

Marco Mozzoni interview with author Keri Smith
For BRAINFACOR
<http://brainfactor.it>

Q1: What is creativity?

KS: In my opinion creativity is the ability to perceive things (and the world) from many different angles in a non-judgmental way. Our perception of things can be altered simply by the angle we choose to look at them. By looking at something as if we have never seen it before we are open to create entirely new ideas and associations, and are not bound by former habitual ways of seeing. In this sense creativity is really a method of seeing, (though I believe it can be implemented using all of the senses).

Q2: Do you think creativity is something of genetic or environmental, or both?

Q3: One can learn to be creative or not? How?

KS: While I do think that there are people who are more inclined to be right brain dominant or left, i do feel there is a large environmental component that affects our creativity. On a cultural level we are not encouraged to use our right brains on a regular basis, the world is largely detail oriented and organized (left brained), and over time we get out of the habit of looking at things anew. If you look at babies and young children everything is new for them, they do not have labels for things, consequentially they are great experimenters (turning things over, touching, smelling, making sounds, moving). Eventually they are taught that "this is a pencil" and thus used for writing, "this is a ball" we use it for bouncing. Over time we no longer experiment, (remain open to 'that which we do not know'). Things have a set purpose, we lose our ability to question them, everything is set.

But if along the way we are encouraged to continue this process of experimenting (look at things in a variety of ways), we can then offset the cultural imposition of labeling, categorizing and organizing. In this sense it is possible to learn to be creative by using our perceptive muscles (so to speak), training ourselves out of our habitual ways of perceiving things. How do we retrain ourselves? By constantly tuning into the world around us, by forgetting names and labels, by collecting, by putting our 'collections' into new contexts (forcing ourselves to look at things from different angles), by implementing the imagination as much as possible.

MM: It seems to me you call to mind phenomenology ("looking at things anew, looking at something as if we have never seen it before, training ourselves out of our habitual ways of perceiving things..."). Do you refer to classic phenomenology (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty) or to one of the newest branches called "neurophenomenology" (Maturana, Varela, ...)?

You are right, I'm happy that you noticed. I have studied phenomenology (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty) and was introduced to it by the book *The Spell of the Sensuous* by David Abram, (who speaks of "the animate earth"). I would say that much of my current research stems from my interest in phenomenology. I am also influenced by the

Situationist Movement, and Guy Debord. These concepts led me to Gaston Bachelard, Georges Perec, Raymond Queneau, the concept of Psychogeography and the Fluxus movement.

I am not familiar with "neurophenomenology", but you can bet that I will be researching it right away. I am fascinated with brain function due to my background, (my mother was diagnosed with a brain tumor when I was eight, so I learned a lot about it first hand, then studied it on my own for many years). I have also read a lot of Oliver Sacks.

[Q4: Which is the role of uncertainty \(error, chaos, noise...\) in the creative process?](#)

KS: As mentioned previously, to experiment involves fully entering into a process of "not knowing", not controlling the outcome (which our left brains so badly want to do). But no matter how much we would like to not control the outcome, it is easy to get caught up in our 'habits' of creating expectations, labeling and categorizing. And so by allowing and experiencing error (chaos, etc.), we become forced out of our habitual perceptions, once again opening ourselves up to new associations. This is why in any creative endeavor, it becomes imperative to incorporate some kind of idle time or method of "goofing off".

This is the point at which we shut down our thinking brains and allow for ideas/connections to come in from other sources, often a place we did not consider at first. New ideas also arise by connection two or more divergent or irrelevant concepts that have never been connected before. I enjoy the image of thoughts "bumping" into each other spontaneously. Velcro was created when the [Swiss engineer, George de Mestral took a hunting trip with his dog in the Alps and came home covered in burrs.](#)

[Q5: Can creativity be measured \(in a professional environment\) and how?](#)

KS: I suppose creativity could be measured in a professional environment, but my first reaction might be "what is the point of going to the trouble of measuring it?" Is there a benefit to determining how much exists? If we determine that the creativity is low, what then? How much is "enough"? The more important question might be how do we implement it on a daily basis?

[Q6: Creativity only depends on brain processes or other factors?](#)

KS: I think there is a fair amount of mystery and personal experience involved in addition to brain processes.

[Q7: Creativity could \(or should\) have a role in the current economic crisis overtaking? Which way? Have you any advice?](#)

KS: Buckminster Fuller said, "I am convinced that creativity is a priori to the integrity of the universe and that life is regenerative and conformity meaningless."

