and the question of how to continue ("how do we transform our digested findings?").

Fig. 9. Photos from the Event in Kalmar, depicting the food, cards, and preparations. Hungry Collective, 2023.
“We came together around the fire. Stories flowed from tongue to tongue. The fire was exchanged for a table. We gather, we still tell. But what stories are being told? Kept alive? What stories do we give power to? What words do we use?

The French just birthed a new word: Winter droughts. Supermarkets start the rationing. Dirt cracked open. We are hungry.

Today’s menu is called “under the dirt”, consisting of food that grew in the darkness, under the soil. Besides our feet – reminding us of our roots. What do we communicate through our food; when coming together?

We are hungry for stories, and just like every good story the meal consists of:
A prologue – beetroot knäckebrot with onion cream and sprouts – an invitation, a promise for more.
The main act – a root-soup with different toppings – warm, filling suspense (running down our throats).
And the epilogue – oat crumble with beetroot cream – a sweet ending, while we know there are no ends.

Stay hungry. Enjoy!”
Hungry Collective, 2023, presenting food and concept.

Fig. 10. Process-sketch “bridging different gaps/worlds/realities”, Timm, 2023. Text on the left was the introduction text to food and dinner-experience, Hungry Collective, 2023.
EXCERPTS AND EXAMPLES
From the Design-Process

2. Demonstration-signs as a visual bridge

During a climate demonstration in Växjö, I looked at how the surface of demonstration signs can be used to connect demonstrators and passers; the one carrying the sign and the one seeing the sign.

Which media do we use to communicate nowadays, and which surfaces can be used for communication? Feeling that demonstration signs often have a notion of finger pointing or vague, albeit humorous, sentences, I tried out how NVC can be used in this context of communication at a climate demonstration. The feedback reflected that the text (one example is figure 10.) was received rather emotionally.

Fig. 11. Climate demonstration, Fridays for Future, Växjö, 2023.
Fig. 12. One of the signs that was used as an intervention, Timm, 2023.
Fig. 13. “Moving bodies”, explorations from the somatic lab, Timm, 2023.
3. **Designing with and from the body**

The somatic lab was an important part when it came to going through the event, different steps, the tools and the language. How to consider the body when it comes to designing communication; how does the body inform the design? Design-colleagues and I explored how the body informs design decisions, the power of languaging and on how to connect to a place/the own emotions/others. As an example, I read certain sentences while the body of the participants was moved in connection to the feelings evoked through the words; the attention was shifted to the feelings and thoughts that arose and afterwards we exchanged how certain formulations had different effects on the physical feeling. In the somatic lab we recognized that as human beings we take our bodies with us everywhere and therefore they are also crucial in the design process and should be included. We also looked at how we can bridge psychological distances and when they make themselves felt in the body. Looking at events that people had experienced in the course of climate change, one participant e.g., said

"If I shall relate I need bridges".
THE TABLE-SERIES
Curating conversations

The conversations were curated and informed by inviting the place and the emotional body to the table. Different beliefs, dreams, and realities come together while words, identities and psychological distance often end up distancing the different parties and stakeholders from each other. So, after a process of connecting to the place, the own emotions and ‘the other’, the conversations were mediated through different conversation tools and methods, like “talking artefact” and “conserving intentions” which looked at how to move into agency, how to go from ‘knowing’ into ‘feel-knowing’, and how to co-curate the emergency.

The conversations were happening within a framework. For that I looked at how to translate the steps from NVC (observing, naming the feeling, sharing the underlying need, formulating a wish or request) into a framework and the general framework was structured according to the categories inform, inspire, engage, which built on one another.

The project was materialized and contextualized through the gatherings in the public space, and thus in political, temporal, economic, socio-cultural fabric. Society was sitting at the table discussing society.

Examples of two gatherings

The events have taken place on different sites; making the place an informing dialogue-partner. One conversation was held next to a dried-up stream, in a meadow full of ticks, in an area of southern Sweden where the dust blew through the streets because the ground craved rain. The other conversation took place right next to a preschool and between playground equipment. The topic of this conversation was “Can we still bring children into the world?” And while thoughts were exchanged, in the background were the sounds of laughter and the shouting of children, which wove themselves into the conversation.

