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Ghost



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They The Them Are We – A conversation with Nástio Mosquito

Yves Mettler

YM: The connection that brings us together is Europe. We met in Bozar in 2016 for the exhibition Imagine Europe. I presented a Europe Square project. And you presented a series of videos. So we met around the question of Europe, it's narrative(s) that should give roots and a great deal of confusion, a widespread feeling of being lost. I would like to start from there, this question of the story of the roots and to work on the roots.



We are built on several roots. There is such a strong thing of identifying with the place or identifying with one story, place, root, but we understand more and more that we're made of many pieces, and we have such difficulty of accepting our multiple identities, that we're made of pieces. And basically while I am going through *theythethemarewe* (theythethemarewe.com is a radio and documentation website involving Nástio Mosquito's community engaged productions), what I felt was at work, is how you make people talk about their multiple compositions, but also you put the listener in a situation of accepting or acknowledging or witnessing their own pieces.

Nástio Mosquito: What is important when asking people to consider something or when wanting to acknowledge something, I love the vehicle of an invitation of consideration, because I think there are many different ways in which one can be pushed to consider something. It can be forceful. It can be confrontational, or legal right? It can be through all kinds of events that we can get to

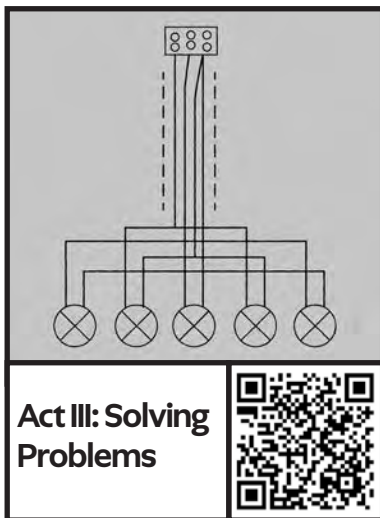
consider a particular perspective or how we think about this and how we think about that. I agree with you. I think we are very lost. It's not just a European thing, yet it's quite deeply rooted in it, this idea of sovereign nations, this idea of sovereign territories, all of these ideas of how do you manage groups of people. These powerful ideas of how you make those groups consequent in one way, whether it's to be productive, whether it is to be aligned with a particular set of values, how people decide or have been deciding to celebrate themselves, has created these pockets of blind spots. Our capacity to adapt to any reality becomes our worst enemy here. Because you don't really need the route or the acknowledgement of this route to survive. Or to even thrive. So, in this disconnect, our ability to adapt and our ability to deal with what is, is what sometimes detaches us from that. I guess there are so many different polluters of how we consider what we are. For me, it became quite important to understand, when talking about the roots, whatever it is, there must be an acknowledgement of this separation. It is important that we acknowledge what we are and that we acknowledge who we are. And if you talk about Europe, you can blame it on Freud or you can blame it on a bunch of different agents of philosophy, biology, sociology and theology, that it became interesting to confuse that, to dilute that separation, this thing that we do carry, a physicality that creates a sense of limitation. But we do carry this mystery, you know: where do ideas come from? Because we will perish, because we will die, because we have an expiring date, I feel highly committed to bet on this sense of clarity. I think it's a generational mission to create this differentiation between who and what. It's a great indulgence to remove ourselves from this existential consideration. But if you do this indulgence of who I am without rooting on what, it's a very dangerous one. We become very volatile to all kinds of interests - conflicts of interest in the managerial sense of interest. If we just go to who without the what, without acknowledging what kind of organism this is and where this organism is operating, if we go immediately to the Who, to the metaphysical consideration without the tools of understanding the mechanism in which this is operating, we are immediately unrooted. In other words, it would be the difference between the technology of your gut and the technology of your brain.

Your brain is just a survival tool. If you make your brain the guide, we are fucked, you know, because your brain is here just to keep you alive. There are more sophisticated things happening within this thing that is our body. This thing that keeps your nose the same. This thing that makes sure that the size of your ear is going to be very much comparable to the size of the ear of your great, great, great great grandfather. This is wild technology! When it comes to roots, for me, at the root is this clarity

that we must exercise between the what and the who. And when we enter these conversations in *theythethemarewe*, I'm committed to the best conversation about these things without it becoming a preaching exercise.

YM: When you said the first time "*theythethemarewe*", it didn't make sense for me. So I translated it in French: "Eux ces autres, c'est nous". Or in German, you could say "Sie die die, sind wir". In *theythethemarewe* there is a suggestion of a "they" that is "at the same time" a "we". As for now, the platform mainly consists of four "podcast" series: Speak Like You Talk, I's Eye, Shape of a Voice and Trabahlo de Preto. That is the "they" that is and is becoming a "we", and as a listener, I transform. That listener is becoming part, or is put in the situation of being invited to choose to be part or not, of the "we" in the process of listening. What is this relationship between the "WE" and the "THEY"?

