

*on disappearing / negotiating identities / exchangeable roles /
group as complex instrument for identity construction / agonistic society / political art /
artists as critical symptoms of society / living a choreography of desires / blurring art and life /
space over participation / semiophore / art for specialists*

with Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen

28 may 2021 [l,h,e]

*an ongoing collective exploration / learning, from experiences of togetherness and uncertainty / reflecting on listening – with Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen, Matteo Zoccolo – 28 may 2021
matteozoccolo.net/on_listening/conversations.html*

SSW: I think it's a very interesting, ambivalent position, the one you are in. There's a moment of self-erasure, but then one of production, which is the contrary of erasure. For me, this is like someone who tries to do a painting but doesn't want to decide about the size, the color or the motive. I think that having this ambivalence in an artistic practice is an interesting thing. You have to come up with a set of decisions.

Every artistic practice is about constructing an identity, you cannot avoid it. I mean, what you do now by erasing yourself is just a specific way of constructing an identity, which is a non-identity. You cannot avoid being present in what you do. And I think, what is interesting also in a collective practice, is to be identifiable as a partner. So, if you disappear as Matteo, it is not productive for me as Stephan. So, I need, how to say, an adversary. There must be someone, a person who says, "Yes, yes, no. Yes." Because then, I can construct myself productively. For me, it's very much about negotiating between positions. But if you want to erase yourself, you disappear as a partner. That's an interesting question, why do you want to disappear?

MZ: I think that was the first impulse when I started to really reflect on my role in society and as an artist. The first impulse was to think, "We don't need the next artist who does stuff, so, I'm not going to do anything." A bit nihilistic, I know. I'm not going to produce anymore in this system. I'm going to reflect, I'm going to connect with people. Yes, I produce knowledge, connections, friendships, but nothing tangible. And of course, now I'm going back, and as you said, I'm realizing, "OK, no, I still need to be present. I'm still the one who makes decisions in what I'm doing in my life." Um, but I think it's interesting what you said regarding the painting. You said that it's like I want to make a painting, but then I don't want to make decisions on the size and on the colors. So, I would turn this example this way: I take the decision to work with some people thinking that doing a painting together would be a nice idea. I bring this idea to the group, the group likes it, and then I involve the people in the group in the decision-making. Which colors to buy? Which is the size of the canvas? Then we collectively decide the colors that we want to buy and the canvas, and then we decide who paints that part, what to paint and whatever. And, in the end, after a huge amount of time, that would have been much less if I took the colors and I painted it myself, after spending an extremely huge amount of energy and time and meetings, the painting is finished. Maybe it's not finished actually, maybe you can always add a little piece.

Um, the initial idea of creating a painting is not important anymore, because what matters now it's this very big effort that we put together in making decisions about something. So, it's a common aim that is not even important to reach. For me, the interest lies in the connections that happen in the process of doing something that maybe will never be done.

SSW: Look closer to that process. You should not just stay in front of the process and admire what happens. The process is a very complex negotiation in which you define your place, and everybody participating in the group is defining his or her place. So, this is why it takes so long, because when the metaphorical painting is finished, everybody knows about his or her place. It's a very complex process of negotiating everybody's identity. And, I mean, this is what is new when authorship in a way failed as the leading principle in art, which was in the middle of the 20th century. The question was, "How can we produce art?" And then we had many, many experiments and failed experiments, you have this kind of interventionist things like an artist going somewhere and there's a group of migrants, or a group of underprivileged people, and the artist pretended that he or she would be a completely neutral force in making these people speak. Which, of course, is a joke. I mean, then the discussions we had was that the artist instrumentalized these groups of people and turned them into tools, using them like colors. So, these initiatives stopped.

And I think it was very important that we started to think of negotiating identity. So, what for me collective work is about, is not to accept a pre-defined identity, but to accept that you don't know who you are.

MZ: Alright.

