

When I was 12 years old I was sent for the first time to professor Zeno's house to start learning Latin, in preparation for high school. After 30 years, looking at what I'm doing in my personal and artistic research, I cannot find something else more appropriate to resume the purpose of my quest than the time spent at Zeno's.

Professor Zeno Zanardi, in reality was not a professor and he did not finish neither his degree in electronic engineering nor the one he started in physics. Zeno was a premature genius student, one of the best minds of his generation. Nobody really knows why he stepped out from the elite academic world that was hoping to have him on board since he was 14 years old. Nobody ever asked him. At a certain point he quit and went to live with his mother. They said that because he could not leave his mother, actually all his genius was worthless; they said he was crazy, gay (you should think about a small Italian provincial town in Lombardy, rarely touched by anything else but consumerist dreams, diffuse ignorance and, as a unique source of "greatness", the fact of being the most important criminal traffic knot south of Milan). They said any kind of stupid or mean things about Zeno, but they all sent their sons and daughters to him to be tutored. When no other teacher would take accept to try and work with somebody's mind and attitude, Zeno was the last solution; not really a solution, but somewhere to park the impossible child. Zeno was also tutoring other young geniuses, average students, smart and silly ones, naïve and inspired ones; PhD candidates and professionals of various sectors attended his house. The age of the people attending his lessons varied from 10 to 70. This house was a former Osteria (once managed by Zeno's mother) in a suburban area of Voghera. From outside it was not particularly special at the time, although right now, its pastel colors, light green and pale ochre, would make it appealing and a relic of this very typical style of houses at the crossroad between the four regions: Piemonte, Lombardia, Liguria and Emilia Romagna. A long time ago, but not that long, along the western Mediterranean coast, from Genova to Marseille and further on, the color of the houses stood for their social group: Arab, Jewish, Catholic, Protestants, they used to have walls painted in different ways with pastel colors.

Zeno's house was not that special from outside, but inside it was a fairy tale, something a kid would never thought to be able to see if not in a cartoon.

When I met him, Zeno was around 150kg, with a beautiful face framed by black and grey hair (in Italy we say "salt and pepper, sale e pepe") a warm

smile and a subtle, unpredictable humor.

Many different languages were thought and learned in the house, yet the spoken one was our local dialect, which varies slightly from one small city to the next. A little nuance in the tone or in the rhythm and we can tell from which village are you from and what it means. I always loved speaking dialect,...and tried hard to do it when my grandparents were still alive, but I never spoke it as well as my friends. It was the language of men and women, in the countryside, a language so subtle and complex which plays with tones and onomatopoeia, French, Spanish and Austrian roots; those who spoke the dialect succeeded to be cool and funny and sarcastic and intense. Speaking dialect made those who did it look and sound confident and with a "style". You felt you could not mess around with them. Gestures and postures were shaped by education and environment (generally a hard one). But my generation was doomed to be the one that had to speak "Italian", and instead of learning to play the piano and to dance liscio, tango, bolero, foxtrot and rock 'n' roll we went to play tennis, to ski and to do all the new things.

Zeno defended dialect because he made it so elegant and precious and unpretentious at the same time. 4th degree differential equations, classical Latin and Greek, technical drawing, biology, pharmaceutical chemistry and dozens other subjects were discussed and shared through a roller-coaster rhythm of colorful images, brilliant associations and sparkling sounds of our dialect. This happened while Zeno was preparing a Middle Ages' recipe, or tasting his last homemade cake,.....or while he was working never-ending boiserie that was growing like a vine all around the walls of the house, sometimes art-nouveau balustrades, others byzantine mosaic, or Pompei's inspired frescos. The motif of the house was the wind star, carved accurately from very specific wood, and manually assembled by Zeno himself with the occasional help of a carpenter and one or more students; as a matter of fact students had to keep declining their Latin verbs, or their poetry or their geometric theorem, while covering the assistant position. Responsibility was distributed and expected by everyone,...so the PhD candidates had to help the high or middle school students with their issues and somehow exchange between themselves waiting for Zeno to intervene and help.

