

*on the creative power of listening / listening to god /
listening as relational practice / audience engagement / the condition for listening /
engaged art practice / proxemics in pandemic times / sound and temperature*

with **Michele Cerruti But**
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*an ongoing collective exploration / learning from experiences of togetherness and uncertainty / reflecting on listening – with Michele Cerruti But, Matteo Zoccolo – 01 June 2021
matteozoccolo.net/on_listening/conversations.html*

MCB: First of all, I would like to know, more or less, at which point did you get with your research? Which are the main issues?

MZ: It's getting very broad, I have to say. Uhm, so, the idea started with the initiation of these three spaces. One is *radiusq*, one is the magazine *1+1=3*, and the other is the *hörraum*, which is our living room in Linz. And then I started to speak to people about those three spaces. And I realized, talk after talk, that actually I was more interested in what the people had to say about things that have nothing to do with those three spaces. So, for example, here we are. You didn't take part in those three things, but I believe we can figure out something together.

MCB: Alright.

MZ: It's also a way for me to understand all the possible declinations of listening as a tool, as an agency, as action, as an active process... Uhm, basically listening to what the people have to say. So, I'm using it as a methodology and also as a topic, let's say. This is more or less the idea of what I'm doing.

MCB: Did you interview only artists or also other categories?

MZ: I mean, of course, I'm into the art bubble. So, the people I hang out with are usually in the creative field, let's say. But I also spoke with people that have nothing to do with art. Psychologists, engineers... Yesterday I spoke with a man who does dumpster diving, for example.

MCB: And what did the other people say about listening?

MZ: Oh, many things. And often it is not even about listening, you know. It was about caring, sound as interruption, vulnerability, responsibility... It was about very specific stories that maybe can teach something. It was about very specific experiences. And, you know, the topic of this research is not well-defined. And I think there is a very interesting tension when you speak to people, and it's not so important what you say, but more how you say. You know what I mean?

MCB: Yes.

MZ: Yeah. So, this is what I'm doing. But, what about you? What are your interests lately?

MCB: I mean, in the last few days I was thinking about what to discuss and what to delve into by talking with you, and I was thinking about the fact that you have been in Israel for a while, and that you had the chance to meet many different cultures there. In a way, I've always been very aware from this feature of the Hebrew culture, which is also part of the Muslim culture, that is the role of the

Word and of the Listening. According to those cultures, the Word is the Creation itself, but it may occur and fulfill itself only through Listening. Listening embodies the power of completion, or the power of “perfection”, according to the Latin etymology. In a way, listening can bring the divine creation to perfection, to its completeness.

When I was struggling with Bible studies, Hermeneutics and similar disciplines, it was very clear to me that the relation between God and the humans occurs through listening and that listening is the creation power of humans, who can decide to which extent making God’s word a reality.

MZ: Uhm.

MCB: This is quite interesting because in a way, you know, all the Bible is about what God said, what God told. God is always expressing something through words. But it’s actually the Word itself that creates our world. So, when he says, “Let’s do water.” Water becomes a reality. The fact that when you speak, talk or express thoughts that go out from yourself, you create the reality. Which is of course also very close to Nominalism and other contemporary philosophies. But this is the power of the Word itself. And the relation between the creation and the people, the humans, occurs through listening. In the Bible there is this sentence, “Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live” (Isaiah 55:3), that in Italian sounds like ‘tendi l’orecchio’. It is a very physical way of listening. And the fact is that humans can listen to the word of God, but also to the word of other people. And this is super interesting because it’s through listening, not talking, that makes the things happen. It is quite amazing in a way, because usually, if someone is talking and someone else is listening, it seems that there is a vertical relation. But instead, actually, in those cultures Listening is an active action. So, it’s not listening because you are a sort of a slave who has to submit to that will but it is exactly the most active action that you can do when someone is talking. This is super powerful, and it’s really part of that culture, and part of the Muslim culture too. When they say that in Islam you have to be submitted to God, it’s not completely true. It’s not a passive submission as we intend it in the Western countries, but it’s actually the active decision that you take for yourself: to listen and to enact what you are listening. From an anthropological point of view we may say that Listening embodies agency since it owns the power of creation... In this sense we do not address our energies and our efforts to transform listening into agency.

