on acoustic interruptions / being open to change / here and now / listening mindset /
flux and openness in a workflow / played roles of people and care / hermetic communities and spirituality /
being together or being productive / an activist approach

with **Eva Leitolf**
27 may 2021 [*r*,*l*,*h*,*e*]

EL: I thought you were already recording, that was a nice introduction actually!

MZ: Now it's lost! So, yeah, the research is on listening. And listening, I'm discovering, is a very broad topic. It can include anything, from care to vulnerability, DIY and open source, space, togetherness, relational art, hearing…

EL: That's interesting. Doesn't listening also have something to do with letting things happen?

MZ: Definitely. Listening is about letting things happen and sound is about interruption. Sound is the biggest interruption, it's so violent actually, from the bells of the church to whatever. Sound is interruption. Like we're experiencing right now.

EL: …

MZ: And listening, I'm discovering, or better we are discovering, is always something that happens between two people. It's a relational act. And when you work with people, you have to be open.

EL: Even if it's mediated. I mean, you might listen to a CD with music somebody played long ago. So, it's not necessarily between two people at the same time, it might happen through a medium.

MZ: Yes. It's kind of difficult for me to concentrate right now. It's true, it can be mediated. In our semester in Bolzano we were speaking about violence in representation, specifically images. Do you think there is a similar mechanism with sound?

EL: I think that's an interesting question, especially since I'm very interested – as you know, and as you experienced in Studio Image – in the relation between image and text. For me, the very interesting thing now, in our conversation, is also the difference between written text and the spoken word. The act of reading and the act of listening. Because somehow, I just realized, while sitting here these past five minutes, that listening is much more immediate, it's less mediated than, let's say, a photograph of something. If I'm listening within a live process happening between two people, it's different from a radio programme. But somehow, suddenly, since I'm consciously thinking about and perceiving the way we listen to each other – or maybe don't – it seems to become extremely mediated. When the man just came by with his loud vehicle, it was really much more about our reaction to that than to an actual intrusion, because I had the immediate feeling that his sound was disturbing or intruding on our conversation, but at the same time, it's really dependent on my reaction if I conceive it as a disturbance. Can I just bear to sit here with you, waiting until the sound is gone? Or do I feel the urgent need to make him do his stuff fast or disappear, so that we can

continue our conversation?

MZ: For me, this is about being open to changing your plans. So, we had the plan to have this conversation, right? We decided to do it outside, so we were already open to things happening. If we had gone to the office now, there would have been way less interruptions. But we decided that we preferred to have a coffee outside. And now there is a storm coming, thunder, the man with his loud vehicle, Curzio coming, the girl on the phone… Everything around us. And I think it's a beautiful form of resistance I would say, or resilience. To stop, listen to the sound and be fluid, be open to what comes.

EL: I experience it almost as an exercise in awareness. Often in a conversation, be it in academic fields or wherever, a lot of us, including myself, tend to try to bring our own ideas across as effectively as possible, to convince people, to kind of in the end reproduce ourselves, instead of being open and just learning and being surprised. For me, teaching activity has a lot to do with the act of listening, but also with looking closely and being really curious about what the other, the student or colleagues, are producing. In the end, to develop together rather than reproducing myself over and over again. So, I think listening is quite an interesting mindset. On the other hand, I think it depends, really. Sometimes I also enjoy having very concentrated specific environments where I can get completely immersed in my work, only occasionally interacting with others. I don't know if you have similar experiences, to completely forget time and space, and just be in that kind of workflow.

MZ: Yeah, I can relate to what you said about listening in an educational setting. For me, it came naturally, now that I'm working on my thesis project, which is about listening, to reproduce a similar educational setting in which I try to learn from the people I speak with, work with. And this inevitably changes the result. So, it's no longer about what I imagined it would look like, it's taking a form that is completely different from what I envisioned at the beginning. And I think this is also beautiful. I remember how my artistic practice was back to front before I went to Jerusalem, I had a very clear idea at the beginning, and I wanted it to work. And in the end, of course, it never worked. And it was very frustrating. And now…