The problems of our society are philosophical not economic, and so must be dealt with in philosophical terms in order for them to have any long term effect (dealing with them on economic terms will only garner short term benefits). The current economic crisis is a

cycle that has been repeated time and time again, history shows us this. As with any experiment, if we continue to do the same things we will always come up with the same results. If we are going to continue in a capitalist system we must come up with entirely new models in order to have different results.

The current energy crisis was predicted many years ago by scientists, and should be of no surprise to anyone. The auto manufacturers have had years to come up with new solutions that respond to our current needs but chose not to for reasons that were based on greed and profit. They are now paying the price for that.

These new models need to be based on sustainability and the greater good of the planet and society at large. So how do we come up with these new models? I believe we need to implement the imagination. Author Stephen Duncombe in his book "Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy", suggests that it is the artist's role to re-imagine and dream about what the world can be, EVEN if we think it is not possible. ESPECIALLY if we think it is not possible. That is how change occurs, by pushing ourselves just beyond the edges of reality. So we can start by brainstorming and letting our mind's drift to the furthest reaches of our imaginations (not judging whatever ideas come up). This will help to push us in new directions. I believe this is what Einstein meant when he said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge." It allows us to move beyond our known worlds into unexplored territory, this is what his "thought experiments" were designed to do, (imagine a world beyond "the known").

We can also come up with new models by combining current ideas in entirely new ways. Some examples of what I am talking about include a shoe company called Tom's shoes that gives a pair of shoes to a child in need for every pair purchased (doubling the benefit of a necessary consumer purchase, a company called iLiv.com working on creating forms of architecture that actually give back to the grid (not just taking away from it), working with concepts such as "micro-lending" for small businesses in remote and impoverished communities with no access to capital (allow for wealth to be distributed across the world). Generally taking a more wholistic approach regarding everything we do.

another quote by Fuller: "The new life needs to be inspired with the realization that the new advantages were gained through great gropes in the dark by unknown, unsung intellectual explorers."

[Q8: Why do you suggest people to buy, then wreck your "journal"?](#)

KS: The act of destruction is in itself a creative act. It involves a process of rearranging materials into a new configuration, allowing for new processes to emerge. So on a most basic level by "wrecking" something we are transforming it. More importantly we are entering into an experiment to "see what will happen". What will happen if I spill my coffee onto this page? What shape will the stain make? What happens when we incorporate indeterminacy, allowing outside forces (error, gravity, time, speed, other people) to effect the outcome? What happens when we relinquish control completely?

As an artist these are the questions that I wanted to open myself up to in "Wreck this Journal".

By approaching an everyday object in a different way than we are trained, we are opening ourselves up to a new experience of this object, once again allowing for new ideas to emerge. It also helps us to push past our fears of starting, and our judgments of whether our output is good or bad (judgments of good or bad hinder the creative process or stop it entirely). So this book is a place for ideas and processes to exist without judgement. They just "are".

[Q9: You say you are inspired by several Italian writers and philosophers. Which suggestions from them inspire you more and why?](#)

KS: I am interested in what the writer Umberto Eco has called "the open work", works of art that call upon performers, readers, viewers or listeners to complete or realize them. I like the idea of creating a work where the reader becomes a participant in an experience (as opposed to a passive witness). What is also exciting to me about this is that there may be hundreds or thousands of possible solutions to a problem, the "book" then has many different "lives" or permutations and will change depending on the perceptions of the 'user'.

For many years I have been influenced by the work of designer Bruno Munari, as he was interested in implementing the imagination into everyday life through the use of the senses. This is something that I am also trying to do with my books. I would like people to have a direct experience with the outside world, as opposed to being hidden away spending all of our time looking at screens. How are we to care about the planet and nature if we fail to even notice it or interact with it in any way?

I am also greatly influenced by the work of Italo Calvino as he combines the two approaches, implementing the imagination and giving the reader their own experience of "the work". There is also the work of Guido Quarzo, a children's writer who in his book "tales of stone and more" uses images from contemporary Italian artists to tell his imaginative stories.

[Q10: Creativity and the brain: Semir Zeki, professor at UCL and director of the Institute of Neuroesthetics based in London, is showing us "the neural basis" of Art production and fruition, supported by fMRI evidence. In general, what do you think of the neuroscientific approach to the Art and human creativity?](#)

KS: Any investigation or study in this area can only aid in our understanding of the brain's processes and benefit society at large. Will it help us to be more creative? probably not. that is dependent of the journey and path of exploration of the individual.

[Q11: In a word: Neurons or Spirituality? Brain or Mind? What do you choose as "creative factor"?](#)

KS: My guess is that creativity combines all of these factors. On a personal level I

rather enjoy a bit of mystery regarding the "how". J. Robert Oppenheimer said, "Live always at the edge of mystery--the boundary of the unknown."

that seems an appropriate note to end on.