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Speak-to-Write from Multiple Perspectives, as Method

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Article abstract

One of the practice-based research methods that excites me the most today is to work with writing as a practice, and as a practice-based research method. The technology of writing can be very misleading, especially when that writing is typed using a word processing program. When using this tool, writing looks the same whether it represents a stream of consciousness, a first draft, or a final proof. Because of this, I have found that I hold myself to the standard of the final version, which of course completely freezes me up. If we are always aiming for the final version, there is not much room for thinking, making errors, going sideways and backward and forward again. There is only the guaranteed feeling of failure.

In response, graphic designer Juliette Bellocq and I have developed a set of writing exercises that address these two limitations, as I have come to know writing from my training as an academic. In this piece, we share our exercise, 1,000 Ways Home. It is a non-linear process of thinking and writing. It also offers the alchemy of communicating in the presence of another person who pays close attention. We call our process speak-to-write.

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Speak-to-Write from Multiple Perspectives, as Method

Nina Sun Eidsheim and Juliette Bellocq

While I (Nina Sun Eidsheim) cannot speak to what is *the* most exciting area of practice-based research (PBR), I can share what gets *me* most excited: to work with writing as a practice, and as a PBR method.

The technology of writing can be very misleading, especially when that writing is typed using a word processing program. When using this tool, writing looks the same whether it represents a stream of consciousness, a first draft, or a final proof. Because of this, I have found that I hold myself to the standard of the final version, which, of course, completely freezes me up. If we are always aiming for the final version, there is not much room for thinking, making errors, going sideways and backward and forward again. There is only the guaranteed feeling of failure.

One simple shift is to return to pen and paper. A piece of paper without lines offers a different invitation than a computer program that places characters on a predetermined grid. It is even a different invitation than paper with lines, a grid, or a music staff. The proverbial napkin or back of an envelope—a “throwaway”—often provides the most open-feeling space.

I sometimes compare the back of a napkin with an easy-flowing conversation with a friend who will let me meander, repeat, or contradict myself before I find my way. There is alchemy in the knowledge that somebody gives me time in conversation. In that trust, ideas can be spoken that I didn't know existed within.

The tendency to want to be correct, to be good, to be publishable has also held me within ways of thinking gained through hard-earned study. However, my field's perspective markers are also limiting.

Graphic designer Juliette Bellocq and I have developed a set of writing exercises that address these two limitations, as I have come to know writing from my training as an academic.

Our exercise, *1,000 Ways Home*, describes a nonlinear process of thinking and writing. It also offers the alchemy of communicating in the presence of another person who pays close attention. We call our process *speaking-to-write*. We formulated a number of questions that are meant to position the

Nina Sun Eidsheim has written about voice, race, and materiality, including the books *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* and *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music*. She is professor of musicology at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is also a vocalist and the founder and director of the UCLA Practice-based Experimental Epistemology Research (PEER) Lab, an experimental research Lab dedicated to decolonializing data, methodology, and analysis, in and through multisensory creative practices. **Juliette Bellocq** is a designer collaborating on diverse projects for paper, screen and space. Her studio, Handbuilt, specializes in work for artistic, cultural, educational and civic work, partnering with diverse groups to engaging and advance communities. In addition, Juliette is part of Project Food LA, a collective seeking to propose alternative nutrition choices to underserved communities. Her work has been recognized by the AIGA, Graphis, the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*.

speaker-writer within new and different relationships and perspectives in relation to an object of study, a scene, or a question they have on their mind—something they wish to get to know from more perspectives than they can see at the moment. For example, what does your object of study look like if you're inside it? Or if you see it from above? The writer simply listens to the questions posed and responds by speaking. The writer's friend asks the questions and transcribes the writer's response. It is lovely when two people can assist each other. That is, Anne serves as the asking and transcribing friend for Arnvid—and then they change roles: Arnvid serves as the person asking Anne the questions, and transcribes for her.

We offer the exercise here and encourage you not only to experiment with it but also to formulate your own questions and, most importantly, to form community, trust, and alchemy around writing.

