

*on waiters / resistance / non-productive time lost / systems of evaluation /
prototyping and establishing instruments and scales to assess collective processes /
provocation / reasons for*

with **Italo Zuffi**, a waiter
10 June 2021 [r,1,h,e]

*an ongoing collective exploration / learning from experiences of togetherness and uncertainty / reflecting on listening – with **Italo Zuffi, Matteo Zoccolo** – 10 June 2021
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IZ: Let's go.

MZ: Let's go. The battery of my computer is low, I hope it will survive our conversation.

IZ: Let's try.

MZ: We were just speaking about the concept of resistance. And I was wondering if maybe in this conversation we managed to find a way to connect it to the act of listening and... Ja, hallo, ich warte auf eine Freundin, dann bestellen wir!

waiter: Gerne, aber problem ist, dass wir um 18 Uhr schließen.

MZ: Sie kommt in 15 min oder so, ist es OK?

waiter: Des passt, super.

MZ: Super. Ok, sorry Italo...

IZ: We also keep this Matteo, right?

MZ: C'mon, let's start again...

IZ: No, no. We keep it. We can just continue, it was super nice. A good example.

MZ: So, now we can speak about interruptions.

IZ: No, we have to speak about the element of enrichment. And surprise.

MZ: Sounds good.

IZ: And the unexpected. I mean, there are many elements in this... And I am fond of waiters, one of the most beautiful jobs. If I was not trained as an artist, if I didn't decide to pursue a career as an artist, I might have become a waiter. It's real choreography to be a waiter. And also, the magic of a good waiter is that you need a colpo d'occhio, a very sharp and quick eye.

MZ: Colpo d'occhio?

IZ: It's about being able to catch fast the needs of your customers, in a fraction of time, because if you leave somebody without an order, without a beer or for too long without the bill, they will get upset.

MZ: I would say being a waiter is to care.

IZ: Being a waiter is like being a regista, a director, I think. It's about caring, it's about being present. You cannot be a distracted waiter.

MZ: Yeah.

IZ: It's one of the most alive jobs. That 'interruption' was quite beautiful. I'm happy that there was this person suddenly asking for your order.

MZ: In a way, it's all about listening, no?

IZ: It's about feeling.

MZ: Feeling what?

IZ: Feeling the space and the people in it. Feeling the expectations of those that you aim at 'serving' - just in the sense that you provide a service, which is to collect the orders, bring the food and drinks to the tables. And also, be careful, to be the mediator between the customer and the kitchen. You have that very important role as a waiter. You are an ambassador, both ways. It's full of angles to be a good waiter. And of course, you have to have a sense of space, you arrange the tables and the customers. It's a beautiful job.

MZ: Wow, never thought about waiters this way.

IZ: But going back to resistance, what is so interesting for you in that concept? How does it relate to your work? If it does...

MZ: I would say resistance is something... You know, I still don't know exactly how it relates to what I do. When I think about resistance, I think about this effort for a cause, a purpose, without being sure that you can even reach that goal. You know, when you resist, you are putting an effort into something that maybe will not work, but nevertheless you do it. It's also connected to resilience, in a way.

IZ: But I think we first have to define the context of the use of the term resistance. Here you are already using it in a very romantic way. You can also put it in the context of resisting against somebody who is somehow attacking you, opposing a resistance against something which is already going to manipulate you, put you in trouble or offer you something you don't want, for instance a change to your life. But there's also a resistance to a feeling, for example I resist your love, I resist your proposition. Or even resisting to something I could benefit from, but because I'm too rigid, I don't want it. So, I think, first we should define the context of this term. Where do you want to apply it? In the everyday life, or is it a specific context you're thinking of? Resistance in the artistic production field, in the expressive field, in the cultural production field, in the philosophical field...

MZ: Maybe more in everyday life, I would say. And also connected to specific artistic productions. So, in a way, let me bring an example. There is this Spanish friend of

mine, Mariona, who organizes these huge parties, sort of baccanali, with people drinks and food. They cook and eat together... They basically spend time in a useless way, in a non-productive way. They basically party as artistic practice. And she calls it a 'dispositif for resistance'. And in a way, I can relate my own practice to this concept, thinking of the groups of people who contribute to the 1+1=3 magazine and the hörraum. In a way, for me, resistance is also connected to trying to find your own way inside a system that defines the rules. And the system can be the art system, an economic system, the state with its rules... When you have a system and you're an individual trying to find your own way, applying or not applying the rules of the system. I don't know if you get what I mean.

IZ: This is a political context, then.

MZ: I would say it's political, yeah. Even though we can also apply it to art and other fields. But I would say that, yes, I'm interested in resistance understood as a political act.

IZ: In the sense that you can express a choice?

MZ: Exactly. With your own free will, you can make your decisions. And when your free will pushes you to take a decision that goes against a border of the system, then you try to push that border. You resist the fact that the system imposes borders and you try to re-define them, in a way to compromise your own borders with the borders of the system.

