on the freedom of being heard in pandemic times / social media dynamics / space and place / problematizing participation / small scale democracy / post-opinion exchange / friction and common aim / time to think together / the unexpected outsider / inclusivity

with **Maximilian Pellizzari, Isabel Solveigh Artschwager, Chiara Duchi**
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MZ: Who wants to start?

MP: Thanks to Matteo, we are sitting here in front of Museion, in Bolzano, and we will talk about a topic that Solveigh proposed to us. She would like to speak about freedom and the Coronavirus, the notion of freedom in this pandemic situation. We think this might be a very interesting topic. I will give the recorder to Solveigh so that she can introduce her special interest in this topic.

ISA: So, first of all, the overall topic is propaganda. And then I started reading a really interesting text about one-dimensional language. There are words which have a strong symbolic power, for example freedom, democracy, peace and so on. I think right now the topic of freedom is a really important theme, especially through the past one and a half years. And yeah, I started doing different interviews with different people, and research. I learned that there are a lot of different concepts of freedom. First, there is collective freedom, I would name it. It is when we live in a democracy, where we all live together in one freedom in which we depend on each other. And second, we have the inner freedom, which is how you get free in yourself and how you can freely live. In the past, I read about a lot of Greek and Indian philosophers, who often spoke about distancing yourself from material things and to meditate. That was my background. And now I started doing interviews. That was quite interesting because I asked people, "How did your freedom change? How did you live your new freedom through the pandemic?" It was really controversial, I would say. When I talk to students or professors, it is not a problem to get in a conversation with them. It seems they didn't have such a hard time during the lockdown, they could handle the situation. And then I tried to speak with people who come from other environments, for example who worked in restaurants, security guards or secretaries. I wasn't able to speak to anyone, nobody wanted to talk with me about this topic, except for one person. After five minutes he was super nervous, and after we spoke a few more sentences, he just said, "I can't do it anymore." And he left. That was a really important experience for me. Now I'm on this path where I really want to concentrate on the people who have the feeling they can't speak in the open space.

MZ: I think it's super interesting what you're speaking about, and I am very interested in the distinction you made between this collective freedom and the inner freedom. And I think, what you said about the people who didn't want to speak to you, it's also very pointing. My question would be: "What about the freedom of being heard?" Because we usually speak about freedom of speech. Usually freedom is something that lies on the side of acts, who says something. But we rarely think about the freedom of being heard and the freedom to listen. Do we all have the freedom to listen? Do we all have the freedom of being heard? And how does it change in pandemic times?

ISA: I think this concept of freedom of being heard is so powerful. You know, the people who scream the loudest, even if they are not the highest numbers, they get the most attention. We really have to figure out how we give people a room and a safe space to be able to talk when they're so anxious. We need to give them the freedom to be heard.

MP: I think that this is a fascinating topic. Probably, many people at the moment are struggling to find, as you said, safe spaces to express themselves, but at the same time, a safe space where they can be heard and understood by other people. I'm thinking about the environments that Matteo is creating in Linz and also in online spaces, which are now the spaces that have been most used during the pandemic. It's a very important task to create a space where people can really enter a dialogic situation within each other. And yeah, it's something that often is missing in our social context. And also, social media and other social spaces online are pretty individualistic. I have the feeling that they function more to provide incomplete freedom of expression. Then an individual is supposed to post some content, but it's not something that is directed into a discourse, but everyone creates his own image and his own discourse, and then other people can just react. Somehow, it entails a power structure in which there is who speaks and who reacts. It would be more useful if everyone could speak or interact on the same level and in the same space. That would be more engaging for everyone in a process of exchange, in a space in which everyone can interact.

ISA: Good point you had about the Internet. The fact that to a certain extent is anonymous, gives really a safe space for a lot of people. It can be a positive thing, but it has drawbacks. And maybe that is a good starting point to think about figuring out a safe space for people, which could provide anonymity at the beginning, so that they can really freely speak and be open without feeling judged. That is also an important thing I learned, that judgments take freedom from a lot of people, who are really anxious about them. And the Internet partially takes it away, your person is not judged because you are not visible, maybe.

