

The Fair of Others

The Fair of Others is a participatory art project focused on the wide and complex topic of social perception and conflict, that directly refers to social inclusion/exclusion processes.

The Fair of Others is not a passive experience, but a path involving a series of concrete, material actions: writing a letter to a stranger; participating in group games, where people are called to (literally) tear down stereotypes, establishing distance with specific social categories, and make themselves aware of their privileges as well as of their real inclusivity; narrating their own experiences of being socially marginalized or excluded; contrasting visions and values with unknown people.

Being not restricted to a metalevel, The Fair of Others is not (only) an opportunity to reflect, as it concretely exposes participants to social dynamics that get tangible and evident primarily when people are hit by them in first-person. Indeed, during the performance, it is likely to feel excluded from the rest of the group (for example, because one could not receive a letter) or find oneself alone in supporting a different opinion. Therefore, The Fair of Others has the potential to generate a real impact on participants and may represent an opportunity to practice inclusive group games.

The usefulness of this kind of projects stays in the possibility to work with people on the topic of social exclusion and conflict, as well as on the mechanisms on which they are based, especially impression formation and categorization processes. Indeed, participants have the opportunity to realize that is impossible establishing an interpersonal contact without developing a first impression of other people, a process that is only partially conscious and is due to automatic cognitive mechanisms, such as perceptive salience.

In a more and more categorized, and categorizing, society, the effort of being inclusive may go through the relativization of the majority of those categories that we implicitly use daily. The categories of belonging offer a social identity for the individuals but they also have high

costs in terms of social division and breakdown. A society split up in increasingly restricted and narrow categories is an itemized society, where the experience of exclusion is more and more frequent and feasible.

Research in social neurosciences has clarified the similarity of the neuronal substrate between physical pain and social pain during the experience of social exclusion (Kross et al., 2011). Moreover, it has been demonstrated that the experiences of social exclusion change our brain function – for example, when we're excluded, our brain will release an enzyme that attacks the hippocampus – resulting in the reduction of some cognitive abilities, such as working memory, decision making and ability of focusing (University of Georgia, 2006).

In the light of these evidences, art work on intersubjectivity processes are important and necessary. The Fair of Others responds to the need of elaborating and testing tools for intervention on the interpersonal dynamics that are at the roots of social conflict, firstly making manifest and problematizing many categories that we adopt and manage as if they were natural, logic and self-evident.

References

Kross, E., Berman, M.G., Mischel, W., Smith, E.E., Wager, T.D. (2011). Social rejection shares somatosensory representations with physical pain. *PNAS*, 108(15), 6270-6275. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1102693108>

University of Georgia. (2006, November 9). Social Exclusion Changes Brain Function And Can Lead To Poor Decision-making. *ScienceDaily*. Retrieved September 7, 2022 from www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2006/11/061108154256.htm