MZ: Yeah, that makes sense. I was in Jerusalem for some time and I could experience what you are saying. Maybe we don’t want to go into politics... But from a religious point of view, I agree, listening is a crucial and beautiful act for what concerns faith. It just makes me sad to realize that it sometimes teaches very little in other fields. You know, listening for me is very connected to empathy, care, to finding a strength in being vulnerable. And

unfortunately, those elements are not so politically present in the Middle East, otherwise the situation would be much calmer down there. And it’s also interesting what you say because actually, if I look back at the development in my artistic practice, when I was in Jerusalem something really changed. Somehow, I turned my whole interest from shooting pictures to doing things with people and dealing more with a microphone than a camera.

MCB: Don’t you think that these things that you experience somehow probably came from the culture that you were living in? Not only from contemporary issues.

MZ: Sure, 100%. I have changed as a person, I have changed what I like, and I changed what I do after being there. You know, I don’t aim at becoming famous, but if I ever will be, I guess in my biography there will be a whole chapter about Jerusalem. It was one year dense with experiences, people, places, rituals... Every second day someone was trying to convert me to every kind of existing religion. I did crazy stuff there, actually.

MCB: Funny!

MZ: You know, when I was there, I felt I was not that active. I felt like I wasn’t doing any shit. Especially in the last 6 months there was even a lockdown. I felt I was very unproductive. But now that I think back, I realize I did many things. And I realize only now the amount of things that I learned. And listening, it’s maybe one of those things that I learned. I mean, it’s very difficult. I don’t know if I’m listening very well. But definitely, this research that I’m doing has a sort of educational value for me. I use those experiences also to learn something, to learn how to listen better. And basically, everything started there.

MCB: These things that we are saying, again, focus on the fact that listening is not a passive action. Sometimes we say, “We have to be able to listen, we have to be able to open our eyes and our ears to welcome any other’s words.” In a way this action is about caring, a lot about being there for the other with empathy... But I really think that if we intend listening only from this point of view, then we really miss the power of the *action* of listening, which is a decision. In a way, you *decide* to listen to something. And sometimes you can also decide *not* to listen at all.

MZ: I had this question in mind. What do you think about listening to yourself? Because sometimes listening is placed, let’s say, in between two people. But what happens when you place listening within your inner self? Do you have experiences in which you were listening, or maybe not listening to your inner self?

MCB: Oh, yes, sure. I would anyway suggest reflecting on sounds, otherwise it may be too open. It’s a super interesting thing to listen to the sound you make, the sound

that your body is making all the time. I did it many times, actually, more when I used to do a lot of sports, less now. It's the perception of your body.

MZ: But I would say that listening is always a relational practice.

MCB: I don't know. Yeah, maybe. I don't know if it's always relational.

MZ: Relational in the sense that it's like a bridge between two different realities. Listening actually builds a relation between two objects, or two people. If we speak about listening to a sound, there is something that produces a sound and there is something that receives that.

MCB: Yes. I mean, in one point of view it's a relational practice. Sorry, I'm talking a little bit louder than before because I'm at the station now!

MZ: Yeah, sure!

MCB: It's always a relational practice. But when you say relational, then it may be violently related. And I was thinking, for instance, about the bells you were recording in Jerusalem, and you were saying, "Come on, this is so violent." It brings the prayer to the communities, but in a way that sound is imposed. In that case, as you were saying, you cannot really choose to listen. Sometimes it's not something that you can decide. When you don't want to see something, then you can turn your face, but you cannot really close your ears. It's much more difficult, you can do it only partially.

MZ: It's true. Sound is a very powerful tool that is used by religions and power. You can use sound to make good and bad, having all these elements connected to a very physical presence, No? Sound happens in the air, it's a physical phenomenon. And it can hurt.

MCB: How do you think you can use sound in your art practice?

MZ: I don't think I can use sound in my practice.

MCB: Or listening, let's say.

MZ: Yeah, I would say I use more listening than sound. And for me, this is a very, very important distinction because my interest is not to produce something, it's more in allowing a space in which people can reflect and exchange together, learn from each other. And by doing that, my focus is on receiving more than producing. So, I try to listen to the needs of the people, listen to opportunities, to my interests, and then the production comes in a later stage. I don't know if it's clear. It's not even clear to me, so I guess it's a bit difficult to explain it to you.

MCB: I understand!

MZ: I see it also as a sort of critique to our current economic system. I'm getting a bit sensitive and activist to those things.

MCB: Um.

