

ZOE ROMANO

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BACKGROUND

Zoe Romano is a Milan-based activist, who since 1998 has been directly involved in a series of initiatives and struggles against precarious working conditions. Romano is constantly using her specialism in communication design to try to reach people who, up to that point, were not politicized.

AREAS OF ENGAGEMENT

Chainworkers.org, an Italian webzine on media and mall activism for awareness-building and unionisation of precarious workers. The collective was active from 1999 until 2010.

The **MayDay Parade**, which, on the 1st May each year, brings many types of non-standard workers across Europe onto the streets in a joyful (but angry) expression of dissent towards sub-standard conditions of work and living.

San Precario, an Italian activist collective grouped around the patron saint of the precarious, campaigning for a fixed axis of non-precarity with regards to income, housing, human affection, mobility, communication and access to new technologies.

Serpica Naro, a meta-fashion brand dedicated to rethinking a style of production beyond precariousness. The brand was launched during the 2005 Milan Fashion Week using guerrilla communication activity in order to draw the attention of the media to the problem of precarious working conditions in the creative industries, particularly, in this case, the fashion world. Serpica Naro has since evolved into a network of fashion makers trying to build a system of production parallel to the classical one.

OpenWear, a European collaborative platform for fashion creation, attempting to establish makers, fashion producers, small local enterprises and educational institutions working together towards the creation of a new vision of fashion based on micro-communities and sustainability.

FUNDING

Her own job in a communications company; EU funding for OpenWear.

DEVELOPMENT

1999: Chainworkers webzine is launched

2001: the first MayDay Parade takes place in Milan

2004: San Precario makes his first apparition

2005: Serpica Naro is launched as an alternative, activist fashion label

2007: the European alternative fashion network OpenWear is launched

LOCATION

Milan, IT, 1,338,436 inhabitants

CONVERSATION

This conversation was held in Zoe's kitchen in Milan in February 2012.

Bianca Elzenbaumer: Considering all the creative activist groups you have initiated and been part of, we are wondering what path brought you to be so thoroughly engaged with precarity. Could you trace your path for us?

Zoe Romano: At the beginning I was studying philosophy, because at the age of nineteen, I did not know what I wanted to do in life. I only knew that I wanted to work little and earn the most money out of this little work. I used to work when I was in high school and had realised that working was pretty tough, sucking a lot of your energy. Therefore, my aim was to go to university in order to get a highly-paid job that would allow me to work just part-time. (laughs) That way I hoped to have time for developing my personal ideas and for all the other things I wanted to do in life. So I studied moral philosophy here in Milan, because my parents would not pay for my studies abroad, insisting that here I could get all I needed. And I accepted their position, knowing from all my older friends who were working and studying at the same time, that by needing to sustain myself away from home it would take me a very long time to finish university. So I concentrated on my studies, hoping to finish them in a reasonable time. Studying philosophy was good though, because it was teaching me how to think. It was like a psychological treatment for me. Discovering all those philosophers who were thinking about the meaning of mankind and asking these big questions, taught me that the important thing is to ask questions more than to find answers. For me, it was a good training to understand the situation we are living in and to find the right perspective to solve problems.

At that time, I also found myself liking computers—even though I was doing humanistic studies, I re-

ally liked video games and playing with technology. Already during high school, around 1986/1987, my uncle, who was working at IBM, would be giving me his “leftovers” to play with. When I graduated from university, I longed for a nice computer and my ex-boyfriend told me to ask my grandma to give me a nice big computer. And indeed, to celebrate my degree, my grandma bought me one: I got this nice big IBM, which was about 4,000,000 Lire (about €2,000). So I began to work with graphic programs, beginning to do interactive stuff with basic programs like Director. Being passionate about computers, I applied for a master’s degree in “New Media, Science and Technology” in the engineering department of the University of Pavia. There, they were trying to bring together humanists with engineers for all the multimedia stuff coming up at that time.

Fabio Franz: So did your connection to the hacker and DIY scene come from that experience in Pavia?

