

*on being hurt and heard / funny bureaucracy / questioning the concept of plagiarism /
open source / sharing a process or keeping it secret / diversity and inclusion*

with **Mark Markin**

28 may 2021

*an ongoing collective exploration / learning from experiences of togetherness and uncertainty / reflecting on listening – with Mark Markin, Matteo Zoccolo – 28 may 2021
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MM: Ciao, sono Mark.

MZ: Oh, can we do it in English?

MM: Hi, I'm Mark. And I'm 24 years old. I always need to count my years, because of Covid I lost track of the time and of my birthdays, they don't count sometimes.

MZ: Yeah.

MM: I'm from Russia, which is one of the most important key points of my life, sometimes everything plays around this fact. Why? Because sometimes I feel trapped in this bureaucratic stuff I was born in. Basically, I am Russian just because I have a Russian passport. And right now I'm sitting here in Bolzano, Italy, with my passport and stay permit expired. Chiara just lost a cigarette... Funny enough, when I go to the police station I always speak to them in Italian, and they're like, "What the fuck are you here for, if you're Italian?" It's always like a theater, a performance between me and Italian bureaucracy, which is funny sometimes, but not most of the time.

MZ: So, you are Italian!

MM: I technically feel like I'm Italian, but I'm not treated as an Italian by Italian bureaucracy, which is kind of a pain in the ass, because I studied here since elementary school. I mean, I cooked a carbonara for an Italian girl, and she said it was the best pasta she ever ate. I need to get my passport because of that!

MZ: Completely makes sense.

MM: But apart from these funny stories, most of the time I need to fight a lot. Um... I mean, all of us need to fight a lot, more or less...

MZ: What's your last fight?

MM: My last fight is pretty crazy. It is between an institution, my ex-professor and me. OK, it's really a strange fight, I call it 'caso a caso', or 'case by chance'. Basically, I was sued for plagiarism because I unknowingly copied a project of a professor of mine. Until this point, I don't know what happened and why, and how basically my professor and I got to the same technology and shape at the same time. I guess the world is a small place. I'm quite angry, actually. I've never been heard since this caso a caso started. Which is funny, because the only two people who heard me were my second thesis supervisor and a friend of mine who has an important place within the university. And that's it. I was basically in the epicenter of the cyclone, but I wasn't physically there. Which is actually the same experience I have with Italian bureaucracy. It's me, but it's not me. I'm giving all the papers and I need to wait, without being able to see what is going on during the

process.

MZ: So, what happened at the university?

MM: A colleague of mine, who was my professor, just kind of stopped me from being, at least for a month or so. It kind of felt as if a little ant would walk on a big human, who got pissed. Because of an object...

I mean, you cannot bring an object with you all the way to the next life. It's just an object. It's not easy right now, when I see my professors I'm pretty pissed off.

MZ: We were speaking yesterday about the freedom of being heard. Or, let's say, the right of being heard. And how, sometimes, it's something very crucial and not really understood by people who stand in a privileged position. Who's in a position of power, let's say, doesn't have the problem of not being heard, at least in an institutional context. They get attention, space and time to speak. But again, maybe it's not about speaking. It's about being heard. And I wonder, how can we create some spaces in which people can be heard? And I don't mean a room. I mean situations in which people can be heard.

MM: I mean, democracy offers us a lot of spaces to be heard, such as the court. But this is another crucial step. If you're poor or disadvantaged, you cannot afford to be heard. A privileged person already has a voice, and already has an impact on other influential people. I was pretty much left alone, except for one of my thesis supervisors and this friend of mine.

MZ: Now we are speaking on an institutional level. But I'd like to get to the essence of this very specific happening. So, why did this happen? Alright, you are sued for plagiarism. But in the first place, why do we need the concept of plagiarism? How to think differently, in a way that judgment and evaluation are not involved?

MM: This plagiarism thing links really well in my head with the concept of being hurt. Did you say 'hurt' or 'heard'?

MZ: Heard.

