



Sefirot Independent Publisher
CREATIVITY COLLECTION

The Creative Ambush
Original Italian title: Agguato creativo
Translation: Alizé Latini
Copyright © Sefirot Srl 2024
www.sefirot.it
ISBN 979-12-80241-22-1





Matteo di Pascale

**THE
CREATIVE
AMBUSH**

**A Course
in Creativity**

Index

Disclaimer	9
Introduction	11
PART I: TO DEMOLISH	15
Rebellion	17
Magic and responsibility	19
External blocks	21
Let's start!	45
PART II: TO AWAKEN	47
Looking inward	49
The most terrifying aspect about creativity	50
Inner blocks	53
PART III: TO STRUCTURE	95
Back to the roots	97
The creative path	98
The fundamental matter: who am I?	99
Responsibility and reality	103
How creativity works	109
Feminine and masculine	110

Train the feminine side	115
Training system to open up to the feminine	120
Conclusions	141
Train the masculine side	142
Training system for strengthening the masculine	145
Conclusions	159
Internal critics	160
PART IV: THE PROCESS	169
Getting down to earth	171
My creative process	172
Application example	175
Second application example	176
The importance of the evaluation phase	177
Example of applying the process in the work environment	180
Process problems	184
PART V: FAITH	195
Uncertainty	197
To love uncertainty. Fear of death and fear of life	200
The shadow of creativity	201
Integrating the shadow	202
My own shadow	204
The nonlinear road	207
Diving in	209
Why can't we dive in?	214
Facing your blocks	224
Experience the discomfort	228
The joy of miracles	229
PART VI: TO EXPAND	233
Us in the world	235

Goals and identity	240
Misalignments analysis	245
The key to everything: truth	248
The real goal	252
True nature overflows	252
Enhancing your true nature	256
Recognition	258
Pride and mediocrity	259
Responsibility and co-creation of reality	262
Ideals and impact	264
Conclusions	266
The last ambush	269
PART VII: RANDOM LESSONS IN CREATIVITY	272
PART VIII: APPENDICES	299
Finding Teachers	301
On inner work	303
Useful books	305

DISCLAIMER

What is this book and who is it for?

This is not simply a handbook on creativity. It is something more: it is a laugh-out-loud, earth shaking book, a shake-up that will challenge you, and force you to experience the thrill of creative life, its ups and downs, the pain of falling on your ass and the extraordinary excitement of feeling your hands burning hot, driven by the eagerness to create something new. Those who will have the courage and the strength to get up time and time again, to laugh and enjoy the trembling of their knees as the vibration rises to the sky, those are the readers to whom this book is dedicated to.

The Creative Ambush is for all of those who want to feel creative and wish to pursue the creative path whether you are a professional, an artist (art director, designer, illustrator, painter, writer, sculptor etc.), or simply a creative soul (manager, entrepreneur, chef, teacher, employee, shoemaker, baker ... and I could go on and on and on with this list). The important thing is that you wish to access the dimension where creating, breaking patterns, finding new solutions, intuition and miracles exist.

If you are among those who often say, “No, I’m absolutely not creative!”, you can put the book down. Don’t read it, it is not for you, yet. Maybe you bought it by mistake or it was a gift, in which case give it to someone who you know can benefit from it.

But if you feel a burning desire, a fire that you want to feed and free upon the world, you must keep going: this *is* the book for you.



Introduction

I usually start my lectures by asking, “What is Creativity?”

And I get a wide array of answers: creativity is talent, it is the ability to come up with ideas, creativity is expressing yourself, it is creating something that did not exist before, it is passion, love for what you do, becoming a channel for something higher ...

That’s when I insist: is a designer who invents a new tool more creative than an advertiser who spits out fifty ideas an hour? Is the artist who paints a wonderful painting more creative than the actress who brings a character to life? Is the young startupper who studies a food delivery app more creative than the person who invents a new pasta dish?

Was Picasso more creative than the person who invented pizza? Da Vinci or Bill Gates? Castaneda or Ogilvy? The creator of a new teaching method or the one who invented the ballpoint pen?

As some of you already guessed, these are funny questions to get the ball rolling, nothing more than tricks. After letting the answers roll for a while, I explain that creativity is such a versatile, flexible, and overused term that there is no right or wrong definition.