I refer to the meetings as gathering, rather than workshops because the word in its combination of work and shop is rather misleading and I find the word gathering (an act of coming together) more fitting in this context.
In the following I will give a rough outline of the conversation framework and explain it in more detail with some examples from the events that have taken place. ‘Rough’ refers to the fact that all conversations take place differently and are always adapted to the current mood; it must therefore flow with the various stakeholders and ‘gatherers’. The events need someone who holds the position of a host and leads through the gathering, and who has also made the preparations (invitations, choosing the site, collecting stories, introducing the methods, holding the space, etc.).

Fig. 14. Images from the different gatherings. Image to the left: sitting in a meadow craving rain. Image to the right: Becoming part of the playground. Timm, 2023.
THE TABLE-SERIES
The course of the events, and examples

1. Pre-table
   1.1 topic and gathering stories
   1.2 personal invitations
   1.3 choosing the place
2. Curating conversation - building bridges, to place, people and own emotions
   2.1 Talking Artefacts and Table-Meditations
   2.2 Card-prompts
   2.3 others
3. Conserving intentions – the tablecloth
   3.1 how to move into the phase of engagement?
   3.2 The brain & cognitive dissonance
4. After-table/ talking artefacts

Fig. 15. Process-picture, Timm, 2023.
Fig. 16. Photo of table-gathering, Timm, 2023.

Fig. 17. Rough outline of the gatherings.
Prior to the table-gathering the topic of the conversation was decided and stories were collected that were in connection to the topic. Personal invites were sent out and a fitting location was chosen.

Given that a place is a ‘storyteller’ in itself, the location was chosen in reference and in support to the topic.
Fig. 19. Process pictures of testing different locations, Timm, 2023.
2. CONVERSATIONS

After arriving at the place and settling in with snacks and water, I gave a short introduction of the project and guidelines of engagement. To connect with the place, the own emotions and each other different methods were introduced.

Talking artefacts and table-meditations

The method “talking artefacts” acknowledges the importance of storytelling (Muraguri 2018, 1:32) and through the haptic component it tries to overcome the psychological distance. As an example, I was wondering if people can connect differently to the event of the flood disaster (Germany, 2021) through a ‘witnessing artefact’ from the event (e.g., a pair of rainboots), and how that shift of connection changes the form of communication and the course of the conversation. For that reason, I collected artefacts and their connecting stories that were in relation to the climate emergency, and we then meditated on and with them at the table. While I was reading the story of the artefact, the participants held an object in their hands; the artefact as a witness and a connecting bridge to another temporality, space and another story.

Example 1:
For the conversation with the rather controversial question "Can we still bring children into this world?", the overarching theme was chosen because the people at the table belonged to a very similar bubble and in order to evoke somewhat of a feeling of polarization. During the event I introduced the story of a father who feared for his own life and that of his children whom he had put to bed like every other evening when the water entered his house, due to the flood disaster in Germany in 2021. For sharing the story, we moved to the water that was next to the location of the table. Some participants sat down and touched it, some closed their eyes and listened to story and waves. In this case the water, or the lake in a broad sense, can be seen as an ‘artefact’ that makes the story tangible.

Example 2:
For another event seashells were introducing the effects of acidification. For that I had translated scientific research into a short poem ("A song from the ocean") which communicated the effects that carbon dioxide has on calcifiers organisms and their ability to produce shells when it dissolves into the ocean and how that impacts a whole eco-system (through the acidification calcifying organisms struggle to produce shells, have then less energy to find food, for reproduction and defence and could make them soon go extinct).
Fig. 20. Photos of gathered stories and “talking artefacts”, Timm, 2023.
Card-Prompts

There were different cards that came into play in between, to allow new impulses and information to flow into the conversation or to bring the focus back on commonalities. The cards are divided into the following categories:

- connect to others
- connect to yourself
- connect to place
- connect to temporalities
- connect to open-mindedness
- connect to understanding
- connect to agency

Fig. 21. Cards, second version, front side, Timm, 2023.
Fig. 22. Table with artefacts and cards, Timm, 2023.
Fig. 23. Process-sketch “connect to place, connect to other”, Timm, 2023.
EXAMPLES

“What do we all agree on or struggle with?”
“In what ways do we meet?”
“How do you measure the quality of a ‘good’ conversation?”
“What are you grateful for in this conversation?”
“What is a moment from the past where you became more conscious of environmental issues?”
“In what ways are we all affected by this issue?”
“Where in the surrounding landscape can you see influences of weather/species/change?”
“What future or futures are possible in relation to the topic discussed?”
“Is something responsible because it is legal?”
“When was the last time you emotionally felt the emergency and where?”
Conserving intentions

At the end of the gathering we talked about how to move into agency; how to move forward and transform ‘knowing’ into translated action. People left with different intentions and reflections which they wrote down on the tablecloth. Harvesting these intentions through the written manifestation on the tablecloth enables a second string of communication - a conversation in itself, taken from gathering to gathering; visually showing that these conversations correlate and built on one another and embedding them in a bigger context.

