

*on turning production into a participatory process /
the bottom-down discourse on privileged artists / accepting being an outsider /
self-censoring / life commitment to human rights / fighting for human interaction and dialogue /
books to solve the ethical issue of art distribution*

with **Nicolò Degiorgis**
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*an ongoing collective exploration / learning from experiences of togetherness and uncertainty / reflecting on listening – with Nicolò Degiorgis, Matteo Zoccolo – 21 June 2021
matteozoccolo.net/on_listening/conversations.html*

ND: RORHOF started as a way for myself to publish my work. Initially it was a self-publishing project, but through the years we understood that the scope was expanding and that we were working and using RORHOF not only as a publishing house, but also as a place where we could do workshops or exhibitions. And so, for approximately a month now, RORHOF has turned into a non-profit organization. Earlier, it was a profit-oriented company, now it's a social cooperative. Which is a specific way of working as a cooperative in the social sphere.

MZ: Alright.

ND: So, this change of juridical status enables us to expand our activity beyond the book. What we're now running are different workshops with people with Autism or Down's syndrome, and we're using visual languages and books to increase communication. This is also about listening, which, I think, works both ways. I mean, in order to listen to somebody, you probably also need to be able to understand somebody. So, RORHOF tries to facilitate communication with different people seen as disadvantaged within our society. Do you follow me?

MZ: Sure, it's very clear. It's very interesting how, from something that was originally product-oriented like a publishing house, eventually became something more process-based.

ND: Definitely. Yes, it's all related to bookmaking, but in the way we conceive books, in the way we produce them... We are not a traditional publishing house. So, it's not that you send us a submission and we are going to publish and distribute it. We work more as a collective and we develop the content ourselves. Teaching in the prison of Bolzano was the starting point for understanding how to focus on the process within the overall practice of book-making.

MZ: And what about the workshops?

ND: While delivering the workshops for people with disabilities, we understand how they communicate, how we communicate, and we understand how they react to certain books, to certain visual material. We develop content together. And then, obviously, we publish it. The process is participatory.

MZ: And how inclusive is this collective?

ND: The cooperative is run by two people, Allegra Baggio Corradi and me. My brother Michele Degiorgis and Allegra's sister Federica Di Giovanni are helping out. In the way we develop content, we try to collaborate quite closely. I take care of the visual material and the design, Allegra deals with words and research, while Michele takes care of the space, for example during exhibitions.

MZ: Alright.

ND: And then we have these other people we do workshops with. They're not part of the collective, but they become temporarily part of our team. We try to keep it quite equal. One of our concepts would also be to always have the same number of students and teachers, so that within a group, you are unsure about who is who. I mean, you can decide who is the teacher, but actually, there is no minority or majority involved.

MZ: Cool! Oh, now it will look like an interview, even though it was supposed to be more like an exchange. But I'm actually interested in what you do... Where does this drive to work with disadvantaged groups of people come from? And how do you manage, in the context of collaborative practices, to work with people that are not as privileged as you?

ND: So, this interest comes from myself being part of a minority, since I grew up in South Tyrol and I'm bilingual. Here, you're always part of a minority or a majority, depending on how you see it. My whole youth has been shaped by this dynamic, and it is currently still like this. Also relevant in this sense were my studies in political science and the years I spent living in Asia. I started documenting minority communities in China, and then I moved to minority communities in North-East Italy. I think it has to do with my interest in otherness, whatever that entails, and certainly with traveling. It is wonderful to notice how you do not need to travel too far away to encounter a plethora of cultures nowadays – they're within easy reach.

MZ: True. And what about this issue of power struggles and being...

ND: How did you say? Elite?

MZ: Privileged. I don't know if this is the right word, actually.

ND: Well, there is a very strong discussion within the art world about this very topic at the moment. I think I can be seen as privileged if compared to other people, sure. But I think this perception of being privileged is also a bottom-down view of things, which I don't necessarily agree with. For instance, my interest in the arts has nothing to do with me coming from the arts themselves, but it developed out of my personal experience and over time, which makes me wonder whether it is possible at all to speak about privilege in 'vertical' terms.

MZ: This might be a good segue to talk about "Hidden Islam", your first book.

ND: Yes, for example. It's a documentary project in which I photographed religious communities of which I was not a

member, although I lived in the same area as them. In this sense, I don't like to see myself as a privileged individual, but simply as a part of the society in which I live. This is why my right to establish a contact with the people who live in the same society is the same as that of those same other people. It goes both ways.