However, since it is *my* lecture (haha)—in this case it is my book—we'll embrace my vision of creativity which is the most extensive possible: creativity is to create something new.

First it wasn't there and now it is. Puff. Like magic. And it can be of any shape and size. In fact for me there is no difference between a writer and a chef, between an artist and a middle school teacher: if they express themselves, they are creative.

I'm super proud of my bread recipe (buckwheat and chick-peas flour, no yeast) just as I'm proud of my stories. I worked hard to find the right combination of ingredients, I studied and then tested it out dozens of times and every time I see the bread rise, or when someone sees a picture and asks for the recipe, I feel extremely proud of my creation.

I am A Creative. I dedicated my life to self expression, to the task of bringing out something that was inside of me. I've always felt a push towards creating, building, developing, and generating new things.

I did many things: I worked as an art director and UX designer for companies and agencies in Milan, Turin, Amsterdam, Shenzhen, for brands like Samsung, OnePlus, Whirlpool; I built the first UX design online academy in Italy; I published a few novels; I wrote *Survival Guide for UX Designers*, the highest selling book of its kind in Italy; I developed the creative tools *intùiti*, *Fabula Deck*, *Fabula Deck for Kids*, *Cicero*, *Edito*, *BAD*; and when I couldn't convince a single publishing house to include them in their catalogs, I founded Sefirot, my own publishing house, through which I sold more than 150,000 units all over the world.

I've had a brilliant career, and the truth is I've never been the best UX designer or the greatest art director or the best writer, either of fiction or nonfiction. There are so many peo-

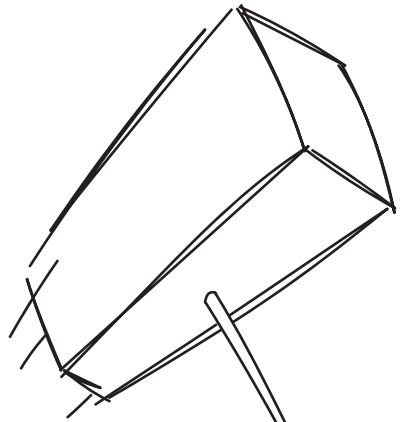
ple out there who are more dedicated than me, more specialized, more talented. Yet I always had a burning longing: the yearning to express myself and never having enough of it, of wanting to break the cage I felt closing too tight around me, and I think this was the key to my success and satisfaction.

At work they liked me because they sensed I had a strength that couldn't be contained and that I impatiently had to use it. The UX manual had a following because it is a quirky, straightforward, fun product, full of illustrations that bring smiles to the reader's face. Sefirot shines because it is different and had the courage to publish titles that no one believed in.

There is no formula for this, no mathematical equation or framework to lean on. I had the courage and arrogance to expand into the world and something good happened. And my intention, with the help of this book, is to push you to do the same, to challenge yourself, to find out what you really have to give, in any field, and also to face disappointment if the result should be less glorious than you expected.

A master can only take those who follow as far as they have come, no further than that, and it has taken me almost two decades to become my favorite creative.

I want to take you there: I want you to become your favorite creative.



This is Jack

You too can be like Jack



PART I

To Demolish

Rebellion

Years ago I went to a job interview for an advertising company in Turin (maybe the most famous) and I met with the head of HR and her assistant. They smiled at me while we sat around a shiny crystal table set in a basement meeting room that looked like the VIP area of a club. They wanted me—they made it clear from the start—because I had already worked in Leo Burnett, another famous agency. For them, that was reassuring enough since ad agencies are cut-throat meat grinders and they wanted someone who they thought could survive the metal teeth of that hellish machine.

But their smiles slowly disappeared when I told them that I had quit Leo Burnett. They looked at my resume, reading it with more attention than before and there it was, ink on paper it said that it had been months since I had worked there.

The manager picked up her glasses. “Why,” she asked, “did you leave?” When I told her that I didn’t like the quality of the output, the final result of the work I spent so much time on, she looked over at her colleague aghast, as if she was talking with a mad man. I laughed out loud.

“And would you like to go back and work in an ad agency?” she asked. I leaned forward. “It depends on what you offer and most of all on what I will be doing,” I answered.

