

Dialogue on creativity

or how to tackle creative block, with Paco Roca, Sento Llobell and MacDiego

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How does creativity surge? Are there keys, rules, ways to keep it in place and for it to never fail? These are questions that we ask many times when facing a blank piece of paper, when we are facing that moment by ourselves, in which we are waiting for that brilliant idea to arrive, transforming our project into an exceptional piece. It is not always easy. The best solution is to have some tricks or techniques, acquired with time and practice; the savvy of those who have been solving problems for years. A round-table with an audience was organised to learn how creativity is perceived by three heavy-weights of illustration and design. In it Paco Roca, National Illustration Award 2008, Sento Llobell, one of the classic Valencian professionals of the same field, and MacDiego, graphic designer, discussed their own creative processes, the way they tackle the so feared “creativity”, and how to do it in the most effective way. The round table was titled “Is Creating from Scratch Offensive?”. It took place on October 29th, in an auditorium packed with future creative professionals (designers, illustrators... design students and professionals), chuffed to hear of the secret strategies of these three professionals. Their three-party dialogue on how to face the creative blocks that appear throughout the work process, and how to solve it, continued as follows:

Paco Roca started stating that he works in illustration because he ruled out other things –it seems that his career as an electrician did not go so well... and it’s a good thing!-. “Creativity is one hundred percent linked to the passion that you feel for your work, to how dedicated you are to it, and to the enthusiasm that you put in that which you have to create. When you are passionate about something, you spend the day looking at things, researching, soaking up the work of others... and that is how creativity surges and ideas start flowing”.

“Creativity (or inspiration in the case of the painter) exists, but it must always find you at work”, continued Sento Llobell remembering Picasso’s famous words. That is why it is necessary to consider, to mull things

over, to work at them. To look for the best way to improve them and, most importantly, to fight creative block.

For MacDiego finding creativity has two important phases, “One, the time that I give a brilliant idea to come up as I leave my client and walk to my motor-bike; and two, if it does not come up on the way home, look for other people to share the work with, because what is important is to deliver the goods, and to deliver them on time”, he concludes. He mentions the importance of the decision-making process. Any work will be better produced under pressure, because you think fast and make decisions. “When you have time for a certain job, other more urgent tasks cut through the queue, so all work ends up being urgent. It is decision-making, honed by experience, that solves problems. Besides, creativity is part of an insult, provocation, game, surprise and risk... you have to grab the attention of the audience, and it is only after living, experiencing clashes and critical situations that you are capable of making decisions. From torment, loneliness and different moods, provoked or not, great creations can be achieved. This is being creative out of need.”

However, all three of them coincide in saying that they never face the blank page, a situation where they have to just create. Paco Roca always works with an idea previous to the blank page, “There is always a commission, an idea of what you want. In comic, where I am my own boss, my way to create is recovering moments that are important for me, drawing up paths that I would like to walk or recovering moments that give me happiness. I always think about ideas that, with the passage of time, I know have improved me as a person. With clients, it is always different, they ask you for what they need and the starting point is a fluid, good communication with them, to be able to understand what they need and to synthesize it through drawing”.

Sento Llobell remarks, “I don’t remember having started anything from nothing. Usually it is the art director who asks you for something, and when you have it, they tell you, *it needs a bit more work*, which means

that they don't like it and you have to start again. In time, you learn to give things several layers of work, with a pause in the middle. This is very important for the quality of the work and to encourage creativity".

MacDiego believes that creativity is universal, "Everybody is creative in some area. It is learnt with practice. Later on, the same job can be done in a boring way or you can try and innovate, and differentiate yourself". Like Paco Roca, MacDiego agrees on the need to feel passion for your work. "Creativity is, finally, the ability to surprise ourselves with a project, the spark that differentiates us; hours dissolve, so it is better if you like it".