MZ: What I'm trying to do is to create little utopias, in a way. Those spaces in which people are friends, everyone exchanges very openly and can be themselves without feeling judged or evaluated, which are dynamics that are not usually happening in the real world. But I consider those experiences as a sort of... I don't know if I can say pedagogic opportunity, but it's definitely something that is teaching me something, and it's also enriching the people that are working with me through these projects. And then comes the problem of telling a secondary audience what the hell we are doing. So, all the issues of documentation and representation. And do we call it art or not? Where do we present it? Maybe it's good if it stays between us. Maybe other people don't need to know about it. Maybe we don't want to be recognized as cool people doing sexy projects.

MCB: Um.

MZ: Yeah. Those are questions that I'm trying to answer together with the people I work with. So, I'm not taking decisions, in a way, everything is very transparent, and we discuss a lot about those things. Even though the aims of the people are different. Some are there because they want to exchange ideas, some are there because they want to publish something in a magazine, some are there because they think the project has artistic value. Some are there because they want to connect with people all around the world... The needs are different, but somehow, it's working.

MCB: I mean, another issue connected with the listening as a medium, let's say, it's the audience engagement. It's something very market-oriented nowadays. When we say audience engagement, it's more trying to convince people to participate in something, or to do something. In your case, you would like to use the listening as a medium, right? And I don't know to what extent it's possible. Then, the audience engagement is a fundamental issue for you because it's much easier to engage an audience if they only have to take a seat or to look at a painting. People are more used to it. How do you engage people with listening? If they don't listen, then they cannot get your work. They cannot experience it.

MZ: It's a good question.

MCB: How do you manage this form of engagement?

MZ: Yes, it's very difficult, and it takes so much time. I didn't think it would be such a hard job to have this kind of engagement. I don't have an answer, but I have some strategies that we found working out well. One could be to keep it as free as possible. So, to really focus on the free will of people, to not try to impose anything, to try to not decide anything on your own as an organizer, but to really always ask the people that you're working with for every change, so that everyone can feel part of the decision-making. And this also makes people feel responsible for something. And when you feel responsible, there is an element of care. And when there is an element of care there is also listening, basically.

MCB: Alright.

MZ: Yeah. Another strategy is to be nice. Simple as it is. To create an environment in which people smile, in which you can tell a joke, in which you can drink a glass of wine together, smoke or sit in a circle, take an instrument and improvise, this is what people need. You know, we go to work, to school, we have a lot of duties and things to do, that we have to do. And then the spaces I'm trying to create, or to facilitate, are spaces in which people come by their own free will because maybe they just want to chill, or maybe they just want to be good together, exchange some ideas and go home when they want. And there isn't any sort of 'have to', but an 'I want'.

MCB: It's interesting, but the fact is that you're probably discovering that the environment, that is both the space and it's relations, is fundamental or even essential for listening.,

MZ: Yes, it's true.

MCB: So, to listen, you need to work on the conditions for listening.

MZ: Yes. And that's what I think. That's exactly what I'm trying to do. It's to work to create the conditions of a space in which listening can happen. And, in a way, then I would say that my role in those spaces is more the one of the facilitator, because I try to facilitate listening. And what you say about the setting of the space, I think it's crucial. The way things are organized in space defines the relations. For example, if we sit in a circle, it's different than if we sit in a row. If we are in a Zoom call, it's different if we turn the cameras on. It's different if we have a glass of wine or water, it gives different things. And I don't know much about traditional aesthetics, and maybe you can help me with that, because for sure, you know better. Is that something also connected to this way of organizing the space?

MCB: Yeah. I was thinking that, in a way, listening depends on the external conditions, but many times this is because we don't really have the internal conditions for

listening. I mean, before Zoom and all the video-conference systems, we were using the phone, as we are doing now, for instance. In a way, it's much easier to listen when you phone because you are not distracted by other things. I'm really listening to your voice, and this changes a lot. I mean, if we have the chance to see each other, that should be easier for listening because it makes better relations between us, we are in a way more distracted. We are not used to only listening anymore. I guess that we have to work on the external conditions because we are not used anymore to work on the internal conditions for listening.

MZ: How do you think that this applies to art? To relational art and social engaged practices, what is the role of the artist in facilitating those external conditions?

MCB: Um, I don't know. Because in a way, when you try to develop an engaged practice, then many times there are some goals that you want to reach. You want to engage your art practice with those people. Why? Because you want to do this, because you want to do that. And so, which is the goal?