The lights dimmed for a moment, as if I had dared to curse in that seventy years old Temple of Advertisement. The Head of HR took a breath and looked like she was about to faint, and for a moment I honestly thought the assistant was going to grab her in her arms. It seemed like she was mumbling the words: “What? Isn’t working for such an important firm not enough for you? I mean, it is *us!*”

“If I end up making shit—I didn’t say that, I used “things I don’t like” instead of “shit”—the answer is no, it is not enough”. I imagined the dialogue between them: “Oh my God, Maria, this is the kind of guy who quits unexpectedly, without a logical reason”.

The manager straightened her back in the chair, her lips slowly paralyzed in a grimace that locked the side of her mouth, she took pen and paper and drew two circles. She handed it to me, like I was a child and said, “So, if some special projects, which I can’t talk about, get the green light—she hit the first circle—you would work with the creative team on those, otherwise—she hit the second circle—you would work with our regular clients”.

I looked at her, feeling confused. That didn’t explain the position at all. She let her fingers run through her hair. “Oh,” she complained, “I don’t understand why you creative people always have to make it hard. Why do you care so much about what you do? Don’t we pay you to do it? Then do it”.

It was at that exact moment, while the head of HR lectured me and her assistant nodded proudly, that I decided that I was going to turn this interview upside down.

“Let me teach you something,” I said.

I took a piece of paper from the stack sitting at the center of the table. I folded it in two, I tore it and slipped one half towards the senior and the other towards the junior.

“By noon you have to fill this with something and I’ll come

back to evaluate it". They stared at those white rectangles looking terrified. "Perfect," I said, "you will then go to lunch and at two o'clock I will hand you a sheet that must be filled in by the evening and I will evaluate what you wrote. And tomorrow we will do the same, and the day after that and the day after that and so on".

"Feeling anxious? I know ..." I said. "And it mustn't be some mechanical thing, a repetitive action. You must pour your entire self in every blank piece of paper. Every day".

They looked at me flabbergasted, like I was a monster or a rapist.

"And you dare to ask us why we creatives want to do something we like? Because deciding to employ ourselves totally into useless things kills us".

I looked at the pieces of paper I handed them and I realized that yes, just like a piece of paper you might end up being consumed and scattered in the wind.

They didn't call me back of course.

Magic and responsibility

Potentially, we are all magicians who hold the power of the infinite yet unrealized possibilities in our hands. This is creativity. We can feel something new and then we see it, we think about it, we create it. We can build it, write it, play it, sing it. We have this incredible power that we should never underestimate. We can create something new, isn't that wonderful?

It is pure magic: an idea that descends from above, coming from who knows where, awakens us or catches us by surprise while we walk on the street. I am talking about inspiration and intuition, and the urge to chase them when they suggest something to us. It is a spectacular and mysterious dimension, powerful and inexplicable, that needs acceptance more than explanation, a desire to plunge in, get involved and experience it.

Be careful, though: as I was telling the two HRs in the agency it is a power that comes with a certain degree of intensity, through which we pour ourselves into what we do, so we must have care and respect for it, otherwise we end up creating blocks upon blocks that hold back the mechanism until it stops in its tracks, leaving us feeling like plastic bottles squeezed until we are empty.

We will start this journey from the blocks. We all have them: usually, they are made up of sentences and concepts that limit us, both coming from the outside and from those teachings that we have internalized and that we repeat to ourselves like mantras.

If you have a project, whether it is writing a book, creating a board game, opening a cafe, changing jobs, making music or any other thing that makes you happy and vibrant, and you're not doing it or at least not pursuing it the way you would like—for example you are already writing a book or working as an art director but you can't put your entire self into it—there's nothing to worry about: it happens to us all.

The thing is, there is a block somewhere and all we have to do is take it apart.

This is the most unpleasant part because if we are pushing on the brakes there must be a reason. If we are climbing up with a rope so tight that it's cutting into our waist preventing us from reaching the top, it is because we are afraid of falling. Removing some of our blocks will be painful, and annoying, it will make us shiver, it will make us cry, however, we must remember that if we keep those limits we will never be able to fly. But I guarantee that once we remove them, the joy of freedom will seize us like a wind filled with creative fury and our internal voice will tell us, "You can do whatever you want, so do it!"

External blocks

Let's start with the external blocks. We are going to shake things up a bit. There is a huge need to destroy, to throw away old systems, catchphrases, preconstructed ideas, until we realize that there are no more patterns, that everything is possible.

