

*on relational art in a nutshell / fertile field / possibilities of space /
learning to do things with no practical purpose / art to change normality /
checking the possibility of an alternative / what remains in our hands /
how to make a living / proving something*

with **Michael Lengauer, Sujeong Kim**
25 april 2021 [r,l,h,e]

*an ongoing collective exploration / learning from experiences of togetherness and uncertainty / reflecting on listening – with Michael Lengauer, Sujeong Kim, Matteo Zoccolo – 25 april 2021
matteozoccolo.net/on_listening/conversations.html*

ML: So, what participatory art is and why...

SK: Why participatory? It's not also about the interaction between people?

MZ: Um, I think for me, it starts from a space. So, you can initiate a space in which interaction can happen. The space can be a garden or an online chat. It can be more or less physical or immaterial. But for me, the interaction starts when people feel comfortable in a space and they do things together. My research now is how to open those spaces, how to create those spaces so that people feel comfortable and feel they have a common aim, or better, a common direction where to go. Given that, we can research together on a topic, or maybe we can produce together a magazine. And this is something we are doing together. Yeah, I think this comes from the space.

SK: It's too abstract for me. First, I was thinking about... I don't know, take one store in which two people work together, and their common aim is to sell something. At the same time, they have a lot of time to talk and they have small chats with each other, every day. Really small talks. But in the end, I was thinking about a podcast or something like that, because you were talking about conversations, with some common aim. I don't know. But what is the relationship between the space and this kind of conversation? Why do you think the space is important?

ML: Tough questions uh?

MZ: Um, why is the space important...

ML: I guess you are more speaking about the fact that the space needs to be comfortable for the people to be open to engage in this interaction. In a way, if the people are not comfortable doing whatever you want them to do, it's because the space is not inviting. If they feel kind of nervous about it, then they will not really participate, and they will not be open enough for whatever.

MZ: It's interesting that you say, "Whatever you want them to do." This is an approach that I absolutely want to avoid.

It's not about what I want people to do, because then it means that I need people for my things. That I need the presence of someone, or I kind of exploit people to be part of my artwork. And I see it as a danger. For example, I find it common with that kind of new-media art in which in the end, you want the participation of people because you just need them to interact with your stuff. Of course, you want to do it because you want to create an experience that is personalized for those who interact with the artwork, but is the focus on people?

I'm going more in the direction of saying, "OK, first of all, we start from the space, so that we don't care what

people do anymore.” We just want to do it together. And it’s not that I want people to do something, but I just open a context or an opportunity where something can happen, and I lose control of this something. And I am part of this group, I can contribute with my energies as much as the other people do. For me, this is a strategy to avoid a power dynamics between the artist and the participants, because then, in the end, I participate as much as the others who want to participate. No one is forced to do anything.

ML: So, your role is more like... An organizer or provider of the general facility. And basically, if someone has an idea that fits into this room or space, then you also will help them realize it. That’s how the outcome is very undefined at the beginning, but you kind of have a fertile field for something to grow. If it appears to happen...

MZ: This is the point, I think. I don’t even know if we need to call it art anymore, at this point. You know, it’s blurred. Why do we need to say that I am an artist? I can just be... Me.

ML: It sounds very similar to a thing that I knew. My father’s ex-wife actually contributed a lot to this free radio station in Freistadt, it’s called FRF: Freie Radio Freistadt. It also feels very similar to your idea – they just built this radio facility so that everyone who wanted could have their own radio show. And of course, some radio shows were like, “Why does this exist?” But others were quite interesting. Of course, someone was always there to do the organizational work. Someone initiated the idea of making this spaces and maintained it. Do you see yourself in such a role?

MZ: Definitely. I quit time ago thinking of my things I want to produce as an artist. I’m more and more towards providing the space, the material and ideas. More connecting people than doing my own stuff. For me, it’s definitely more like a proper work to encourage these connections and to put people in communication with each other. What comes, will come. But what we do it’s not important anymore, my focus in on the process that leads to this something to happen. And maybe this can teach us something about how to deal with things, how to learn from each other, how to be open to each other, how to...

SK: It sounds really like a good therapy for the couples, for example. You can offer them a really comfortable place, especially for old couples that don’t have conversations anymore. I don’t know, maybe you can just initiate their conversation, wherever it goes. It sounds very good to me, when you combine it with some purpose. In my point of view, without purpose, it must be really difficult to control the outcome.

MZ: I don’t believe it’s necessary to control the outcome. Open-endedness can bring many things. And yes, it can be

seen as basically doing useless things. It’s doing things not because you want to do those things, but because you want to have the approach to learn during that process. Probably there will never be a point in which you are happy with what you are doing because it’s a constant research that you do in a community or a group.

ML: But aren’t the possibilities of the space kind of given by what the space actually is? If it’s a radio station, you can do this, but if it’s like... Of course, if it’s just a room, you can do many other things, but maybe it’s not so creative. Because you want to spark some kind of creativity or some kind of ideas. Of course, you can apply this to many fields, but in the end, you will still measure it in some kind of success...

SK: I don’t know, it doesn’t perfectly fit our modern society, don’t you think so? People really like to achieve something. At least they need some goal, like a result in the end.

