THEATRUM MUNDI

Voi[e,x,s]: an interview with Alexandra Lacroix and Marta Gentilucci

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Published	17 July 2019		Sonic Urbanism
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John Maybe the best way to start, is with you saying in a few sentences how you understand this project. Between us we have language that we've used over and over again, but it's probably all developing in different ways in our own minds. So, how do you view what we are creating here at the moment?

Marta [laughs] Good question!

Alexandra I have to say it's a very exciting but also diffcult project for me. I am used to crossing different fields, but this is something really special. We are outside of the theatre and we are meeting not only artistic fields but also sociology, architecture and urbanism, so it's diffcult to say what this project is. Really, it's an experiment – a musical, artistic and sociological experience, but one that has no name, in a way.

John That's true, this kind of project has no existing name. It is somewhere between sound installation, spatial design, community opera and acoustic ecology.

Marta I would add two things: one is that for me it's very interesting to share and confront my work with Alexandra's. As a composer I usually work by myself, completely owning and controlling the procedure and the method I use to compose. Meanwhile Alexandra is leading the *mise-en-scène*, so she's the director of the stage. Having two entities that usually conduct their creative process independently together, and having to find a common place, is extremely interesting. The second thing is that I see an exciting possibility in this work. Usually, I have a container to work with: I can write music for a theatre, for a concert hall, for

a smaller or bigger space. I try to develop a musical discourse for different situations. Here there is something different, because there is the possibility to create not only a container for the performance, but also to create a common context, the roots, from which I have to implement and modify my own language. It's changing my way of composing.

John Part of the challenge is taking something into the public realm. This project forms part of a wider reflection for Theatrum Mundi on sound, not just as a material, but the way that we use sound and the way that we create sound and how performative techniques and compositional techniques could inform urban design. How do you think that Chapelle Charbon, space and the way it is changing, have been affecting you in terms of the work that you're making?

Alexandra You need to be very clear why you are doing this thing. When we are doing something in the theatre or in another cultural place, people want you and expect you to make an artistic piece. But in urban space it's not obvious. Nobody is waiting for you or asking something from you, so you need to be different. You need to defend an artistic thing in a world where that thing is not necessary.

John There's much more competition for attention in the public realm. Not just in terms of the immediate setting of the performance, but different things competing for space, competing for the right to be there.

Marta Yes! Exactly

John A theatre creates emptiness that is intended to be filled, whereas a true city, or at least its public realm, is always full, in a sense. That's one of the reasons we were so stimulated by Chapelle Charbon as a space, because it was genuinely empty apart from one small group of people we met who were living there. Whereas in the rest of the city there's traffic, there's commerce and so on.

Alexandra In the city you don't have any place where you can really exist and the space to do something. You need to make it exist. You need to identify the needs of the streets, the needs of people, of the urbanist, and to find a way to say, "Yes, it's important to have this artistic dialogue with you".

Marta Chapelle Charbon is a kind of like huge playground in which there are few instruments, but many sonic possibilities. That's why it takes so much time and so many visits and so many recordings to have a sense of this huge instrument that is the park.

John You mean Chapelle Charbon as a space?

Marta Yeah, it's a huge instrument, a sonic instrument, that incorporates the people that were there for the show. I think that one question that we have to ask ourselves, is if we need to think

about the kind of people that are coming. Or do we need to develop the necessity of our work – the artistic, social, urbanistic necessity – from inside, for its own sake? Then afterwards to try to give it an "outside", in terms of the reaction in different contexts. On the one hand, we try to figure out which or whom is the public, and then work with this public in mind. Or, on the other hand, we try to focus internally on an exchange of knowledge, questions, creative process between ourselves, and then we put it outside. And a er the performance we try to figure out the reaction of the public. It's not a project that is just "OK, I'm doing this and that, it's a piece, it's written, then we perform it" – it's not like there is score that is finished and then others will interpret it. We are interpreting it all the time, in different ways.

John I think another way to frame what you've just raised is: Are we saying that a community already exists for this piece? Or are we going to create a public?

Marta I think there is a third way: that we are not creating, but we are already part of it. So being there doing the project and the performance is not creating something that the other will fill with their presence; instead we are already part of that community. We are creators and spectators at the same time, from the very beginning.

John We're creating an intensification of the public, in a sense. There are already loose connections between people that are near to that site, its potential community. This gives a certain level of connection, but we're kind of coalescing that potential community into a real one via an intensified, shared sensory experience. This is Jacques Rancière's idea of a community of senses,[1] which emerges in a space. A community might not be linked by anything else other than the same sensory experience they're having at that moment.

Alexandra It's an empty space and that's a good thing, I think, because there is no expectation. It's a new space for the inhabitants and for us. So the only connection is to be there at the same time, doing something new there.

John There was this notion that we weren't trying to capture the place and say, "this is how it sounds"; instead we were trying to say it could sound like this. You could make it sound this way by activating this piece of material or by saying this name. What for you is the difference between that documentation, which operates in a supposedly neutral way, and what we're doing?