That is, after all, the starting point of creativity.

If we were to rebel against a religion, we would try to be as blasphemous as possible, we would dare to demolish the dogmas, the commandments of creativity, those concepts that are taken for granted and are now repeated over and over again, used on social media, by professors in universities, by great designers and employers alike.

So get a hammer, muster some courage, and follow me: we are going to shoot at the sky, plant bombs, and build a new world. It will be a lot of fun.

1) Not everyone wants to be creative

Let's say it out loud: creativity is a trend. It is treated as a soft skill, a cross-cutting skill that gives an edge to those who claim to "have it". One of the most overused positive catchphrases is: "We are all creative", which is often said with

a sense of self-righteousness, as if creativity is an inalienable right and a hand should be extended to the more shy to reassure them, to tell them that, “Yes, you can be creative too”.

Creative inclusion, which is often enforced through workshops and meetings, involves the use of techniques such as colored voting stickers, sticky notes, moments for thinking and moments dedicated to sharing to make sure that everyone, even the most hesitant, gets a chance to have their say and make a contribution. A true automatization of the creative process to make it accessible to all.

The underlying democratic ideal is to restrain the most charismatic individuals from hogging the conversation so that those who are by nature less imposing, are included as well; the capitalist ideal, on the other hand, which is what drives companies to pay for this kind of workshops, is to maximize team contributions, forcing all the chickens to hatch, even the most reluctant ones.

Now let’s make an effort to look around the meeting table and we will see the ugly truth: not everyone wants to be creative.

Albert over there is thinking that it is getting late and that in twenty minutes he wants to get out of there so he can pick up his daughter from school, and Giulia next to him, who decided to pursue a career as an account manager precisely because she has always considered herself more rational than creative, just wants to do her thing and then go to the gym; neither of them really feels like being creative right now. They have their own reasons to have no desire to fill a blank sheet of paper with thoughts and ideas. And yes, sure, they too might contribute in some way to the brainstorming that is taking place at the table, they might be useful if forced to hatch, but they don’t care about what’s being done. Maybe they want to be creative in another way and in another place (maybe he wants

to compose music at home after dinner) or maybe they have decided not to venture down the unpredictable road of creativity (maybe she suffers from anxiety and prefers to operate in more definite, clear-cut, tangible territories) and it is only fair that they can be free to quietly sit at the brainstorming table minding their own business while those who want to be creative monopolize the conversation.

But let's turn our attention to John, who is sitting on the opposite side of the table, listening to Luciana and Valerio with pure admiration; those two look like they could physically fight each other to defend their ideas. You can tell that John would like to raise his hand to announce that, yes, he too has had an intuition and he has a proposal to make, but his arm wavers, he doesn't dare: is he lacking the energy or the courage?

So what should we do? Stop everything, ask everyone to be quiet, hand out ten sets of sticky notes, force those at the table to jot down their ideas, and then finally give John the space he democratically deserves?

John is not the victim here. John is a grown man who is acting like a child. Yes, there is such a thing as creative responsibility: raise your hand, open your mouth, have the courage to say the stupidest thing ever while everyone looks at you and then, if you didn't talk only for the pleasure of hearing the sound of your own voice, find a second dose of courage and defend your idea. It is far from simple: you sweat, your face turns red, your heart skips a couple of beats. It takes tremendous courage to be creative, and you have to want it badly. When you are a child, it is okay for a teacher to help you out, to push you a bit; when you are an adult, it is not.

There are people like Giulia who simply do not want to be creative, others who want to be creative at a certain mo-

ment, like Albert, and people who would like to be creative but decide not to, like John. There is no right or wrong. Not everyone has to come up with ideas, write books, compose songs, paint, innovate, create. It is not mandatory. Not only that: those who decide to be creative are no better than those who don't want to be.

And besides, it is not our problem. Everyone has their reasons for choosing to be a certain way, and it is only fair that they take responsibility for it.

We shouldn't feel bad for those who seem to want to but can't, like John. If he can't find the strength to do it, to commit himself, to get out of his box, that's his damn business. We're not in his head, we don't know what he really thinks while sitting on his chair with his fist clenched: maybe he is convinced that he has to say something in order not to be left out, maybe he is so arrogant that he believes he doesn't even have to share his pearls of wisdom with Luciana and Valerio.

