

*on listening institutions / generations to engage / information technology and agency /
ownership over data and spaces / traces of participation / an ethics of practice /
redefining the idea of expertise / museums towards social transformation*

with **Bart van der Heide**
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*an ongoing collective exploration / learning from experiences of togetherness and uncertainty / reflecting on listening – with Bart van der Heide, Matteo Zoccolo – 29 June 2021
matteozoccolo.net/on_listening/conversations.html*

BVDH: So, would you like to start?

MZ: You said you have a question!

BVDH: Oh, yes. Well, the thing is... You're 25 years old, right?

MZ: 22 actually.

BVDH: So, for an institution, you belong to one of the most difficult generations to engage, to grasp. And when you try to read into that target group, you discover that listening is not very much the main priority of that generation. It's more about creating an agency. It's about having agency and getting this freedom to have an impact. How would you describe the role of listening and traces in relation to your generation?

MZ: That's a tough one. Um... So, I can only speak from my perspective, of course, which is from within an art environment. I believe it's very different if you ask people back in my Italian village. I think that my generation is undergoing a sort of change. I mean, this is probably what every generation believed in their 20s, yeah, I don't think it's anything new. But I do think it's very interesting what's happening now, especially in this sort of post-pandemic scenario, after two years of experiencing similar restrictions and fears. And people my age, who were especially limited in the social sphere, found in the digital an alternative to exercise their agency. I don't know what remains, which traces we are leaving, but I believe when this agency comes out from my generation, it's more visible than before, in a way.

BVDH: Um...

MZ: I mean, everybody has agencies. I'm also thinking of all the protest movements, especially connected to the Palestinian struggle, which I follow since I was living in Jerusalem, but also in America and Europe, of course. I don't know, it seems like something is changing, but, as I said, probably every generation throughout all the history of mankind experienced this feeling when they were between 20 and 30 years old. Concerning listening, I would need some more time to think about it...

BVDH: Yeah. Your generation is also very much influenced by information technology, you're a digital native. I don't want to completely generalize a whole generation, but the digital, information technology and the Internet had a huge impact on listening. The emphasis is more on sending, on the constant visibility of the self and less about the traces you leave behind.

MZ: I don't know if I agree, actually.

BVDH: No? That's how it's described, the impact of

information technology on how we operate as humans on the Internet, and what kind of impact it has. How would you describe it?

MZ: I don't know. I suspect this sort of discourse is a bit to update now.

BVDH: Yes.

MZ: I mean, if you go on social media and on the Web, of course, you have emphasis on sending, but what if you see it as a commodity? Then receiving plays a big role. I'm saying that listening plays a role in online environments too. That's what we experienced during the pandemic, what do you think?

BVDH: In one way.

MZ: I mean, listening not only as receiving...

BVDH: Well, in the economy of social media, which is only one part of information technology, there is a large emphasis on receiving. And the system of 'likes' is creating distance between the person who sends and the responses they receive.

MZ: I get your point, and I was of your same opinion some time ago. I was very skeptical about social media, especially when they are used to raise awareness or to fight for something, you know?

BVDH: Yeah.

MZ: And Then you ask yourself, "Well, is that so effective to fight with a few likes and reposting some videos?" But now, I do believe that social media can be really used as a tool for resistance, and why not, also information. I mean, if you say that social media and the Web doesn't work as a system, you will probably reject it. Sometimes, when you say something doesn't work, you don't want to deal with it.

BVDH: Right.

MZ: But instead of saying it doesn't work, maybe it's more useful to say, "OK, it is problematic, it is something based on concepts that maybe we don't like, but maybe we can use it and twist it." This is always keeping in mind that information technology has drawbacks, first of all, the issue of ownership over data.

BVDH: True, I agree very much. But it becomes problematic when thought in relation to ideas of listening and ideas of traces, which are things you're dealing with. Information technology had an incredible impact in the definition of those topics.

MZ: True. Especially thinking of Traces... I don't know,

I'm a person that finds it difficult to create a trace and then destroy it. So, for me, Instagram stories are pretty problematic. I always suffer a little bit when I think people create something that disappears.

BVDH: Yeah.