In the big living room there was a huge library filled with any kind of books, from the old rare ones to late comics, magazines and science reviews. We sat around a large table which could sit around 10-12 people at a time and had to deal with this chaotic but extremely lively and anarchic situation.

Petrarca and Dante, Dylan Thomas and the songwriters, Machiavelli, Kant, Heraclitus, Henry Miller and Dostoievskij, Maradona and Gilles Villeneuve, Niels Bohr, the neighbor, the old lady and the ugly teacher that everybody knew, the engineer who made it from the old town, the ignorant but rich businessman, the town gossips and the color of the fresh eggs, and thousands of other things, were all dancing in the air through the sound of the dialect and they suggested, explained, showed, unveiled, symbolized, transformed, linked, surprised, disrupted...

The situation was perfect for the pupils who wanted to do nothing; often someone left saying that this was no method to learn whatsoever, and that learning needed much better discipline than this theatre de l'absurd..

Strangely enough, often these same people came back after a while, still suspicious but incapable to escape the attraction of Zeno's afternoons. The worst students, those who had tough characters and/or lacked discipline, enjoyed the sessions more,...they felt at home and they also worked and got interested in what the others were doing...I think they felt like their refusal of the common rules of learning in a class had become the rule itself of this class...and they did not care to ask why was this happening and what this was about; they just enjoyed fully and asked for more....and eventually also crafted their own forms of knowledge and discipline, ...right in the middle of disordered learning.

For those like me who had a strict upbringing with a strong respect of authority and had been convinced that learning was all about pain and sweating, this place was too much.

We felt guilty, we had the impression we were wasting our time, yet we felt so at ease there and we went home with hour homework done and a lot of new things to talk about.

Language and gestures, materials and praxis, actions and thoughts seemed to combine each other all the time at Zeno's.... in strange different ways we had never figured out before.

And these other ways were so convincing and enjoyable, that we were not capable to dismiss them with trivial humor or superficiality.

Nothing seemed sterile, nothing was empty or dry.

Words, ideas, concepts, vases, antiques, books, songs, voices, were all spinning around and communicating with each other, like in a demi-

immaterial mobile sculpture, like music in a plastic form and invisible sculpture of the senses and intellect.

It was addictive, mesmerizing, nourishing. After an afternoon at Zeno's the world outside, which normally looked old, boring, insignificant, and repetitive, all of a sudden started to become rich of sideways, interesting corners and previously hidden paths.

At the time I did not know how to explain this, but I felt like the notion itself of learning and that of physical space were transformed at Zeno's place. The house was never finished and often a new direction was taken, always to explore an ancient technique, a lost knowledge, but also to fulfill practical things, such as how to make room for more students, to keep the kitchen big enough in order to teach, cook and talk and do some sculpting, mathematical analysis or literature commentary all at the same time.

I felt something different there, as if we and Zeno and his place, his books, his words, the cakes, the exams, the talking, the jokes, the objects, the boiserie, the tools, the poetry declaimed, the mathematical formulas, were all constantly interacting and "creating" each other.

Everything was contributing to this constant transformation, to this rhythm always changing but never losing its tune.

Spatial definitions lost their rigidity and the authority of the words "teaching" and "studying" was replaced by an unusual sense of sharing and enthusiasm.

We were allowed to make jokes and to talk about other things, but right when we were on the verge of turning the place into a bar, to let it go, Zeno stepped in and reminded us why we were there; but he did not "restore" the order, he somehow made us aware that our mental and often even physical process and interaction was losing quality and intensity at the advantage of triviality and laziness.

There was such a subtlety in those behaviors but it reached out to everybody indistinctly.

Even wasted time had a meaning, and I never left that room without having learned something or being curious about something new or different.

