

## Oliviero Toscani on Creativity

*The following is a transcript of the closing comments on creativity delivered by Oliviero Toscani at the conference entitled Art in the Service of Power: Ethics and Social Responsibility in Advertising, organized by Syracuse University in Florence. The conference took place on April 2, 2008 at the Ospedale degli Innocenti, Florence, Italy to an audience of over 500 people.*

The human race is divided into two classes, people who are creative and people who are not. That is, the humans and the sub-humans.

Politicians and people in power would like to become gods. Instead, creative people are in direct competition with God, the quintessential creator. But since they are neither politicians nor people in power, they don't care whether God exists or not. They are content with having been created creative, and they consider themselves privileged because of it, while the people in power are consumed by envy.

Creativity is Genesis: birth, divine force, energy, imagination, suffering, commitment, faith, generosity. Creativity has to be visionary, subversive, disturbing. It must be innovative. It must drive ideas and concepts. It has to question stereotypes and models rooted in time.

Creativity requires energy and courage. There are few people left who have that energy, because everything—from education in the family to education in school, and religious and ethical education—tends to limit the creative energy in each of us.

Truly creative people are rare. They are a tiny minority, oppressed by false proponents of creativity and by everyone else. Only truly creative people have no fear of creativity. Everyone else is afraid of it. They, the non-creative people, oppose it and try to curb it because they know that creativity gives rise to new ideas that sooner or later they will have to come to terms with.

The army of non-creative people is huge. It includes a mass of bureaucrats who claim that their positions of power give them the right to block creative processes. They exist to cut down to a level of mediocrity every idea that is not stupid enough to gain consensus. That's why all newspapers are alike, all automobiles look like one another, television programs are interchangeable, and different brands of clothing propose an identical style.

Market research helps identify so-called "targets" that are willing to accept mediocrity and just as willing to reject innovations and ideas, avoided by the researchers.

Lack of creativity produces degradation. Look at Italy today. The only value that remains is linked to what the past has produced: architecture, art, music and literature. Among them are courageous works that no-one today would ever dare commission. No civic administration would allow a city to be built on water, like Venice. There could never be another Piazza dei Miracoli like Pisa's, never another bell tower like Giotto's.

The economy is a pretext. Power's lack of culture and lack of courage to invest in ideas is a clear and undeniable sign of the agony of creativity.

Paradoxically and ironically, creative people must constantly defend themselves from the bureaucrats of power—those who never need to defend their own lack of creativity and courage, but seem to identify solely with their role as accusers and censors.

In the past, the success of the great entrepreneurs, statesmen and popes was always linked with the names of creative, visionary people who were capable of forging ahead and propelling themselves into the adventurous worlds of research, discovery and conquest. They employed transgression and provocation, the forces characteristic of art. They made diversity a value, in contrast to conformism—and behind it all was the force of creativity.

In 1786 President John Adams wrote:

I have to study politics and the art of war in order that my children will have the opportunity to study mathematics, philosophy, navigation, commerce and agriculture, to give their children the opportunity and the possibility to study painting, poetry, music and art in general.

Unfortunately, war and short political vision did not disappear, but anyhow a post industrial society is showing up that should privilege creativity, ethics, aesthetics, subjectivity, arts in general, a new quality of life and—of course—beauty for future prosperity.

Art is the highest expression of human communication. And by Art I don't mean only painting or sculpture or the ancient and traditional arts, but above all the modern, mass arts, like photography, design, fashion, architecture, cinematography and so on.

Communication, like art, has always been at the service of one power or another—religion, politics, industry and production, or as a counter power, but still a power[R1].

But it does create a huge problem for anyone who believes and feels passionately about freedom for creativity in communication and the power that needs communication—the businesses, the faceless corporations, with their managers for whom the risks of creativity evokes unpleasant reminders of youthful defeats and deluded aspirations. Companies, and between them also publishers, with their committees and boards and marketing directors and bureaucrats and managers. People who don't say a word or move a finger without consulting data printouts and market research reports—where everything is pre-established: audience, acceptance, percentages. People who think they understand the needs of the masses, of those who make up the part of humanity they simply call consumers.

Creativity is communication.

Today the creativity of communication is conditioned by an obsessive search for consensus, in the false belief that consensus is success. Fear of failure always produces mediocrity, because the chosen solution will always be the least risky and the most banal. In most cases, it doesn't even attempt to be original, but wants, rather, to be a mediocre and repetitious replica of originality.