MM: Oh, then I misunderstood you before. I think plagiarism is a crucial point in our creative field, especially in design. When I do a project, I give it a name, I give a character to an idea or a shape. And when someone's trying to steal this shape, saying, "This is not your idea," I feel hurt. And I can imagine that many people had similar experiences on a bigger scale, like companies or millionaires claiming rights they don't have. This is actually fun because this is the same feeling my professor had, probably. He also felt hurt because, from his point of view, I stole his idea.

MZ: I think this is also about vulnerability. You made

someone feel in a vulnerable position, and the natural, human response to it is to attack, to hit back. Even though, in the first place, you maybe didn't hit on purpose.

MM: Yes.

MZ: So, I think it's pretty much understandable what happened. And I feel you, it's shit. But what I'm trying to understand, going to the core of the issue, is something else. Is it so important that when a person has an idea, that idea is property of that person? I feel like we don't escape the problem if we continue to think in those terms.

MM: Um...

MZ: If I want to be very idealist and imagine a utopian world, I would think of a place in which people cooperate and collaborate together in order to make life better for everyone. And I wonder, why do we still need, in 2021, to define intellectual property? Because ideas circulate, constantly shape each other, get stolen every day. And it's OK to steal ideas. It's OK to take inspiration. It's OK to ask to do things with the ideas of others.

I don't know, I very much support open source and the concept of really working together towards a common aim. I think that what happened to you is symptomatic of a bigger issue that we, as creative people, as designers and artists, should try to fix. We should try to find alternative ways of dealing with those things, right?

MM: Actually yes. When I was a child, like all the other children, I always copied something. I was trying to emulate, simulate the reality I was looking at. I copied art pieces, cartoons, cars... I was interested in that stuff. Later I thought, "OK, I need to move on." And I started to blend my ideas. I think creativity is like a muscle. And actually, everything should be open source. Nature is the best open source place where we can get inspiration. I mean, have you ever seen God being angry at someone because they fucking copied trees and made solar panels? The Internet should be open source, too. Open source is when you do something, and you know that you are going to share it. And there are people who are creating and sharing something without the aim of their idea being taken by someone. But as you said, we automatically, subconsciously take stuff from other people. I mean, can you steal colors? We, as designers, always see other people's things and say, "OK, this color is cool, I'll use it. I'll also take this texture, it goes very well with my product."

MZ: Did you produce your 'stolen' product in secret?

MM: Not at all. I was sharing it with my roommates, my girlfriend, my mom, my supervisors, my friends. But the other similar product was secret. I think none of us would have been able to see it before its release. Also because of the lockdown, our university was closed and no one was

able to physically see a product which was conceived in a closed space, in a closed environment in which people signed a Non-Disclosure Agreement. So, yeah, there is a thin line between open source, stealing, giving, taking. At least for me.

MZ: Don't you think that this mechanism is driven by money?

MM: Yes, I do. Our democratic world is not as democratic as we think. And sad story, you cannot bring all of this money with you forever. It's sad that in our Western society we just crave for stuff, we buy stuff, we do stuff, we do stuff that we don't need any more, we do stuff to sell it, to be consumed, to be thrown away, to be stuff.

MZ: What about school?

MM: The university is just a place to produce people which will make money flow. And when the university produces an individual who cannot produce money, who cannot be a small ring in the chain of our consumerist world, it does fail.

I also had a discussion with a friend of mine, on the topics of diversity and inclusion...

MZ: What was that about?

MM: You have to know, reader of the future, that in 2020, in the middle of a pandemic, we had a really important moment in our modern history, the Black Lives Matter movement. From this point on, basically every big corporation acted not to look like a racist or homophobic. For example, I'm working at COS, who is actually training us on diversity and inclusion. And I had a thought. Society excludes some individuals, right? But now society needs those leftovers. It needs people who are different to be there at work, it needs their image to attract other people.

MZ: Um...

MM: It's unfortunately all around money. And the fear of losing money. Or the fear of losing opportunities to earn more money. But don't worry, dear reader, or dear Matteo. Let's try all together to not hurt each other because we already need to fight big corporations and big angry men. If you're hungry, just say you're hungry. A friend of yours will cook pasta with some oil and Parmigiano on it. If you need a hug, just ask for it. It's just a matter of being self-conscious of the place you're in. Someone will help you, unexpectedly.