

*on self-reflective processes / problematizing empathy / I-other relations / empathic propaganda /
an approach for socially engaged art / neglected listening / pedagogical projects*

with **Beatrice Catanzaro**

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an ongoing collective exploration / learning from experiences of togetherness and uncertainty / reflecting on listening – with Beatrice Catanzaro, Matteo Zoccolo – 19 may 2021
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BC: Numerous insights I gathered with my Ph.D. connect to the work of my supervisor, the artist Shelley Sacks. She has been working with Joseph Beuys for years, and developed her Social Sculpture and Connective Practice since then. One of the insights I gathered is the radical difference between maturing a research attitude and approach in the practice, instead of thinking of the practice as a functional response to contextual issues. When I mention attitude and approach, I address the importance of working on ourselves. The inner self is a space where we produce our mindset, and we build the lenses, we see, and we perceive and live in the world. It's an aspect that has not been sufficiently contemplated in socially engaged art. Of course, I'm talking in very general terms now, one should always consider the specific. But when you talk about socially engaged art, the risk is that the 'social' becomes that outer objective space, or sphere, the materiality of life in a way, to which you respond and act upon with your work. In this separation between acting out there and experiencing inside yourself, I have realized for myself, a separation is taking place. So, my all questions throughout the Ph.D., but also throughout those last years of practice, was, "How can I heal this separation? How can I always find the space, an inner space, where I can act upon and work with my personal assumptions?". So, it's not only assuming that I should work in this or that way out there, but also to work at the same time with my own assumptions, that are, of course, connected with the cultural setting we live in. What in socially engaged art may be overlooked, in a way, is that by focusing so strongly on the social fabric, we might forget that we are subjects living in that social fabric. So, we are also carrying, in our inner world, assumptions and a mindset that might not allow us to see what is really going on out there. And at the same time, we might also need to change our perspective. I don't know if this is clear.

MZ: It's very clear. And I really like that you considered this very self-reflective inner self as part of the game, because there is the risk that one can go into an outer social context and imply that she or he is neutral, in a way. When you are in a different context you might think your point of view is neutral, and then you act accordingly. But it is never neutral. So, it's a good practice to self-reflect on how it is not neutral and how your inner assumptions play with the other people that you have around.

BC: Precisely, which is not to say that everything is just relative. It's not a postmodern position. It is to become aware that we are, as you say, part of the game. That's a nice way to put it. We are constantly involved, we cannot be external. And we should take into consideration, "What is happening? What emotions, what thoughts, what is going on in my inner self?" And especially when dealing in working with others, inviting others to participate in your processes. I see the work, and that includes also the teaching practice, as an ongoing inquiry. An inquiry has always to contemplate a self-reflective dimension.

MZ: Do you have personal experiences on how you applied this self-reflection, or maybe other experiences in which you didn't?

BC: There has been a transition from my practice in Nablus, Palestine, with 'Bait-al-Karama', to the work I developed in Bolzano, 'You Are But You Are Not'. Precisely following this question, on how to move from an attitude where you just act out there, into including self-reflective modes in the practice. So, for instance, in Bolzano I've tried to invite a group of people to experiment with collective self-reflective processes. Well, I'm still in a phase of experimenting. On that occasion, one of the issues we were exploring was the issue of borders, inviting every person to reflect on his own border, and then to share one's personal experiences of the border. To look at the borders not only as physical borders that others have to face, in that case, refugees and migrants, but as a condition we all potentially experience. The word condition I think it's really important, a condition that we all, in different ways, have or can experience. And that is to make us more sensitive, to look at the emotions of what it means to experience a 'border'. My border could be of being, I don't know, being dyslexic. And we already see how the word border can take various declinations. Border as limit, border as sense of confinement.

MZ: Limes and Limen.

BC: Yeah, exactly. And while inviting others, I was inviting myself. In such processes you never know what will emerge, but surely what was happening was a different sense of closeness between participants.

MZ: Is it the collective narcissism that you speak about?

BC: That refers to another question I was trying to explore in my Ph.D. Collective narcissism addresses group identification and group creation out of exclusion of others. And that was an experience I had in Nablus, not because we were narcissists with 'Bait-al-Karama', but I could see how this idea of I-other developed. We had a group, and we started to feel ourselves in a way, kind of exceptional.

