

*on defining narrative as violent and political / history as exclusion /
partying and art to dismantle narratives / numbers for non-hierarchical communities /
2011 occupy movement and neo-hippyish-socialist-leftist dream /
technology as tool for resistance and control / social media's drawbacks / how to fuck capitalism /
a network of little utopian islands / responsibility on the internet /
extension of man inside your body*

with **Gilad Ratman**
07 June 2021 [I]

*an ongoing collective exploration / learning from experiences of togetherness and uncertainty / reflecting on listening – with Gilad Ratman, Matteo Zoccolo – 07 June 2021
matteozoccolo.net/on_listening/conversations.html*

GR: We'll see where it goes. Maybe it will be very interesting, maybe it will be... I don't know, but we can definitely start.

MZ: Ok, let's start.

GR: How long do you think it will take?

MZ: We can really decide it together. When one of us feels like it's a good end, we stop it.

GR: Alright.

MZ: So where do we decide to start? Let's try to figure out if we have some interests in common.

GR: Um. We can start in space, we can start in time or we can start in content.

MZ: I would start in space. I was also listening to one of your interviews when you were at the Venice Biennale, and you were speaking about narratives. This is also something I would be interested to hear more. I don't know if we want to get into politics...

GR: Narratives are politics. I mean, narratives are, I think, one of the most powerful tools to control people. So, it has to do with politics, of course, which is the realm in which we practice power.

MZ: Isn't it, in a way, manipulation?

GR: It is, of course. There is a difference between past and history. What is the past? The past is everything that passed, everything that was. And when I think about history, I think about the manipulative thread that is making connections of cause and effect within endless facts that already happened, which create a narrative. That's history. I mean, when we say that in the Second World War, the United States bombed Japan... In the same time some mother was cooking food, some person had a screw in his shoe, some goats gave milk... And it all happened. But what remains is some facts that established themselves as narrative. That is how we, the people in power, articulate the relationship between cause and effect, time and space, which are the elements of a narrative. I mean, I'll just make a comment: I studied narrative for four many years. With my tools of course, I'm not an academic, but the notion of narrative is something that haunts me for a long time. And for me, the terms that are in play, which are based on a very traditional definition of narrative, are chain of events, shared time and space with a cause and effect relationship.

MZ: Alright.

GR: So, we have three elements here. One is the element

of time and space. We need that to create a narrative, we can't work without it. And we need causality, we need something that made something else happen, because if we are describing things that happened in parallel... Look at the party, which is my favorite image to encounter what is called an event. It is some kind of alternative for a narrative because within an event there are endless narratives that are happening all the time. So, the idea of parallel actions or parallel micro events within a big event, let's say, is not a narrative. In order to have a narrative, you need to tie some knots together. You need to make a line between them. You need to say, "OK, from everything that happens, I take this, this, this and that." And they share time and space in some weird way. We also share a space right now, although it's not a physical space, but this allows us to be part of the narrative because we do share time and space at this moment.

MZ: Right.

GR: So, you need those elements in order to create the thread. And this is why it's such a powerful tool within politics, because when we try to deal with the anomaly of the past, and the fact that it's just too much to digest... We can never grasp it. OK, but people need to grasp reality. So, what story do we make them believe in? And we do know that the power of humankind, let's say Homo sapiens, is by collaborating in big numbers. This is not my theory, this is actually Yuval Noah Harari's theory. We are powerful because we know how to collaborate in large numbers, and we don't need a communal space. You and I can collaborate and change the world without being in the same space, like two monkeys can never do. OK, so we know how to collaborate in large numbers and to bypass obstacles of time and space. And by doing so, we are using concepts and narratives. We use imaginary concepts that are connecting us together, and narrative is part of them. That's what makes people able to collaborate on a large scale. If we do believe in the same story, let's say in the Jesus story, we have something in common and we can collaborate. And by that, gain more power. So, narrative is one of the most powerful tools in which the human race deals with chaos, and with the overwhelming amount of evidence, facts and information that needs to be constructed in some way, otherwise we will lose ourselves. But basically, I don't think we would lose ourselves, I think we need to find a different way to deal with that, but I don't have the answer.