Nina Sun Eidsheim
Juliette Bellocq

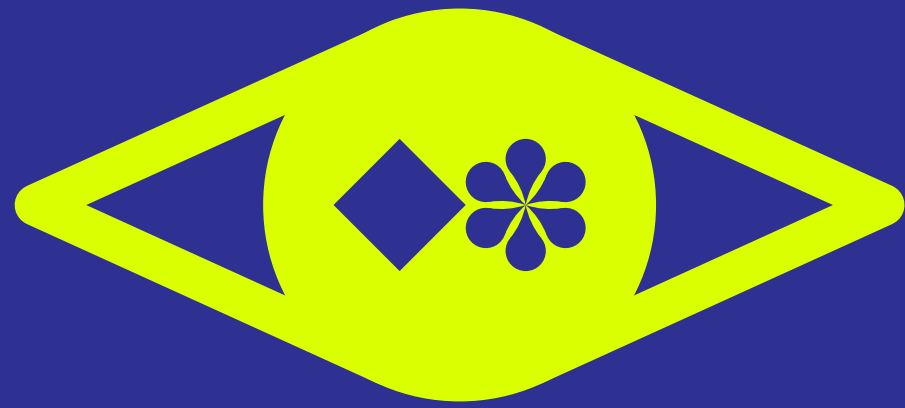
P
E
R
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A
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1000

WAYS HOME

Nina Sun Eidsheim
Juliette Bellocq

P
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*Man is a creature
who makes pictures of himself
and then comes to resemble
the picture.*

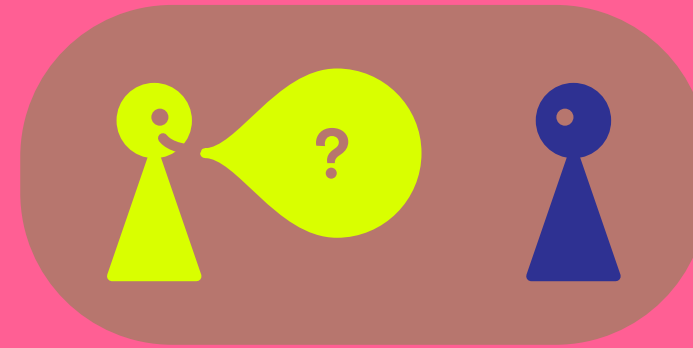
— **Iris Murdoch**

Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals
(London: Chatto and Windus, 1992), 75.

P
E
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R
L
A
B

Interviewer Interviewee

1 Interviewer reads the question



2 Interviewee answers



3 Interviewer records the answer



Repeat

Touching—A close shave—Hitting close to home

**Describe where,
in your body,
you feel it first?**

Touching—A close shave—Hitting close to home

**What part
is closest to you?**

Touching—A close shave—Hitting close to home

**What does it sound like,
right in front of you?**

Touching—A close shave—Hitting close to home

**What part feels
dirtiest?**

Touching—A close shave—Hitting close to home

**Is it camouflaging
against anything?**

Touching—A close shave—Hitting close to home

**What do you see
when you block out
the big parts?**

Touching—A close shave—Hitting close to home

**What part
do you want to kiss?**

Touching—A close shave—Hitting close to home

**Follow the silence.
Where does it lead you?**

Touching—A close shave—Hitting close to home

**Feel it upside down.
What does it make you
think of?**

Touching—A close shave—Hitting close to home

**What are
the rough parts?**

Within—The belly of the beast

**What does
the cellular structure
feel like?**

Within—The belly of the beast

**What are
the fragile parts?**

Within—The belly of the beast

**What are the smallest
construction blocks?**

Within—The belly of the beast

How crowded does it feel?

Within—The belly of the beast

Where does it hold tension?

Within—The belly of the beast

Describe its internal flow.

Within—The belly of the beast

What does it retain?

P
E
E
R
L
A
B

Within—The belly of the beast

What does it evacuate?

P
E
E
R
L
A
B

Within—The belly of the beast

**What kind of light
makes it through?**

On top of it—On top of the world—Reaching the edge

**What does it feel like
sitting on it?**

P
E
R
L
A
B

On top of it—On top of the world—Reaching the edge

**What's the first thing
you see
when you look at it
from above?**

On top of it—On top of the world—Reaching the edge

**How firmly planted
are you in it?**

PERILLAB

On top of it—On top of the world—Reaching the edge

**How deeply
can you establish roots?**

PERILLA

On top of it—On top of the world—Reaching the edge

**What part are you
carrying yourself?**

PERILLA

On top of it—On top of the world—Reaching the edge

What parts will fall apart?

