

*on conclusions / how one feels about a process / artistic and personal growth /
who can judge an experience / companionship, guidance and honesty /
expectations / how to challenge the university system / appreciations*

with **Jianan Qu**
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*an ongoing collective exploration / learning from experiences of togetherness and uncertainty / reflecting on listening – with Jianan Qu, Matteo Zoccolo – 17 june 2021
matteozoccolo.net/on_listening/conversations.html*

JQ: What if I ask you a question, you answer, then you throw me any question?

MZ: Alright!

JQ: How do you feel about your project, today? Yeah, you've been through a lot of things and you come through a lot of discussions with me, Italo and different friends. You also had confusions and ups and downs. How do you feel about it?

MZ: I guess I gained a sort of confidence with it, which I didn't have in the beginning.

JQ: Confidence in yourself or the project?

MZ: I would say both. At the beginning, I took this project as a sort of provocation to the system of evaluating young artists through shitty parameters based on grades. And I took it as a sort of challenge to the system in saying, "Well, I am asked to write a thesis, I will not write it. I will gather 50 people who will put ideas that will constitute my thesis." This was the main idea at the beginning. Right now, I would say, it actually works. It is actually interesting for me, and I actually learned many things speaking with those 50 people. I ask myself, "Is that so important that this work came from the context of a bachelor thesis, or is it something I want to continue afterwards?" I guess the answer is yes. I want to continue this work because I am learning every day from people. And why not, also teaching something to people. I feel I want to keep this exchange alive and I want to make it available for people who are not participating first hand, to be able to read it and reflect on it, when possible to encourage dropping me an email and giving me feedback, or participating in the next conversations. It's an inclusive exploration. You know. I feel good about this work, I feel like it's bringing something new. I think it will be criticized by many who are maybe not very used to...

JQ: Don't be too sure.

MZ: I mean, I can imagine some people...

JQ: Nah, you think too much. I'm only interested in you, not in what you think of others.

MZ: True. So, I feel good about it. I feel like I'm learning, and that's good.

JQ: Perfect. Drop me a question.

MZ: Same question but reversed: how did you feel following this project?

JQ: I don't know if I am able to say that I was following it. I was observing it to some degree, that's for sure.

Following it... I don't know, I was not following it from the beginning until the moment you approached me. How do I feel about it?

I feel... I think when an artist arrives at a certain age, with a certain amount of experience, the experience plays an important role – it sets the limitation of the artist.

With your project, I feel like you don't really know what you want exactly. You don't have much experience in this kind of project, so you can do it in a safe or a smart way. Maybe you do it in a 'stupid' or 'inefficient' way. It can be cool to say, "Well, I don't want my project to be efficient." But my question is, "If you want to be efficient, are you able to?"

For me, that's a valuable experience, full of passion, full of confusion and full of surprise, a treasure.

MZ: Sweet.

JQ: Actually, in some cases, you are not in control. You just decided to create the three spaces and jump into them. You experience what you experience. I find that beautiful. Maybe there is a judgment in the presentation for your thesis. But who is in a position to judge your experience?

MZ: I agree.

JQ: On one hand, I feel I'm very subjective, I'm speaking my mind with you. If there's something I like or don't like, I'm quite straightforward. I also told you, "I'm not confident about this," with the hope that I don't hurt anyone. And on the other hand I'm neutral, being there and being who I am next to you, looking at what you do. And you do it!

MZ: This is a beautiful gift. It actually always felt you being a sort of companion, someone who's next to, giving some inputs, ideas, advice or opinions, but always saying, "Well, it's your project and it's your life. You do what you feel like."

JQ: Nobody's in the position to judge the experience you are experiencing. Nobody.

MZ: This is something very special, no? In arts, you usually have these criteria and judgments, you often feel like in a competition. You always feel like there is an external eye looking at you, and saying, "OK, this is relevant. This is not relevant for your success." What I felt with you, has always been a very chill guidance, or companionship. Like walking together somewhere. We still don't know where, but we can define it. And this made me feel not alone, somehow.

JQ: Thank you. I don't know if there was any guidance. It may appear to be, but it was not my intention. I don't think I am in a position to guide anyone, I'm also a rather young artist. For me, it's important to be honest, so that I can be

who I am. Otherwise, if I'm playing a role with you, a performance, then who am I?

I don't think a reader or mentor has to be involved in a project in a way that it has to be good in their eyes. I don't think so. I'm generally against the professor who goes too professional, "Oh, art is so open, and everything's art! I cannot say if it's good or bad, but I will give you some references, bla bla bla..." I am not for that kind of guidance. I'm trying to help you analyze the project. I share my mind.

MZ: I guess that's what I need!

JQ: Let me ask you a question.

MZ: Please.

JQ: What were you expecting, having two mentors supporting your project? Were you searching for psychological support or for practical, artistic and technical support? Or it's just because the system asked you to get somebody, you did what you've been told?

MZ: I guess I was expecting to learn something as a sort of extension of my study period. So, the plan was to have another six months after my studies, when I could be in contact with two people I estimate and learn something from them, in a very specific way. This is one thing that I was expecting.

JQ: Really? Are you honest?

MZ: Sure. It's not like in Austria, in Italy we pay for university! Then, another thing I was expecting when I started, which is not necessarily what I still think now, is that those two professors would kind of get me access to something in the future. I tried to make a good impression so that I could know better two established artists, which can be a starting point for something else.