MZ: Do you think this interest in narrative comes from your personal history as Israeli?

GR: Oh, it's all about the narrative here. It's all about the story, who tells the story and what story. And basically, I think the most stupid and meaningful question is, "When, in history and in time, do you start to tell the story?" I mean, according to the Zionist story, which is the story that

I grew up on... And we are getting politically here. So, this is the land of the Jews from the Bible times, And we... 'We' is a very weird term because I don't know why I need to connect with the people that lived here 2000 years ago... It's weird. Maybe to maintain the connection to this country. And then the story starts with the Zionism, which says, "OK, Jews were suffering from anti-Semitism and they needed a safe place. So, they started to come to the place they have been before." And this is the point where the story starts, but you can tell this story from a different starting point. You can tell it from Muhammad, or from the Ottoman Empire. There were different people who had connections to this land, who can tell their story. So, it's a whole fight between the narratives. The Palestinian narrative and a Zionist narrative, I would say, are the two narratives that are fighting here mostly. And also, you know, the idea of the Zionist movement was not to see the narrative of the other people, was to only see its own narrative, saying "We suffered in the diaspora, and because of that, we have the right to seek for shelter." But what they didn't see is the fact that their shelter is somebody else's Nakba, somebody else's Holocaust, you know. It's very nice to protect the Jews, but at what cost? This is, I think, the root of the conflict.

MZ: And what kind of strategy do you think we have to twist a narrative, to create a third narrative? Or is creating narratives always sort of violent?

GR: It is.

MZ: So, how to escape this system of violence?

GR: I don't know. I mean, I totally agree with you, the very notion of creating a narrative is violent in its core. Because it throws out things and accepts other things. It's about exclusion and inclusion. If you want something to be part of history, you need to exclude so many things and to include several things, and then you can create a narrative. So, the idea of narrative is the idea of exclusion. But we know that the human mind is having very severe difficulties engaging with the world without narratives, and I am aware of that. So, maybe the solution is just multiple colliding narratives at the same time. And the other option is, I think, what art is trying to do. But what Art is trying to do is not ethical in the sense of, "Let's make justice and tell other narratives." I mean, some art tries to do this, and this is the art that I usually don't appreciate so much. I don't think the role of art is to fix the world with the older tools that we have. So, if we have the tool of violent narrative, should we use it and duplicate more and more narratives? Maybe this is not a bad choice, but not what art can do.

MZ: What is the other option?

GR: What art can do is try to open us to a situation in which we can find different ways to engage with the world

that are not narratives. And to define those ways, it would be very difficult for me. But I would say that I'm fighting for that, and I think that what art is trying to do is to work on the consciousness and the mind of people, to open them up to a different possibility of creating meaning, not only by narratives. But rather by images, by friction between entities, I don't know, by looking into mechanisms, by imagination, by contradiction, by parallel events, but not necessarily with the pillory of a cause-effect time and space, all squeezed into one thread. So, I would say, one of the roles of artists is to fight that option in an abstract way. Would it directly help? No, it would take a lot of time, maybe a thousand years, maybe more. I don't know. In art it is not about practicality so much. It's not about breaking something. It's about injecting something into the system.

MZ: Um...

GR: What do you think? Why are narratives so interesting for you? What's in participation that has to do with narrative? Is there?

MZ: I don't know actually, I'm fascinated by narratives but didn't really focus on them. I'm more dealing with the problem of defining an us-them dichotomy, which definitely has an element of inclusion and exclusion. So, in the past year, we put some effort into creating new communities of people that didn't know each other before, and now they are collaborating for a common aim. What we try to have is to be more inclusive as possible, but at the same time, if you keep it too inclusive, you lose this feeling of belonging, which is very nice to have in a group of people. You know, when you feel part of a group, you know the people, you have the trust to work together very well. And I don't have any answer how to compromise that. We are trying to apply some strategies, trying not to erase hierarchies but more exchanging roles. So that the thing can move with different people around who are taking different responsibilities at different times, let's say.