Breakdown n.1

Let's drop the cheap do-goodism, leave others to their own devices, and focus on the only variable we can work on: ourselves.

Think about your responsibility.

The only certain thing is this: if we do not express ourselves, whatever the reason, deep down we do not want to be creative and we cannot be saved. No one will ever come and lend us a hand.

We have to tend it to ourselves. There is no pouting and sulking; creativity is not a right we can get by stamping our feet. It is up to us to decide.

We have to be the ones who want to be creative.

2) Framework, lateral thinking and other tricks will not make us creative

There is a lot of talk about ways to increase or develop creativity: methods, strategies, frameworks, structures. I myself have enormous fascination and respect for these kinds of solutions and I have developed several tools with Sefirot, my publishing company, in the form of cards that you can arrange on the wall and use with sticky notes, such as Fabula Deck for writers or BAD Canvas for designers and entrepreneurs.

Any help is valid and welcome. The problem lies in the misunderstanding that the tools will turn people into creatives. They merely provide help to better channel a certain drive.

During presentations of Fabula Deck, a tool that offers a framework for writing novels and screenplays based on the hero's journey, there is always someone who raises their hand and asks the fateful question: "Ok, this sounds great, but who is going to actually write the story?"

Well love, you're the one who has to write it.

All those frameworks and methods are merely complex knowledge synthesized and offered to simplify actions. Fabula Deck will not turn you into writers overnight, just as Design Thinking does not turn you into master designers, and the same goes for Design Sprint, Business Model Canvas, Lean Canvas and so on. They are simplified ways to get from point A to point B, which allow us to find the faster road, maybe make fewer turns, however, they do not give us the car, the gasoline and especially the will to travel.

Those are things we must put in ourselves.

It is the same misunderstanding with lateral thinking codified by Edward de Bono. Solving problems by tackling them from the side, laterally instead of head-on, by finding alternatives, by searching into the world of the absurd, switching

vision and perspectives. These are all valid, applicable and effective suggestions, but it is the promise with which they are perceived that tricks us: to be creative with as little effort as possible. That illusory joy of having found the grail, the pot of gold, the system for turning on creativity with a snap of the fingers, with a magic technique, with a new way to conduct a brainstorming session.

Have you ever done a real brainstorming session? Knowing about the existence of brainstorming never made anyone more creative. Haha. It doesn't work that way. Getting into brainstorming means to walk into discomfort, it is the knowledge that we are testing ourselves over and over again until we have found a good idea. Of course we can use "divergent thinking" first, to come up with a large number of ideas, then we will use "convergent thinking" to narrow down what we have and keep the best ideas. Ok, but do we really think that coding the uncodifiable can give us power over it? Truth is, after three hours of brainstorming, on the fourth straight day, when we realize that none of the ideas are even acceptable, we will take all of the words that our comfort zone loves so much and we will shove it up where the sun doesn't shine. What can we *converge* on, when only shit has come out of *diverging*?

We will find ourselves walking around, taking cold showers, talking about it over and over as we come to terms with the one and only truth: we will never have control over creativity, no matter how many techniques, neologisms and magic spells we can come up with. We will also understand why we feel the strong urge to find systems to latch onto: because it is terrifying knowing that we have no control, that we must abandon ourselves to the kind of flow one can learn to navigate but will never tame.

No creative person, no matter how senior they are, knows that something good will always come out of a meeting. No

writer knows that the book will actually become reality. The experience doesn't guarantee the chance to bend ideas, but it does teach how to respect this immense and unknown force.

It is not the water that learns how to bend to the will of the sailor. It is the sailor who has learned to respect the water.

Breakdown n.2

Let's make a list of the tools that we use—books, canvas, methods, AI—to be creative.

Would we be able to work without them? Do we simply depend on these tools or are we slaves to them?

Let's imagine the tools set on the table in front of us or in the room. Feel how different they are from us, they are not part of us, they are part of an external reality.

Thank them for what they've given you and imagine pushing them away, making them small or even kicking them out of the room. We can use gestures, make a sound or take a deeper breath if that helps. Fum. Swoosh.

Feel that you are the creative one, you are your only tool. We'll never be confused again: we are the only ones capable of doing so. At that point we can use any instrument, framework, game, method to help us but it will never again define our creativity.