Marta I think, that it has something to do with fluidity. The fingerprints of today's sonic and emotional social space are in continuous change. When we recorded the sounds at Chapelle Charbon, the raw material – a hit with a wooden block, a piece of metal – these sounds could come from anywhere, they are not specific. Some sounds become specific because of our memories of

the place. We recorded many names of the habitants and I was moved when listening back to the names because I knew exactly when we recorded it, the faces of the children who were saying names, the person whom you were laughing with during the recording and so on. But then, when it's recorded and re-created and replayed over and over you lose this connection with the actual act of recording. That's where I think we need to find a way to go beyond the specificity of Chapelle Charbon. How can the process of being in Chapelle Charbon produce a way of operating that can be meaningful in another situation? With other people who are coming? With other sounds of a different city?

Alexandra But it was a very special moment. You can't cheat, it's not a recording, it's not electronic… it's the very organic connection between the bodies, the voices of these bodies and this space.

John I want to pick up again on the playing of names. Marta, you can see the materials that made the sounds you recorded, but an audience can also have a real and meaningful sensory response to these sounds. We don't have to understand somebody's name for it to give us an intimate sense of them. So, I wondered if you could reflect upon the way that, when we play those sounds – when we play the names into the space – does it represent those people or invoke their presence?

Alexandra Another question related to that for you, Marta: you recorded some names, but many were recorded without you being present. You had the les but not the faces, so how did it become alive in the moment for you?

Marta As a composer I'm very sensitive to the quality of sounds. So when you listen to the voice of a kid you know if it is a boy or a girl, if it's lively or a bit sad, or if it's shy or not. You have all this information there in the voice of the person and you can almost see as if he or she were real. You can create an image, an identity of the face.

Alexandra That means, as you say John, all the people who hear those names can imagine and seize the faces. The identities of those people are in their voices. Even the sonority of the names, the origin, is giving you so much information that everybody can begin to imagine the person.

Marta Personal names identify a personal space, so when you say a name you are creating an identity. And I think there are things in the performance, that were a kind of a confirmation of that capacity of names. Today we are surrounded by technology – TV, radio, advertisements outside, etc. – so everything pretty much has a connection with technology. Sounds that we hear are o en coming from something electronic, so we are constantly listening to real sound mixed in with digital sound. The techniques used to spatialise the voices in the performance – having voices in different

spaces, speakers hidden behind the public and the performers also whispering – produced a constant interaction between the created reality and the real reality of the place. The sounds were not misleading the perception but amplifying and making it bigger.

John This leads beautifully onto the last thing I wanted to raise. In one of the workshops this project grew from, we asked: "what is a sociable acoustic?"[2] In other words, how could you understand the social configuration of a space via its acoustic properties? Could you reflect on this? To what extent could the carving out of these virtual acoustic spaces Marta just mentioned create a realm within which people respond socially to one another in a different way? Perhaps they feel more intimate with one another or they feel more like they're part of the same thing? Or where suddenly you feel connected to the wider city, as the voices were coming from the rooftops of the surrounding buildings.

Alexandra For me the big emotion concerned how to communicate in this big space. You could have a dialogue between the kids and the performers who were really far apart, those in the space and others placed on surrounding rooftops up to 500 metres from each other. For me this was something very emotional that opened up the possibilities of having a dialogue in a huge space. We don't need to be very close to share an intimacy; we can have something really intimate in a huge space.

John It's a really valuable idea, using the public realm, which can be very big and very overwhelming, in such a way. More and more it has to become a shared space, because many of the other shared spaces in the city are organised into different kinds of social categories around different subcultures, religions, consumption preferences, and so on. We have to be able to have an encounter that doesn't involve you explaining yourself to someone else, but which involves you feeling much closer to them than you do when you're just passing in the street.

Alexandra What is super exciting for me is the fact that we can create different listening experiences that come from sound in the bodies of people. The way Alexandra is creating space through the *mise-en-scène* and through the sound – this interaction creates a common language. If we can find this common place in which space, bodies and sound are mixed, and create many listening experiences through this… I think that is going to be what the project is about. And these listening experiences are the interaction with the people. So people are free to interact in those spaces that we create.

John This is making me think more clearly about the how people use these different spaces that are created within workshops and the performances. And within these, how people change their physical responses to the space, which go beyond what one does in the everyday sense. Usually, in order to protect ourselves from one another and from the overwhelming nature of the public, we really

limit our bodies, so this experience can open people's bodily openness to one another, or at least give them the opportunity to do that. There's an opportunity to have a very different, intimate relationship with strangers within that sonic envelope we're creating.

In this interview, Lacroix and Gentilucci discuss the project Voi[e,x,s] with Theatrum Mundi's director John Bingham-Hall, asking what it means to use a piece of public space as a sonic instrument, how sound both identifies and creates an identity for space, and how the project relates to a wider city context. The interview was conducted for the Sonic Urbanism publication and edited by &beyond for Theaatrum Mundi. See voiexs.fr for more.

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1. Rancière, J. (2004). The politics of aesthetics: The distribution of the sensible. London: Continuum.

1. Workshop on 30th May 2017
   https://theatrum-mundi.org/programme/atelier-tm-first-workshop-what-is-a-sociable-acoustic/

1/1 Still from footage taken of the performances by Esmeralda da Costa