GR: Um... You know, the thing about having an alternative for groups to exist in a manner that is not purely hierarchic, is usually a question of numbers. I mean, this is something that I've been interested in for a long time. Again, I don't have the academic references ready to show, but there's been a lot of thinking about the influence of the number of people in a group towards the possibility of having a non-hierarchical community. I mean, if we take it very easily, we can all understand by intuition that if we have a group of 6 people, it would be very possible to have something that is like, "OK, let's spread the responsibilities, let's take decisions together, let's vote on everything, let's have roles, let's exchange power..." But try to think about it with one billion people. So, what is happening between 6 people and one billion people? Knowing that, and understanding what kind of structures are possible in relation to the number of people, brings us to the question,

"How can we construct society?"

MZ: I mean, I definitely relate to that, and I would say it's happening also on a smaller scale. We started this 1+1=3 magazine thing in two, me and a friend. Then we started to call people, and at the beginning there were like 15. And it worked. Then it got bigger, bigger, and bigger. Now there are between 40 to 60 active people. And it's getting harder and harder to have this switching roles, responsibilities, changing... We're also trying to avoid this kind of paternalism in which you are the organizer, and you try to convince people to do stuff. We tried that, and it didn't work, of course. And still, you say, "How to define society." But for me, it's really starting from below. Actually, I'm more interested in having these small utopias as sort of kibbutzim.

GR: Alright.

MZ: And instead of thinking big and saying, "OK, now I'm an artist, I deal with society, how can I make a social change on a bigger scale?" For me, it's really starting from a very specific and located situation, and then, hopefully, the people who are involved will maybe initiate other spaces or will gather experiences which maybe can teach them something, so that they can bring this change to other people. That's more or less the little dream behind it.

GR: I see. And do you sense the difference between 5 people to 40 people?

MZ: Definitely. I would say it comes from being closer in time and space.

GR: Um. I think the last attempt that I can recall was made in recent times, to try and have a communication that is not based on the old hierarchy. It was during the 2011 Occupy movements that spread around the whole world. I mean, there was also one here in Israel, which was political and economic. But we also saw it in Wall Street and in many other places in the world. And you cannot speak about all of them with the same terms, of course, because the reasons were different, and the circumstances were different. But something was in common, I witnessed the attempt to communicate in a different way in large numbers, and very weird practices started to appear. Sitting in very large circles, some new signs and gestures with hands were invented, so that people could express what they thought simultaneously without interrupting the flow of the discussion. Do you remember this period? You know what I'm talking about?

MZ: Um, I was too young... What happened in 2011?

GR: Many things happened in the world around 2011, there were many riots and strikes. In the Arab world, for example, it was politically directed to change the regime,

like in Egypt.

MZ: Is it the Arab Spring?

GR: The Arab Spring, yes. But the Arab Spring happened with conjunction and at the same time with Occupy Wall Street, for example, which was an anti-capitalist movement trying to see the world in a more social way. And the same happened in Israel and in other places. And what you could see was like, let's say, a neo-hippyish-socialist-leftist dream, to have a more equal conversation and to spread the wealth differently, to use economical scholars in order to try to think how to get out of this capitalistic system, let's say. For example, in Tel Aviv the whole Rothschild Boulevard was covered with tents, and for a month thousands of people slept and had some kind of festival within the city. It didn't start as a festival in which you have music and do drugs, but where you have conversations about the future of the world. It was a very utopian moment, a very weird one, within a long period of very high and violent capitalism. It was interesting to see how they were trying to practice non-hierarchical methods of communication and governing. And it was very utopian. And it didn't work out. I mean, it's difficult to question whether the discussions influenced the world or not. I don't think I can go into that, honestly. I think it did and it didn't at the same time, but it was a very significant attempt to try to imagine something else, which remained in the imagination. And later, do you know Adam Curtis?

MZ: Sure.

GR: Adam Curtis is this BBC documentary maker who has been doing amazing things for 30 years now. He has, for example, a lot of critical thinking about this moment, and what he's basically saying is that the idea of dismantling, breaking down and deconstructing the power, is not enough. And to him, that's what happened with the assistance of the new social media that was coming really strong at this point for the first time. You know, in 2011 Facebook was already grown, not like the first 2 years. So, suddenly people could communicate on larger scales with the technology that was developed in our world. Who owns that technology? The people or the government? If we look at the point of view of people owning the technology, yes, social media was the most effective tool in the Arab Spring, for example. People came to Tahrir Square because they were using Tor and social media, everybody knew what was happening, everything was broadcasted live, and the government lost control over the power of the narrative. We know that whenever something that is against the regime is happening, the regime will do whatever it can in order to tell us a different narrative.

