on process as work / structuring a space / questioning democracy / forming a collective / individuality and letting go / collective intelligence / structures vs systems / censorship / analysis of an artistic practice

with **Josefina Sundblad**
04 may 2021 [*r,1,e*]

MZ: What are you working on now?

JS: Alright. I didn't know this at the beginning, but I did do a third edition of 'Searching for Humans'. I just didn't know I was doing it while I was doing it. So, that's a bit weird. It really has no clear beginning, no clear end. It's just a continuous process. I've been attaching myself to is this saying, "The process is the work, the process is the work, the process is the work…" And by following this kind of dogma, basically by instinct, intuition and impulsivity, the work appeared. I tried to come up with anything else to do for around a year. I started working with Duarte in February 2020, thinking about what could be possible, I was like, "I have no clue of what the fuck I'm doing. But let's discuss it."

MZ: The work is the process!

JS: Exactly. The work is the process. In November, I just got tired. I was like, "I'm tired of constantly thinking and reading and deleting." And suddenly the impulsivity. I decided to give myself to the concept fully: and started working within this process. I think it really connects quite a lot to the context of Covid, 100%. Quarantine was quite harsh at that time. I got Covid in November, so I was in proper quarantine for an entire month, and I really felt the lack of people. You know, all those times that we would come out of class and go have a coffee in Uni Bar, and then you're sitting there and you're talking with people about projects and things. And then before you know it, lightning hits and you're like, "Oh, shit, I'm going to go do that!" And this is something that to me connects a lot in my own practice… I mean, the other day someone asked me, "When are you at your happiest? What is the thing that really kind of calms your entire soul?" Men, just sitting in a bar! Literally sitting in a bar for hours, smoking cigarettes, drinking… Whatever, and having people and good conversations.

MZ: And how does this connect to your practice?

JS: I go back. These are things that I am understanding now by analyzing all of my reasons why I did shit, because a lot of what I'm doing is analysis of the process and the way that my own brain puts things together. I'm thinking back. This is one of the main reasons why I started doing this. I was like, "I wanna talk to fucking people." But I don't want to just talk to them in the way that… I couldn't really do it in-presence because of all the regulations. You know what? I didn't want to think of the limitations of Covid, but I wanted to use its possibilities instead. So, I opened it up to internationality and I ended up with around thirty people that, you know how things are, they slowly kind of condense itself into a solid thirteen. Fourteen, actually. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine… 15 people from all around the world. So, we have people from Argentina to the United States, to London, to Australia, France, Germany, here in Bolzano, etc. And it's all people

that I actually have known. This is something that was really different from my other past collectives, because they were open and I would just put a bunch of shit out there and be like, "hey, whoever wants to join…" And I worked with people I didn't know. This time, I was working with people that in my life, in some way or another, I had a connection with, that I have met, but they didn't know each other. That was pretty weird. We created this kind of space together. I started creating a structure, so I had to start thinking, "Okay, how can this be viable? How can we actually meet and create types of discourses and this really beautiful intensity of sharing?" So, the name of it, as a free title to begin with, was 'Panem et Circenses: Neophytes Dream'.

MZ: Crazy!

JS: Yeah, I must say I do love my title! And then the aspect of a neophyte and the dreaming is the part that really, really quite intensely connects to it. I didn't want it to feel as a place where people felt experts about something, but it was more about our own innocence and our own ignorance. And that's OK.

MZ: I see.

JS: It's OK to learn from each other. It is OK to have discourses that in the end ended up being about politics and social problems. And we also spoke a lot about artistic practices. We did a bunch of meetings where we felt like we were just having group therapy between each other.

MZ: I had similar experiences with my projects. And how did you organize it?

JS: From the beginning I said, "OK, maximum, this is going to go until the end of March." And I called it 'phase one'. And in phase one we had these meetings. The process is the work, so I worked within the process. I created a file where I had all the people, I had all of the different time zones, because, of course, everyone is from different places, so I needed to figure out how to make them connect in a time that it would work. We didn't have fixed dates, at the beginning I would contact them directly and be like, "Hey, next week, when are you free?" And I would do this with everyone. Then I would create smaller groups of between… Sometimes we were three. Sometimes we were four. Sometimes there were five people… Wait, someone's ringing the bell.

MZ: Yep!

