

on documentation / keeping traces / destroying traces

with **Marlene Aigner**

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*an ongoing collective exploration / learning from experiences of togetherness and uncertainty / reflecting on listening – with **Marlene Aigner, Matteo Zoccolo** – 14 april 2021*
matteozoccolo.net/on_listening/conversations.html

MZ: It will change now.

MA: Now it will not be the same.

MZ: My voice already changes. I try to be clearer and louder.

MA: Um...

MZ: Facing the top of the microphone with my mouth.

MA: Is this how you always speak when you...

MZ: This is how I speak when I record myself.

MA: Very natural. Very authentic.

MZ: We were speaking about...

MA: leaving traces, no? Uhm, about performance and how it dies in the moment it happens. No. Yeah, but what were you thinking about?

MZ: I cannot think with this thing in front of me!

MA: But this is not the first time you're doing this, like recording a conversation, right?

MZ: Yeah, it's true. I need a few minutes, in the beginning, to get used to it.

MA: Do I need to also take care of my voice and my articulation?

MZ: Yeah. Traces... What is a trace?

MA: That's a good question.

MZ: Can you try to define it?

MA: I mean, there are different kinds of traces. There are visual traces and there are emotional traces. I think a trace is something that... Changed something, in a way.

MZ: What do you mean?

MA: If, um, if you draw a line on a wall. You left a trace on the wall and that line changed the wall. And if I spend time with you and I feel like you leave traces in me, it's because I feel like you changed me in some ways, or you changed how I think or how I feel.

MZ: So, for you, a trace is not something dead, that is there only to keep a memory of a past experience?

MA: No, not necessarily. Like, especially traces you leave in another person, are very alive, I think. And I mean, there

are traces you can leave consciously or unconsciously, right?

MZ: Right. And for you, does it change something when a trace is consciously produced or just happens unconsciously?

MA: Um... I'm not sure, what do you think?

MZ: The intention changes, yeah. If I want to draw a line on a wall, it's because I want to leave a trace and I take a pen and I draw a line, and that's my goal and I'm conscious that this is what I want to leave. I want to make that line in order for the line to stay on the wall. Um, when I'm speaking to you or some other people, I don't speak to them in order to leave traces. I rather speak to them because I feel the need or because I feel good with them, and then I speak with them.

MA: But maybe you could also leave a line on the wall unconsciously, for example.

MZ: If I'm going around with an open marker...

MA: No! Maybe, you know, sometimes you have, I don't know, things on your backpack or something that is losing its color, you know. And then you can also leave a trace, and the trace is still the same. And with people... it depends. People see whether this trace was done consciously or unconsciously. I mean, also, if you look at your wall right now, you see there are a lot of lines and things, traces of something.

MZ: But I can tell that those traces are not conscious. You can tell. They don't have a message. I mean, they carry a message that is: someone was there. But that someone didn't decide to leave them. Just by living here in this room, they left traces. Italo said that our body constantly leaves traces and waste, even if we don't want to.

MA: But I think, actually maybe it doesn't depend so much on the intention in this case, for me.

MZ: What do you mean?

MA: I don't know. How do we see the trace afterwards? Like, I don't know. The traces you left in me are very... alive, and very... there, even though you didn't leave them consciously, but I can definitely tell that it was you who left them. But I think maybe it's necessary to differentiate between different kinds of traces because, yeah, I mean, a line on the wall and traces from human interaction are very different things.

MZ: Yeah. And considering what we were speaking about before, about leaving a trace of a performance, or maybe more in general, not a performance, but a live experience...

MA: Actually, a performance or a live experience is probably closer to these unconscious traces that we leave in people when we interact with them. I mean, of course, if we perform, we do it consciously. But we don't know which kind of traces it will leave for people that watched the performance.

MZ: Maybe it also leaves traces on the ground.

MA: Yeah. But they are usually removed. Or they are also just temporary.

MZ: And what happens if there is someone who's taking a video? Does the performance change when someone takes the audio or the video or... when someone is with a piece of paper in the audience and he's writing exactly what's happening?

MA: What do you mean with 'does the performance change'?

MZ: If someone is keeping a trace, is consciously producing a trace of something, does this trace change this something, or is this something not bound to the production of traces?

MA: I mean, this something is gone afterward, and then there's only the trace left. The traces, and not the thing itself. It's just a trace, right?

MZ: But are those traces material or immaterial?

MA: Can be both, no? I don't know what you mean exactly. If the performance itself changes if the performers are aware that someone is tracing the performance?

MZ: Yeah. Or if the memory of the performance changes.

MA: This I do think, definitely. I mean... For whom?

MZ: For the performers and also for the audience.