It was a sort of invisible theatre kept together by Zeno's deep sensibility and capacity to generate empathy, tolerance, understanding and desire to

improve ourselves without giving in to big egos and competition. We were fed with culture, but culture was the very matter of life, as I learned long after, reading a wonderful passage from Antonin Artaud's

"Le theatre et son double" it was a tool to "learn to practice life better...and not just something digestive".

Later when I studied experimental theatre I understood how these correspondences between physical and cognitive behavior, spatial and psychological environment were key to develop a specific sensibility and to perceive the quality of our interaction with the world.

Studying plastic art as assistant or pupil of artists in their studio regenerated this experience of talking and discussing and sharing, although this time the relationship was one-to-one.

I think through all the years I have worked as a plastician, artist, painter and sculptor, I was somehow never really concentrated on producing a final piece in itself... the object, the artwork; I wanted to keep alive the experience, the process of going through all these levels of interaction with matter, with other human beings, thoughts, words, and action in space and time.

I often desired to see my artworks to be changed or modified, or re-interpreted by external forces or individuals. Space and time could do that, but it was not enough.

When I finally came back to work with the body and the environment, with performance art and social interventions, I felt again near some "place" where I had been once before, and that all I ever dealt with was the "relational sphere". The relation was the marble I was trying to sculpt with my actions, my drawings and my sculptures and that's why they were never finished and they suggested natural change and transformation through this refusal to be achieved.

China with its precarious, unstable, unreliable environment, its ambiguity and undefined mental and physical territory, became a larger version of Zeno's afternoons and of those spent talking, eating, drinking, painting and thinking in other artists' studios.

Since I left home at the age of 22 and start wandering, I met remarkable people and whenever this happened the "invisible theatre" activated itself and a word, a movement, a goofy gesture and a mistake all of a sudden

tore a veil, revealed something, and changed the perception of reality. The spectrum of my perception was enlarged and grew; and so did my understanding of the value in the complexity and the fragility of human interactions. China is not like meeting another single remarkable individual, it is a step more; a whole giant organic and contradictory living grey area where people's lives and actions set standards and rules day by day, paying extremely high prices and undergoing extremely high risks.

The relational is the only stable basic element of Chinese society because everything else, from personal identity, to social standards, from legal aspects to physical space cannot last long. Your family, friends, acquaintances, protection ties and political connections are the only safety net in the total uncertainty. Living in this country and learning to appreciate it, made me ask myself lots of questions, raised in me serious doubts and affected me deeply.

In the end I realized I perceive this relational dimension, still quite profound and its incredible potential; and I started feeling that I wanted to work with this "medium", in China and everywhere else it could be possible.

I believe in this direction as the only one that might re-establish a relevant connection between art and ethic and that can effectively have an impact on the social and political structure of the 21st century.

Art as an undefined, and experimental relational process to prevent society from being dissolved into pure economic values and functional network; Art to preserve humanity from the risk of being turned into a bio-molecular scientific game. No refusal of the ongoing radical change, but a challenge to its de-humanizing effects orchestrated through an understanding of their mechanisms and an organic appropriation and transformation of their power; Art functioning as antibodies: recognize the new external agent, engage with it, and learn how to turn it into a defense weapon, a source of augmented knowledge and a transformative element.

Working on the relational dimension but refusing spectacle, seduction and simulation; is it still possible? How ?

Maybe we shouldn't even use the word Art, but a new word and if we don't know it yet, we should go ahead and things will be named by time and practice.

Postmodernist artistic practice has been using deconstruction to maintain a form of critical thinking alive and to enlarge the spectrum of media and re-

elaborate world products into cultural statements.

Yet due to market-driven forces and to the fact that art is safely kept "inside" the walls of galleries or museums, its impact on the structure of our society remains limited. Most Contemporary art is just absorbed and neutralized by the status quo.

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Another part of it is, perhaps in good faith, but still imprisoned in the superficial and naïve ideology of the 70ies, thinks that capital should be directed towards good purposes and ethical standards, and claims social contract as a guarantee.