SSW: And the group work is interesting because everybody helps everybody to become someone else. But we should not behave as if there wouldn't be definitions. I mean, about your collective work in Linz, in a way... If I would go to Linz and I would ask other people about your role, they would have a very precise picture of your identity. They could describe it, it's not that you are not there. You have a very precise function in the multi-voice character of the group. Who am I going to become in dialogue with other people? And who am I going to produce in the dialogue with other people as other identities? This is a very crucial phenomenon in this type of practice. You're actually producing an image, but it's the fluent image of yourself in being part of a group. And so, the group becomes a kind of medium to negotiate identities. It's not that you have one identity. You have many identities. And the moment the group ends, the identity also changes. And I think it's interesting to have this in mind, and not just think of the group as a black box. The group is a very complex instrument of identity construction, in a way. You don't like this idea?

MZ: I do like it. I'm just thinking... I'm thinking of what you said before about those experiments, years ago, about bringing communities and using them as tools, in the end. I think I'm really careful now, because I'm realizing it's very easy to instrumentalize participation, let's say. So, one of the first decisions I took, especially after being in Jerusalem, is that I didn't want to have this

problem-solving approach of going to fucked-up situations and say, "I am the artist, and I'm doing a project with you, I will help you to get out of this." In a way, now I'm really establishing these communities, these groups, among people who don't have troubles, people who are privileged like me - we are colleagues. Yeah, I'm actually trying to figure out strategies to avoid this exploitation that might happen. And, as you said, in this process of identity construction, one of the most dangerous things is to give roles to people. What we found out together, especially in the group of the 1+1=3 magazine, is that this issue is manageable when the roles are transparent and exchangeable. To say, when the roles are taken by the free will of people, and they can shift from time to time according to the availability of people and according to their skills. This is a very good way not to erase hierarchies, which is something I'm not even sure if it's possible. But, in a more democratic way, to shift roles and to establish this sense of togetherness, or this sense of collective belonging to something. It's constant research for us, it's learning by doing, and learning from texts like the ones of Claire Bishop and Brandon LaBelle. Yeah, I've many questions. But it's also interesting how every time I speak to you, you always bring back this idea of negotiation.

SSW: I share this idea with Claire Bishop. When she writes about the failure of relational aesthetics, she's turning to Chantal Mouffe's theory of the agonistic society, and the agonistic democracy. And for me, if I think of the political role of art, the only image I have in mind is Chantal's idea that you have to have a counter-position. And counter-position means that if you have another idea, we share, and we accept each other. That's very important for the agonistic position. We become productive. If you agree to what I say, I just stay who you are. I need someone who has a different idea, who contributes. So, the idea of an agonistic process is to develop and change together, that's the important point. To me, it seems the only possibility of how we can imagine that art functions in a political way. And so, I'm always returning to Chantal Mouffe because I think it's the most developed understanding of a kind of political practice in the arts.

MZ: What do you think it's political? How would you define the political?

SSW: Well, to take a position... Not in art topics. I mean, art lived 100 years by criticizing its own language, its own tools. What is a painting? A painting is something which is flat. What is a sculpture? How do we look at a painting? And this is finished. So, what is art doing today? Art has a critical relation to the society it is working in. So, the artist is a person who, from his or her specific position, evaluates, day by day, everyday life. Actually, today the artist is a critic. Is a critic who has a very unconventional practice. It's not the practice of a scientist. The scientist is a critic too, but he has a different tool of criticism. I really

can't imagine any other mission of art today. I mean, what we observe is that we have a bunch of people who are still doing paintings sold in galleries and bought by people who are interested in decoration. And these poor works end up as something like tapestry in rich people's rooms, which I think is a very boring product of art. And this is why I am always a little bit desperate when students come to our program in Bolzano, they think very much in terms of their private experiences, expressions, emotions... Nobody cares. I mean, why should I be interested in your private emotions? Nobody's interested in my private emotions. There is a point where we have to understand that an emotion is significant as an example for a social moment, a social structure. So, I'm interested in Matteo Zoccolo as long as I can understand him as a symptom of a social situation. And that's very important for what artists do, and it's political. I don't think it's very interesting if Matteo Zoccolo tells me that we should have a different politics in migration. I mean, this is the citizen Matteo Zoccolo, who has a political opinion concerning migration. I also have a political opinion concerning migration. This is our civil society, and we are all part of it. This is not the artist Matteo, who is rather someone who experiences his life as significant and symptomatic for a specific social and political situation. So, I look at the artist Matteo Zoccolo as a kind of model, a critical model of society. And here I see the contemporary and political role of art. There's no other way to be political in art.