Nástio Mosquito: All the series want to do is to invite you to consider basically the same thing. And as a listener, you are listening to "they", whoever "they" are, and you get to choose if you become "we", or you become "the", "they the", "them" - who do you want to be in this? It was important for me to not have the word "I" in there because this I has to be so interior. It has to be so personal. It has to emerge out of your conviction that I am. It's just a very simple invocation of a thought that has been thousands of years within human communities, this sense that this biological ecosystem that we are part of, this cosmos that we are part of, that we are made out of this. If you don't take dirt to space, you will die. It is important that you take bacteria. A sterilized space will kill us. We need this dirt, this confusion, these battles, these things. Even conflict is us. When a fetus grows in a uterus, the body is trying to kill it, you know what I mean? What all of these things are, we are these things. Stop talking like you are outside. More than being outside of the problem, you are not outside of the solution, whatever that might be for you. You are not outside of what gets to be built. You're not outside of the reality that you live and that you conceive. What we are, as humans, and the way that most modern societies - again, talking about Europe and this departure point that you wanted to celebrate - is very distant from those ingredients.



YM: You've got a subtitle for the Shape of a Voice series, The N*'s Work. They're short rants, 2-3 minutes - and we hear "I rant, you rant, we rant". There is this act, I think it's Act III. It's like a true slap in the face, but with a huge, caring smile. You say: "I do not love you, I do not care about your problems, I do deeply and honestly hope that you are into self-love, and I do hope you are into solving problems, your problems, your delicious, juicy, nobody-can-piss-for-me kind of problems. You are going to die, you are dying. For you, what is the difference between a dream and illusion?" What are these daily teasers, which I'd love have in my calendar, popping up on on screen when opening the computer in the morning?

Nástio Mosquito: That was exactly the idea! If I was going to give you a daily pill of something, a daily pill of consideration. The idea of one of the series was, wouldn't it be cool, if our life had a soundtrack? So that would be an idea: could we live in a way motivated by our own soundtrack to inhabit the spaces that we want to inhabit. The other idea is, how interesting is it to be a fly? Or in my case, a mosquito on the wall, listening to interesting things being said. And of course, this came from me being in Belgium as well and not understanding the language, being in the Flemish side. And how much you miss when you don't understand what other humans are talking about and laughing about and being sad or happy about. So to be a fly on the wall, to listen to others - what's the value of being exposed to other people on a daily basis? If our life had a soundtrack, and then what could be a daily pill of encouragement without this kind of self-help bullshit, this "you can do anything if you just believe"-kind of vibe, right? It was that need of wanting to motivate, and that's pretty much connected to my son. To being a parent or being in the role of a parent, understanding that you need to be there daily. And our consideration of the kind of lives we want to have and the detox that we have to do in our own mind. What could benefit and what style would I do that with? What is my kind of love? How do I express care? Trying to distill that.

In a way, I landed there because I am trying to express that what was considered a N*'s work, like to work in construction or to work in cleaning, or garbage collecting. All these N*'s works that nobody wants, that Europeans don't want and for which they've been importing Africans to do throughout history. This kind of labor, I'm suggesting to all of us in the creative industries and art, that's the N*'s work today. So as it was to clean your toilets, take your cotton, do your construction, take care of your children, carry you from one place to another. I'm equalizing the caring and letting you know that you matter. It's the new N*'s work. Because there is this difference between caring and taking care of. And that's what I'm submitting as being the difference of the N*, right? Like this European statement that you care about the N* - and understand me right, this is not an ethnical proposition, it's a social conditioning, a social positioning. It's a caste. The working class, the middle class, the poor, we are all the N*'s now. And for N*'s, we care. But from N*'s, you know, to N*'s, you care, from N*'s, you want us to take care of you. So how does that translate? How is that sustainable? I wanted to create a daily pill that has the possibility to be more than just care. That actually takes care of. And in there, a particular kind of earnest presence was necessary.

YM: There is one that is quite mysterious, that talks about the size of the heart. I think it's Act VIII, and I really recommend this, because it's a very strange invitation. There is that voice saying I would like to do something for you, but you're hiding the size of your heart. The two involved characters in this question of the size of the heart represent so many different possible relationships. There is this idea that the one who listens conceals his capacity to welcome. And of course I started to reflect on the size of my heart. What kind of preaching is that?