The thing, in my opinion is that capital has no whatsoever connection with social contract, it is a neutral matrix as we all more or less know by now. It is a challenge and it needs to be challenged

It is been said that society is undergoing radical change because of technology and virtual communication, but there is a big misunderstanding in this statement, as an “operational network” is not a society, so the correct way to put this would be to say that society, as we know it, (the ensemble of relationships developed through a complex interaction between physical space, human behavior, environment, resources and needs hold together by myths, social memory and shared cultural and historical references) is at risk of extinction and a new model of interaction is appearing.

For a while it seemed like a gradual passage, but now hyperbolic acceleration and almost instantaneous saturation oblige us to substitute the word "contemporary" with "emergency" and see which of all the conceptual frames and practical approaches can try to change this reality.

The spreading of a merely economic oriented reading and interpretation of the world, are transforming the nature itself of human relationships. The appearance of new dysfunctional profiles suggests a possible ongoing structural change of the human being on which psychoanalysis itself would have no impact at all anymore.

Both mental and physical space are changing because of speed: time is actually creating and affecting space.

What kind of space?

A certain form of art practice, which refuses to remain within the walls of white cubes, has identified itself with fierce political resistance and promoted the well-known idea of occupation to claim "independent spaces" as alternative realities.

In my view, although I see the importance of this kind of practice, instead of claiming “space”, I see the possibility to invade and infiltrate other professional, public and private spaces to claim “time” and to focus on

changing time's quality through relational practice.

If we can prevent time to become a commodity, we can have a chance to re-appropriate ourselves of space.

This has to start with the body, as it is in the awareness of our body, (Simon Weil articulated this beautifully) its weakness, its fragility and exposure to the external world that we can find the empathy and the compassion (in its Latin meaning "cum patire") to resist alienation, conformism and violence.

Art practice, in all its forms, can exercise a powerful psychological and empathetic power without being formally linked to a finished product. The experience of the artistic process is in itself a form of immaterial sculptural action on individuals and senses

Today, in my view, the production of a work of art makes little sense in itself.

The artist should aim to share the creative process with other people on a daily basis and try to influence other working and living environments with a different form of learning, and social interaction.

Somehow he/she should "disappear" into this process, in this interaction based on the presence and on the fragility of a non-space that cannot be defined and exist only because it is created by the quality of the interaction between the individuals.

We need to create an "Invisible Theatre" that can happen anywhere and everywhere (expanding the idea of Augusto Boal) and offer to anybody the possibility to play, communicate, subvert passive behavior. In 2000, I was walking on the left bank of the Seine, in Paris, near the Pont Neuf, and found a book that attracted me because of its title:

"LES SIGNES ET LES SONGES, Essai sur le Theatre et la Fête", written in 1976 by Alfred Simon, from Normandy, philosophy professor in Alsace

That book has accompanied me since then, and the depth of its analysis of the role of Theatre and the Feast in society, from ancient Greece, to the Middle Ages, from the Baroque to the French and then the Russian

Revolution, is for me, still a source of inspiration. Particularly I remember a passage where through the words of Mallarmè and Michaux, the figure of

the artist disappears to leave place to that of the “animator: and this animator is beyond both the lonely genius artist and the revolutionary militant artist (who too often end up prisoners of their ego and of the ideological nature of their own goal). Instead of being a militant for a political cause he/she becomes a militant for the cause of life at large, and aims at re-establishing a political conscience and a social awareness in every small gesture of daily life.

In a quite emphatic syntax, typical of French academic language of the time, but nevertheless touching for its emotional drive, it is said “only a creator can help the others to become themselves creators; only a poet can help the others to invent their own words”;

and this creator-animateur is defined with another poetic description: “l’ordonnateur de la fetè en chacun”; his/her talent is the capacity to turn the blind jump into the uncertainty of life into a smooth step, to seize the sublime in the ordinary.

He/she will accept to disappear within his/her own creation that has become the one of everybody else.