MZ: I think it's extremely difficult to keep a sense of belonging inside a group that in a way it's not closed. So, in a group that doesn't differentiate between 'us' and 'them'. It's also what I am experiencing with some of my projects, as soon as you define a core group and people develop trust with each other, then you have this us-them. And maybe it's not necessarily negative. And of course, you have a different experience in Nablus. But I think it's very problematic to keep a balance between closing the group giving a sense of togetherness, or keeping it permeable and open, losing part of this feeling.

BC: Well, I don't have an answer to that, but I think that

in a way we are mixing two different things. One is the sense of belonging. And this is an emotional need of feeling part of something. One thing is to think of a group in terms of how much porosity should the group have. And another thing is an inner attitude of inquiry. So, I will give you a concrete example. In Nablus, the initial idea that we developed was to create a women's center, around which a new group of interest was born. So, the idea was already to kind of build a collective. In Bolzano the approach was intentionally very different. It was not to create a group around the project, rather, the intention was to collectively explore certain questions. And of course, of the people that we invited, some participated and some didn't, but the initial idea was not to create a group out of the participants. It was to share questions with others in order to explore that terrain of concern. There was never an idea from the beginning to create a new group of interests or a new group of belonging. In that sense, I could see a radical difference, and I'm not saying Nablus was bad, Bolzano was good. What I'm observing is a very different approach. In Bolzano it was more relevant to think of the terrain of concern of border and migration rather than create a work that would offer a 'solution'. What you also mentioned before, a problem-solving approach.

MZ: Alright.

BC: Now I'm stepping a bit out of this binary two examples, to say that one should be aware of what kind of attitude could fit the most. In Bolzano I felt it was really important to open up a space of reflection in the face of the sense of emergency and impotence I perceived, especially among those who were directly involved, like NGOs members, refugees, lawyers, that all were caught in this, you know, anxiety and impotence. Aware that I could not find a solution, but maybe we could together open up a new perspective. And I changed, my perception changed. I moved from this I-other refugee narrative, into understanding that, "Shit, refugees go through administrative and legal procedures, that in some ways I also have experienced." Funny enough, today, in 2021, all of us experience similar forms of restriction. And to bring this to another level, we are not in the same boat. I'm not saying that at all, but there are different levels in which you can explore I-other relations. So, when you explore it on a legal level, as we did in Bolzano, the awareness that I matured was to realize that I can find myself on the other side, and the line is very thin. I need to speak from a condition, because those same conditions of entrapment and procrastination are not something that I will never or that I didn't experience in my life.

MZ: What do you think about the element of empathy?

BC: Well, empathy is an interesting beast. I give you two dimensions in which I understand empathy. Or better three dimensions. One is our being naturally equipped for empathy thanks to our mirror neuronal cells, and this is a

beautiful possibility. A second dimension is connected with the first dimension, with our physiological condition of being empathic, which makes empathy our first way and probably also unconscious way to enter in connection with others. There is also a dark side of empathy, I would say maybe. Maybe calling it the dark side a bit too much. It's when empathy, instead of remaining a mutual condition, leads us to locate the struggles, the problem, the pain, the trauma, in the other. So, in a way, it can also reinforce the distance from the other. "Oh, I'm so sorry for you, refugee." "I feel so sorry for you, little African kid, you're so hungry." So, this is the problematic aspect of empathy, and you see it all over the place. Instead of inviting us to think and research why we should do or not do certain things, we are just driven by emotions. OK, we are equipped with that, and it's very important. But empathy can also become an easy political manipulative strategy. Think of music. Think of how this relation between the global north and the global south is reinforced through empathic propaganda. This dark side of it makes me personally furious, because I think that empathy is crucial. Not that people are not capable of empathy, because we didn't learn empathy. We are equipped with empathy. Empathy is crucial, but at the same time, it's so easy to manipulate. One should always grow awareness about that, both on the personal interaction, but also on a larger, global propaganda scale.

MZ: Regarding Empathy and geometries of power, have you ever worked with people that are not in a difficult position? Because, for example, in your two main projects, 'Bait-al-Karama' and 'You Are But You Are Not', you work with...

BC: Fucked up situations.

MZ: Yeah! But if we want to be more academic, I'd say with the subaltern. So, have you ever worked with people of your same conditions?

BC: Yes and no. Actually, now that you ask me, I think I haven't worked enough in general! Maybe I should go and work right now. I haven't done enough in my life...

MZ: C'mon!

BC: OK, I tell you what the inner me experienced. To me, it was never a question of working with people in fucked up situations. It was more a question of situations that were conflicting, that were unjust. Not that I felt part of those situations, but I really felt involved in those situations. So, it was not that I was going to help them, but we kind of... "Let's do something together."