IZ: Yes. But for instance, which are the borders you recently experienced in this respect? When did you feel the structure designed or imposed by the government, for instance?

MZ: I mean, a very easy answer would be the imposed restrictions due to Covid. This was a limit imposed by the government, at least in Austria. We were taking the risk to meet in a pandemic, taking precautions but still being slightly off track, not fully respecting the guidelines. We used to meet even though we were not supposed to do so. If you want to see it in a broader way... We live in a system that kind of pushes us towards production and being unproductive is a form of resistance in this regard. While we feel pushed to show results and tangible outcomes, what we are doing is to meet and discuss and party and play music. And all this doesn't bring anything material in the end. So, one can argue that it's time lost.

IZ: No, I think rather think of your meetings to talk with your friends or to play cards as social time. It's never a waste of time. It's very crucial, very important to do this kind of activities. I don't understand why you call it 'lost time'.

MZ: When I call it that way, I'm trying to think from the point of view of the system. You know, I don't think it's lost time, my opinion is different. But, let's say I tell my mom that my project consists of meeting with people and talking, then she would tell me, "Well, good, but in the end what do you have?"

IZ: This is interesting because you look at what you do not from your point of view, but from the point of view of somebody else who is not there, present or involved in the gatherings.

The time that is being invested in bringing people together, who then talk, produce an exchange and an enrichment for each other... You describe this as a waste of time as if through the assessment of somebody else who is judging what you are doing. But this other person, this other entity, is not part of the group that is at work. So, it is interesting because the reading you give is not produced from the inside, but from the outside. And it is a negative one.

MZ: This is true. This is true.

IZ: So, I don't understand...

MZ: Here again, maybe I have this way of evaluating what I'm doing, imagining an entity that is critical about what I'm doing.

IZ: Yes.

MZ: And when I have this entity in mind, I try to counteract it. I try to go against it.

IZ: This is quite interesting because, through this self-assessment of yours, it seems like you actually reproduce the same oppositional model you are fighting.

MZ: And actually, that's something I realized now because... It's super interesting because actually, one of our first points of what we are trying to do is trying to free us from the eye of someone who's judging us. We don't want to be evaluated. It's very clear for the people in the groups I'm working with that we don't want to fit into this system of evaluation. But now, you tell me this, and I realized that, actually, I have this evaluation system inside my brain.

IZ: I mean, this is literally what you were saying, that you do activities that are non-productive, which in reality are very productive since they bring about time for socializing between people, for dialogue and discussion, comparison of views and thoughts, and so on. Yet you describe them as moments of non-production or even as a waste of time. But that is, again, something that somebody else could say. Because your intention is not to waste time, of course, it is not to be non-productive. As a matter of fact you are producing a lot - exchange, to start with. It seems as if the instrument to 'measure' the value and implications of your

work is not with you but with somebody else who is external to your process.

MZ: But that's why in my head I have this external entity.

IZ: Yes, but it only works if you don't use their way to measure things. You can produce your own way to assess what you are doing.

MZ: How can you set your own yardstick to measure and evaluate what you do?

IZ: You create a prototype, some instrument to measure that is not existing, you produce and establish your own way of measuring.

MZ: But nobody knows the scale. I cannot communicate it to people, you know. The meter works because everybody knows that one meter is one meter. But if I produce my own instrument to measure whatever, social engagement or the degree of interesting stuff happening every minute... I don't know what, but it doesn't make sense.

IZ: Well, in this case, I would say that you create your own scale, which will be shared by the components of the groups that you are in exchange with. And if the time comes, if you need to compare it with other ways of measurement, you just convert against it. Or the other way round.

MZ: But you know what? My question is another. Can we do something without any need to evaluate it? Regardless if I create the scale or the scale is already there.

IZ: Of course, this is also a possibility. Not to measure, absolutely.

MZ: Yeah, that's it. But what I am discovering now that I am speaking to you, is that I still have this voice in my brain that challenges what I'm doing, even though there is no one that is actually telling me, "You are doing wrong."

IZ: This is maybe because you have this necessity to evaluate, to keep assessing, which comes from... I don't know from where... You know it. Maybe this whole process you have initiated is to get rid of it. I don't know, this is a possibility, something of a personal issue.

MZ: It's a sort of therapy.

IZ: Only you have the answer for this. But what I see is that you still bring this element in a very strong way, as if it's surveilling you. You feel observed and assessed by it.

MZ: Obsessed or assessed?

IZ: Assessed.

MZ: Ok. I'd say yes, there is a tension when I say I don't want to evaluate what I'm doing, and at the same time, I always have this voice in my mind that kind of talks to me and I have to counteract. There is tension. And maybe yeah, I'm doing what I'm doing to kind of understand what this voice is. I still have to understand how to cope with this evaluation thing. Because at the end, we need to evaluate everything. It's a bit naive to say, "We don't need evaluation." We live in this world and we are humans, we base our choices on constant evaluation. So, as you said, maybe the point is not to reject evaluation, but to establish, even on a small scale, these new instruments and new scales for a different way of evaluating things.