MZ: I definitely relate to that, and I hope what we are doing in our projects can be a little effort or political statement.

SSW: When I listen to you telling me about your different projects, it's not interesting that you have an exhibition group in Linz, or that you do a magazine. Because there are herds of people doing magazines. What is interesting to me and what I find exciting is that I experience the performance of you. It's like a choreography, it's like a dance. So, all these projects end up creating a specific type of movement. And I think, this type of choreography, how you design these situations... You design a magazine, you design a space, you bring people together and this, in a way, conditions a certain intellectual, even bodily movement. You have to travel to Linz, you have to go around. It's a kind of liquidization of a specific model of identity, which you achieve through creating these situations. And that's what I think is exciting about the projects, the way how you implicitly redefine a position which externally is actually defined by society. Society tells you, "You have to finish your bachelor. You have to go there. You have to do a master. You have..." I don't know. But what you do is to redefine what the others want you to do, what society wants you to do. And so, I experience it very much as a kind of ballet, as a kind of choreography created through these situations.

MZ: It's very interesting, you gave me a nice idea. I was speaking with Chris Haring a few days ago, and he asked me to make a small video clip of 1 minute, connecting my practice to choreography. I've never thought about it, because as I said before, my focus now is not on my persona. I really try to shift it towards the other. Maybe I don't reflect enough on my performative role in this thing. Actually, there is one.

Yes, I am one of the organizers who decide who to invite, where to meet, when, how to set the room so that people feel comfortable when they enter, who offers the coffee and sends emails every few days updating the 60 people around that... Rather than a performer, I like to think of myself as a sort of glue. Is this also a performative act?

SSW: I think you should not think very much in traditional categories by saying, "OK, I don't want to be an author, I want to be a non-identity." You should rather think about the fact that you have a very clear set of desires. Apparently, the desire says, "I want to be in different places, I want to meet many people. I want to be inspired by people. I want to listen." It is not interesting that you say, "I want to do something about listening." I mean, that's not very original. But what is interesting is that you have the desire to experience yourself as someone who listens and who does not speak.

So, what is interesting for your choreography is the set of your desires and how this set of desires is going to change. Because you start with a certain position, but it's quite sure that, you know, by going through this choreography, your desires will change. So, if you think of the whole project as a dance in which, through desires which come, change and go, there is a continuous redefinition of your identity, we're very close to performance. We're very close to choreography, to dance. It's a dance outside the stage, which is very interesting. I mean, I go now to Vienna, where there's a beautiful performance artist who does a show. What is the problem with this? She still needs the frame of the museum!

MZ: Um...

SSW: So, there's an interesting step where your performance in a way relates to your real identity. This is why I'm so fascinated by Gordon Matta-Clark, because you're never quite sure. He's doing this restaurant food, so is this an art piece or is this real life?

Now, the interesting thing in your performative choreography is the blurring between art and life, as Allan Kaprow said. I mean, you should not avoid proving your sensitivity and intelligence in reading your own performance. This is what qualifies yourself as a sensitive person. So, the way you read your own performance, and you read the performance of the others in your group, qualifies your choreography. If your reading is very superficial, if you use very simple categories like, "I don't want to be an author. I want to perform in a group," then, the choreography will

not develop in a very sensitive and fascinating way. If you react like an artist, you will try to invent new terminologies for what you experience in relation to others, and to your own experience. And so, for instance, to say that you are living a choreography, which is what life produces, is an interesting and unusual category.

The reading which you continuously do from your own practice, and the instrument to read the categories, are crucial. If you do a painting and you don't understand that the yellow is a little bit too cold and that you need a warmer yellow... Someone who is not a painter doesn't see this difference. The quality in your choreography is that you see differences. And when we talk about politics in art, this is what we expect from an artist, to have a way of receiving reality which is very original, precise, specific.