JS: OK, so, where was I? I was there for every single meeting. So, let's put that from the beginning of December until the end of March. We did this collective work, there were around 40 meetings. I was in every single one of them, I had meetings pretty much every day, and usually

in the evening. Sometimes I had two or three meetings in the same day. But all of them in total must have had maybe six or seven meetings in total throughout that entire time. We just kinda created a safe space where to discuss and be open. I am convinced that if you give people more freedom and more agency, they will not just work better, but they will be happier doing so. And overall, you will create a better democracy.

MZ: I'm definitely with you.

JS: So, I realize that what I'm trying to do is reimagining the structures of a collective. And how can a collective work. I'm also trying to analyze, you know, how democracy works. It's really a big question, that's why it's a bit complicated as a project in general. What is free will? What is democracy? How do people communicate? Of course, this is not viable in a long-term situation and you have to do a lot with the context. So, it is definitely an experimentation more than anything.

MZ: How did you structure the project?

JS: There was phase one and phase two. The first phase of the collective was mainly just getting to know each other. Conversations and discourses for two months. All of this has been documented, and afterwards I would look over the documentation and I found certain patterns and topics, things, concepts that really kept arising from each other within all of these meetings. And then I started pinpointing different kinds of projects. And we had, for example, 'let's build a country' where we spent hours just basically trying to make a country out of the fucking blue, and we would discuss, "Do we want the military? In which way? Do we have free healthcare? Yes or no? Do we… What type of politics do we have? How can people vote? Let's rethink space…" We were trying to go through the medium of film, and we imagined, "What is space?" You know, considering this entire virtuality, what does it mean to be in a virtual space? Imagine you had a holographic person that literally was in front of you even though you knew that he wasn't in front of you. What does it mean for space and time and the perception that we have of reality? The essence of presence, where through poetry we wanted to explore, "What does it mean to be present?" So, all of these little projects came out of this and then we began to put together the concepts and the ideas. Some of them were books. Some of them were going to be a movie, some other ones were going to be maybe essays or a mind map. And that's OK, because like I said, my project is not about that. It's about the analysis of the structure and of the process. And all of the bigger philosophical questions that come up with this.

MZ: And what about phase two?

JS: At the end of March we stopped, and then I had

interviews where I asked everyone, "Hey, let me know, how was your experience? What did you perceive out of this? How did it go?" So I had a lot of feedback from everyone. Now I'm actually working on cutting them, I'm trying to make it into a short five minutes thing where through their words, you can actually also grasp a little bit of what it is that we were trying to do. So that was that. Phase two has been reading and researching. Basically, I do everything opposite. Now I'm trying to understand all of the reasons for why this thing is what it is. My documentation, for me, it's really the abstraction of what was, it's not the work, but it is definitely an extension. So I would call it more an 'artist book', where I will write extremely theoretical essays, but then they're gonna be moments where I go through the process and the documentation asking, "What is 'Searching for Humans'? And what was "S4H: Re-imagining collective structures, an open narrative of the possible *(I think therefor I am)* active agent; a critical analysis of a neophytes' experience of the un-countable noun: LIFE" So, that's kind of what I'm working on in that sense.

MZ: How will you actually document all this?

JS: What is to document, exactly? I have an obsession with documentation, I realized. I'm going to present my artistic practice. It's not so much one physical thing, but it's more all what happened in this entire last couple of years, ever since this popped up. I'm going to make an 'archival interface' and in this space, what I want to do is something that… I want to cancel myself out. I want to have everything in there, so it's kind of the 'Searching for Humans' manifesto, and you have all of the works and everything that happened. And then people can discuss them, they can add to it, but it's all between them, you know. It creates a network of people that believe in this aspect of democracy or free will. That's one thing. And then the documentation is another thing. And then the third one is… Sorry, I'm almost done, I know it's a long shit.

MZ: Please! I let you speak.

JS: Alright! The third one is… All of this, I can pinpoint, is my interpretation. So, if someone else from the collective wanted to maybe take this and do something with it, it will be completely different and that's absolutely fine. And that's as part of the work. You know, this is one interpretation out of the millions of interpretations that could be taken from something like this. So, this third one would be a reinterpretation of the meetings. I want to do basically magazines. Yeah, it could be called a magazine. And you have volumes, each of them is attached to one documentation of one meeting in which I re-structure that which happened, all the discourses, all the things we talked about, into a book where I want to explore a lot the idea of non-linearity and open works. And how do we narrate things and so on. Yeah.

MZ: Wow. I wonder how it happened that we never spoke about those things before.