MZ: But it's definitely the direction in which we are going, if we want or not. My point is to embrace this uncertainty and ephemerality and deal with it being inside a system of precariousness.

BVDH: Sure, but there are traces. The Internet is all running on storage, and that has a footprint in ecology and that kind of thing, which we cannot ignore. But these traces are all privately owned.

MZ: Good point.

BVDH: All the traces we have can only be managed through interfaces which are owned by mostly private enterprises. And a generation is also developing through the technology that they have available, right? It must have some kind of impact on how a generation is growing up with those media, from babies onwards. How do they identify these topics?

MZ: I don't think most of the people even think about it. A big question I have is how to create spaces or environments in which people can engage in conversation with each other, exchange ideas, think together, listen together. That probably comes from the impact information technology has on me as native digital. That's pretty much the question of my personal artistic practice, regardless of this exploration. How to create those spaces? This can be more helpful than using spaces that are provided, as you said, by private enterprises, without thinking and reflecting on the structure and the dynamics entailed in those spaces.

BVDH: Um...

MZ: So, for me, it's also important that the people who inhabit the space, have agency to define the space itself. Which is something that is not happening in most of the platforms which already exist. The owners of the space should be the people who use the space.

BVDH: And in that description, how would you... You know, if you focus on traces, you also need a material in which you leave that trace. What is that material? In those spaces you create, on what would you need to leave a trace? Where?

MZ: I'm not even sure if leaving traces is needed.

BVDH: A ha!

MZ: You know, this is something I ask myself. Most of the time, I'm very concentrated on the process and the people, who have different needs, and organizing things. But, in the end, I don't know how much is important for me to document and to make an experience accessible to a secondary audience, which is not present in the experience itself.

BVDH: Alright.

MZ: Put it simply – if I want to spend my time designing a flyer to invite people in a space, or to look back at what we did last week in that space and try to keep an archive of that, I would definitely go for the first one. And maybe one of the... I don't want to say 'participants'... One of the people inside the space could take the responsibility to deal with traces. I don't think it's my role in that.

BVDH: Alright. But so, if there are, where can I find those traces?

MZ: One good example is the 1+1=3 project, in which people use digital spaces to interact but, in the end, produce and distribute a sort of magazine, which is a rather old idea. The space in which we keep relational traces, in that case, is on paper.

BVDH: It's interesting. You know, you are speaking with a very museum person, right? Traces and cultural heritage is where I come from, that's why I see a huge importance in traces. As you know, relational aesthetics is very much connected to the start of the Internet, with this growth of the participation culture and specific expectation that comes with it. And, in a way, these works were intentionally never finished, in order for other people to finish them, right? They had to be activated. There are traces. This participation is very much geared towards something you also leave behind as an audience, something you build up. For me, traces are also a very important thing in order to prevent people from making the same mistakes again and again. Otherwise, you're just constantly thinking that you can invent the wheel, and you never really go further.

MZ: Have you ever dealt with participatory projects in your curatorial career?

BVDH: Yeah, I'm from a generation of artists and curators that really dealt with these forms of participation, and that also found out the hypocrisy of it. You know, these participatory formats never came with an ethics of practice. So, they often remained on the level of programming, but never had an impact on the institutional hierarchies. They did not change the institutions, it really remained on the surface, on the program side. And as a museum person, I am challenging myself to implement this ethics of practice within the organization, so that it's not just happening within the exhibitions, but it's also lived by the institution.

And that's now the biggest challenge for museums all over the world, in order to reclaim a sense of relevance, from a civic perspective.

MZ: Alright.

BVDH: That's where it comes to the questions, "How to become a listening institution?" And not just to program exhibitions which suggest and allow participation from the audience and however, when the show is over, no one cares about it, right? So, how can we create this institutional transformation in which we turn listening into an institutional practice?

MZ: It's so interesting what you're saying. I believe it's a very difficult question. Right now, I'm experiencing those... I don't really like to call it participation, because it seems like there is a structure between the organizer and the participants, which I don't know how useful it is.

BVDH: Yeah.

MZ: But I'm experiencing it's so hard already on a small scale, that it's difficult for me to think of institutions trying to encourage an exchange, self-determination, listening, agency or responsibility... I don't know how it can work. For me, it's something that really comes bottom-up.