MA: I think for me, from a performer's perspective, if I watch a video of a performance, my memory of the performance changes. Because I don't only have the sensational memory, the somatic memory, I also have the memory from looking at it from the outside, from looking at the visual trace of it. And then I have an idea of what it might have looked like for the audience.

MZ: So, for you, there's also a question of points of view.

MA: Yes.

MZ: So, a trace can also be a tool to experience the same happening...

MA: From a different point of view. I mean, if I'm performing, I never perceive it in the same way as the audience can perceive that performance. If I watch a video, I get an idea of it. But of course, it's very different. But I remember, for example, some days ago we watched a performance and I remember I didn't really like the piece before we performed it. Performing it was like a fight, because it was very fast and very exhausting, and I remember being just very exhausted during this whole thing and actually wanting it to be over because I was dying. And now when I watch the video, I see it in a different way, because I see the whole picture. I don't only see it from my personal point of view, including my suffering at this moment. Maybe also my memory changes and I can think that I also felt good doing this because it looks good when I watch it now. It looks freer than I actually felt. So, I think in that case, the trace really changed my memory of the actual thing.

MZ: And what do you think about this dilemma of deciding between spending your time leaving traces or concentrating fully on what you are living? Because when you consciously want to leave a trace, when you consciously want to produce documentation, a document, a trace, a piece of evidence that something happened, then you are actively engaging with an activity that is not the activity that you want to describe or that you want to document. So, you are not living the activity, you are concentrating on keeping a trace of that activity. Also, maybe it's interesting to think about how artists document performances. They can ask someone to take pictures, or they can make a video, or they can make an audio recording, or they can do the performance, and then when they come back home in the evening, they can write about it or they can make a drawing. Maybe the trace is left before the performance happens, so maybe the traces are of the process that led to the performance. Let's say preparation... drawings, a text that was written before, a concept, idea, an interview... Or maybe this interview can be after the performance, it can be a journalist that interviews the performer and the artist in the end. And this can also be a trace. And how does this trace, according to when it was produced and how consciously it was produced, how does this trace modify the performance itself and the memory of the performance itself, and the understanding of the past?

MA: Are we speaking about traces that we leave for others or for ourselves?

MZ: This is also a question.

MA: Now I have to think if what I'm saying is true... But I usually don't consciously leave traces for others. If I write something, if I produce a trace about an event or even a performance or whatever, I do it for me, but not for the sake of leaving a trace, but because the act of writing it down is clarifying things for me. And this is a way of

processing what happened to me. So in the end, I left a trace, but not intending to leave a trace.

MZ: I would say with the intention of leaving a trace, but for you, not for the others.

MA: But actually, the process of writing it down is making things clearer in my mind.

MZ: So potentially you can write it down and...

MA: and never read it again...

MZ: And then burn your piece of paper. And for you, it would be the same because it was the process of writing, and then it's not important if what you wrote stays.

MA: I think so, it depends. Other times I also write things down and it helps me to re-read them. But yesterday, for example, I wrote something and afterwards I threw it away.

MZ: Crazy thing for me. it's amazing, it makes me feel like something is burning inside my chest.

MA: Maybe because I'm a performer and I'm used to things being lost in the moment they're produced or after they're produced. It's also interesting with dance and movement: there's not only the traces that we can produce in order to produce traces, but because of my muscle memory, I still have traces of performances I did one year ago, two years ago. I still memorize some of the movements because learning this material or creating this material left traces inside of me, on me. I have these scars on my feet from performances or from when I did my audition because I burned my skin. These are also Traces, but only I will know what they mean.

MZ: So for you, a trace is definitely something that when you consciously produce it, you produce it for yourself.

MA: OK, but everything is sort of a trace. And if I write a poem for you, it's also a trace. But I didn't produce it because I wanted to produce a trace. I produced it because I wanted to write a poem for you.

MZ: Let's distinguish, maybe a trace is in a relationship of importance related to something else, that is more important. So, for example, if you write something for someone else, then this is not a trace. It could also be a trace of what you feel, for example, for this person. Then if you take a picture of that poem that you wrote, then that picture is a trace of the poem, and the poem is a trace of a feeling. And the feeling is a trace of what?

MA: The feeling is the trace of... The experience.

MZ: And the experience is a trace of?

MA: The interaction. No?

MZ: And the interaction is the trace of?

MA: I don't know...

MZ: Hm... the interaction is not a trace!

MA: Depends on the kind of interaction.

MZ: What I'm trying to understand is if a trace is always subordinate to something else, if a trace is telling something about something else. It can be used as evidence of something else, but it always refers to something else that is not a trace, that is not the trace itself.

MA: I think so.

MZ: So when you write, you are referring to an experience and you are leaving a trace. But I'm wondering if a way to define a trace is by thinking how long it will stay in this world. I'm thinking if a trace is defined by the time and the accessibility that it has.