MZ: You know, it's something very similar to what's happening now in Palestine.

GR: Yes, exactly.

MZ: I think it's very, very interesting the way Instagram, for example, is being used to really create a narrative. And here, again, we can discuss if this is actually effective to try to counteract a narrative with another narrative. Maybe it's more effective to try to figure out how we can deal with those situations without using the element of narrative. But what Palestinians are doing now it's a crazy work on social media, videotaping moments of violence, spreading information from that perspective, making infographics... I think it's connected to what you said.

GR: I think so, too. I think it's very much connected. And the question that you bring up, whether it is effective to counter a narrative with another narrative, is one of the questions that we're dealing with right now. Regarding technology, I just want to note that what I was describing as a tool for resistance, at the same time is the most effective tool for control. Here comes the question, "Who owns the technology?" Technology has the ability to connect people, to bring them together, to create alternative narratives, to break down narratives or whatever you want, but is also the most effective tool for control and oppression. On the same token you can think, for example, how Palestinians use social media as a tool in the occupied territories, in Israel, Gaza or whatever, but this same tool is used against them. You can imagine that everybody who is posting a video or a phrase on the Palestinian struggle, is also exposing it to the government, telling them who should they arrest next. The same time you are spreading something, you're also exposing something, giving the government the best tool to know where you are. Because we do know that your phone, which is the best tool to resist these days, is also the best tool to control you. Your phone knows where you are all the time.

MZ: I would say there are some moments in which people feel like they are part of a bigger thing, a bigger movement. And then, everybody takes courage to take action on- and off-line

GR: Um...

MZ: So, a few months ago, not many people had the courage to post and do things. I mean, there were people, but not a big number. And after what happened in Gaza and Al-Aqsa in the past weeks there was this sort of awakening of Palestinians and the western world, suddenly everyone realized that there is something going on in the Middle East and wanted to stand for a cause, posting it on social media. And, in a way, you feel more protected because there are a lot of people who are doing the same thing. You imagine you're just one little drop in a sea, you have your little voice. Is that useful? I don't know. But at least I don't think I'll get into trouble because there are so many people doing it that they cannot arrest anyone.

GR: Are you sure?

MZ: Even though maybe now it's different... I wonder if I'll get a visa when I arrive with my flight in Tel Aviv, since they already know that I was posting stuff like that.

GR: Exactly. They do know everything about you. You are right that they cannot deal with everybody at the same time, but since the algorithms and computers are becoming more and more efficient, the ability to process large scale political information is also growing. Do you know that Israel controls the communication system in Gaza and in the West Bank? I mean, if I'm not wrong, they are using Israeli companies, they don't have their own phone companies. Do you understand what it means? It means that the Israeli Shabak... Do you know what is that?

MZ: The Israeli Security Agency, no?

GR: Alright, the Secret Service can do whatever they want. They can know your location, they can know the content of your communication. And there are no people listening. An algorithm is listening. It's not that somebody is sitting with a paper and writing things down, a very smart computer can make conclusions out of it. So, we have a technological big brother that is connected directly to each person. Think of it, each one of those people that are thinking, "I'm one in a million," is actually carrying most of the time an identifier tag, an identifier machine very close to their body, that is providing constant information about where they are and what they're doing. This is terrifying in the same way that it is liberating. And this is the paradox in which we're living, I think. The friction between the old idea of nation state that is controlling in several ways we already know, and the notion of, let's say, the cloud, the Internet or whatever system that is trying to look as if it was democratic, as if everyone could operate it, bypass it, work with it. But at the cost of being watched all the time and being manipulated. That's why I think that escaping would not be easy. And if you do want to escape by not using those machines that are exposing you to the tyranny of the regime, you are paying a very heavy price. Being off-grid is being weak because the whole system is not working like that.

MZ: I don't have an answer...