MZ: From speaking about freedom, we ended up speaking about space. And in my opinion, this is a crucial point. Essentially, space is defining those dynamics. The setting, the context, the trust you can build in a space… And space, of course, it's not only physical. But really, for me, everything starts with space. And this is, I would say, also a part of my research on listening, because the space can make people feel, as you said, not judged. And a space can make people feel they can be themselves. Space brings communities together. I mean, it could also happen that a community finds a space. If we are a group of friends, we can decide to meet in the park, in the museum, in the school… And we are still the same group of friends, you know, it's not about space. But space for me is something that goes beyond the place. It's an opportunity to exchange.

For months, I have been co-creating all these little utopias, these little spaces in which not more than 10 or 20 people meet at the time. It works on a small scale, but when you go on the level of democracy, on the level of state and establishment, you will lose all this. You will lose that personal connection that brings people together in a so-called space. So, I ask myself, are these efforts actually useful, or do they stay as little utopias, little happy islands that nobody knows? What changes in the end? I'm a bit hopeless, I have to say… But maybe not.

MP: I remember one text we were reading in our sociology class. That was by Nigel Thrift, 'Space: The Fundamental Stuff of Human Geography'. He was speaking about space and place. The difference is that 'space' is a more general and abstract term, while 'place' comes with embodiment. I am also thinking of this WhatsApp group (that Matteo created) where people are sending sounds, where everyone is interacting on the same basis, with the same medium. And I think it's very useful. It's what we were actually speaking about before, how to find a common-level exchange between people. These spaces that you used are actually only functioning through participation, with embodiment. Not necessarily a physical embodiment, but they need the presence of more than one person. So, in this way, there is an exchange. I wouldn't just say that they are spaces, but maybe are some places where people can interact more than once. They're places which establish themselves. This WhatsApp group is like a house that you built, and after time someone can get into it to talk and listen. Then someone else comes without any bound to the physical presence at that moment. So, that's for sure an opportunity to have a dialogue that can continue in time and for years, who knows. I have the feeling that maybe you see these projects as utopias because they are not completely useful at the moment, or because it's not sure what's the final aim. But through this exchange, I believe that some sort of enrichment of everyone can happen. And it can also be a personal thing, it's like perceiving an artwork. Everyone has a different experience and reaction. So, in these environments that you create, something which goes also beyond these places can happen. And so, people can meet after some years and something else which was not in your initial idea can develop, and you cannot control it. This is for sure something that goes exactly in this dimension of participation, without instrumentalizing participation, where someone is only invited to participate to show that you are doing something participatory.

MZ: Yes. I cannot really digest those participatory projects that are in a way interactive, but don't take care of the people who interact. It's basically using people for your own project. As you said, there is an embodiment of space in place, in which a sense of belonging is involved. And when you have a sense of belonging, through the free will of the people who are in that place, responsibility comes. And it's not easy for an artist to give up the responsibility. Artists

are those people who really care about authorship and their own decisions and agency. And I'm struggling with it too. Of course, Bibi and I created a magazine, and now this magazine is not in our hands anymore. It's organized by two other people. And none of the people who initiated the project has now the control of the thing. And this is a beautiful experience that taught me to work with people, and not because you need people. Then things change and get out of control, because everybody is different. Everybody has their own needs, wishes, expectations and energies. And when those energies join together, then something really beautiful happens. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, all this happens on a small scale. It's already so difficult on a small scale that I cannot even imagine something like this happening on a big scale. And maybe it's not even important. Are small drops in the ocean enough?

ISA: I think it's really important that it happens on a big scale. Also when I had the interviews, a lot of people said that there is not enough transparency and communication between the states, the people and the different groups. So, I think it's really important to build up spaces for that. I don't know how to really develop it, but I think we should really request it from politicians. It's a democracy, right? Democracy should live through hearing opinions from people.