And another thing I was expecting was to have the freedom of doing what I wanted to do, to experience what I wanted to experience without too much judgment, but still having two companions that could follow me in this journey and teach me something, discussing ideas with me and making them part of the process.

And I guess my expectations were fulfilled. I'm surprised, especially because most of the time, in life, it doesn't work when you have expectations. But this time I have to say I'm very happy with my choice. And I'm very happy that I met you, especially because it was a surprise.

JQ: It was a coincidence that we met.

MZ: And again, question back: What were your expectations?

JQ: Nothing!

MZ: Lie!

JQ: Oh shit, Nothing! I'm not lying. What do I expect? I got a call from a friend of a student of mine, saying, "Can you be my supervisor?" On the phone the project was poorly explained, and the mobile connection was really bad too. You sent me a manifesto and dozens of questions. I had no idea what you wanted.

MZ: Me neither, actually.

JQ: So, did I expect something exciting or amazing? Not at all. I just thought, "This doesn't happen every day." I was rather curious, it's not about what I expected...

MZ: Wait, it's your turn for the question. Let's get emotional.

JQ: Yeah, OK. Let's get emotional. Can you finally get your presentation straight? It's a yes or no question.

MZ: Thank you for the emotional question.

JQ: Welcome. I mean, a presentation that follows a very clear logic and explains it to people who don't know about your project, and perhaps they are not even interested in your project. Can you do a fucking good and clear presentation, can you really try your best?
You can say no.

MZ: I can answer, "Yes, I will." Because I'm a good guy and I want to fulfill the expectations of my supervisor Jianan and my professors who are going to evaluate me in this thesis project. But at the same time, the revolutionary Matteo is thinking, "Let's fuck it up." Let's be 20 min in silence as a provocation.

JQ: I don't think that's revolutionary if you bring 20 min of silence. It's just silence, wasted.

MZ: I agree... Actually, I was kidding. I know you care about the way I defend myself, and I think I will do my best. I will structure this speech by trying to find a way to include the people I was working with. Because what I'm doing it's not really to get credits or recognition from an institution. I'm not waiting for my professors to give me a nice grade and say, "Now you are a good artist, ready for your career." My goal is rather to...

JQ: Can I interrupt you shortly? To me, you're always making a strange relation between the examination system of your university and your way of doing the presentation. But they are two different topics: you are standing behind your project doing the presentation, which has very little to do with how others want to examine you.

MZ: But the very point of what I am trying to say with

my project is not that I want to defend my artwork trying to convince the commission that it's cool, and eventually going against them because I'm actually not happy about their criteria. My whole research is based on a sort of twisting of all this structure. So, for me, it makes sense to use the exam as an opportunity to twist it in another context, to challenge it a bit more. Actually, I'm using my thesis as an opportunity to give space to people, which is also what I am generally doing in my artistic practice. It makes a lot of sense that many people contribute to my thesis and that I actually write very little of it, which is already challenging a structure that gives value to individuality and separation.

JQ: Alright.

MZ: I have to take my grades, there is an anti-plagiarism check, I should not copy, bla bla bla. My ideas go completely against the concept of plagiarism, for example. Completely against the concept of a lonely author who is a genius, has the idea and takes the credits. I will do my presentation, sure, I will do my book and I will try to fit this system, somehow. I don't want to be revolutionary for the sake of being revolutionary. But, if I can imagine a bigger picture in my head, it's to challenge these systems. And for me, this thesis is a starting point, a little example of a structure that I don't agree with, and that therefore I try to challenge. And I know it may be seen as a non-constructive provocation.

JQ: I just don't think that is provoking enough, in fact.

MZ: Maybe.

JQ: If you really want to challenge the existing systems within your university, then I would say you have to work a lot more. Otherwise, it's better to focus on what you want with the project, let the presentation be a presentation. You know, if you want to achieve several goals at the same time, it's rather difficult.
And what I'm scared of is that, if you have so many goals to achieve, what if you don't achieve any of them? I think you're doing interesting projects, but for me, using these projects as evidence to challenge the system... They are just not the best examples.

MZ: Um...

JQ: Sure, you involve more people, the ownership of the project is collective. But is only that a challenge? Or is having a 20 min silence in a presentation a challenge? I don't think it will really shake the base of the system.

MZ: Alright.

JQ: I'm actually hoping you will create a responsible discussion about your project, which you gave a lot to. I think there are a lot of things we can talk about, as it's a

rich project. The juries are also your audience and potential collaborators. Don't take their masks too seriously. I don't know how much you know about them, probably they're just undercover.

I would just say, do a good presentation of your project, and we will see what happens.

We will see. We'll see.

MZ: I agree.

JQ: Let's see what will happen. I don't know. Ask me a question!

MZ: What did you learn from this, if you learned something?

JQ: What did I learn from this? I mean, it depends on what's learning. I am not sure. I can't really name it. I think it gave me a valuable experience, and I'm thankful I was given a lot of space to be myself.

I don't know if I learned anything, I'm sorry, maybe it is disappointing.

MZ: Not at all.

JQ: If your question was "what did you see in this project?" Then I have something more to say. What did I see? I think I've seen freedom; I have seen almost no limitation but a lot of confusion; I have seen fragility but also bravery; I have seen naivety and also maturity; I've seen a process of sinking and doubting about your goal, about the way to get things done, how to motivate people to do things together. I've seen a lot of things.

[hug]