JS: Because you were off doing your stuff! You were in Jerusalem being like… Oh yeah.

MZ: But it's crazy. I don't know, we didn't have many contacts during the past year. But what you speak about is… I would say it's pretty much the same stuff I'm exploring.

JS: That's awesome man. I feel like more people should. The world would be a better place if more people question the structures of how things are done.

MZ: You touched one of the main points of my research!

JS: Are you copying me? Don't copy!

MZ: I don't care! I mean, for me there is no not even the question of copying or not copying.

JS: I'm a free-source type of person. Come, grab, do whatever… But what's your project about? C'mon.

MZ: So, everything started when I was in Jerusalem, and of course it's also very connected to the pandemic. Luisa and I decided that we wanted to do something together because we were just feeling like everything that we would have done alone would have been crap. Not because we were not able to do things, but more because it just didn't feel relevant. We thought, "Now that we are all in our house, we need to connect." And we started to create spaces in which that could happen.

JS: That's key. It's about space, how to create a structure that allows for a space like this to become almost organic… That's the beauty of it.

MZ: For me, it's about making space available. Yeah, and taking care of it. Taking care of the connections between people, trying to erase myself from the picture sometimes, or not to erase myself, but more saying, "I am a member of the group as much as you are."

JS: I know, but…

MZ: That's particularly difficult when you are the initiator of something and then people look at you as the one who started the thing, and therefore as the decision-maker. And I always try to push this thing and say, "Everybody can make decisions." But on the other hand, if you don't take decisions, nobody will take courage in the beginning, because there is no trust between the members yet, there is no trust between us. You know, it's very tricky to balance this being too much inside or being completely erased from the picture.

JS: I mean, it's been my problem since the beginning, because I'm very obsessed with the idea of breaking down hierarchies. And I am very obsessed with the idea of… Not like the hippie way. I know there are some communities that are very like "Hey man, all free will, everyone's the same, bla bla bla." I truly believe that not everyone is good at everything, not everyone is an expert on everything. I do truly believe in communities that by their own free will decide to make their own rules within that community. And it happens to be that in those cases, there will be someone that takes a bit more care of the organizational aspect. But democratically, anything that is like an actual decision gets run through the people. And then if the people say yes, then I move forward with the motion.

MZ: But this is something possible with a group of people that already know each other. You cannot do that…

JS: Teo, they didn't know each other! I mean, they knew me, but they didn't know each other.

MZ: So, did you actually manage to do something like this?

JS: Yes, it works! I mean, for example, the first question I asked was, "If you had heard about this open call randomly from someone else, and it wasn't because it was connected to me, would you have participated?" That was question one. Question two was, "Did you feel my position? Did you feel like I was somehow leading you? And they were only like, "No, you were there as part of us but also as that presence that was almost necessary to glue us together. But then you allowed the space for us to have that moment, also not getting yourself out." So, it was keeping that really tight balance between being a part of them and also being the person that kind of pushes the domino. Who puts the dominoes together, finds them and somehow the dominoes are connected magically and then you push one and all of them fall. And it's really quite intense and weird as an experience, just as an experience in itself. A lot of them used the word 'organic' and a lot of them used the word 'care', so what they felt for me was that I did things with care, like I listened, I cared. It's almost like the warmth of the human touch.

MZ: Beautiful.

JS: I mean, it is called 'Searching for Humans' for a reason. And that humans created an organic space that was the creation of all of us, but also the input, because from the beginning I was extremely open. I was like, "I don't know what we're doing. I don't know why I'm here. This is extremely process-based. You know, I'm not telling you where we have to make anything. If we don't make anything, that's absolutely fine. This is absolutely free will, come and go as you wish. You know, we will try to make it work all together and see where it takes us, see where

the process takes us." And then from the beginning, everyone… I mean, not everyone. Of course, for some people this was not their shit. You know, some people told me, "I just need a bit more structure, I couldn't deal with that." Or some people dropped out halfway through, and it was because they wanted to maybe speak about more specific things. We were very transdisciplinary, like I had computer scientists, mechanical engineers, performers or painters. I had people that maybe did hobbies as art, but not really what they studied. I had communication students. I also had quite a varying range of ages, which was also very interesting. So, well…

MZ: Do you think it's problematic if you say, "I had?"