MZ: I can relate a lot to what you're saying. I had similar experiences when I was living in Jerusalem, one year ago. I was doing these projects that were kind of political regarding the Palestinian struggle. Especially the professors in the school and other Israeli people studying with me, were often labeling me as a sort of outsider who would come there being very critical about the state of Israel. I always hated this kind of label I had.

ND: But you have to deal with it.

MZ: I know, I tried. At a certain point I was so pissed off that I was like, "The fuck, now I will start to take pictures of beautiful flowers," to try and avoid being political in that place. Even though, probably, even taking pictures of beautiful flowers can be seen as a political statement. Art and people would ask me, "Which side did you take?" And it's not really about taking one side, in my opinion. I still have to figure out a way to...

ND: To navigate this.

MZ: Yes. It's pretty tricky.

ND: You must accept the fact that it takes a really long time to become part of a community, even if you grow up in that same community. If you feel part of it, it doesn't mean that you're perceived as being a part of it. So, an artist working on similar issues must be prepared to be lonesome.

MZ: Um...

ND: We are living in very turbulent times. Questions that were avoided for a very long time are now being tackled, which is why there is a problem with self-censoring. People don't allow themselves to express their opinions, but maybe this is off-topic...

MZ: No, it's very interesting. I would like to listen to what you have to say about self-censoring.

ND: Well, it's a very broad discussion, but I think that one of the problems is that there is not a lot of space for listening. I mean, this is related to race, gender, minority communities, disadvantaged communities, colonialism and so on. I think the tone used in these discussions is unnecessarily aggressive, which is why the parties involved do not really listen. However, it is a mistake to think that we have to find theoretical and therefore universal answers to

the questions we are trying to address at present. I do not think theoretically. It is a real commitment everyone has in their lives, so not only the arts are involved. It's simply a life thing.

MZ: What is a life thing?

ND: This commitment to human rights. And it really boils down to listening. Listening to different opinions as much as tolerating them is a necessity and a sensibility. It is important, I think, to always try to aim for something concrete and realistic when you fight for something.

MZ: And this concrete thing you fight for could be human interaction!

ND: Yes!

MZ: You know, when these discourses are on a very small scale you can still figure things out, however, when the scope extends you have to face complex structures like the art world, the media, the law or the institutions. And then the whole discourse becomes mediated and mediated again and again, and it stops working.

ND: Yes, human interaction. Dialogue. Dialogue is probably the key here. It's this dialogue that is somehow missing, but it's also missing, to some extent, because nowadays most of it happens on social media, or it gets triggered by social media.

MZ: What do you think art can do in this regard?

ND: Well, it's a tough question. When you say 'art', you also necessarily have art history and artists. Art is divided and split. Can artists be useful? Maybe. Does art matter, intellectually? Probably yes. All this notwithstanding, it all boils down to one's daily practice and how it is developed.

MZ: Yes.

ND: I'm not into art theory. I just think it's the most extreme of all social sciences. As soon as you try to establish a theory, you kind of go against the concept itself.

MZ: Um...

ND: As an artist, you have to be aware of two things. First, of how you deal with the content and the form of your work, that is, how it develops. And here the participatory element of projects that we were mentioning earlier becomes relevant. And second, of how that work is distributed and disseminated.

MZ: Disseminated?

ND: Dissemination is a matter of scale. Do you want to

work on a very small, intimate scale in which you have a personal connection with the people you're working with, who are also the ones who are going to consume the work, or are you looking for something else?

If you look back, how art is socially understood depends on the time. You have to find a purpose in what you do and put out there, which is also why in the end you do need an audience for it. I tried solving the ethical issue involved in the distribution of my works by producing books.

MZ: Would you have an example?

ND: Yes, Hidden Islam for one. The project is a very vast one, which does not only consist in a book, but in photographs that I have never published, some that I published only in certain magazines, some that I exhibited within art circles, others in documentary frameworks. The book, like all the others by RORHOF, costs €35. I sometimes exhibit the work as an installation, and I do so with the book pages, not with the photographs themselves. The work is democratically distributed, available and accessible to everyone who might be interested in it in the format they like the most or the one they can afford. In this sense, the work listens to its audiences by maintaining its own voice, which is ultimately linked to my personal view of distribution. The book is a space, and it moves in space all at once.