The act of writing down was chosen because it activates a different brain part than the one activated for speaking and therein anchors the conversation differently.
Fig. 24. Written thoughts and intentions, on paper and on tablecloth. Pictures and scan taken during and after the gathering. Timm, 2023.
SYMBOLS AND TITLE

The “well-placed table is a bridge to move” refers to the importance of the place and the space, as this can greatly influence what is happening, or rather what is being said, and therefore plays a crucial factor in curating.

Even though a bridge and a table are very different in their dimensionality, they are similar in their structure, which consists of a rather horizontal flat surface and vertical supports. Just like a tabletop, a bridge is supported by pillars. What are the pillars of our society; what do we lean on when we come together; what are the structures we are supported by?
The ‘move’ can be interpreted in several ways. On the one hand, it points to physical movement. The table, unlike the bridge anchored in its surrounding landscape, can be moved and thus communicates many possibilities when it comes to placement and context. On the other hand, ‘to move’ can also point to emotional movement (to move internally/to move thoughts and ideas/to move together/to be moved). Inhabiting the notion of ‘something is in movement’ it can refer to social movements.
‘Bridge’ can be read metaphorically and is a symbol for connecting to two points that are either separated or less accessible by something else, while the table has many connotations around ‘coming together’ - from eating at the family table to working at a desk in school to meetings in the job-context. The table is a firmly anchored object in our society and in its simplicity and presence an important symbol in the project.

The title "A well-placed table is a bridge to move." is formulated as a whole sentence and thus in itself a little story that invites us to reflect.

As a social heritage, the table was specifically chosen as the main object for the project. Compared to a picnic or campfire, for example, the table communicates a certain importance and seriousness in terms of memories and connotations. This was important to me, not only in terms of how seriously the participants took the project, but also how important outsiders perceived the project through the visual communication of the events. What should also not be neglected is the shape of the table which in the historical context is closely related to hierarchies (round vs a table that allows headmasters).

Fig. 25. Image “Building bridges at the table”, Timm, 2023.
Fig. 26. Gathering, 2023, Timm
Fig. 27. Process-sketches, excerpts from the projectbook, Timm, 2023.
FEEDBACK AND COLLABORATION

The project has been received with curiosity, open-mindedness and appreciation by the participants who took part in the gatherings. The feedback was predominantly positive and of crucial importance for the further development of the project.

In the project I worked with people who have an activist background and people who do not, which gave me different perspectives on the project.

The collaboration with activists and their input on climate communication and the experiences they came with was very valuable, as well as the collaboration with a small group of people who were present at all events and were therefore able to give feedback after each round. This cooperation was of significant importance in the development and will also be an important part in the further development.

Note
I intentionally did not transform the events into a proper dinner, to not add too many layers, but also to make them easier to replicate in their simplicity and low costs, and therefore more accessible.

Fig. 28. Objects and sketches, Timm, 2023.
FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

For the events that took place as part of the project, I took on the role of the host, but for future development everyone should be able to take on table events using the tools and methods that will then be further developed.

Part of the design process was the question of "How can I represent the project in its simplest form and how in the most complex/with more layers?". Examples of the version with more layers would be an extra chair that represents those beings who are not sitting at the table but should be considered or the act of providing a proper meal during the gathering.

What is also planned to be tried out for its effectiveness is the inclusion of the sense of smell in "talking artefacts", as well as methods that are used when it comes to mediating between hyperpolarized parties. Ultimately, the toolbox with the different methods and the appropriate framework should be worked out and refined in a way that it can be passed on to others and be used easily. Several iteration rounds are planned for further development, so that ultimately various groups and stakeholders (from activists to police officers, to the mayor, to students – people from all ages, different backgrounds and beliefs) sit together at the table and once polarized voices come together in a peaceful way.