To go beyond the romanticism of this words and retain enough of their spirit but with a more “cruelty” (as according to Artaud), I imagined some character between a contemporary hacker with a Fellinian tragic-comic side, as Gelsomina and Zampanò, in a cyber-punk remake of “La Strada” ... and I’m sure the roads of today’s China would provide such a setting and even one beyond this nostalgic, and predictable lost-generation nostalgia.

Leaving behind the rethorical tone, the strength of some ideas and some texts remained and influenced deeply my first steps in a direction, which even if it seemed new at the time, it was in fact the continuum of my path.

From 2008 to 2009 I conceived several performance art and experimental theatrical events which brought together Western and Chinese artists and which were held in unpredictable situations (improvisations in an art fair or in the neighborhood of galleries, for example) involving an element of risk and of unexpected interaction with the public.

The surprising interest and complex feedback I received convinced me of the potential of social practice through art in this country, in this specific historical moment.

In 2010 I started to collaborate with Ma Yongfeng - in the ForgetArt project - and our activity represented an important shift towards public intervention and micro social-practice.

Our approach was to raise a form of social and political awareness by pushing the boundaries of a space or an action and strictly avoiding repetition, in order to escape categorization and remain independent.

With this in mind Megumi Shimizu and I held an event on the topic of the disparity between the ratio of men and women all over Asia and we asked the Caochangdi village's folk-dance ladies' group to accompany our performance (writing numbers and statistics concerning this issue on the floor of a space with white chalk). The piece's name was 100-120 (the current women/men ratio in China), and the local ladies agreed to join us under two conditions: that we would not treat this moment as an art opening and that we would invite more people from the village than from the Beijing art crowd.

In 2011, again together with Megumi Shimizu, we slow-walked without interruption the 300metres distance between the Drum Tower and the Bell Tower in the hutong area of Gulou, in almost 5 hours time, on a July Sunday afternoon. The people of the hutong community became the support and the creative force protecting our "weak gesture" and endorsing its message and its value. The action is called "Something on the way" and that precious "something" we found on the way, was the complicity of the Beijing popular crowd who, symbolically and even literally, "walked" with us.

Something on the way was shortlisted as finalist for best performance by the Global Board for Contemporary Art for the ALICE Award 2011(mention prize).

With the project WO BU SHUFU, in 2011, I wanted to explore the more difficult topics of subversion and dissent in China's contemporary art scene. I collected via a USB slideshow, a number of simple unplanned artistic gestures of protest and critiques of the system based on humor, spontaneity and wit.

The goal was to communicate to the outside world a fresh perception of engaged artistic practice in China, and to give a glimpse of the complex dialectic in play nowadays between censorship and self-censorship and how it is impossible to seize one from the other and to understand one without the other.

Chinese artists always answer the question "Where are the boundaries?" with the response WO BU SHUFU, or "we don't know". People's lives and actions test these boundaries but there is never a clear line.

Actually, in China as with everywhere else, I consider the topic of self-censorship

in artistic practice to be a very interesting and prominent one, as it proves the influence of direct authoritarianism but also of the subtler but no less dangerous market forces, which restrain freedom of expression.

After these experiences based on testing the value and the impact of social practice, I felt it necessary to combine independent resistance and an educational approach which aims to foster new progressive and emancipatory contents in contemporary Chinese society.

This is why I decided to bring art and creativity into the work place and have the artists directly intervene with the workers and the space around them.

This idea is not new, but, in my approach, it is liberated from the ideology of the 60ies-70ies. Instead of representing a specific political attitude or an intellectual experiment, it is a direct engagement with society and the system; its political effects will appear during the process and won't be determined in advance.

The Social Sensibility R&D Department is the result of the meeting between my practice and the enlightened vision of Mr. Guillaume Bernard, who allowed and encouraged me to turn his Beijing-based factory into a new territory.

In the situation we created together the artist and the workers/employees/managers establish a new relational space that transforms the rules of the physical space where this encounter happens.

The fundamental question I asked myself when preparing the project is: can artists and art practice "invade" other professional spaces, not by "occupying" them, but on the contrary by creating a dialogue with the rest of society?