Zoe: Actually, in 1998, just after starting the master’s, my boyfriend and I started to work with the people of the occupied space Deposito Bulk. It was a huge building in Milan squatted by high school and young university students. The occupiers had called older people to manage the second floor of the building and so one of my friends, who was in touch with the people from Deposito, suggested we manage the space together. And in fact, my boyfriend and I at the time used to be really hardcore techno club goers, but we had also become tired and bored of going around Europe for clubbing. We realised that only consuming becomes boring. So, over a period of a year, we managed the second floor of the squat by organising parties. And then the first Italian tech meeting happened to take place on the 3rd floor: all these hackers arrived and it was very inspiring. So when I had to take an exam for the master’s on html, I decided I wanted to make a social project out of it rather than designing something random. During that summer, I had been to the US and I remembered that in the Financial Times, I had read that the first McDonald’s had been unionised in Canada. For me this was amazing news, because, during my last year at high school, I had worked at McDonald’s! This prompted me to build a website that talked about the rights of the workers but with a way of communicating that was more akin to MTV, rather than to the unions. While I was doing this social html project, my boyfriend and I wanted to create a collective inside the squat in order to do direct actions to raise awareness around chain stores, after having seen how these chains had

colonised the American cities. So we began the Chainworkers Collective with a website and by going around chain stores with flyers talking about the rights of the workers. We were going around at mid-night, when the places were closing, talking to the people our age who were working there. It was a nice experience.

Bianca: How did you make a living at the time when you were mainly involved with the Chainworkers Collective?

Zoe: I sustained myself with a stable job that I had found after my MA studies. I knew I wanted a stable job because my mother had been laid off because of the recession in the ’90s and I saw how much she had to struggle as a freelancer. This was actually how I experienced precarity for the first time, through her. We had ten years of little money and so finding a job for me was a major concern, even if it would be boring, because otherwise I would have been stuck in their house forever. After refusing the unpaid internship that had been arranged by the University, with the help of a friend I found an opportunity as an html programmer for an educational project by Telecom Italia in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. It was a nice job; we were planning activities for online collaborations between schools—very elementary things like chatting online. I liked it. I started as a coder but began to work more on content once they realised I was not simply able to code. I spent six months there within a paid internship and another six months on a contract. Then one of my colleagues was hired in another, bigger place and he told me to come with him. And in fact, they offered me a good contract because they were about to enter the stock exchange and needed project managers. So I went there as a project manager on a long-term contract. But I didn’t want to get sucked in and so I negotiated a working week of four days. At the beginning they said no, but then they accepted.

Bianca: Do you think that this negotiation of free time protected you from not being sucked into this world of the creative industries and giving up on your activism?

Zoe: I was never seduced by any job. Having a job was a necessity for me in order to be independent, to pay my rent. I never lived in occupied houses, so I always had to pay the rent and Milan is not cheap. So I was in my paid job from Monday to Thursday, 8 hours a day, while at night and on Friday and at weekends, I was

working on my other projects, studying and exploring.

Then, in 2001, we had this idea with the Chainworkers of participating in the parade of the 1st May in Milan, but not in the boring way it usually happened. We wanted to do the parade in the afternoon with music, trucks and a big sound system. In order to launch that idea, to let people know about it, we did a huge action at a mall. We didn't like the malls that were trying to become a new fake "public space" and we wanted to experiment with a new way of protesting that would be different than the usual picketing. We wanted to bring the social centre into the mall. (laughs) So we entered the mall at the top floor with about sixty people pushing carts packed with a sound system and a generator. The building had a hole in the middle and so you had this feeling of being in a theatre. We put the jack into the system, started the generator and played loud reggae music. (laughs) We had printed about 3,000 flyers and started throwing them out, giving them to people.

We managed to stay for one hour, negotiating with the DIGOS [The General Investigations and Special Operations Division that in Italy, amongst others, follows the activities of the social centres], because we were not aggressive. We just talked to people, had a bit of music and some flyers. "We stay here another 10 minutes"—it is like that when you are protesting. We were not doing anything bad, we were not destroying the place—we just had a bit of music and some flyers. Anyway, at a certain point, we heard a voice from the speakers of the mall saying, "Would everyone in this mall please leave the building." The manager of the mall was saying this! He was so overwhelmed by these flyers that he had the building evacuated. (laughs) That was Saturday afternoon at around 4pm—can you imagine how much money they lost?! (laughs) We couldn't believe it. He could have waited like 10 minutes and we would have gone, but we were pretty happy about this. And then we started MayDay. In the first year, it was 5,000 people, in the second year 10,000, the third year 15,000 and in 2004, there were 50,000 people, and then 100,000, and then in 2006, 120,000—since then it has been declining a bit.