It is ours and ours only.

You are tools and I thank you.

I take my power back and I will never again delegate my creativity to something outside of me.



Bye!

Swoosh

3) Creativity is not a mechanical method (nor a muscle that needs training)

Another trend right now is teaching creativity, as if it was something accessible, structurable (or even worse, already structured), codifiable, that can be put into a system and then shared. I can teach you the equation for ideas and you can put it into practice at home. Two plus two equals creativity. That's clearly bullshit: another rope to hang on to feel less lost in an unpredictable world. Making the concept as simple as possible: creativity is to create something new, be it a product, a new system to achieve a result, a solution to a problem, a breaking of old paradigms. To make something that wasn't there before and now it is.

But where do ideas come from? How does something shape inside of us, an image or a sentence, a vision (for the few fortunate ones) that we suddenly need to chase? Whether it is an electrical discharge between neurons or the voice of god or a demon whispering in our ear, the only certainty is that we cannot force this process. We cannot sit in a chair and order our brain or a higher entity, "Chop chop, give me a good idea". Try it out and see if it works. Enlightenment comes when we least expect it, while we are in the shower or on the way home from work or out of nowhere without even having started nor mentioned brainstorming. First there was emptiness and then poof there was enlightenment.

I wracked my brain for weeks to find the name for a storytelling tool. I talked about it with my business partner on the phone, we would say names out loud, just to hear what they sounded like, even though, as we said them, we already knew they weren't the right ones. Names like *Storytellers* but maybe without the 'e', to make it smarter, *Storytellrs*. I kept on shouting names alone in the car, or walking back and forth from the office: dozens, hundreds, thousands of names, one more appalling and inadequate than the other.

And then one evening, while having dinner at a friend's house, we opened Google looking for synonyms for the word "plot" and the third voice on the site was "fabula". When I saw those six letters I felt two separate things connecting somewhere, a beam of light coming down and putting everything back together. I said it out loud, "Fabula!" The others looked at me and I repeated it, knowing that it was the right name and that my partner would agree, "Fabula! Fuck, Fabula is perfect, it's beautiful".

I have known the difference between fabula and plot since high school, yet that word had not occurred to me during all the brainstorming sessions. Could it be that the system was working in the warm darkness of my unconscious mind and that at some point the final idea came out of the wall of black smoke? Or maybe there was an alignment in the universe and a star came down and hit me on the head? If I had taken a cold shower or slept eight hours a night would it have hit me sooner?

Do we really need to know? I don't think so. How about we stay on the magical feeling that strikes us when a new idea arrives? It's pure joy, as if a thread had finally been pulled somewhere and we feel connected to everything, the pieces fall into place, the glory that excites us is not so much related to ego; it's more of an emotional outburst, a child laughing and crying at the same time. Those who have experienced it know that it is a wonderful feeling. It nourishes us and makes us feel what fullness is.

Now, you see how ideas cannot be forced to appear. At most we can wish for them to arrive. And the worst part of creativity is the space between an idea and another, when we stand in between flames, when we walk miserably in front of a Temple and we don't know how long it will take before they will let us in. Try using lateral thinking or thinking hats now,

or any other tool. It won't do you any good except to give you the illusion that you are doing something, that you still have a say in the matter.

And this wandering around with the hidden fear of doing nothing but fumbling in the dark will always be there. It is happening to me right now, as I write this book and I don't really know where I'm going with it, I can only dive in and trust that something will keep happening, that at the end of each chapter I'll be hooked on the next one, and that the whole bundle will reveal itself at some point.

Breakdown n.3

Let's break the link that ties us with the mechanical view of creativity. Let's see the absurdity (and also the lack of poetry and heart) inherent in that American-style way of doing things that expects willpower to be everything, that everything depends solely and exclusively on our commitment and discipline.

That's not how it goes: not everything depends on willpower. You've been fed another illusion: creativity is way bigger and unmanageable.

Let's try to change our attitude: what if our commitment was not to squeeze, force, destroy ourselves, but to open ourselves to something higher, to be willing to believe, to receive, to rely on a dimension—where inspiration and ideas live—that we cannot know and control?

What if the purpose wasn't so much about doing but reaching something?

Imagine walking in front of a temple, our inner temple standing in an open space. It's night and the sky is starry. We feel that the creative process is not an endless working factory