Can a creative perturbation in the work place by the artist influence and transform ways of thinking, existing structures and even value models?

Can art, through this direct interaction with work, affect people's sensibility and intelligence to induce the whole economic system to re-think its own ideas: what is capitalism? What is reward? What is success? What can be exchanged for labor apart from money and safety?

I DON'T have answers to these questions, but I want to find out and I feel that the instability of the present situation offers a gap to run such an

experiment.

How can we re-define the space of an encounter, the space of a potentially new form of human exchange, where art is the tool that makes this encounter possible?

Jacques Rancière's recent book "Proletarian Nights", a collection of ideas, poems, writings, artworks, political theories and memories from obscure workers, artisans and dreamers in XIX century industrial France, is a powerful source of inspiration to praise the value of independent learning, radical educational theories and emancipative practices.

From this reading and that of "The ignorant schoolmaster" (of the same author), along with a series of random positive circumstances together with a personal need to push the boundaries of art practice, I found myself with an idea and the support to test it.

By creating a constant non-mediated interaction between artists, workers, managers and employees, in their working place during working hours, the

Social Sensibility R&D Department aims to transform both the role of the artist and that of the company/corporate system.

The artist becomes the creative and positive disturbance in the company's daily routine, which will influence at different levels (through mere presence, discussion, practice, confrontation, empathy) the whole relational aspect of the working place.

The territory where the artist and the employee/manager/worker meet is negotiable and will affect the optimized structure of codes and rules of the company.

The art-project will be the context where this constant negotiation between the artist and the people working in the company takes place.

My project finds several common points in the Autopoietic theory of Varela and Maturana, which early on questioned both the idea of knowledge and objective observation. When describing an autopoietic system they affirm that if the "organization" is maintained, the structure can change.

Similarly their interpretation of the interaction between different living organisms suggest a dynamic quite close to the type of interaction I'm trying to achieve with my project. After being in contact long enough it is

possible for two systems to "lose" their identity and to "merge" into something new and different.

The radicalism of this interaction between art and work is based on a few points:

- 1) The fact that art is not introduced, explained or proposed to the employee/worker/manager through the filters of a gallery/museum visit, curator/critic introduction, or team-building and coaching interaction, but instead as an overall complex and qualitative experience to take part in and share.*
- 2) This interaction is considered as part of the working experience and integrated as a continuous formation.*
- 3) The outcome of the research program isn't rigidly defined a priori; the process in itself should be, first of all, an organic source of daily micro inputs and micro ideas (micro-breaks from routine and automatic behavior) for all those involved in it.*

It is neither possible nor suggested to predict its effect on a macroscopic level, yet there is a chance that this kind of experiment can contribute to open the path towards redefining art and science and help to protect and preserve what is precious in human relationships.

Obviously it will be difficult to measure the impact of the experiment. The question remains: how do we know if it is a success?

To answer this, we have to admit that we cannot quantify results. I would like to inscribe this project in a long line of thinkers that argue that new qualitative norms should be introduced in both art and science, but mostly in our own understanding of the world.

This is possible if we don't limit life and work to measurements and quantitative analyses.

For example, Michel Foucault in one of his late articles, "What is Enlightenment?", is very inspiring in this sense. In this article he sketched a historical ontology of ourselves that would involve a critique of what we are saying, thinking and doing".

According to him this "historical ontology" should focus on the complex

interrelations of knowledge, politics and ethics, hence fostering personal and political transformation without resorting to violence.

This historical ontology would be an investigation that could create new ways of being, an investigation that has scientific value without being disengaged because it would promote a relevant form of knowledge.

It would include an historical dimension without reducing the experience to a theoretical idea of a linear "progress". It would be sensitive to power and resistance and be a source of emancipation by disclosing, through the analysis of practical activities, how we are made and how we make ourselves.

The social change promoted in this way would not be the outcome of revolt but instead, in Foucault's own words, of "a patient labor giving birth to our impatience for liberty"