Modern creativity has been stripped of ideas and individual passions. It has been relegated to the role of a company servant. It has to be a vehicle for strategies that focus solely on raising the market price of the company's stock. But the raw material of art is the artist, the communicator, the photographers, the designers, the writers, authors, painters, musicians, actors, image-creators; good sense would tell us they should be protected, handled with the same care with which bakers handle flour.

But this is something that is becoming more and more rare.

The artist who clings to his intents, his sensitivities, and his inspirations; to his visions rooted in his own insecurity—the essential requisite for producing creativity—risks seeming narcissistic, hysterical, or even presumptuous.

Creative people are now condemned to serve and work in terms of financial success and the stock exchange, while communication concepts, ideas and scenarios are conceived and decided upon by specialists in communication and in marketing; by market researchers; and by levels upon levels of managers who make sure the result is banal and stupid enough to satisfy the public that they call the “target”: the minimum common denominator of the market and of society.

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Communication is a means of delivering messages produced by an institutional and corporate power that is polluting our lives with this miserable level of culture and creativity.

In the world of communication—and not only in that world—the people who manage creativity and art, limiting and restraining it instead of encouraging it, are paradoxically responsible for working against the very same economic interests they say that they defend.

But no fear—the only thing that's missing is courage, the courage to take risks, and anyone who won't take risks can't be creative.

Creativity is the risk and the opportunity of the real present. If we are really interested in the future, we can simply study the present. Unfortunately we consider the present to be only what appears in the rearview mirror. So we live in the past, because the past is more secure—since we have already been there, it is more comfortable for us.

Humanity's utopias are images of a preceding era seen in the rearview mirror of the present.

Whoever lives in or looks at the present is disturbing—a true subversive, a real revolutionary.

Excitement about new technologies and every conceivable kind of software sustaining modern communication justifies our creative inertia. We are all becoming very, very lazy.

In the meantime:

- About fifty percent of the inhabitants of this planet have never heard a telephone ringing.
- Less than seven percent of the world is on-line. In other words, ninety-three percent of the world's population does not have access to the Internet.

What we refer to as the technological and digital divide is clearly more of a schism: a gaping, unbridgeable crack in the earth that acts more like a barrier, safeguarding and enriching those who have access, and dividing them from those who have nothing.

This year 100 million children will be born. Today alone, another 230,000 individuals will come into the world.

Ninety-seven percent of these children will be born in the Third World.

In fifty years Europe's population will have shrunk by twenty-five percent.

In 1900 Europe's population was three times larger than that of Africa. But in 2050 Africa's population will be three times larger than Europe's—AIDS permitting.

If the world were to shrink and hold only 100 persons (according to present rates), six of them would possess 59 percent of all wealth and 50 would suffer from malnutrition.

The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

You might think we would want to share a little of our wealth, but in fact official aid from rich countries to poor countries shrank by twenty-five percent between 1992 and 1997, and it is presently at its lowest level in forty years. Now priority is given to military spending, to the hysteria for security and defense from terrorism.

Today communication, across the media, is like some colas (Coca-Cola, Pepsi Cola, and so on.) They are largely content free, artificially flavored, infinitely reproducible soft drinks based on a memory of addition, sweetening our false needs. No potential for sustenance or nourishment, and no enduring quality beyond an immediate need of thirst. A thirst for what? An endless yearning to fill the space, that gaping hole left when we are not fed or truly satisfied or loved. As we cannot love ourselves, we crave a substitute love from the outside, and we want the media to perform that virtual role for us.

And, like using monosodium glutamate, the communication food tastes great, is addictive, but can leave you feeling bloated and tired with a headache. It leaves a trace of addiction, and, like addicts, we always return for more and more, our memories washed of the past, but not free enough to live the present or to imagine a different future.

So most communication, like most products, looks alike. It is branded and conditioned by marketing that makes us feel part of the herd, the vast global flock of livestock, where to be different means to be alienated. Branding means exactly that: a burning logo of ownership stamped forever on our brain.

No one wants to be a black or a lost sheep, so we are all lambs in the slaughterhouses of communication, and especially those of the multinational brands. A brand is a membership card. It means that we belong to the global club in the race against mortality, a race against time that tries to stop death which is snapping at our heels.

Brands do not nourish society; brands are nourished by society.