MA: But why?

MZ: Because when I want to consciously leave a trace, at least speaking for me, I want this trace to be accessible for as long as possible in the future. So, for example, if I'm taking a photograph and I consider this photograph as a trace, then I take care of the conservation and I maintain this trace. You also need to spend a lot of energy on it, for example, regarding pictures. You print the picture on very good paper and then you don't put it in the sun or under the water. You keep it, you conserve it, so that this trace can live for as long as possible and can be seen in the future by someone, and maybe it can change their experience of the world. Maybe it can add a little piece to their life. This is my understanding of 'trace'.

MA: Hm...

MZ: So when you say that you write something, for me already the act of writing is something that requires energy and it's something that requires time. And then I'm very surprised when you tell me that you throw away what you write. It's a sort of blasphemy. You decide to put something on a material that is readable and accessible, and that can potentially be a memory or a document for the future. And then you destroy it.

MA: Yeah. Because it's my decision, what I do with this. And maybe I decided that I didn't want to leave this trace. So I destroyed it. And I think I'm very different from you with these things. I definitely don't take so much care of the conservation of traces and evidence. Really not. I'm quite bad at it actually. I delete pictures, I throw away

papers. Yeah. I think I just don't give equal importance to all the things I produce, to all the traces I leave, consciously or unconsciously. Sometimes I don't consider them as important, and then I can let them go. The act of letting go of a trace is also something valuable, I think.

MZ: Sure...

MA: I do think it could have to do with my practice as a dancer because it's just impossible to keep all the movement material and information you gain over the years. It's impossible to keep all of it, to trace all of it.

MZ: You cannot write it down?

MA: Movement? There are notations, but it's very complicated, and it's not really useful. It's so much about the experience and there are so many layers, a movement is not just a movement: it depends on the intention you have, how you do it, what is your reason for doing it, what is your mindset while doing it. So maybe it would be easier if I would tell someone to keep traces of my movement. Because they can trace it based on how they saw it. If I want to write down my experience of the movement, what do I base this on? Is it how I felt? Is it what I saw? Is it...

MZ: The story you had in mind?

MA: It's very hard to keep traces of that. And this is also something you learn in a choreographic process, you create movement material, sequences, phrases... And you have to choose. You have to let go of things if they don't fit anymore. And then they are lost, you don't keep them in a folder of things that you didn't use in the end. They are just lost.

MZ: It would be interesting to choreograph a piece picking material from all that was lost, that has been thrown.

MA: Yeah, then you have to somehow document everything.

MZ: And that's a lot of time.

MA: Yeah. I mean, the easiest way to do this is to make a video. Or to tell your body to remember everything you did and to memorize. But many times we improvise, and things are lost.

MZ: And how do you connect this to life experiences? Do you think there is a connection between your practice as a dancer and how you keep traces, how you don't keep traces, and your life as a person?

MA: And how I don't keep traces? It's not that I don't keep traces. Maybe because I learned to accept this thing in dance, that you have to let go of things, that you have

to throw away things that you thought were valuable in the beginning, that's why also in life it's easier for me to select the traces I want to leave and the traces I don't see as important.

MZ: For me, the image of creating a trace and then destroying it is still very strong. Because from the moment a trace exists, for me everything changes. When you don't produce a trace, then you can still think: OK, do I want to produce this trace or not? Do I want to search for someone who produced a trace about this thing or not? But from the moment I know that there is a trace, then there is a twist in my mind. And then I cannot simply ignore that there is a trace. I need to keep this trace alive, to keep its existence, and to take care of it. That's why for me, it's very hard to delete something, to delete a file, picture, audio... I usually keep those things in other folders. I have a folder called 'important stuff', and I have a folder called 'not important stuff'. And I don't delete the second folder, you know.

MA: Uhm.

MZ: And I don't think I will ever watch those things again. You know, I just need to keep them there. I need to know that they are there. I have this image of myself being old, living in a house in the countryside, broke because for my entire life I just lived out of a not very stable job, so I'm broke but happy in my little house in nature, finally having time to check the traces after an entire life of leaving traces without looking at them.

MA: Oh man!

MZ: I will finally have time and I will spend all my days sifting through the recordings and pictures and...

MA: This is horrible. So you think that at one point in your life, when you're old, you will stop producing traces and only live on the traces you produced in your previous... in your life?

MZ: There will be a switch exactly at the half of my life. The problem is that you don't know when it ends!

MA: So you're going to relive all your experiences because you go through all the traces you have left.

MZ: Yeah, because I feel like now I don't have time to...

MA: But you will never! Because you will never stop making traces. You will never stop leaving traces. And then you're going to die, and the traces are there.