Nástio Mosquito: I can accept that I'm preaching, but I don't want to be preachy. If I would answer your question directly, I'm establishing invitations. What kind of an invitation? Maybe I'm inviting you to my wedding. I'm not inviting you to a bachelor party, I'm not inviting you for an office Christmas party. I'm inviting you to my wedding! It's a weird invitation, weddings, right? So I'm inviting you to my wedding, and I'm married to this commitment of what this human experience may be. Come and witness how this person, this thing that I've met, this energetic field that I'm nurturing, that I'm living in, I'm inviting you to come and witness this. Let's dance. Let's make this party. Because to get married alone kind of sucks. I want to celebrate it with you.



YM: The series Speak Like You Talk sets a very different tone. You talked about the mosquito that is listening and the series is based on this disturbing observation you made of young people talking about their survival, while there is obviously no immediate threat. But then listening to these voices, we hear that there is an urgency. How did this survival thematic appear?

Nástio Mosquito: By listening. Like in this specific case, you would listen to a lot. And they were talking about survival. Young people are expressing how hard it is to be a living thing. And that was quite shocking. I was born in a country in the middle of a civil war. I have witnessed war. And people didn't talk about surviving that much in that environment. What is going on with these kids that they think that they are in such an environment? What is creating this fabric of so-called reality for them? How are they considering the experience they're having in life?

So this is how I work and create *theythethemarewe*: listening created this frame because I have the conversations first, I edit them first, and then I frame them, taking real advantage of them - I don't create the format first. I don't create the frame first and then make the conversations fit that. So I have the conversations and then I express. I do take the responsibility of creating the invitation, understanding that, inside of it, i'm not manipulating what people do of course, but I season it, and

I remove the bone, which is my questions, my interpolations, to leave the statements almost in a stream of consciousness. I'm there in these conversations as a facilitator, and they conduct where things want to go and how things go.

YM: When I tried to imagine your position, I saw the middleman, the doorman, no, the bridge-maker. I see an impudent generosity working through the whole *theythethemarewe* proposal.

Nástio Mosquito: If we demystify this, I don't want to be alone. It's as simple as that. I'm not that generous. I'm not that altruistic. I think that it is the realization and the commitment to what it is that I found out. I believe that I matter and my value in society and my value in this project is my availability. It's not that I feel things that a lot of people don't feel, that I have a capacity that a lot of people don't have. It's not that, but I'm available to put myself in a place that a lot of us are not, for whatever reason, and this is what creates value to my presence in any given situation. So to some extent, it is my understanding of my interdependence and my co-dependence to have a pleasant life. I love when a player scores a goal. I love when you win your race. I love when you do something that you like. And I love laughter, I love witnessing success in others. It's almost like with a comedian, when you make somebody laugh, you become kind of addicted to that. In the film that we're doing now with the festival Steirischer Herbst in Graz, I placed "where is Hope?". And I say quite literally, my sense of hope is that I want to make people laugh more than I want to make them cry. We want to experience a sense of joy more than we want to be in the shithouse. And if we commit that, we will occupy that space... There is something that caught my attention once when I was watching a whale documentary. You know, whales in the ocean, these big mammals, these cousins of ours. There was this group of about 5 to 8 whales, and a new whale came that didn't belong to that community, necessarily speaking a new language. And the scientists realized that all the group of whales was trying to learn the new dialect and not the other way around. The majority was curious enough to say 'what is this?' And they spent whatever time it was learning the new language or dialect or expressive nature of the other whale. This created quite an impact in me, in regard to when I get to Ghent and I receive a letter in my mail in Portuguese saying that they are offering me free lessons of Flemish. You come, you adapt, and your adapting to us shows good faith. And there's very few people coming to ask how do you say this in your language? Like, "we already speak this. We already know what this is". The majority already is navigating within the same mayonnaise, and there is hardly curiosity for if you bring mustard or ketchup, not asking what does that taste like? What is that? Until you get into a very one-to-one level. This happens on the one-to-one. It doesn't happen on the thousands to one, or the hundreds to one. But on the one-to-one, there comes the core of the human being, the curiosity: what are you talking about? What do you do now? And we understand how collectiveness changes behavior. How do we behave as collective? What becomes possible or not possible within those frames? So with *theythethemarewe* I'm trying to use everything I have, everything I've come across, be it neurologically speaking, scientifically speaking, within the different segments, sociologically, theologically speaking, and see what resonates and what will make this invitation more efficient.

YM: It's like you're making us whales. Ideally, we'd become whales.

Nástio Mosquito: It can be interesting, it can be a cool experience. It can be a different way of considering how you inhabit time and space.