GR: We don't. The best we can do is just to describe what is happening and try to imagine different small solutions like you are doing. I really appreciate the attempts of trying to do something else, even on a smaller scale, because I do think it's changing the way people think in a very deep and slow way. And maybe this is our only option, it's becoming more and more difficult to resist. It's also becoming more and more difficult to know if you do want to resist. What head should we chop? You know, back in the monarchy days, let's say, during the French Revolution, there

was a king and it was very clear that if you take this king and chop his head with a guillotine, at least you break the system, right? And once you did it, there's a vacuum, the system doesn't know what to do without the head. Now the system is way stronger than that. Do you think that if you chop the head of Bibi Netanyahu or Putin, something will change? I don't think so. Wherever you hit the system, the system is reshaping around your fist in a different way. You can't really hit the system. There is no head to chop.

MZ: I started this book called 'The New Spirit of Capitalism' by Boltanski and Chiapello. It's about this idea of constant shaping and reshaping of the system that reproduces itself, and whenever you think you are attacking it, you are actually still acting inside the rules that are defined by the system itself.

GR: Exactly.

MZ: I think that here we can connect it a lot to what recently happened in America with George Floyd and all the Black Lives Matter or LGBTQ struggles. We are seeing how those causes are used, for example, by Israeli government's pink washing. Which is not about capitalism, or maybe yes. But still, you have an element of resistance that is used by a government to create a narrative to oppress.

GR: Exactly. Can you send me the name of this book? It's something that I think about a lot. And I would like to...

MZ: It's pretty heavy, I don't know if you want to start it. Look here...

GR: Oh my God! I want to be honest, I would never be able to read such a huge... But I mean, there are endless examples of how capitalism is reshaping and swallowing any resistance, making this resistance to work within capitalism. Think about hip hop and rap music, how it started as a resistance in the ghetto and how much it is tied to the capitalist machine now. Think about the punk movement, that was very much about, "Fuck the system." And a few years later it became a commodity, each 15-year-old girl wanted to dress like a punk but didn't know anything about what it meant. It became a fashion very easily. And the interesting thing is that there is no mind behind it, it's just the nature of the beast. It's the nature of this algorithm. It's just acting like an amoeba or something.

MZ: But in the end, all this is still a product of mankind. I think there are mechanisms that you can apply on different scales. In a way, it's a sort of big brain, if you want to think of it that way.

GR: Yes, I do.

MZ: Which still follows the nature of humankind. The accumulation, the need for safety, the concept of

individuality... Or maybe this was different before. In the tribes there was not such a concept of individuality like we understand it now. But still, as a human, you want to survive. You want to exploit resources that you have around you and take advantage of situations.

GR: Yes, I do agree, and I think the idea of individuality was a scheme in the beginning, but it played very well into the system. The notion of individuality is what keeps us numb. It's what keeps us asleep and unaware of the ways we are controlled. If we are in a communist society, it's on the table. You know, everybody can see it. The text is like, "We are not individuals. We don't have our free will. We have to be synchronized with the state and the leader and bla bla bla." But if we numb the people... The biggest manipulation of capitalism is to make you think that you are free. That's the idea. You will think, "Wow, everything is possible, I can have whatever I want!" But, at the same time, you would be controlled. Not knowing that you are being controlled is the best way to control you.

MZ: It's actually useful, as we said before, to start from below. To start from dismantling this separation between people, and not to create a communist state in which it's clear that people don't have a free will, but to have little environments in which people still have their free will, think together with other people, do things together with other people. With elements of care, vulnerability, passion, whatever.

GR: If I'm thinking about your project, the idea of many islands is better than the idea of one mainland, as a metaphor. If you start with a seed of two people and grow up to 40 people, in one year you'll be 200 people, and then you would be 1000 people, I don't think it would be efficient. I think it should be broken down into small groups. The challenge will be how to create the connection between the islands, and not just to expand everything, because then we will end up understanding that we cannot operate together. But what if we can work in small groups that have some kind of modality between them that connects them? If we think about the ancient models of groups, the idea was that you are part of a tribe, or a family. And you don't change this family. You belong only to one family. This is your tribe, you go from place to place, you find a cave, you make a fire... And we all know the history. Once people started to make agriculture, they wanted to sit in one place, and then society got bigger, people needed a system to rule it, and the whole fucked-up thing started. Right?

