

ABSTRACT

In this presentation I will explore the activist potential of a specific mode of listening to improvisational and participatory performances. Many studies have emphasized how listening is multifaceted and influenced by various attitudes and approaches that allow us to experience the sensory in different ways.

Since March 2023, I have started conducting a series of site-specific improvisation performances in pristine or degraded ecosystems. The project, called *[in situ]*, stems from the need to explore the space between social ecology, post-human environmentalism, and improvisation. The ecosystem in which the improvisation takes place, with its human, more-than-human, living, and non-living elements, is a fundamental aspect of the improvisation in *[in situ]*, making each performance a unique and unrepeatable event, a complex system linked to the place, the audience, myself, and the time. In September 2023, *[in situ]* was held in the Maremma National Park, as part of a week-long artistic residency called Dune- Utopie, focused on site/situation-specific art and the art-environment connection. Throughout this performance, acoustic interactions have developed between me and the human/non-human elements of the ecosystem in which I operated, which are worth reflecting upon. These non-linear interactions have led to the decentralization of the artist in favour of abolishing hierarchy between passive and active elements within the performance. Listening is an active communicative component, even when silent, and lays the groundwork for recognizing a shared space-time in which interactions can occur, encouraging creativity and re-framing ecological perception with the environment.

PRESENTATION

Our way of understanding the world is largely influenced by the relationship we establish with it through our senses. In this context, which is simultaneously political, social, and ethical, sensitivity plays a fundamental role, positioning artists as agents of change through their works, conveying new modes of perception.

I will just briefly mention that the relationships between listening and ecological awareness are already well-established and deep. Sound artists emphasize the concept of listening to the environment not as a composition but as an improvisation. Like improvisation, the sound environment is not a fixed entity crystallized in an immutable form, but rather an active and reactive system. Aleatory and stochastic elements guide our movement and influence our listening in space. Their studies revealed that what is defined as improvisational listening encourages participation and raises the consciousness of the audience in ecological issues.

But, talking about my experience:

Since March 2023, I have started carrying out a series of site-specific improvisation performances, named *[in situ]*, in more or less polluted environments. I am using improvisation as a means to experience the context and interact with its various elements. The ecosystem in which the improvisation takes place, with its human, other-than-human, living, and non-living elements, is a fundamental aspect of the improvisation during *[in situ]*, making each performance a unique and unrepeatable event, a complex system linked to the place, the audience, myself and non-human elements.

I would like to share with you a case study: a single performance of these series. In September 2023, *[in situ]* was held in the Maremma National Park, I identified the performance space: a field approximately 50 meters wide and over 500 meters deep. With four panoramic microphones available, I decided to mic four points: mic 1 at the lake, mic 2 in the forest to the right, which housed the nests of some birds and cicadas, mic 3 in the field grass, e, and mic 4 on the path where the audience would stop, near a basket where I had placed some objects, mostly materials found on site (pinecones, abandoned bottles). An additional sound input consists of my instrument, the electric bass. The signal from the microphones and my instrument is routed to a mixer, which is connected to a chain of effects. The electroacoustic setup thus represents a key element for connecting the two systems at play, the performative and the environmental, and create something hybrid, which is different from both and is not necessarily the algebraic sum of the two streams. The elements of this meta-system are considered equally active and interact in a non-linear way, like any improvisational system. The *[in situ]* performance is thus an event of post-human collective improvisation. The performances took place on September 15, 16, and 17, for a total of five performances at different times of the day.

During these five events, the interaction between the elements changed: in fact, initially the audience remained silent as if they were attending a traditional theatrical performance or concert. For this reason, initially, most of the stimuli came from non-human elements, such as wind, cicadas, and birds. However, over the course of the five performances, there emerged, with progressively increasing intensity, a strong participatory dynamic that, especially from the third to the fifth performance, saw the audience becoming increasingly central in directing the course of improvisation and interacting with the performer. The two audio you have listen to are brief excerpt from the last performance, there are 2 issues that I would like to mention here: 1) The aesthetic conception of improvisation performances is destroyed and reoriented in different terms. The acoustic feedback, here is not just a collateral effect of open miking on the audience and environment but a creative stimulus. 2) The presence of feedback highlights an issue I might call ethical/relational: every element is responsible for the overall orientation of the performative

system, just as every living and non-living element is responsible for the health of the ecosystem in which it operates. Some participants wanted to interact using their voices or playing with plastic and pinecones, but they were forced to re-orient their interactions with the microphones in order to find a balance between interaction and feedbacks. In my view, these behaviors emerge during *[in situ]* precisely because of how it is structured: open microphones on human and other-than-human elements allows for experiential knowledge of the agency of components traditionally considered inert and passive during improvisation performances. Not succumbing to the temptation to assume artistic control, but rather working to lose it without imposing predetermined behaviors on the audience, allowed the performance to disintegrate and reassemble as an event where there is no barrier between active and passive intelligences. These emergent behaviors within the performative system suggest a new ethics, a different conception of norms and values governing (post-)human and non-human behavior in a temporary event.

I can't draw conclusions from this study, but I can anticipate a few things.

The relational and performative dynamics in *[in situ]* are in a dynamic balance similar to the ecosystemic ones. In an ecosystem, there is not a rigid stability but a continuous adjustment among different levels. To be sustainable, the energy and nutritional inputs and outputs of the ecosystem must be in balance, yet it is never a static equilibrium but a dynamic one, whose value can fluctuate over time. This balance is subject to a series of controls, including feedback controls, where the downstream element controls the upstream one, as well as predator-prey mechanisms, parasitism-symbiosis, resilience-resistance. The type of equilibrium that results is called *omeorhesis*. It is an emergent characteristic, not observable through reductionistic investigation, but emerges only when considering the ecosystem at a higher level. Resistance and resilience are examples of these emergent behaviors in ecosystems. Situations of self-organization, transitions to chaos, resilience, self-determination of listening focus and re-actions are perceived during *[in situ]* both by me and by the audience, and I believe it is a clear aspect for an experiential knowledge of the performative agency of non-human elements. But, besides having performative relevance, I believe that the potential of this experiential knowledge can also translate at an environmental and social level, recognizing an agency in components that are traditionally considered socially and environmentally inert. The concrete experience that the audience/actor lives during the *[in situ]* performance becomes the starting point of an experiential knowledge that has the potential to propagate into society. It is precisely in this possibility that the subversive and socially impactful potential of a certain type of artistic performance lies, and it is precisely this way in which this point event can reverberate and propagate over time, space, and society and transforms in a *artivistic* performance. This last point requires a sociological investigation, which is currently being planned and will be carried out in the coming months. The effectiveness of *artivism* in this context is also yet to be demonstrated and will require an in-depth study, which cannot yet be reported here. However, what seems evident in the contemporary music field is that listening can play a central role in the construction of *artivistic* performances

and that improvisation can be a valuable support, given its participatory, experiential, unpredictable, and active qualities.