P
E
R
L
A
B

On top of it—On top of the world—Reaching the edge

**How do you know
where the top is?**

PERILLA
LAB

On top of it—On top of the world—Reaching the edge

**What imprint
does it create?**

P
E
R
L
A
B

Away from—Bird's eye view

**What color is it,
viewed from the sky?**

Away from—Bird's eye view

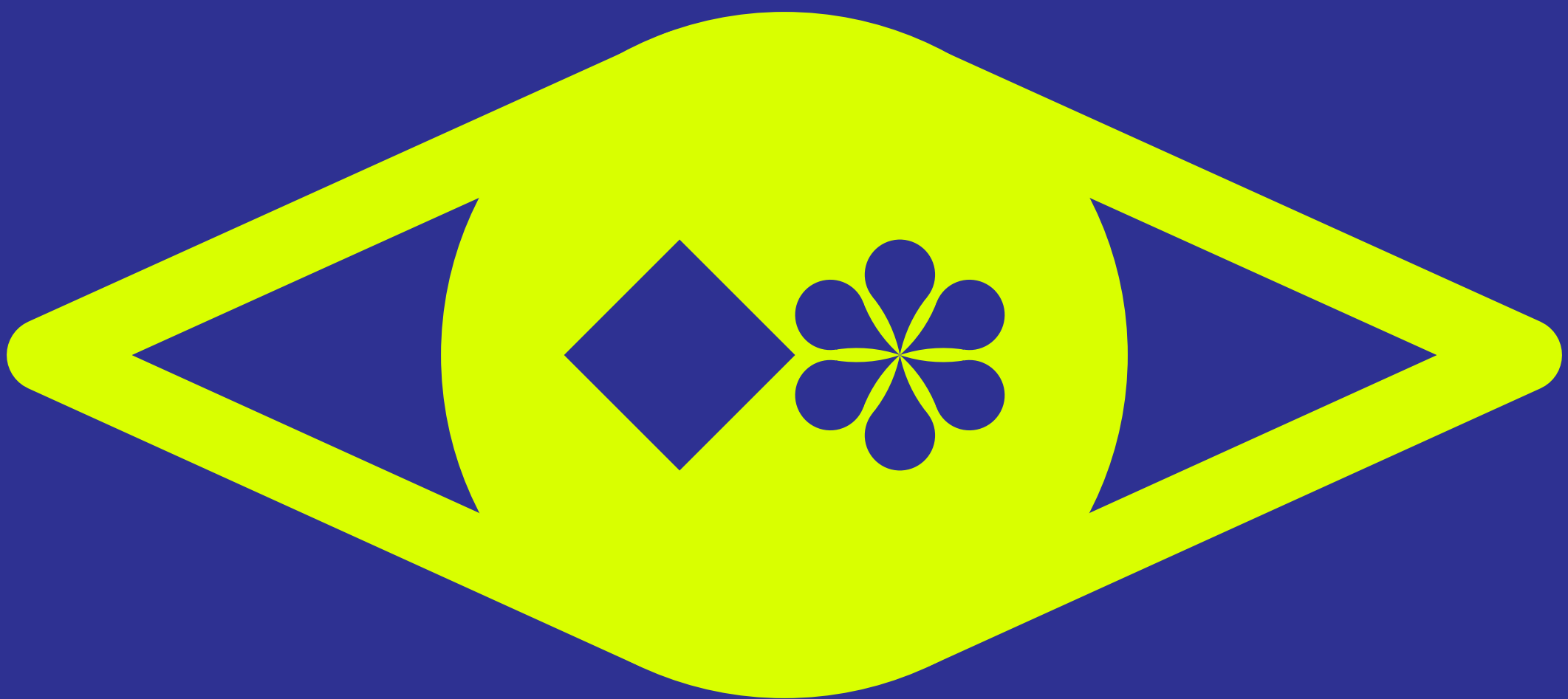
**From really far,
what is its shape?**

Away from—Bird's eye view

**How far away
do you need to be
to not sense its pulse
anymore?**

Away from—Bird's eye view

**What smell lingers
when you are away
from it?**



PERLAB