MZ: Right.

GR: This is the snowball of everything. But one person could not be in several groups, you would only belong to one group. Nowadays, if you are constructing something that is like small groups communicating with each other in some kind of constellation, it is not necessary that one

person will be 100% loyal to one group. Maybe the communication between them is that each person is part of 3 groups, which prevents the groups from being apart from each other. They are not completely different from each other because all of them have the same genes within them. Now we have possibilities that we didn't have in ancient times. I think that we should imagine how we work with small groups and big groups together.

MZ: This is exactly how the Internet works.

GR: Exactly, right.

MZ: You have a network of interconnected points, or islands.

GR: Yes, I agree with you, and I think, as I said, that this is the solution and the problem at the same time. But we can borrow some of those models and bring them into something that is not the Internet, that is not completely controlled by the Internet. And we can also not agree to everything on the Internet.

I would say that what we are lacking on the Internet is responsibility. For example, if I belong to a Facebook group, 'Car Lovers', I don't feel such a responsibility for this group. I have five groups and can leave one, nobody will even know that I left. So, how do we create groups that still have the sense of responsibility within them and to other groups? I'm thinking of models that are less anonymous and less voluntary than the Internet. And I do think that the biggest problem and advantage that we have, in relation to what you pointed out about the Internet, is technology. I don't see how technology is not going forward. I don't think it ever happens that technology is reducing itself, lowering its impact. I see connectivity becoming more and more thick. It will be more and more connected to more and more things, and that means, in the end, that it will be very difficult to dismantle, to take it apart.

MZ: But I think we should intend technology as an extension of man, not technology as computers and Internet.

GR: What do you mean by 'technology as extensions of man'?

MZ: For example, writing is a technology. Everything that man creates is an extension of himself.

GR: It's interesting what you're saying, because while it's coming out of the human race, technology is thriving now to get into your body.

MZ: Yeah, it's a proper extension, in that case it's actually an extension.

GR: But the extension is something that goes from you to the outside, 'to extend'. But now, we have extensions that

go inside. That's the paradox of it. Usually, when you think about extension, you think about making very long hands, so that you can reach far away. And now it is not so much of a physical extension. It's an extension of abilities, which goes inwards.

MZ: But it's still an extension of abilities.

GR: Yes, it is, actually. And it goes inwards and outwards at the same time. You know, Elon Musk just exposed his new chip that goes into your brain. Have you seen that?

MZ: No, crazy!

GR: It's insane. The idea is that you will have a chip inside your brain. And, of course, what he's claiming is that it's a good thing because it will cure depression, anxiety, mental illness and whatever. But we can all imagine what would be the cause of having something that is all the time connected to your synopsis in your brain. It's just one step from your smartphone. I mean, think about the Internet in its early days. In order to use the Internet, you would need to sit in front of your computer, at home. And when you weren't at home, you were not connected. Now you carry it in your pocket, it's always with you. So, you are connected all the time. The next step will be that your phone will literally go into your body, and that would be the end point of everything. It will be connected to the systems of your body and at the same time to the whole Internet, and you will become one entity in a bigger system.

MZ: That's pretty dystopian.

GR: Yes. But this is where we are going. The only question is, "How would we use it?" But the fact that it's going there, I think it's inevitable.

MZ: I think there will be a big movement of resistance to those things.

GR: Of course.

MZ: I mean, up to now we didn't get to the point in which we touch our bodies. It's always, as you said, the external. We have objects and things. I can decide to destroy them, potentially.

GR: Yes, but if in the 70s someone would have told you, "You know, in 40 years from now you will carry in your pocket some kind of device that will say where you are all the time, recording everything you say." People would laugh!

MZ: Yeah, but many people would laugh even now. It's not so clear that having a device with you can mean that.

GR: Right. If you told me this in the 70s, I would really

say, "No! People would resist!" I would say people would not accept it. I would not imagine how people would actually want this, and this is what I told you about the notion of being free. It's not gonna be that the regime will hunt you and force you to put the chip in your mind. You will want to do it. And you will want the new version! You will stand in line in front of an Apple Store to get the new chip!