YM: That's also what's happening in the I's Eye series, where we go quite deeper in the person's life trajectory. It's a bit longer format, 20 to 35 minutes. And what is fascinating is that we don't get to know anything about who these people are. We learn about how they're feeling, feeling rather than being, about their struggle and life trajectories, how they took decisions. Another voice is distorted, and she is speaking about how she learnt about not being ashamed of her gift of speaking, of being a voice. So who are they?





Nástio Mosquito: Well, it was very important to me that we wouldn't make this about a personality. And of course, everybody that I spoke to at the time thought that was suicide. People listen to these things because they are interested in the individuals themselves, who they are. So if you look at most content in that format, let's call it a podcast, most podcasts are personality driven, right? The ones that are based on interviews, of course, and the ones that are not based on interviews are based on the personality themselves. I wanted to shift away from that belief. I want to talk with curious people. I want to invite people to become curious people. So it was important that it would not be about whom. It doesn't matter who you are. It's not about how you look. It's not about where you are. It's literally about the experience you've accumulated as a human, no matter where, at what age, at what stage. There's a testimony in all of us that has the potential to create value in some individuals where for some time. So if they the them are we indeed, it was just a thing

about being consequent. I'm presenting to you human beings that are being very vulnerable, and in a lot of the times, with a stranger. I don't know these people when we are having these conversations, probably I've met them for 15 to 20 minutes. I make sure to play them a song, so I get a sense of who they are. They offer a song, I offer them a song, and then we talk about the song they choose to offer me. I infer certain things and I start my conversation, sort of my process of x-raying who that individual is in front of me now, at that exact moment. I love to be in a space of recognition, and I'm inviting people to consider that there are indeed moments in which we need to decide. There are an only a few things that we should decide in our lives, but it is my conviction, and my living experience, that with most things you don't want to be deciding, you want to be right. I hope you don't decide who your friends are. You recognize them. You don't decide what you find funny. You recognize it. You don't decide what your favorite color is. You recognize it. You don't decide to like or not like broccoli. You recognize it. Now, the challenge is that we know that human beings can be formatted. It can be conformed into something, can be adapted into something, can be trained in favor or against something. So that is the challenge: our biggest asset is also one of our biggest challenges. How do we inhabit this capacity, this ability or this potential?

YM: You often play with the distinction between illusion and dreams. This is a motive that seems to be an important tool for you, right?

Nástio Mosquito: I keep making these distinctions between possibility and opportunity, between decision making and recognition. It's all an exercise about clarity: Before I speak about these things, I say "for this conversation that we're having, this is what dream is, this is what illusion is, now let's talk about those things". So, to answer your question, because it can be confusing: if you are 32 years old and your dream is to become a soccer player and to play for Real Madrid, this is not a dream anymore. This is an illusion. I am trying to create this dynamic: When you postpone your dreams, because they happen within time and space, we need to understand that it's not me that crashes your dreams, only you can do that for yourself. And then there is a stage in which illusions may become dreams. And what is that? Your sense of commitment. Your engagement with whatever that is.

YM: In the intro of the I's Eye series, we hear "Before process, before productivity, before consequence, there is you. Before community, before responsibility, before the right things to do, there is the guts." So is this series framed around a notion of responsibility in a community?

Nástio Mosquito: One has to remember that the quality of the community is intrinsically embedded in how the individual recognizes itself to be. So the I's Eye is saying, before responsibility, there's you. So what the I's Eye wants to express is that you cannot neglect what you feed. They say on the



plane, before you assist even your child, you got to put on your own mask first. Because if you don't, you will pass out. You are heavier to carry. It's just the logic of that. It's not what we would do instinctively. No parent or decent adult would take that decision, but it's actually the best thing to do. And we've realized these things in certain practical aspects. So that's what the I's Eye is saying: Motherfucker, you got to be in a good place to be a good person to your community! Because this obsession about the collectiveness is messed up. We have everywhere bunches of individuals pretending to care about shit they don't give a fuck about. Because there is this pressure of the agenda of the community, and as individuals it's prohibited to say 'I don't care about that, but I care about this'. We don't need as many people to care about the same thing. It is this multiplicity and understanding of community that is at work, not only the different capacities or skills or interests that creates this environment that we want. Within the frame of how we've been placing this in society, I think we've distorted these things. So with that series and with *theythethemarewe*, I am committed to empower the individual, for it's inevitable that any given individual inhabits a community, whether he wants to belong to it or not.

YM: On *theythethemarewe* one can get in touch with you and commission you to work with their community. How does that work?