MZ: This is definitely an opportunity for me to find alternatives to our way of living. How do we do something without producing anything? And how do we spend our time on something that has no practical result? I think this way of thinking can lead to something good, that goes beyond our current economic system, trying to find a way in which we don’t do things because we want money, a result, recognition. Not because we want to achieve something or because we are being evaluated by some system and we have to reach that level or that grade. For me, art is something that can teach us to do things that are useless and nevertheless require energy and time. Things that in a way don’t fit this system.

ML: So, maybe that’s the artistic aspect of it. What is art in the end? It’s not useless, of course, but it’s not so fitting in our normal, daily world. It’s not what everyone does every day. It’s something different than normal life. Of course, it is aiming to change normality a little bit. But, of course, this cannot really be achieved completely, realistically. So, that’s maybe what art is about, in the end.

MZ: Yeah, you said it right. For me, it is checking the possibility of an alternative. And this can lead to something. It can make people think about it. That’s enough. This approach can create a little, but meaningful change.

ML: You said before that you kind of follow three projects that you did already in this direction. The last time we met, you said something about your own living room. So, what are the others?

MZ: The first one is an online radio. It’s called radiosqu and is more like a sort of collaborative online environment in which people can listen to some broadcasts that are created through the collaboration of other people. It’s developing now in something different, it’s a work in progress.

Then we have a magazine that we call 1+1=3 paper, we are a group of around 50 people from all around the world: Europe, the Middle East, some from India... Every two weeks, sometimes every week, we have these big Zoom calls in which we stay hours talking about things. And what comes out of this, ideas, contributions, or whatever, falls into the paper without any selection. So, everything that comes is published. And it's a very inclusive group, people can enter, can contribute as much as they want and there isn't any kind of pressure. We also try to keep it very horizontal, so that there is no boss, no hierarchies. But there are still organizers like me and other three people, to make it work. Now the organization is changing from Bibi and I to other two people, because we had a tough time lately and we didn't care too much about this project. Those two people at a certain point wanted to take the responsibility to bring it forward, which is super good. Now we are all four together.

And then there is this living room, the hörraum, which is a physical space. I'm doing this with my flatmate. We are meeting every Friday night and we do stuff together. We also transmit a sort of pirate radio through a small home-made radio transmitter, every Friday night on 103Mhz. Tune to listen to us!

ML: Uh, you want to compete with FM4, 104Mhz!

MZ: Why not? And yeah, we speak about sound and listening. We usually do some minutes of silence and then we write about it, we share our thoughts, we use recorders, contact microphones, we organize listening walks around the city, we get to know each other through sound. The topic of the research is listening, I think. But then, people in this project bring their own interests. In the end, we help each other, we discuss things... It's just like, as you said, a fertile ground for things to happen.

My role in that is definitely to be one of the organizers, I take care of the space, and people can do what they want and what they feel. It's good if people do things.

ML: So that something stays.

MZ: Exactly. What remains in our hands? What is the trace that those three spaces leave? Maybe these traces are in people's minds? The output of the 1+1=3 project is a paper, for example. Uh, I can give you a copy of the first and second issues. We are printing it fresh!

ML: Sure! So, it's only a real paper copy, or do you also have an online version?

MZ: We collectively decided to be completely offline.

ML: Fair.

MZ: We meet online because we are in different countries. But in the end, the paper is... A piece of paper. 80 black

and white pages, a bunch of A4 simply folded, that's it. We don't sell it, we just give it as a present. Each of us can print copies, it's a kind of open-source thing. In Linz, it's me and four or five people, in Jerusalem our friend Elnatan just sent me a message, he's going to print 80 copies, crazy guy! He leaves them to friends and in cafés. Some weeks ago, a random guy took a copy, he wrote us an email and now he's joining our group. It's cool that it's also open to other people to join.

SK: It's really special. I cannot do it... I can participate, but I cannot start something like this. That's so much to do!

MZ: It's easier to speak about it than actually doing it! But I actually feel like I'm not doing so much.

ML: It's work. You must have done something, maybe you feel like it was not enough but, you know, in the end, when you spend so much time on something, there must be an outcome.

MZ: Yeah, for sure something is happening. I will never get money out of it, though. I have to figure out how to make a living!

ML: I don't know... Normally, in the business world, you would be the supervisor or the person who is organizing the thing. You would also get paid in the same way as someone who's actually producing something. So, I feel like these projects can have, for instance, some income from people who want to support them, like with Patreon or something. People can say, "Maybe you're not doing anything." You just provide the space, but as a creator of the space, it is fair to demand some remuneration. Of course, you have to be transparent, so that who funds you won't ask, "Where's Matteo? He's on the Caribbean again?!"

MZ: But it's for the project!

ML: Yeah, of course!

MZ: If you call it art, you can find a lot of funds, foundations, prizes, competitions, museums... You have an entire ecosystem, from institutions to collectors. There are a lot of funding possibilities for socially engaged projects. And that's why I still think that calling it art could be a good way to support this work.

ML: Yeah. I can also see why it's a bit of a hassle. If you call it art, you always have to present it as art, as well. You're not allowed to talk about it like, "Yeah, we just do this for fun, you know, it's just fun." You cannot do this as an artist.

MZ: Yeah, another solution could be to call it 'social project', so that it's not in the art field anymore. We don't care anymore if it's something that has to have an aesthetic value. But you still have to prove that what you do is good for society...

ML: In the end, everything in our world has to prove something. That's how the world runs. Even if it's very abstract, you don't get out of this big game... Maybe if you win the lottery.

MZ: This is something I'm trying to figure out. I don't play the lottery, but... Actually, it could be a nice solution.