IZ: You can also decide that within your own small community, you don't need any scale. This is also an option. But this is something to be figured out through a shared decision probably...

MZ: But, you know, this is also interesting if we think of what comes out of these groups. So, in the group we can decide we don't evaluate anything, we just be, here and now, and we don't care. But then, when a product comes out, when other people get to know about that process, then you have to communicate what's happening and, in a way, you are judged. Maybe this is also why I don't like to tell what's happening to a secondary audience, to document, to take pictures, to kind of create some sort of evidence of what's happening. Maybe this is why I think of documentation as an issue. Because in the end, it's still about evaluation and judgment.

IZ: I don't know, Matteo. I think that after so many months of practice and dialogue with other people, you may already have a clear idea of what you are trying to achieve. Even when you say, "I don't want to achieve anything," that's already a goal in itself.

The process is very clear. It's about staying active and living, engaging with other people. I mean, it's not a process where your objective is to stay alone. The goal is to keep staying with other people and actually to make this circle larger and larger, to involve increasing numbers of people. But as for the reasons of this process, you and the other components are the ones that know why you do this. I mean, there's always an urgent need in yourself, which brings you to meet other people, to sit down and talk freely about your topics. And also, to decide that this can be seen as a form of art.

waiter: Entschuldigung, hier ist die Rechnung... €8.70 bitte.

MZ: Hier ist es, danke!

IZ: The waiter is back.

MZ: The waiter is back. I wonder if there is also an

element of provocation. And I don't know how healthy it is to have this layer.

IZ: Provocation towards ... ?

MZ: I wonder... I think there is a layer of provocation in what I do, towards this way of thinking. It probably comes from my parents who still didn't get what I'm doing.

IZ: This is very rare!

MZ: No, this is very common!

IZ: No, it's rare that the parents understand what you do.

MZ: Well, yeah. I agree. The problem is that they already didn't understand why I was taking pictures. And that was a very easy stage, at least I knew what I was doing. Now it's getting harder to explain all those things about collaborative processes and engagement. They are pretty lost, like many of my friends back in my village. A bunch of people there are like, "Yeah, but in the end, what are you doing?"

IZ: What is your hometown?

MZ: It's called Ponzone, on the mountains close to Biella. Yeah, a very small village, with very small horizons, actually. That's why I moved. But yes, maybe this background is a personal reason why I'm doing this kind of stuff. I am wondering if this element of provocation is actually something I should keep or not...

IZ: I think that each person joining those meetings that you implement has got a specific reason to be there, no?

MZ: Well, definitely.

IZ: It's not a common one. Maybe it's a very personal interest. So, I was suggesting that you, Matteo, but also others, can question this urgent drive to join a group of people just to chat/talk with each other. This is the most common activity, to be with friends and talk openly about issues and questions you have about your present and future life, your views, your theories.

MZ: Since it's such a common activity, I also wonder why I need to call it an art project.

IZ: Well, that's a good question for you.

MZ: Sure. Yeah, I guess it's about opportunities and possibilities.

IZ: Opportunities for... ?

MZ: I think that when you call something art, you have access to places that otherwise you would not be able to go.

Also, when you call it art, people pay more attention.

IZ: Well, I don't know...

MZ: I don't either. I still have to figure it out. But I guess we are doing it well, we are learning by doing. But back to the waiter and the care thing, why did you end up to be an artist and teacher, and not a waiter?

IZ: Well, because destiny chose for me.

MZ: And have you ever thought to bring the image of the waiter into your work?

IZ: Yes, in a performance that I haven't done yet, there are waiters at work. It's an idea for a choreography with waiters. I got sketches, drawings and photos, I'm just waiting for the right opportunity to bring it to life.

MZ: I like waiters. I like when they are happy, they smile and they are very friendly. Sometimes they are a little bit grumpy...

IZ: There are places in Italy where you get trained in such a 'proper' way. I mean, I don't care about the being professional, but to learn the skills, to learn how to bring the cutlery, to bring the tablecloth, the food, pile up the empty dishes on your arm back to the kitchen, and so on... And to do it properly, in a very accurate way.

MZ: I would say in a careful way.

IZ: In an attentive way. And also to chat a little bit with the customer, sometimes. You don't improvise this job. Being a waiter or waitress requires a specific mindframe. You need very good training. You can also learn it by doing it over time, but a good school training makes a difference.

MZ: Actually, I would say that there is something in waiters who are not trained. Like students who work in pubs and restaurants during summer. It brings a good vibe.

IZ: Of course, we are not talking about how nice people can be when doing a job at their best. I'm talking about people trained through thi

[connection interrupted abruptly]