MZ: So, to be nonacademic, you have a fucked-up situation, you put yourself into the shit, and then you can say, "We work it out together."

BC: Yeah, in some ways, yes. And if I go deeper in this question, I always, since I remember myself, I always had a very vivid memory of being angry with any form of injustice. It's really something that is very rooted, and it probably also has to do with empathy, I'm not denying that. I would say it has to do with my soul. It freaks me out. And I know that other people don't have that inner experience, so I think we're talking on a soul level now. Probably I could have taken another path in my life, becoming a lawyer or, you know, whatever other... I was probably too lazy to study Law. Injustice, violence, aggression... even the invisible aggression, invisible violence. I freak out when I hear teachers violating their students by imposing their ideas.

MZ: Do you think they are not listening enough?

BC: Listening takes us back to the beginning of our conversation. I definitely recommend this book of Gemma Corradi Fiumara, 'The Other Side of Language: A philosophy of listening', that you should definitely get yourself.

MZ: I'm actually reading it!

BC: Great. I think that she points out a radical problem in our constituency as western culture, having discarded listening in favour of the spoken word, and neglecting it as a passive attitude. In addition to verbal listening, I would say that listening is the ability to enter into fine-tuning with what surrounds us, to sense, to listen also on a vibratory level. I think it's an essential practice. And she also goes in the depths of activating what she calls 'inner void', which is very beautiful. Listening is an active practice, it's really important to say that. The way I am trying to explore listening is...

MZ: Can you give me a concrete example?

BC: I listen a lot to my students. So, when we have individual tutorials, I try to become an active listener. And the way I do it is by writing and taking notes of what resonates with me the most. For me, listening is not only capturing what the others say, but to try to capture what the others say according to my inner self. What makes me vibrate, what makes a spark. Or what makes me confused, what I don't understand. I have books full of notes. Sometimes I think I take more notes than my students. And this note-taking allows me to unpack with them. What do they mean with what they say? What do they really mean, what is behind their interest? This is a listening practice. I try to understand what personal experience, emotion or understanding lies behind their interest. Why are they interested in doing something? And this is because I learned through myself that often we have an interest, but we hardly go to the 'why'. I try to mirror them and give more space to the personal background that they might not see, or that they might not connect with what they want to do. What you

want to do is already at the tip of the iceberg, so to speak.

MZ: What about the pedagogical aspect, not only in what you teach, but in your projects and artistic practice? I'm now reading 'Artificial Hells' and there is a whole chapter on the issues and advantages of a pedagogical approach. And I also think that listening is a big part of this approach. For example, how do you relate it to mutual learning?

BC: I'm not an expert in pedagogy, but I can pick from my experiences.

MZ: Yeah, that's interesting.

BC: This goes back to the time when I was studying at the Brera Academy. And that goes back to violence. I struggled a lot in those years, hearing teachers, professors, maybe artists, promoting the idea that the students should be able to defend their work, that their work should be bulletproof in a sort of militarized educational strategy. And sometimes I felt there was so much violence going on. So much judgment. One thing is criticism, but if you're not equipped with great capacity to be critical, it usually goes into judgmental speaking. I feel it's very unproductive for students, but also in general, I think we are surrounded with so much judgment all the time. Personal judgment and judgment towards others. Luckily, I met Shelley Sacks, my supervisor for the PhD, and she gave me, through her way of attending tutorials, a completely different approach of openness and engagement

MZ: How is this approach?

BC: The point is to have an attitude of being very active in listening, being reflective and understanding. And eventually, to me, picking on the very old idea of maieutics. The role is to help the student to pull out the 'why' of their intentions. For me, it's something that goes with me and comes with me.

MZ: And what about pedagogy as art?

BC: I'm not very sure about many educational or pedagogical projects I've explored, also the ones mentioned by Claire Bishop. For me, the question is not how to create a new form of teaching, for example with migrants teaching, or creating an open school. But I would rather put the focus on the invisible that goes on there. How do you engage with the other? It is not just to borrow the format of a school, of an academy or educational institution, we have to work in depth with the actual approach to the other. I know there is a wave of very cool projects going on, and probably I don't know enough about it as well, but I rather focus on the level of relations, than to package a new project.

MZ: Is it more like on a small scale of interpersonal

relations?

BC: It can also be on a big scale. But how much the cool projects that take an educational format actually invite for different forms of relation, in regard to learning? How is the experience happening? What is the experience? Is it again a teacher delivering a lecture, even though the teacher is a migrant or whatever?