

on improvisation / loud pause / a twisted practice

with **Chris Haring**
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*an ongoing collective exploration / learning from experiences of togetherness and uncertainty / reflecting on listening – with Chris Haring, Matteo Zoccolo – 20 may 2021
matteozoccolo.net/on_listening/conversations.html*

CH: What's that? You have a nice background there!

MZ: Yeah, it's very mystical. It's my official video call background. I put it because the rest of the room is so messy that it's better you don't see that.

CH: Oh, are you at home?

MZ: Yes, I'm in Linz. Are you also in Austria?

CH: Yes, I'm in Vienna! This is our rehearsal space. So, what's up?

MZ: So, I thought it would be very interesting for me to have a very small talk with you. I don't like to call it an interview. Let's do it like this: we can decide together if it's going to be an interview, and then I prepare a few questions on Liquid Loft and you, or we can decide to go with the flow and see where we go.

CH: Are you recording?

MZ: Yes, just the audio.

CH: Alright. So, let's have a conversation.

MZ: That's perfect. I thought it would be very interesting to exchange some thoughts about listening.

CH: Right. Now, most of the time, we work a lot with sound environments. Our composer and musician Andreas Berger is always here for the rehearsals. So, that means that listening, creating an atmosphere, is always a part of our work. Most of the time, we listen to the dancers during improvisations, rather than watching. Everybody has its own, different rhythm, which I understand better if I listen. In the company we often try to create something through the method of listening. Listening is this moment of time break, it's like when you grab something, when you try to grab the moment, and adjust, before you continue.

MZ: So, would you say that listening is a sort of tool that you use when you create a piece?

CH: Yeah, I think so.

MZ: And how do you relate the element of listening with the element of improvisation?

CH: Oh, well, as I said before, most of the time people are more listening towards each other than speaking, talking or dancing. An improvisation is mostly reaction, more reaction than action itself. Of course, it needs a beginning tool, something like... Anything, it can be, anything, it's a concentration point. And then from this moment on, the rest is listening. How do you listen?

MZ: How do I listen?

CH: Do you listen to the words? How do you receive if people...?

MZ: How do I listen? First of all, I try to be fully aware of what's coming, and then I think it's also important to react, as you said. It's not nice to be apathetic. It's important to react to who's speaking or who is creating a sound, in a way that the person is aware that I am listening. And this applies also to music. For example, jam sessions. It's the same concept but with musical instruments. But what would be interesting for me is to relate it to the body, and this is something I don't have so much. I'm not used to working and dealing with the body, my body or other people's bodies. And I'm sure you are way more than me. So, I wanted to ask, how can you listen with a body? What happens if we bring the concept of listening, and we don't only relate it to hearing anymore?

CH: Well, we cannot all speak together, but we can all listen together. You know what I mean? I think most of the time you're listening and not speaking. So, you're more a receiver than a sender. And the other thing is, for example, if you work as a visual artist, it's often about the pause. A freeze of a movement on stage can be a very cheap pause, then the dancer looks like a marionette or a puppet, but it can be performed like a breaking down of time. And that is a listening moment. It's not just 'stop and freeze', it's rather 'hold it and listen', before it continues. And this creates a moment in which everybody, the spectators as well as the performers, are suddenly in an acoustic space. If we talk about listening, then we talk about an acoustic space, more than a visual space. And this is basically what visual artists can learn from music, from this musical parameter.

MZ: So, what is listening on stage?

CH: For me, it's more like a pause in music. A pause is not nothing. A pause entails the end of something and the beginning of something else. It's in between. This is the corner in which I would put the idea of listening.

MZ: Is it also related to silence? If it exists.

CH: Yeah, what do you mean if it exists?

MZ: I ask myself that because we were doing an exercise with some people in a project that we are doing, we call it hörraum. We stayed in silence for 15 minutes or 20, and in the end we wrote down our thoughts. We found out that it was very difficult to be silent, the body was continuously making noises, the breathing, the stomach... We found out that silence is much more than just avoiding speaking, it's a sort of passivity in which you don't act, but at the same time is also an activity because you are fully aware of what's happening around you, and you can listen properly.

So, yes, that's what we were finding out together.