Fabio: Who were the people that you wanted to get involved with the parade when you started it in 2001?

Zoe: Until 2004, the main target of our actions was the service industry—people working for call-centres, in big offices, malls or chain stores—because there was a clear target there. But at a certain point we realised

that we also wanted to involve more people like us—people working in communication, fashion or other 'creative' jobs—so we began San Precario. As an idea, the patron saint of the precarious came out of a meeting in which the unions proposed that we do an action on the 27th of each month, the day employees get paid in Italy. But we pointed out that this proposition only worked for those who actually had a stable job, so for us precarious the 27th was meaningless. We needed something else; we argued that we would need something more like a saint to protect us. From that moment, we were convinced: "Yes, we need a saint." And so people came to me with this idea, asking me to design that saint. To create the figure, I decided to use a painting by Chris Woods of a chain worker praying. So I did this thing with this weird green I liked. (laughs)



And so, as now we had a saint, we did a warm-up action for the MayDay with him. One month before the parade, we did a procession in a supermarket with a sculpture of San Precario. There was a guy dressed like a priest and another dressed like a nun and we went into the supermarket saying the prayer of San Precario. That was very weird for people! (laughs) We did that action to protest against working Sundays, expressing the need for a day on which everyone rests. Right now, I still have some doubts about this action, because we surely need a day when everyone rests, but at the same time I like it when everything is always available. So it is a difficult topic.

Fabio: So your activism passed from the Chainworkers Collective to San Precario and now you are actually involved in a bottom-up fashion label called Serpica Naro. How did that come about?

Zoe: In 2005, we wanted to focus with our political actions on the creative industries. With San Precario, we wanted to protest against and talk about the precarious working conditions within the fashion system in Milan—not in China or India, which are usually targeted by ‘fashion protests’. We wanted to speak about the red carpet of fashion, where everyone thinks they are rich but where in fact most people are poor and exploited, working 14 hours a day, being mobbed, not being paid enough. For this, we needed to do a protest that was different because there is a lot of aspirational as well as affective investment in this industry.

When you work for McDonald’s or a call centre, you don’t think that your work will make yourself better, you just do it for the money and want to go home at six. Whereas, when you work for fashion, design or communication, you constantly believe that if you work hard, if you can show your talent, then you will make it. So in a way you want to be your own boss. No one wants to protest against his or her own boss. It is generally accepted that you need to make some *gavetta* [Italian for a time of sacrifice that will help you to climb the career ladder]. Organising a protest was impossible, so we came up with the idea of creating the fake fashion label Serpica Naro and building a scandal around it. This branded anagram of San Precario allowed people to work for a thing that was actually furthering their cause, while at the same time doing their job: in the action we had to build the catwalk, make the garments for the events, create the videos, the graphics, the web site, everything. There was the perception of doing something that was actually cool and subversive for a good cause and that was different from working for a classical pro-bono event. And in fact, in this, the meaning of the brand also changed. It became less about ‘correcting’ big brands. Why correct them if what you actually want is to see them crash? It became about building a new network in which creatives could do without selling their creativity to big brands. How can we think of a new fashion system that is not based on the values the existing one is built on? With Serpica, I changed my activism to a day-to-day work—how can I build something different with the work I do on a daily basis? We also realised that people working in the creative industries usually do a shit job for making money and then they do free projects where they don’t

earn anything, but they learn a lot and gain satisfaction. Very often the job that pays their rent is not connected with their creativity. The problem is that they don’t fight for their income in ‘the other job’ because it is not their ‘real job’. They say, “That is not me. I’m a designer. I don’t make money out of it, but who cares.”

Bianca: Would you say that you figured out that creatives don’t fight against their shit job and they don’t fight for their creative job?

Zoe: They don’t fight at all. (laughs) And this is a problem. A lot of people here in Milan work in a ‘high-level’ service industry like catering, which is very precarious, but people don’t identify with the job, because their real career is somewhere else. The real career... (laughs) Even if underpaid or not paid at all, they like what they are doing because they are part of a network of ‘cool’ people with ‘cool’ parties. And then, once they are over 30, when they would like to live in a house on their own, maybe have kids or simply need some money, they start to say there is a problem. “How comes I’m not making a career? Why has my shit job become my real job?”

Bianca: How did you deal with that situation in your life? Combining activism with building a somewhat stable career?