MP: Yeah, it should definitely work like that but in the end, it's really difficult. As Matteo said, if the system is too democratic, you're losing control and also vulnerability comes. If some people have to make decisions for other people, it's for sure not easy to accommodate all the interests that are present at the same time. But yeah, I also don't have the perfect solution for that. For sure, inclusion is a very important aspect in a participatory dimension. At the same time, I'm not sure about the role of moderation. Do we need moderation? Do we need some guidelines? Are we free to write the rules of the game in the beginning? Because otherwise, we wouldn't even begin to create self-defined space. In this regard, everyone can interact and re-define the whole thing. We can also try to program small-scale environments that can change in time and with people, through dialogue and participation. I strongly believe that this is something we need in society. As you said, Solveigh, we should create some place where also an opinion, a personal and political opinion, can form. We are in a post-truth scenario, right? In my opinion, this post-truth became post-opinion. Because we have so many truths and no truth anymore. So, we also have no opinion because people are not speaking any more about politics with each other. Because politics seems like something abstract that comes from above, but actually politics is what represents us, it should be our imagination and our idea of how we want to live together. So, I think that the core thing that we have to do is to actually create spaces that can really help people to build their own opinion through exchange.

ISA: I think this way of talking about exchange and listening really works. In my childhood, when we were sitting in talking circles, the person who had the balls was allowed to speak. We learned how to listen and speak, and maybe we lost it as adults. Maybe that would be an interesting way to start a discussion again, really listening and learning from each other. OK, everybody wants to get their opinion away and forgets to listen to what the other people tell them. And if you have this microphone or ball in your hands, you really need to listen and connect to what the others are saying.

MZ: Yeah, you said it. Learning from each other is the point. Everybody is learning from and teaching to others, always. And when you are aware of it, then you can really have an opinion. And vulnerability, as you Max said, is something beautiful. When you listen, you are in a position of vulnerability.

MP: You're absorbing. And my words are against your will, sometimes.

MZ: Exactly. Not always what you're listening to pleases you. Sometimes you listen to something you don't want to listen to. And here comes the hard part of listening.

MP: Active listening.

MZ: Exactly. Listening as a tool for communication, mutual learning and togetherness.

ISA: Just a project popped in my mind. It was years ago, they just let people sign up for this talk-round through a questionnaire. And then you were matched with people who had different opinions. They really created an environment where different opinions are shared and discussed. Maybe this should be done more often as well. Speed-dating with discussions and opinions.

MP: What is the English for 'attrito'?

MZ: Grip?

MP: No, I'm pretty sure… Friction! Friction. So, when there are different opinions, there is friction. To have friction is like to heat up something, and also to be in a position of discomfort. And in this friction, people can actually get closer to each other's identity without losing their own. And that's how exchange happens. I had an image in mind before, which is kind of strange, but maybe can represent this concept. Two people with different opinions are talking close to a tree, each one holding one handle of the same saw. When they exchange ideas, they pull the saw in opposite directions and in the end the tree falls down. Yeah. And the two people hear the tree falling.

MZ: So, thinking of this image of the saw, I guess what we need is a common aim. Do you think the two people knew

that their common goal was to cut the tree?

MP: Not at all! They didn't, because they were convinced about their own ideas. And in the end, what happens is that… Maybe you don't realize this thing at the end of the speech. But with time, if you are confronted with different opinions, you really grow and develop your self, your own identity. We cannot be convinced of our own ideas forever. We have to confront ourselves and change positions according to changes. Everything is changing. We have to adapt ourselves to changing systems and realities.

ISA: Personally, I never learned how to discuss. It's really difficult to discuss for me, I don't know, I say something and maybe I don't get a point, or I'm just, you know, wandering around. And I don't know how it was for you in school, but I never learned how to discuss. It's really missing. There's such a weakness in this, in our society. That's my opinion, of course. And I'm glad we're doing it right now because that's how I learn and how I figure out what my opinion is. I just noticed in the last year how powerful it is. Yeah.

MP: Speaking about this very discussion, and about learning how to discuss, I think that this opportunity that Matteo created now is really stimulating. We really have to listen carefully and then say something when we have the microphone in our hands. And maybe I'm just repeating something that we already know, but I really have the feeling that we are learning something that was already in ourselves but we did not express before. It's a system of exchange in which everyone is speaking at one time and if one has a strong thing to say, they have to adapt to this system and wait. Maybe on another occasion, you would react immediately to what someone else is saying. But here you have to wait a bit more and let your thoughts grow inside you. We are building something that then grows as we are carrying the discourse.

ISA: What I also noticed myself, but also with other people, is that you speak immediately because our society is so fast, you need to think fast.

MP: But you're not speaking anymore.