CH: It depends, silence can be very loud. If just silence is left, the body often doesn't understand what it is. Silence can take over, and then it can be very loud. It's like if you make a room from black to white. Suddenly, white can be very loud. The funny thing is that I had an ear problem recently. They say it comes from stress, it was a kind of tinnitus. And at that moment, you have a sound in your ear, and it's erasing other sounds. It's kind of a white noise. Mostly it comes from the neck if the body is under stress. They don't know what kind of sound it produces, they cannot measure it. You just have to believe the person who hears it. And I think that's a very interesting idea of listening, what the body does with itself, giving you a sound that doesn't exist. You know what I mean? It has nothing to do with listening, but you have to listen to it because it's there. And, on the other side, it also covers some soft sounds that do exist. This is an interesting kind of listening.

MZ: Yeah. I'm sorry for your problem...

CH: It's getting better! So, what is your research?

MZ: So, I am exploring this element of listening when applied to a group of people. Listening as a sort of social activity. And I was wondering if it's possible to listen when there is only you, or if listening is something that happens in between two people. Listening more as an ingredient for empathy.

CH: Absolutely. It's all there. I mean, you just give it an abstract word, basically. You know, some people talk about energy, some other ones talk about sensibility, and others might use technical terms like 'time' or 'shared space'. It's nice what you say, two people listen to each other and in between, they speak. So, basically you turn it in the opposite direction. You're doing video, right?

MZ: No, no, no. I was making the video of the performance at Bruckner Uni because I know how to use a camera...

CH: So, you go for music now.

MZ: Not really.

CH: What catches you the most? If you're interested in the topic of listening, and I see you have this 'mantra' there in the background...

MZ: I know, nothing to do with what I do!

CH: Are you more the visual or acoustic type?

MZ: I would say it's more acoustic for me. Since I lived in Jerusalem for some time, I have to say I don't take pictures

anymore. So, I kind of have this rejection for visuals, unless, you know, if it's something like a job I can do it. But in my artistic practice I don't use visuals anymore. Right now, what I'm trying to do is to create more or less physical spaces or opportunities for people to meet and to do stuff together. So, this is my artistic research. And I think you can define it with the term 'relational art' or 'community-based art', let's say. So, I'm organizing opportunities for people to engage in conversation, to mutually learn from each other. And I am also inside those groups, but I'm more like taking care of the connections between the people and the organization of the space. And I'm working on my thesis, which is basically a collection of chats that I have with different people like you. I want it to be another space for this kind of reflection, actually.

CH: When is the project finished?

MZ: It will never be finished.

CH: What's the motivation behind it?

MZ: I like to work with people. All this lockdown time made me really go into the direction of working with people.

CH: And you spoke about the book, as far as I understood. In the end you write down the conversations, so that it becomes a solid, practical thing.

MZ: It's a bit counterintuitive to have this kind of endless research in the form of a finished book. But I think it's a good tension to keep. To say, "Until now, that's the point in which we arrived, and in the future will probably make other books." I consider this just a starting point, let's say. I'm collecting ideas and thoughts and working with people on three different projects. One is a magazine, one is a radio and one is a room.

CH: And what's your background? If you say you left the visuals back like in Jerusalem?

MZ: In my previous life I was a photographer and visual artist. I was doing installations.

CH: Alright, is this something that you say like, "OK, now I need to take a step further?" Were you listening to yourself?

MZ: Yeah, exactly. Now I'm twisting it upside-down. Instead of producing, I prefer to enable a space in which people can be productive. It becomes a bit complicated when you want to produce a documentation of those processes, because I don't really want to create anything, you know. I just want to listen. That's what I want to do.

CH: Would you do me a favor if I ask you something?

Would you send me a little 1-minute video?

MZ: A video?

CH: Yeah, as a postcard, so to say. Without any pressure, just like with the idea of what else can be choreography, for example. Can be everything, it doesn't matter if you're in it or not. What else could be choreography?

MZ: Alright.

CH: Because you changed your profession, you swapped over from this visual idea of thinking into an acoustic way of thinking, but now you say that you put it down in a book, which means that the words are written. So, they are not even spoken anymore.

MZ: But they are spoken in the mind of the people. It's still about hearing, I think.

CH: Yeah, but they have to read it. So, that could be interesting. Doesn't have to be anything big. I just ask people to send 'Minute Mades'. And this is an interesting point of view that you say, what you see. Or what you hear.

MZ: I'll do it right after this call!

CH: Great, thank you!