Zoe: Actually, I am someone who thinks a lot about the future. I try to plan ahead even for when I am old. I am doing a little action for the future every day; this gives me more confidence about it. I don’t just want to have the young years to enjoy. I would like to build something to enjoy the life from when I’m 60 ’till I’m 90. It is 30 years! My experimental moment will be from 60 to 90. (laughs) I see it like this. You could say that I’m a slave to this job of mine and to this flat I bought, but I don’t know. I also bought this flat as an investment for when I’m old. In ten years, when I’ll finish paying for this, I could rent it out and go wherever. And in my job, I try to be as productive as possible, using minimal time so I can still have time to think about my projects even when I’m there and without getting too tired. Even if I could work as a graphic designer, I prefer to work only on text and campaign strategies because it is not as time consuming. I think I have found a balance and, also, this way, I feel more in touch with reality: waking up every morning, going to work. And I learn a lot from observing the marketing strategies of big brands. You cannot imagine how much they invest in campaigns every month, while their offer is

always the same, just restyled, to make people think it is a new thing. Many brands invest around €200,000 a month just for online marketing. (everyone laughs) If we want to be successful in our creative, critical thing, we need to put a lot of effort into talking to people, because companies are not just selling stuff: they are really convincing and moving masses of people with a lot of investments. In order to make Serpica work, the thing of “coolness” was really important. We started to move from the idea of the militant activist to the cool person that doesn’t get exploited and that fights against capitalism, but not as an old communist.

So now what I’m working on is trying to find new business models, or ecologies of work, where you build a new type of producer, a new type of consumer and a new type of supplier. It cannot just be the workers changing, the whole network must change. I want to do something that is more ethical, not exploiting the world and its people. This is why I also recently entered the area of technology, prototyping and personal manufacturing, because I believe that this kind of technology is democratising the way things are produced. So, you don’t need to be a designer, you don’t need to produce 10,000 pieces. You can just go small, produce on demand and it is a good thing environmentally as well as creatively. It is not easy, but that is my big plan. I’m experimenting—trying to understand what the nodes of this new ecology of work and creativity are.

Moreover, I feel that there is something about ‘satisfaction’ that is important, because when I meet people who are successful, around 40/45 years old, they feel drained. They speak about living in the countryside and so on. This gets me very angry, because I think they should use their knowledge to talk to other designers in order to change this draining situation. Also, in terms of my job, I realised that I would have liked to work for an ethical agency, but they don’t really exist because NGOs like WWF, left-wing parties or unions go to big agencies to have their campaigns planned and designed. Sometimes agencies actually do it for free because they want to say that they also have some ‘good’ clients. I hate that.

Fabio: How are you trying to address these issues around production and marketing with Serpica Naro at the moment?

Zoe: In 2006, with Serpica, we created a new license to open up the brand, which we had to register for the fake fashion show. Until now, no work has been done on ‘open’ patents or licenses, so we began to experi-

ment with this open license, so that everyone could use the brand. Moreover, we began to foster networks with small producers of garments to see whether it was possible to create relations between them and to support them, to create an economy out of their work. We also began to do sewing workshops with people, so they realised how difficult it is to produce something with a sewing machine. This way they realise that when they buy garments for a low price, it means that someone else was paid very little to make these things.

Bianca: In parallel to Serpica, you are now also involved in the European fashion network OpenWear. Can you tell us how that came about?

Zoe: I started the project with OpenWear because I wanted to try to establish a business prospect to this idea of networking, to actually build a network that is parallel to that of the existing fashion system. OpenWear is trying to do this in a more institutional way since we also applied for some EU funding. I took one year off from my job—every 7 years, you can take one year off—and so I played my jolly for OpenWear. The first two years of the project were very good, so I think there could be a chance that it can become financially viable and that some of the people from Serpica could be employed on it. But in any case, Serpica is more political, more grassroots and with no mediation, whereas OpenWear is a lot more about mediation between the interests of the European partners involved.

This project really helped me to understand how fashion universities work and what are the limits of dealing with them. I realised that the maker scene is more keen on this new approach to fashion than proper fashion schools. That’s why I’ve now moved my actions more into the maker scene. They are not really politicised either, but they have a different approach to how they do things. They don’t like the glamour—for them, it is more about substance than appearance and that is more in line with my approach.

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