JS: I had… Yes, it is. It is problematic. But I also, at the same time, almost accepted it at this point. I've been working with collectives for… I mean, in my short life it feels like a long time. And something that I realize, there is a 'we' but there is an 'I'. And I am not trying to cut away the 'I', I am not trying to cut away the individuality. I'm trying to make it shine within the collective. I am trying to say, "We are in the 'I', one." I don't know how to explain it. It should be a space where we can be together as one, but also as ourselves. I'm not trying to create a hegemonic 'we-ness'. The other day I was talking to someone and they say, "Jesus was the ultimate anarchist and ultimate communist." He was there to be like, "Everything is a 'we'." OK, sure. I don't think saying 'I' is incorrect because there were certain aspects about this project, which were an 'I', yeah. I mean, there was a 'we' later, there was sometimes a 'we' in the meantime, and there's always a 'we' in the generality. This is something that's really funny about trying to understand where shit comes from and where do ideas begin, and how do they develop. Man, I have voice notes from 2017 where I said something that actually connects to what I'm doing right now.

MZ: Yeah.

JS: I just didn't know it. My bibliography will have everything. I'm planning on writing the series I watched, the movies I watched, the books that have nothing to do with it… Literally, my acknowledgments start with all the people that I don't remember but influenced me. In some way you have influenced me as a person. You are part of this project because this project is about life in general. It's hard to say.

MZ: Sure.

JS: I go back. It can be problematic sometimes, of course, but I don't think the people I participate with on these projects have any problem when I say 'I', because there are certain moments where he was definitely me, and they can feel it, and I can feel it too. It would be unjust to any of us to take that away.

MZ: Yeah, it's fair.

JS: For sure. I don't know. If you were to make something and maybe 3 people out of the 17 did it. You could say, "Yes, within the umbrella of this collective, these 3 people did this." I don't think there's anything wrong with that.

MZ: I think it could get a bit tricky when you put this volume of work into the art system or the school system, where individuality plays a big role. It's 'my' thesis, it's 'my' work…

JS: Again, the process is the work, I won't come out of the process ever. This is what I call a reinterpretation, and this is why I call it 'my' reinterpretation. I cannot speak for anyone else. I cannot speak for anyone else.

MZ: I completely agree with this. I just think we found different solutions. You say, "I cannot speak for someone else." And you do collaborative work, a collective-based research, exploration, whatever. And then you give your personal opinion and view on that. In the end, it's you.

JS: No, let's not simplify things that are quite complex.

MZ: Yeah. But it's your personal view of what happened, and then that's you writing a thesis about what happened.

JS: No, that's the beauty of it. It's not so much about what happened. It is more about the experience of what happened. Here terminology becomes a little more specific.

MZ: I can relate. Actually, for me also the word 'documentation' is pretty problematic for this kind of work.

JS: For me, it's more about the individuals within the space. The collective is a thing in itself, of course. But this is why I speak more about the structure, because that is me. I am very clear about the way that I create collectives, the way that I create the structure that then allows for the space, for the collective to happen. Until there, that's me, then, this is all of us, everyone who participated. But no one can take that away. You know, I can't delete that. Sure, someone else could have done it. And they could have done it probably the same way, but I did it.

MZ: But that's also what's happening in the 1+1=3 paper now. Someone else is taking care of the organization, it's not my thing anymore. That's maybe the difference between what you and I are doing, it's defining positions, hierarchies and structures of power.

JS: That's why I said it's reimagining collective structures. It's not obliterating the idea of a hierarchy. I am working, I am trying to understand exactly what it is and how it really works. I go back, it's a bit of a hippie thought in general. I connected a little bit to this idealistic idea that humans can

just be little perfect peaceful puppies, all collectively working together. I'm not that positive about reality and about humanity in general. 85% of me is positive, but then there is another 25% of me that is critical. There are levels, and I'm trying to understand those levels.

MZ: So, what is your role in all of this?