EL: Maybe we could even take this thought a step further. When I talk with students, especially at the beginning, many of them imagine a project like this and that. They start at the wrong end, at thinking about the product, rather the process. So, maybe, it's not only about listening to others, but also about listening to yourself in the sense of generating awareness. What kind of questions arise from the project, the process itself? You can understand artistic production as a succession of phases of intuitive production and critical reflection. I think that often, during those

phases of reflection, if you watch carefully and listen to the project itself, new questions arise that would eventually lead you towards an end you might not have foreseen. So, I would extend this relationship of listening to us as artists, between ourselves and our activities. I think the most interesting things about artistic production are the processes that eventually will *lead* to something. For me, it's really important that I also continuously surprise myself, that I don't define my assignment at the beginning of the process, not saying, "Yeah, OK, I'm working towards that result, and either it turns out well or not." But to have this flux, this concentrated openness.

But I think you initially asked if I think that sound could have a similarly violent impact on audiences or listeners, right? Like the images we discussed in the semester on 'Violent Images'. I definitely think so. But then, we are now moving from the passive act of listening to this active part of producing sounds, language, words or whatever. And if we are thinking about bias, this can happen not only with language and images, but sounds might even be biased, in some way.

MZ: I just want to reflect on what you said before, on this being here and now, this going towards more open-ended processes, if what I understood is right. So that, instant by instant, you don't have a clear result in mind, but you rather have this flux. For me, this is something I want to have in my artistic practice. I realized not long ago, actually by carrying out this exploration with other people, that it's not possible for me to have this kind of workflow on my own. I need colleagues, I need collaborations, I need exchange of ideas. And this, I discovered, has always been the case. When I first came to study art here in Bolzano, Glüher gave us an assignment to make a self-portrait in the form of a sculpture. The very first thing I did, very intuitively, was to go around with a piece of paper to everyone who knew me, even people I'd only met once, and ask them to write three words about me, the first three words that sprung to mind. And then I took this bunch of words and I started to reflect, and I learned how people perceived. That was the very first thing I created in this university, after previously studying science. So, now I have this realization that I just enjoy working with people. I don't see any point in doing something alone. This connects to life, of course.

EL: Yeah, I mean, it connects to life because obviously we're social beings. But I think it's also probably a very personal thing, because, for example, in my own practice, I experience the need for both. Both working on my own and together with others, which I discovered actually pretty late. Now working at the university is a wonderful opportunity for me, not only with students but also to work with a research group, which I find extremely rewarding. I worked entirely on my own for a long time, and I can still really value and enjoy that. You mentioned being open to the 'here and now', which is, the more I think about it, a quite vague notion: To be 'open in the here and now'.

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And I'm wondering what you really mean by this. Does that mean you're sitting there, and you're creating a work, somebody comes by, you hear a noise and the noise becomes part of the work? How literally do you really mean this? Because to me, processes are also interesting when a person takes responsibility, and says, "That's what I'm going to do or contribute now." And then it needs to be discussed, there are degrees of integrating the here and now, right? Could you elaborate on that?

MZ: When I talk about being in the here and now, I mean it always in a context of working in collaboration with someone. Listening to the people around me. What I meant is to basically be open to the influence that other people have on me. It's not about hearing a sound and putting it into my work just because it's happening here and now. Actually, for me, the concept is not even creating. It is more the concept of facilitating interactions between people.

EL: Do you think that those activities exclude each other? If I consider my own practice, I would say I really enjoy working very concentratedly on something on my own, but I cannot survive without an exchange phase, and then I want to pull back again and … rethink on my own before I go out again and maybe have a conversation with somebody else about issues I'm interested in. Do you think those phases exclude each other within your practice?

MZ: I would say my practice is relational, which means that it's based on the relationships I have with other human beings around me. It's also based on respect, and on listening, which is the basic element of communication. So, it's based, I would say, broadly on communication. For me, it's not about working with people to get inspiration, but to define a space and foster connections with and between other people. Not with a clear aim, not with the aim of producing something, not with the aim of claiming authorship. But, encouraging other people to take the same care that I am taking. To say, to take responsibility in those spaces.