We think that the future is a place where scientific and technological evolution, combined with branding and marketing, will give rise to a guilt-free, trouble-free, pain-free, shiny, sterilized virtual world—a world in which everything that is potentially ugly about human reality is excluded for fear of turning codes upside-down. While we try to reduce all of life to a set of patented codes, the worst risk is that of natural evolution. Difference becomes the enemy of the state of things.

Creativity in communication is arching but superficial. Increasingly it nourishes our fears, augments our deepest feelings of insecurity. We are convinced that our future survival depends on what we consume, on material riches and on power. The media have been sterilized, they are one-way only, reproducing themselves in a monoculture; a fantastic vision of excitement and promises; a place where Disney and sperm are deep-frozen to be revived in the future, evolving in highly sophisticated software systems, final solutions that are influenced and amplified by the arms of intellectual property.

Today communication feeds on the people that it should instead be feeding. Originally, it was thought to be a public service, the voice of production and consumption of culture. But now it has degenerated, becoming an instrument of economic manipulation.

Intellectuals, creative people and artists who produce communication are in the front line of this army of collaborationists. Artists should have the power, finally, to free themselves of their fears. The future needs to allow the artist real power and responsibility in the world of communication.

Creative people should break these bonds and destroy these codes, and help encourage free thought.

It has never been in marketing's interest that we artists and consumers should be able to think, because anyone who thinks can be creative, and creativity is always subversive.

It's about time to revolutionize this situation.

We need creativity in communication. There have been, and there still are, instances when expression has had the courage to risk being different: communication that takes risks and dares to go beyond profit and the requirements of the clients.

Creativity is a surplus of intelligence and sensitivity. It is the opportunity that potentially lies between our heart and our brain.

Creativity has to be subversive. Unless it encounters an intelligent patron or institution, it is destined to remain outside pre-established plans and bureaucratic authorizations.

To be creative means to have no securities, it means doing the contrary of what every pre-established system wants you to do. To be creative means to try to do something that has never been done before, to build out of nothing something that can have an enormous value. Creativity requires a state of non-control of limitless courage. And that is why conformism is creativity's worst enemy.

Anyone who doesn't have the courage to take risks cannot be creative.

The obsessive search for consensus, the fear of meeting with failure, leads straight to mediocrity since the solution chosen will always be the least risky one. Society does not want to be original but wants to be a photocopy of it.

Modern architecture has a style that blends revival and nostalgia. Every city is a touristy version of itself: a series of Holiday Inns, of reproduced paintings hanging on the walls of an infinity of identical hotel rooms.

We do not produce creativity but conformity, opting to publish clichés cloned from a palette of prefabricated ideas. Everything must be capable of being reproduced. This is the problem of evolved democracies: very rarely, political and economic power will assume the responsibility for experimenting but it prefers to stay on the beaten track.

On the other hand, no one cares anymore about teaching creativity. Young people go to school to get passing marks, not to learn. And there are few masters of teaching and learning who really care about transmitting knowledge, compared to the many who are eager to make judgments.

This kind of scholastic system is leading also to a loss of the manual ability that was the hallmark of the master craftsmen who made our country great.

We can't hope to find creativity in young people who are taught to conform. Without creativity there would be nothing to spark enterprise, there would be no industry and therefore no economy.

Communication in all its media could really be at the service of humanity. It could be a creative means of research into the new language that we are searching for to symbolize and identify the human condition and the exertions of society; to understand and explain the new world that is racing toward us at the speed of a meteorite. It could be utilized to help enrich humanity in the laborious task of expressing itself better in this world, to connect with the rest of society and permit a better future. This kind of media and communication could challenge and provoke debate about ideas, it could break the rules, destroy the preconceptions and the conformism that rule and condition us.

This could give rise to true beauty, and give us the opportunity to create in a condition of free expression, communicating true and profound beliefs to the world around us without being conditioned by profit.

We have the creativity to change the messages, rearrange the entire image.

We must have the courage to risk being different. No one should be culturally, physically or spiritually starved. Channels of distribution exist. Creative people, and providers and creators of content, may have the keys to unlock real communication, communication of real meanings that could change our lives and the lives of others with creativity and respect.

We need to create a dialogue, not a mono-brand, a mono-thought, a monologue, a monoculture. We have to alter the messages, rearrange the whole image.

We should not only be survivors as a species, but we should prosper creatively and evolve dynamically, we must recognize the whole human race as a brand, with all of its diversity, ethnicities and colors, its differences and sometimes its limits and vetoes. A human brand based on respect, not on power; possibility, not uniformity; love, not fear.

Our spirit needs that kind of creativity.