I mean, you can also have no goals at all, like when you try to engage your practice with a community just because you want to actively listen to that community and try to see what is happening.

MZ: Um.

MCB: Theoretically, it's like that. But then, if we go into examples of socially engaged practices, then all the times there is a sort of goal. I am working with those people because I want to create a community. I want to do something with this group of people because I want to cope with environmental problems, societal problems, inequality issues and bla bla bla. In a way, in the examples that I have in my mind, you always have a goal. What I'm saying is that, in socially engaged practice, the medium you're using is a tool for doing something else: a paint, a sculpture, performances, process, whatever form of art you can imagine. You always have this approach with art, that it's something in between. In between you as artists and the others. So, you know, if you define listening as a medium within the regular art system, then it means that you have speakers and headphones in a museum. Or that you create the conditions for listening, but as an artwork, something that at the end you have to sell. Can also be an experience, but always something that you can sell. In engaged practices it's different, you don't have to sell anything. Maybe it's also something that you can sell, but the main goal is not selling.

MZ: I can definitely relate. And for me, to give an audience some headphones and make them listen to something, it's not a relational practice, and it's not about listening. It's about, you know, sound art maybe. I'm really interested in something, as you said, that is not driven by the need to

sell, but to the need to connect people. And yes, I'm still trying to figure out how to make a living out of it, since the final goal is not to sell. And it requires a lot of time, anyways.

MCB: Um.

MZ: I don't know. You can call it art, activism, being nice to people... But for me, to connect people is a very powerful thing, to be a sort of glue between different needs, agencies and individualities.

MCB: Sounds good!

MZ: I'm also very thankful for the Fondazione Pistoletto and the Accademia Unidee that kind of really introduced me to this kind of understanding of art in this more relational direction. Yeah, I was doing those things before, but I didn't know what to call them. I had these ideas in mind, and I was like, "Fuck, how can I apply them?" I didn't have any examples before, and I felt a bit alone in this way of thinking.

MCB: Actually, I was thinking that these issues that you are coping with are really connected with the research on proxemics. I don't know if you had the chance to discover proxemics.

MZ: What is that?

MCB: It's a research started by Edward T. Hall with "The Hidden Dimension", a book he wrote many years ago. Nowadays, everything has changed. It's a discipline itself, exactly working on the distances or the proximity between beings, objects and people. Just to be very rough, Hall tried to understand the relational discourse starting from the point of view of space. So, the distance that you have between one and another makes the difference in the relation you enact. You can be in an intimate relationship when you are a couple of centimeters apart from each other, you are in a friendship when there are more than 15 cm, but not more than 2 m, and so on.

MZ: And I guess now with the current pandemic situation, the distances have changed a bit.

MCB: Yeah, exactly. Nowadays, there is a huge debate on proxemics, exactly because of the new rules and restrictions. And this, connected with listening, also makes a difference. In a way, when you talk about creating the conditions for listening in terms of spatial conditions, then you're talking about proxemics. This is a very difficult issue to address today.

MZ: Um. I agree. And I didn't know there was such a thing. I should definitely check it up. It's true, the pandemic changed a lot of things. At least on a personal level, the

way I see proximity with people changed. Two years ago I would have never thought that I could work with people exclusively online. And with that comes the need to have more physical spaces. And that's why we also initiated the hörraum project in a room, meeting every Friday night in person despite the pandemic. I mean, we always get tested before we see each other, but always in a very unofficial way, let's say. Even during the very strict lockdown in Austria, the need to meet was stronger than the one to follow guidelines. I think it has a lot to do with listening. And also with sound, which is something that travels in the air and loses intensity with the time and distance. And then proximity is an important element, also in the transmission of sound, and the way it is transmitted. Is this sound going through radio waves? Or through pressure waves in the air? Is it going through the Internet infrastructure? I think it changes what sound is.

MCB: Yeah, and actually the most perfect way that we have for measuring temperature is using sound.

MZ: Really?

MCB: Really. Actually, the most precise tool for measuring the temperature is not a liquid one but measuring sound waves. And this is very interesting because it really has something to do with proximity and with the speed of sound. And temperature is quite a thing today, with the increasing level of global warming. It may also be an abstract thing between people. I mean, through listening you can understand the temperature. But maybe I'm going too far.