I acknowledge that so far, all conducted gatherings have taken place in a safe framework and not yet with hyperpolarized parties. I also acknowledge that the project certainly still has many blind spots that will unravel with more iteration rounds and feedback loops.

Harvesting and Exhibiting

For the future communication of the project in artistic spaces, such as galleries, the sketch to the right shows a possible variant in which the different artefacts, their stories, the words on the tablecloth, and video material from the gatherings are ‘interwoven’ and enter into a dialogue with each other.

Fig. 29. Sketch of possible presentation (written-on tablecloth as canvas, movie from conversations and about meeting as society in the light of the CEE, gathered objects) Timm, 2023.
FINDINGS

To conclude with the findings, I am coming back to the research question “How can spaces be designed and curated to open up for empathic and moving conversations which mediate the emergency and inform agency?”

Answering the how I argue that the spaces which inform our emotional body and mind need to be co-designed with place, people, science, and spirit.

Spaces can be looked at on two different levels, on a dimensional and on a materialized level. In the dimensional space we can find languages that are spoken and thought in, and therefore also the method of NVC, emotions and therefore also emotional dis/connection, values, emotions, beliefs and identities. All these need to be considered when thinking of and curating these spaces.

Looking at space as a materialized location or place, I invited the place to the table and the space informed the internal as well as external dialogue as a third actor. It was very interesting to consider the different spaces and to co-design with the emotional and physical body and how they were informed through the food, background-noise, memories and the placement of the physical body (on a chair or on the floor, in an indoor or outside space).
To explore *empathic and moving conversations* I looked at how to design for agency and how to design for empathy (what makes us move from knowing into ‘feel-knowing’, plant a seed and move into agency and by applying the principles of NVC and translate them into design and a framework to move within. Connecting with the emotional body can help counteract psychological mechanisms like cognitive dissonance, or emotional disconnection. Different methods like NVC are important when it comes to disrupting the spiral of silence.

If the curatorial practice describes the actions of questioning, managing, organizing, selecting, mediating, and bringing together and through that creates a space in which audience and artwork can meet, who in my project is the audience and what is the artwork? I argue that coming together empathically as a society, interacting peacefully when forming opinions and making decisions and while connecting to the own emotions, the place, and ‘the others’ can be considered a form of art; *the art of hosting society, unmaking dis/connection and co-curating the emergency.*

The audience is not inhabiting a passive position but is part of the making, a participant of the gathering and the encounter.

Outcomes of the project, and one possible answer to the question, are a framework, conversation-tools and methods (cards, “talking artefacts”, “conserving intentions”), a network of people who engage with society as activists, community-building, insights from the somatic lab, and many questions and open doors I would like to explore further.
FINDINGS
Closing words

Not only the climate crisis and the biodiversity crisis are amongst the greatest challenges of our time, but also the noticeable division of society. While so-called ‘radical’ actions often polarize civil society, the state of emergency and urgency demands cooperation. How do we talk about the climate crisis today? In what spaces? With our emotional body or just from mind to mind? The climate crisis is also a communication problem and measures to mitigate the crisis must be discussed and found socially and collectively.

In times of ecological catastrophe, we need new radical ways of thinking, perceiving and living on this planet. This change requires action, agency and resilience. To move into uncertain times, while embracing the unknown, change is necessary but the way we get there can and has to be diverse. Conversations are an important factor when it comes to opinion-forming, behaviour and perspective change. System-change from a bottom-up approach. The project raises the question of how we communicate and interact with one another as a society and as a species.
FINDINGS
A second prologue

A prologue always has an introductory function. Since the project still needs to evolve and develop for a lasting manifestation in society and find agency of its own to tackle climate communication or crisis communication effectively, I take the findings to build on them and end with a second prologue.

I began formulating a seed when some supermarkets in the UK started rationing food in response to the winter drought in Europe, and I am 'ending' the project for now at the time when France started rationing water.

The table as a social cultural asset. The table as a starting point for discussions, conversations and decisions. Table-conversations as a political event. A well-placed table is a bridge to move.

Fig. 30. “After the gathering”, Timm, 2023.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


A well-placed table is technically a bridge.
A well-placed table is a bridge to move.
A well-placed table is a bridge to be moved.