ISA: Yeah, if you need to react immediately, you say something that's maybe not even your point or opinion. We should get slower and really take time. We need to give people not only the non-judgmental space to freely express their opinions, but also time to think. This goes hand in hand.

MZ: Time to think together. Because thinking is something, but thinking together is… What is thinking together? What is thinking together, what does it mean?

ISA: Maybe doing an art project together, when you are in

that situation in which everybody has different skills, and you really learn to relate to them, always sharing progress. It's not only yours, it's ours. So, to include people through listening and thinking together. Especially in art, it's not so abstract anymore because you don't only talk, but you also see something which makes it easier in the beginning. To develop the skills of thinking together and sharing opinions.

MP: What is to think together? But also, what does it mean to make something together? I'm really interested in this topic of participation. There is a book that I have never read, which might be interesting or total crap. I really don't know. But it's called 'The Nightmare of Participation', by Markus Miessen. I don't know about this book, we have to figure it out! But what I understood is that it reflects on how normally participation is carried. So, invited people are in this participatory position in which they have to participate in that system, somehow. In the end, they are participants and they are acting as participants. But what this book is calling for, is the dissident, dissident outsider, the outsider that comes into the system without being invited at all, and that revolutionizes the whole participatory system. Something which was not predictable before happens. Also predictability, in a system which is defined at the beginning, is somehow defined by the system itself. How the system can change is part of the system itself. And to completely change this relationality which was created in the beginning, something has to unexpectedly come from the sky or from the outside.

MZ: The migrant body is unexpected, for example. It is an outsider, an unknown person. The stranger is always an outsider. It's always an interruption of a system. It's someone who made a change that was not foreseen by the system itself, and I believe it's there that lies the power of people traveling.

ISA: But what I noticed a lot, especially discussing with older generations, is that they're afraid of change, and afraid of their unknown. People are afraid of the unknown. And maybe we need to figure out how we can get this anxiousness out of the people, so that they can be more open to different cultures and thoughts.

MZ: I believe this openness that you are talking about doesn't happen when, as Max said, there is the concept of participation being involved. Maybe the concept of participation itself is a problematic one. Why do we need to call it participation? Who participates is a participant, but why do we need to give roles to people? "I am the organizer, you are the founder, and some people from the streets are participating." Are they really participating? When it's happening naturally, by the free will of the people, then it's participation. But then there is no need to give it a name! Especially in the art world, participation is highly commodified. It's something that artists are seeking for,

because it's cool to make a project in which people participate. You want art to reach people, you want people to get 'engaged'. But this very wanting people to do something is problematic.

MP: Yeah, but you can still invite people. For example, you invited me to take part in the 1+1=3 paper and I didn't have the time until now, but I liked it. Yeah, maybe I can participate somehow, some time. But yeah, to give someone the freedom to participate it's not bad at all, actually. A strategy could be to open it to everyone. If everyone can participate, then nobody is labelled as a participant, everyone is a subject, a subject that wants to take part in a collective journey and learn something. So, in the end it is still participatory, but if it is open to everyone, it's not so problematic, maybe.

MZ: I agree. And I would say, the freedom of accepting the unknown is crucial. Accepting the stranger that comes into the group, not because they were invited, but because, by their own free will, they consciously decided to join. That's why inclusivity it's an important element.

ISA: But especially with inclusivity… I have the feeling that sometimes, when there are two groups that really don't come together, to force them to enter in exchange may be a really tough thing to do, but it can be extremely enriching. Maybe sometimes you have to force it. To bring two groups together, to get more understanding, to have their participation with which everyone can grow and learn together, changing their mindset.

MZ: I think this is a very 'social design' approach, a sort of problem-solving approach… Oh, sorry, Chiara is calling me.

MP: Give her the mic!

MZ: Chiara?

CD: Matte, dove sei?

MZ: Can you speak in English now?

CD: Yeah, sure.

MZ: What is participation?

CD: Ok, the first thing that comes to mind is to take part in something. Feeling included in something. Actively taking part in something. Where are you, Matteo?

MZ: We are in Museion, having a very interesting conversation with Solveigh and Max.

CD: Maybe we can come there in a while.

MZ: Join, please. We are waiting for you!

CD: Cool, see you soon!