JS: Ok, to sum up. I remember, when I had to write my abstract, I was trying to exactly understand what my position in all of this is. And I used the word 'agent activator', which is a really French way of saying… I feel like I'm the kid, I'm the child that saw a domino and decided to kick it. So, it's almost like everything was there. I just looked at it and I decided to poke it, and then something out of that created some type of chain reaction. So that's a little bit how I see my position. Because of my artistic necessities and because of my artistic interests, and it all happens to be within this whole idea of freewill, democracy, people, connections, safe, open spaces for communications… I mean, I go back. It touches a lot of topics, it touches narration, it touches the idea of learning, sharing, of ignorance and knowledge. It's very philosophical in its essence. So, because of all of this, I looked at it, I touched it and something happened. The touching is the structure, and the structure is what is my actual artistic work. And this is why it's extremely weird for me to try to… It took me ages to get here, to understand it. At first, I was like, "Well, no, the work is what we all make together." I never considered the structure as something that was so important. I always thought it was just like my means to achieve the collectivity. And then at some point, something clicked in my head. And I'm like, "wait a second. That's their shit! That's our shit all together, but mainly also their shit!" You know, it's a space where these people get to meet together and do stuff, and they have that freedom to do whatever the fuck they want within it. I happen to also be within it, so I can also do whatever the fuck I want within it. But the structure got created, the structure was thought, was processed, tweaked, was almost slightly in an innocent way, manipulated. I can't take that away. I am extremely conscious of censorship, and I am extremely conscious of manipulations, even in the good sense, which I first thought they couldn't exist. And then I thought, "No, actually they do." It's just that we have a tendency of using it extremely in the bad sense, but you can also have a positive sense. In the way that we manipulate each other just by speaking. You know, "I'm slowly trying to make you understand what I'm trying to say." And maybe you wouldn't use the word manipulation, but sometimes I do. So, for me, my artistic work as an 'I' has been the structure, but then the structure happened to be used for this mode, great. It is what I wanted it for. I wanted to be a space where people can meet. But I can't take away that that happened. And you can't take away that you did that, too, I mean, even if you hadn't, then it just wouldn't exist there. It wouldn't exist.

MZ: It's true.

JS: This is a little bit where I'm going to. That does not mean that I take credit in any fucking way about anything that happens within it. Imagine if the person that invented the fucking Internet decided to make it closed source instead of open source. And just because he created a structure and a program, now that program is only for him to take credit. No! Everyone can use the program, and everyone can use it in their own fucking ways. And there is freedom of communication. But, you know, the person that made the program is still the person that made the program, and I'm not trying to speak for 'the death of the author'. I don't think that there is such a thing as 'the death of the author'. But I also don't believe in the way that, like in the 70s, 80s, when we had that gigantic moment of the artists as a God, "The sole creator of something." Which also you can see it in entrepreneurs, you can see it in the way that we raise all of these rich billionaires up into pedestals because they 'invented'. I don't believe in invention in the sense of the sole creation of something from nothing else. Everything is a collective memory. Everything is collective intelligence. Everything that I say, someone else has already said in one way or another, everything I know I only know because I live in society and I have access to information that other people made, and it all creates another connection. But do you see how that does not take away the individuality?

MZ: Sure.

JS: I want to move from that. You can't take away individuality, because if you take away individuality, you actually take away the beautiful thing that is human. It's more about overcoming our ego about it and overcoming this idea that just because I have a talent for something, or I'm special at something, then that makes me the sole creator of something.

MZ: I completely relate. I think it's good. It's very pointing the distinction that you make between the 'I' and the ego. There can be a healthy 'I'.

JS: Of course.

MZ: And there is also an ego that is healthy. But I think it really changes from person to person. You and I are going more towards trying to overcome our egos, not our 'I' maybe, in order to allow ourselves to be more in a group.

JS: Yeah. Sometimes I think I just do it because I want a space like that. And I don't know anyone else doing a space like I want to have it. So, I make it myself, and then I put myself in there. Sometimes I think it's because I really, truly believe in connectivity and democracy. Sometimes I become altruistic, and I think that I'm doing it for this. Sometimes I become a bit more selfish and I'm like, "No,

I'm just doing it for me." And sometimes I think, "I didn't even know what was gonna happen." I just had an impulse and I went with it. And there is no way for me to analyze it. I think that's also the problem. I mean, we are subjective beings, and apart from subjective beings, we are also moldable and changeable, and we change with our experiences. So, it does not mean that something that for me was true yesterday can be true tomorrow. And that also goes for my artistic practice. I mean, I've changed it a hundred times. I had an entire mental breakdown a year and a half ago, everything went to shit, and I had to suddenly… I saw my soul pieces and I was like, "Oh, I need to put this together somehow." And there were holes everywhere. And I was like, "Uh, I guess I need to make new things." And that doesn't mean that in a year I won't have another one. I don't know man. Being a human is weird.

an ongoing collective exploration / learning from experiences of togetherness and uncertainty / reflecting on listening – with **Josefina Sundblad, Matteo Zoccolo** – 04 may 2021
matteozoccolo.net/on_listening/conversations.html