Nástio Mosquito: Anybody can commission me. You can commission saying, I want you to have conversations with this group of people for example. So if there is that same conviction that you have, it's about identifying a territory, identifying a particular kind of community or individuals or people within a particular context. I don't know what's the price now for a project, but I think it starts on something like a €2,500. We go and we create a series and we understand, okay, is it more an I's Eye series or Speak Like You Talk or what kind of format is it that benefits whatever these conversations need to be. And we budget that with what I have to do with the editing part, the website and sharing the responsibility of spreading that content in and beyond that community.

YM: If one cannot escape being part of a community, where does the community start? And there can be also negative communities. Or completely intoxicated communities, disabling the individuals because, like you said before ...

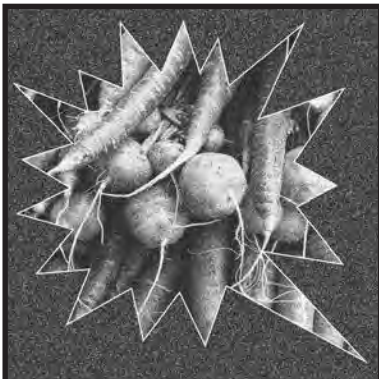
Nástio Mosquito: It's not only that there can be toxic communities, we are in the middle of it. And when I say we it's a very broad and vague we and I'll stay in this vagueness. All of us within the culture segment that think that we are on the right side of whatever this is supposed to be, we are confused about that. We are toxic in the way that we speak about things. We've been insisting that people gotta care about shit they don't give a fuck about. Most people don't give a shit about whether you use this toilet or that toilet, if you change your sexuality or you're not, if you're black, if you're tall.. They want to feed their family. They want to make sure that they are safe and they want to have a perspective of a tomorrow. And now, if I don't care if you're called N*, black, Negro, I'm a bad person... It's a toxic way of engaging with these things. Eliminating the individual, clumping individuals into these frames. What we are experiencing now with the right, the extreme right or whatever it is, it's a result of that. We say this is not good. We don't say, I don't like it. That's two very different statements. We say this is bad. You are bad. You don't say, oh, I don't like that, I don't want to relate to that. We have made the way that we speak like we are on the right side of things. It's that question when you give a beggar in the street two Euros. Are you helping? Are you perpetuating? Those two points of view exist.

YM: They absolutely coexist. The world does not need us to be reasonable to exist. The world will be full of contradictions, whether we want it or not. Any gesture can be made ambiguous, and navigating these ambiguities cannot be resolved by fixing identities.

Nástio Mosquito: I even push back on ambiguity, because ambiguity became this relativity exercise that allows things that I also think are not as efficient as it can be, in the sense that not knowing is not ambiguous. On the contrary, it's quite clear: I don't know. There's nothing ambiguous, we just don't know. I'm not a fan of ambiguity as a concept of understanding. We've created this ambiguous vibe so that we don't position ourselves. Ambiguity is not our ally. Nature, the universe, the cosmos, our environments, our fellow living things from vegetable to animal life, there's nothing ambiguous about this. It's just a lot of stuff we don't know about. There's nothing ambiguous about our living. At the service of what are we embracing ambiguity? This is this difference between what's hard, what's difficult, and what's complex. Most things are just hard, and we keep saying they're complicated or we keep saying they are complex. No they're not. They're just hard. There are complex things we don't understand, for example how physics and quantum physics work. There's a complexity there for us of understanding that, and in a particular frame we can talk about complexity, when more than one thing is true or whatever. But most things that we are dealing with in our lives, there's nothing complex about it. As far as I perceive, it's hard, you know. Difficult.

YM: We landed back to your statement: we need to know what we are before we can tell who we are.

Nástio Mosquito: It's not that we have to! The difficulty is, that you don't have to. You can live a whole entire life without it. This is what different managerial structures, be it governments or corporations or kingdoms have realized, that it's possible to live without it, that it's possible also to placebo the whole process. We will still function and we will still produce and we will still procreate and we will still do all of those things. The great difficulty is that we don't really have to. And that is the challenge. That's why this is N*'s work.



This is *theythethemarewe*, it is a labor of love. It is something that I wanted, next or along my practice as an artist. The visual arts world is very personality driven, on the geniality of one given individual. And this is my way of first going back to my roots, which is, more than talking, to listen to people. I want people to listen to this. I want these things that are adding to your experience when exposed to it, that more people have it. I guess the great difficulty that we have is how do we break the noise? How do we nurture a community? How do we make this "they, the, we" a larger sense, where is this language that I am inviting people to - again, how do we get people to go to this wedding?

Speak Like
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