My biggest battle with students is that they are not patient enough to look, they're not patient enough to listen, maybe. My experience is that you say, "Please, look at this work of Gerhard Richter." And they look at the work and say, "Ah, yeah, I saw it." But how long did you look? I mean, Gerhard looked at the painting for 3 weeks. You look at it for 1 minute just to realize that it's an abstract painting and it's red and blue? That's not looking. You know, looking has to change, you have to change yourself by looking, you have to overcome your expectations and conventions while you look. It's a very productive work, and a big question in my teaching is, "How can I engage students in a passionate way, in an insistent way of looking?"

And actually, this is what I would expect from you as an artist. An insistent and differentiated way of experiencing your own identity in this structure you create. And then, I think it's a very exciting way of getting out of the museum, getting out of the market, getting out of the conventional settings for your identity defined by society.

MZ: Yeah, the first thing I would do to engage, to encourage people to engage more, is to stop showing paintings!

SSW: I'm not sure! I mean, I know beautiful paintings. Italo Zuffi is doing beautiful sculptures. And sometimes a good painting is much better than a bad intervention or a stupid work. So, I wouldn't make...

MZ: It was just a provocation. What I was trying to say is that maybe the best way is not to search for engagement or participation. It is more, in my opinion, to create a space that can allow that. And now we are in a university, so the space is already this, this framework is set and we are acting inside this building. Which works for something and doesn't work for something else. You know, this context is shaping what's happening inside this building. What I am finding out is how to allow a space in collaboration with other agents, who are people who have agency to take decisions and responsibility, to shape a space in which we can feel comfortable to talk about things and we are not feeling judged. And in which we are not being evaluated.

So, my research, I would say, is not about engagement or participation, but it's about creating a space, and then things will happen in that space. And of course, the decisions I am making with other people to define the space, are shaping the future dynamics in the group. But for me, it really starts from space. That's why it's so difficult for me to relate to painting, sculpture, or more conventional forms of doing art, because to me it looks very dry, somehow. I can look at a painting for 3 days, but what will I get? If I drink a coffee with my friend, I will learn something more.

SSW: But of course, a painter looking at other painters works, gets a lot. And of course, a painting is not a flat surface. A painting is a place to unite and to share. I mean, there's this beautiful term, 'semaphore', which means that a work is not a message, but it's a kind of empty vessel where people have to produce the meaning for the semaphore.

MZ: What is that?

SSW: It's a container of meanings. And so, we can easily understand that you're creating spaces of shared meanings.

MZ: But it's so dry. When I enter a white cube and see a painting... You know, those spaces are institutional, they are defined by rules. If I enter there, it's because I'm already privileged. You know, for me, it's really searching for alternative spaces in which not to show anything. We don't show in those spaces. We do. We listen.

SSW: It's a very fair artistic program, the one you have. But I could easily argue that there is no white space because this space has been under negotiation since it started. I mean, the moment you had a white cube, artists started to disturb the white cube, to destroy the white cube, to change the white cube.

MZ: I get it, but the shades you're speaking about are minimal.

SSW: Every interesting shade is minimal.

MZ: I agree. Changing the position of an object in space can change everything. But you are still inside a museum. You're still inside a gallery. You are still inside an art bubble, art system, art market. You are still speaking to people who are already willing to look at what you are doing...

SSW: You said you made a group of specialists. It's the same. They are people who are interested in a certain type of discourse. It's also a sharing of meanings. It's always a group of experts who are able to negotiate. If you're not an expert, you cannot negotiate.

MZ: But when you blur art and life, then it's not important anymore whether you are an expert or not. Everybody

shares the experience of life.

SSW: No. If you go to Africa... I mean, you should already have had this experience in Israel, where there are a lot of people who don't share your experience.

MZ: That's why I'm not working with those people now. Because I don't feel prepared to put myself in the position of being the privileged one, working exploiting a difficult situation of someone else. That's why I'm doing my project in Linz and not in Jerusalem, let's say.

SSW: It's getting interesting but I unfortunately have a train in a few minutes... Let's think we made a good point and continue another time.

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