EL: And is there a difference between this artistic activity and forming a living and working community of any sorts? I mean, you are part of these groups where group dynamics develop, which I think is also an interesting part of that whole undertaking. In groups of people, be it students or others, we all tend to take on roles. Roles, behaviours. I guess listening could be a way to challenge those roles.

MZ: I don't think the roles are necessarily bad. We don't want to be productive. In the communities I'm working with, it's not about being productive. And usually, roles are something that's very useful when you want to be productive, when you want to get work done. But I don't think roles are necessarily bad. In our projects we found a solution: to constantly switch roles. So, there is no boss, there is special person responsible for sending emails, there

is special person recording and documenting. Those roles constantly change among a defined, permeable group of people. So people come and go according to their free will, which is beautiful. Because it's completely unforced, and people take on tasks voluntarily.

EL: I think you are referring to the functionality of roles, like tasks. And that was not all that I meant. I think that we are deeply… Through our socialization, we sort of tend to take on specific behaviours or live specific behaviours within a group dynamic, and these are often difficult to overcome. And I don't mean that functionally, but let's say, there are people who are more outgoing, so they would contribute, on one level at least, a lot to a discussion. I think that handing round the microphone probably helps with dynamics like that. But I'm not only talking about functional roles, I think the human beings in these groups are so complex, and it seems as if you can't get out of the dynamic of certain people being more dominant, more empathetic or whatever. Because you said you would like to foster a space that enables everyone to be as caring as you are yourself. Maybe it's a bit provocative, but what about hubris?

MZ: What do you mean exactly?

EL: You're thinking you provide a possibility for everybody to be as caring as you are. You are creating a role model, which suggests to me that, first, everybody needs to be as caring. And I mean, not only that everybody needs to be caring, but also that everybody needs to be as caring as *you* are, which is different.

MZ: It's true, it's problematic what I said. Of course, I have my own wishes and my own expectations, and it's not good to have too many expectations when it comes to people, but I personally find it unavoidable. As soon as you are with someone, on a personal, romantic or professional level, you always have expectations. So, for me, the point is how to work with those expectations, always being open enough to engage in discussion, to listen to the needs and to try to understand. I think empathy plays a huge role.

EL: That's interesting. Maybe I'm on the wrong track, but it seems that within what you're formulating there's a dichotomy between you and the people. And I'm wondering ─ if you're the facilitator, does that mean you have a special role within this group?

MZ: It depends which group are we speaking about. For example, in the radiosuq group, I am the organizer. In the 1+1=3 paper group, the organization has now been taken over by the other two, but I'm still part of the group. So, here again, the roles are changing, and the spaces are taking on a life of their own. And for me, it's a sort process rather like when parents have to let go of their child.

EL: At first, when you tell me about your approach, it seems to be non-hierarchical. But when you introduce this notion of the family, there certainly is some kind of hierarchy involved. And I'm wondering, how do you see your own role? Maybe this is not something you wanted to talk about. To be open for the here and now, to be open to the group… This all sounds like flat hierarchies, but I wonder if there's a conflict here. The conflict between being an initiator, being a facilitator, and 'the people'.

MZ: That's one of the hardest points for me to answer. How do the others see me? Who am I in the group? What is my role? What do I want to do? One of my questions is also whether is it possible to flatten the hierarchies, and, most of all, is that something we really want? To be horizontal? Maybe it's good if there are some hierarchies. But in that case, I would say, we found a strategy through collectively experiencing those dynamics, where shifting hierarchies and dynamics of power within the group can really help to strengthen it. Not in the sense of fostering collective narcissism saying, "We are the cool ones. You are not." But more with the vibe of saying, "This is what we are doing. This is what we stand for. These are our names." We don't care if our names appear in our personal contributions, because we believe that our strength lies in the group and in our physical dispersion, in different cities in the world. And if someone is interested, they can join us, and we will be happy to have their influence in the group. Whatever that influence is. It's a sort of little utopia, I would say.

EL: That's the way I also understood it. But what is the role of the outcomes? I hesitate to call them products, but, you know, a radio programme or a magazine… Especially since you're saying you are so spread around the world, somehow a magazine is a very traditional outlet, or a very traditional medium. So, what do these media and the way they are conceived, conceptualized, designed, what kind of role do they play as such?