MZ: So maybe they are for other people, who maybe will look back at my entire life. Only for those who have time.

MA: Nobody will look at it! Because they have to produce

their own traces.

MZ: But maybe someone like you could. You know, because you don't produce your own traces.

MA: I do produce traces and I do keep traces, maybe not for the sake of keeping traces. I have notebooks full of traces that I don't throw, and I will not throw, but I just don't keep everything.

MZ: I also don't keep everything...

MA: It just sounded different.

MZ: I live 24 hours a day. I don't keep everything, it's still a big selection.

MA: Yeah.

MZ: And actually, I don't keep anything now. It's been months that I don't leave any trace.

MA: Maybe if you would write more, you would sometimes also feel like it's not necessary to keep all of it. Or maybe not. You also used to take a lot of pictures, no?

MZ: Since I was in Jerusalem, I don't take pictures.

MA: Oh...

MZ: But when I was in Jerusalem, I felt my way of leaving a trace or keeping a document. It was to record going around with the sound recorder keeping sounds. And now I have a folder of I don't know how many hours of recording in total. That's a lot of recordings. I will never have time to listen to them. I used to take a walk and go around with the microphone, just taking what was happening, not waiting for anything. And it's everywhere in Jerusalem, in Palestine, Israel, Ramallah, Tel Aviv... no, I didn't record anything there.

MA: You said leaving a trace and keeping a document.

MZ: Exactly. What is the difference between a trace and a document? You leave a trace, and you keep... maybe you can also keep a trace.

MA: You can also keep a trace.

MZ: So, what is the difference between keeping and leaving a trace? You leave a trace when you are in an interaction with someone else or with space, you can leave a trace in space. What did I leave recording my walks in the Musrara market? Did I leave something? No, I took something. I didn't leave anything, I was just like a ghost going around with this microphone, taking sounds around me, but I didn't leave any trace.

MA: Maybe it's more the other way around. This city or this walk you took left a trace in you, and you recorded it as evidence for that. And, for example, if you would have written something about this experience, then it would have been you, leaving a trace.

MZ: So, it's also a matter of how active or passive you are.

MA: I think so.

MZ: When you record something, it's the world that leaves traces on you. And when you write something, then it's you. It's about who produces the trace and who takes it.

MA: I mean, I'm not sure.

MZ: Anyway, it's interesting to think about it as a more or less active process. If we come back to the line on the wall, I can leave a trace, and the wall keeps the trace.

MA: But also, instead of just walking through the city and recording the soundscape, if you would have recorded yourself speaking about what you saw or what you did, what would have changed? I think this is also more an active way of leaving a trace. And maybe just walking and recording is more a sort of documentation.

MZ: I see it as an act of collection, extraction. There is an environment and you decide to extract the soundscape of that environment. But what do you leave for the environment? What kind of trace do you leave in that place?

MA: Maybe by walking through that place with a recorder, and people seeing you, you left traces in them. Because they saw someone walking around with a recorder. And maybe they had thoughts about it. I mean, it was probably not a very long-lasting one. But maybe you left a thought.

MZ: Yeah, it's interesting what you said. What happens if instead of just taking the sounds that were external to me, I also describe what's happening? And then my voice is mixing, melting with the sound of what I am describing, visually at this point. Or maybe I could also describe the sound itself. You can describe something that is a sonic event, a visual experience. You can describe a story from the past. Or you can describe a wish for the future.

MA: Or you can describe a body sensation.

MZ: A recording is not only a recording of my voice, because I can be in the street of Linz and I can record my voice speaking about a memory that I have of another city. And then these two...

MA: Melting to each other. And you're the connecting point. And there are two realities.

MZ: And then it's also interesting to think, how do you play those sounds? Where do you play those sounds? To whom do you play the sounds? If you want to share.

MA: Or if you keep them for yourself.

MZ: Or if you want to transcribe them if you transform it into a readable, searchable text.

MA: But then...

MZ: But then you lose all the elements.

MA: You lose the external sounds.

MZ: Even the tone of my voice. You lose important information, but maybe it's not important. Maybe language and what you say are important. Or maybe there is a way to transcribe audio and to make it readable... You know, maybe some artists tried to...

MA: Transcribe sounds.

MZ: Yeah, or to visualize a sound, through colors and shapes like Kandinsky. But it's such a personal experience. It's not so regulated like language. It's not such a shared set of symbols.

MA: I agree.

MZ: Sound is something that always tries to escape. When you try to keep it, it's gone. When you try to record it, you're losing something.

MA: Hm...

MZ: When you try to describe it, other people will not understand what you heard because sound is an experience that happens at the moment. And also listening.

MA: Actually, listening is the experience, not sound itself.