BVDH: This is a central point, which brings to the definition of expertise. So, the museum had always been the end-point of an academic career. You know, curators were really specialized in that field, they had the expertise to really make a selection, like, "This object, Yes. But the other object, No. I can make that decision." And so, in this changing landscape, the idea of expertise is a very tricky one, one that needs to be redefined in order to create this institutional transformation.

MZ: Does it mean that people in the museum should not be specialized?

BVDH: I think they should still be specialized, but there needs to be the awareness that their specialization is just one of many. And if a museum really starts to speak out and say, "OK, we have these specialists here, and therefore we stand for this," that also means that they cannot stand for something else. And the idea that the museum is a publicly funded institution, and therefore it needs to represent the general audience and everyone, is a difficult one. Here in Museion we only have 30 people, and these 30 people do not represent the entire society. However they are placed in their position, they have to choose, and they have to choose having an idea of the general society in the back of their head. But of course, no one can do that, right?

MZ: True.

BVDH: My lived experience is completely different from someone else's lived experience, especially here in Bolzano. You know, I come from Holland, what can I say about someone who lived here? I have to be very much aware of that, and not think that as the director of a museum I represent the entire world and the entire society. If you acknowledge that, you are much more of a discussion partner, than someone who makes decisions in the broader scheme. What an institution needs to create are these different 'I' levels in which, at the moment of decision-making, the people who you want to reach are also around the table. If we want to reach the generation of young professionals between 20 and 35 years old, I cannot decide what the demands and needs of that generation are, being in my mid 40s. When we want to program for them, we have that generation present at the moment we make decisions, and not try to communicate what we thought they wanted at the end.

MZ: Sounds fair.

BVDH: Another example. If you program a set of exhibitions around the collection, you can do that basing your decisions on your own expertise, but you could also do that based on the state of affairs in the larger cultural landscape. What are the demands? What are the jubilees, debates and discourses going on? What are now the most important things that are happening in the field? After figuring that out, you can answer with the collection. The museum is asked to be much more in tune with what is happening outside than what is happening inside the museum itself. This would already be a huge step towards transformation. On one hand, we have to make decisions together with the audience we want to reach, and not inform them at the end. And on the other hand, to create an institutional mindset which is less occupied with its own institutional practice and much more engaged with sensibility and responsiveness to what is happening outside, listening to the demands. This way, an institution becomes an agent. I think that's the new role of Museion and the museum in general, to identify a sense of relevance in this changing world.

MZ: I very much agree with you. I think you have a beautiful mindset and it's good you have the agency to make it happen, as you are the director of Museion. But I have a curiosity: I don't know if we can say you are an outsider in Bolzano, but how does it feel and what does it mean to be an agent of transformation in a place which doesn't originally belong to you?

BVDH: Yeah, how does it feel? For me, it's just part of my nature. I'm part of a generation that really built this internationalization of the art world. You know, for me, working in the arts was always something very much international and global. However, that generation now is also made accountable by their own audiences, by the fact that this whole internationalization of the art world has missed

a local embedding. You always need to have a balance in order to remain relevant as a public institution, you have to be able to communicate relevance and have people believe you are important. So, at the moment, museums for Contemporary and Modern Art all over the world have quite an identity crisis. There are two camps, opposite to each other: the traditional collection-oriented approach, and the one which is very much about building constituencies, being more like an agonistic platform where all different voices come together. These are two different identities of the museum that do not integrate. At the moment, there is a big discussion in the institutional field to redefine the meaning of a museum. What is a museum? They don't find an agreement.

MZ: Do you have ideas how to solve this conflict?

BVDH: I'm thinking that these two poles should not be opposite. They can also be integrated. I am very happy to work for an international institution which still needs to really build local constituency and local relevance. In that sense, Museion is still a quite young institution, and this is what excites me in this position. There is still a lot of ground work to be done in that respect, we can still make a big difference and have an impact. I believe this is what I can contribute to South Tyrol.

MZ: I wish you good luck for that, it's a pretty ambitious program!

BVDH: Yes, thank you very much! Keep following...