MZ: I would say that they are more excuses for us to be together. It's not about producing something, it's about the interactions.

EL: Why would you then need them in the end, if it's just an excuse to be together? Why not just be together?

MZ: Here we have to differentiate between the projects. In the case of the magazine, of course, there is also this very nice feeling that comes when you produce something, and you expose your thoughts to an audience. And this is a way to say to the world what we are thinking. The radio has the same mechanism. Someone who speaks and someone who hears, or hopefully listens. It's a way to communicate with audiences. In the case of hörraum, that is the new project that I'm following in my living room in Linz, we are not really producing anything. We meet every week to discuss.

So, I'm also trying to explore those different options. Do we really need an outcome, or do we just want to get together? We found that the outcome can be something that brings people together, a sort of common aim that we reach together through a collective effort. But definitely, it can work beautifully even where there is no tangible outcome, even if the only outcome is shared knowledge.

EL: Obviously the hörraum is already taking this exploration a step further, in this respect. Let's say, further not in the sense of progression, but in the sense of going in another direction.

MZ: Definitely. It's very difficult for me to explain those projects to our secondary audience, like you, people who are not in one of these groups. By the way, if you want to join, it's open. I've also been asking myself, "Do we really need to tell those things to other people?"

EL: Which things?

MZ: The participants already know what's going to happen, because we are part of it. We are taking decisions, we are taking responsibility for our projects. But do we really need to take those projects outside our safe environment?

EL: To even communicate it at all? Is that the question? Because this could be even more radical. If you're talking about a utopian scenario, you could then really go and be a community, sharing a physical or non-physical space, and making it then not only exclusive… it's not exclusive, because as you just said, you invite other people in. But hermetic, somehow. It's almost like a ritualistic kind of… Some religious communities work like that, in the end.

MZ: I would say the element of ritual is important. But it's interesting to hear your thoughts because actually, in the hörraum project, what we do every time is a tea ritual. And I don't think that happened by chance, in a space where we are not producing anything, there is a ritual involved. You know, I think there is this element of freeing ourselves from the need to produce and the need to justify, the need to evaluate. We don't care about evaluation. That's why I don't care about my thesis, if I have to be honest.

EL: I hope that statement will be included! Because that's what I get from what you're telling me. Which sounds quite like a big liberation, in a way. But another question. Do you see this whole project as a sort of spiritual undertaking?

MZ: I am personally not so spiritual in what I do. But I do believe that spirituality can be an answer. Or can be used as an element of resistance. Maybe a resistance to the current economic system that pushes us towards production, for example.

EL: Do you see it as a political project?

MZ: I definitely see it as a political act. I would say almost as activism. I always like to say that what I am trying to do, personally, with my artistic practice, is to engage in little efforts with other people towards a culture of empathy. To work on a very small scale, not to think big, not to say, "We want to change the world, right now." But to really start from the very specific, to start with two people, that is the minimum for a group, and meet, drink a coffee or a beer and really discuss, "What can we do now that we are two, now that we're not alone anymore?" And then other people join, this is a big need that we are discovering, especially after the experience of lockdown and the restrictions and the isolation. I would say Covid gave us a push, it was a big kick in the ass to do things, to move, to be active. Maybe other people think there are better solutions, but I would say, for me, working on a small scale, fostering very personal connections, caring about each other, exchanging ideas, thinking together, being in silence for twenty minutes in a room… This can change something.

EL: This now sounds to me as if we have come full circle in this conversation, there is not much to ask from my side. For me, it is really a pleasure to see how you have developed. I think you were in the second group of students when we started the art major. So, to me, it's quite interesting that you would say, "Hey, I was one of the first and I don't care at all what grade my thesis gets." I'm sympathetic to that because I sense that you might not be interested in the evaluation, but obviously you're very interested in the process that leads to it. You make this process your own. And this is all I, as your former teacher, could wish to happen.

MZ: Thank you! I'm definitely more interested in the people I'm working with. I'm not interested in a group of professors meeting and giving me a number from 0 to 110.

EL: That's pretty healthy, I guess.