Another of the hindrances of creativity are blocks. To start working and reaching a point in which you feel you are unable to continue. Sento Llobell exposed a whole set of keys to avoid it. "As an illustrator, you are supposed to know how to draw, to solve things. Suddenly, one day something does not work. Inexplicably, you are blocked and you cannot continue. To sort out those moments it is important to take into account several things. The most important one is self-esteem. Sometimes, a small criticism from someone who is not important for us can make us fall, it robs us of the enthusiasm to continue. Let us not allow it. We have to be confident of our work".

The length of projects may be a complication too. In the case of Llobell or Paco Roca, who draw comics, their work is long-term. "Not being able to see the end of the project can block you. I always recommend to divide it in small challenges. It is not advisable, either, to give too much importance to what you do or what you want to do. Do what you know and don't fret, don't be over-demanding of your work, since you may feel let down if you don't reach the minimum standard that you set", Sento explains. "Similar situations happen with people who use too much research, they never have enough; or with those whose work system is so strict and studied that in the end they bore themselves. In the end, work gets blocked always by excess, not by want of anything. Let us try not to create too complex structures".

Paco Roca understands creativity as the answer to conflict. "We are not creative every day; only when facing a problem, a conflict, a need. This happens in all professions. When we are facing the problem, the project, the work... is when we start to think around it to solve it. It has two parts: one that is the idea that we want to develop, the other, the tools and tricks of the trade, that come through working insistently, day after day.

"If you cannot be creative, be corporate, meaning, try to sort it out by using the corporate identity colours or fonts, mainly. The best thing you can do is to deliver your work as you committed to do. There is never time to produce the work, but there is always time to make changes or corrections. It is vital to transmit that you are interested.", explains MacDiego.

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Do you copy or do you get inspired?

For the three of them, talking of inspiration is talking about studying, seeing other work that may help in the search of inspiration of their own. Sento Llobell finds

plenty of ideas that inspire him. He looks at the work of other professionals and considers how they have come up to the solutions they have, what resources they use. "It is in those moments when you slip into someone else's skin when you start finding solutions that surprise yourself", he concludes. MacDiego is more straightforward: "The word creativity comes with discovery. Some time ago I read a book which had a title like *If you copy one author, it is plagiarism; if you copy two, it is a version, and if you copy three, it is creation.* So you copy until one day you realise they are copying you. It's cool". Paco Roca differentiates between the beginning of his career —"when I didn't have a style of my own", to now, when everybody asks him to be himself. "When I was an anonymous illustrator I could give different answers to anything, inspired by the style of other illustrators that I admired. Now people want my style, it is easier, but also more boring, because many a time I end up copying myself", he says.

"My working process is always similar: the easiest thing is to draw concepts. I try to absorb all that I want to develop, especially when it comes to illustration. I look for a concept, I doodle it, I let it stand, tack it up on the wall, and I consider it. A few days later I have a broader point of view that allows me to finish it", comments Paco Roca.

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The search for a style of your own.

How does one define and set a personal style? It is a question closely related to creativity and the working process. "The search for a personal style may become an obsession, when it is not the goal. You find your own style when you know what you want to tell and you do it through your drawings. It is your way of understanding commissioned work, how you face work... it is your most natural way to express", argues Paco Roca.

For Sento, style is the third or fourth step of creativity. "First is the idea, then the form you want to give to it, finally you ask yourself about style: the tone of your message, whether you are ironic or serious, the genre you use, all of it ends up defining your preferred way to work, which, with time, will be your own style".

MacDiego considers that you have to walk miles to find your own style. To do so, it is necessary to work. "If you do not have clients, you make them up, do things for your friends... or even work for yourself as a client. What is important is never to stop". Knowing how to value our work is important too: "A good exercise of self-criticism is to write down what we think about what we do; it helps us acquire full awareness of our capacities, but more especially, of our mistakes", concludes MacDiego.

Finally, all three of them recommended sharing your work, showing our projects and ideas to third parties, and allowing them to help us, in order to improve. Always, always, surround yourself with honest people who know how to give their opinion without fearing dejection. For, in the end, creativity is the result of work.

Thus, in good humour, with laughs and the presents that MacDiego brought for the audience, this round table came to its end.