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State of Emergency

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Michele Spanghero



In the current situation, how would you define a 'sound of emergency'?

Loud and yet silent.

The form of emergency we're experiencing has been centered on a conceptual 'absence', or the combination of an invisible organism (the virus) and a drastic reduction of movement, and so of sound/noise production. You reveal some imperceptible elements in your work, including some 'absences', too (like silence). How did you perceive 'absence' during the pandemic? And has it changed in any respect your approach to your work?

I am interested in working on absence, void and silence because they're powerful metaphors to stimulate the audience. And they're subjects that deeply attract me too. Working on absence is very difficult though, because it is not just enough to remove or omit something to create the sense of absence, it is necessary to evoke the feeling of something potentially present but unattainable, not fully perceptible or understandable.

I think that during the lockdown, rather than a real absence, we experienced a sense of lack. We felt distress when something that we were used to, was suddenly missing (hopefully only temporarily). Lack is linked to a sense of loss and the desire to recover, while absence is the contemplation of something that no longer is, or never was; I guess it's a form of nostalgia.

So far I don't feel that my artistic approach has changed due to the pandemic, but I believe that it's too early to see how deeply we've been changed by it (if we have been changed). Perhaps some aspects of my work made me already suitable for this scenario.

In your "Vol." installation you explicitly investigated the volumetric relationship between sound and architecture "reproducing the resonance frequencies of the room in which it is exhibited". How do you see this specific relationship, and what kind of 'augmented' spatial perception does it potentially generate? And similarly, since we've isolated ourselves inside apartments during the lockdown, how do you think the perception of our own spaces has been (temporarily or definitively) changed?



Acoustic resonance in space and matter is the focus of my sonic practice, because I'm interested in using sound in its basic acoustic principles, but also in a metaphorical, yet non-rhetorical way, making it the conceptual core of my work. The word 'resonance' itself explains this double meaning: in acoustics, resonance is when sound reflections amplify specific wave frequencies (e.g. of a room), but I'm also interested in the reflection (of thoughts) that sound can trigger in the audience. I believe that art should be a quest for meanings, not a mere search for amazement or wonder. So what I want to achieve in my works that concern empty spaces, like in *Vol.*, is an acoustic awareness of the audience. By amplifying the characteristic timbre of an ambience - its resonance - I can make audible the imperceptible "voice" of a room, thus making the audience think about the role of hearing in spatial perception.

During the lockdown we lived in our houses more than usual, because we were forced to stay home, so the acoustic result was quite the opposite of the subtle drones in my works; it was a space full of lively sounds.

Your sound sculptures "Ad lib." used a medical machine for automatic pulmonary ventilation with a few organ pipes "that play a musical chord frozen to the constant rhythm of the automatic breath". In it, you are pushing the viewer to reflect on the delegation of technology. You realised different versions, with, for example, the German Requiem op.45 by Johannes Brahms, or a "C cluster chord producing a dissonant sound". Can you elaborate more on these two different choices? And how do you see the sculpture now, after the ventilator has become a universal symbol and a crucial tool to save people's lives?

The sound sculptures *Ad lib.* are the result of several years of research, trying to create an original artwork through the juxtaposition of two very different objects. I wanted the pulmonary ventilator to work like a proper medical machine and picked up the challenge to make it interact with real organ pipes without altering any of its parts.

The first small version that I made in 2013 plays a C cluster, because I wanted it to sound sharp and uncanny (in fact it happened that some spectators could not stand it). Working on *Ad lib.* I had many options in the Western musical tradition of Requiem, but I chose Brahms' German Requiem op.45 for the beauty of the composition, furthermore, the use of an organ "ad libitum" is prescribed in Brahms's score... it seemed to me that everything fitted perfectly! Of course, I would like to make another version tuned in D minor (the key of Mozart's Requiem K 626) and I'm constantly studying options to improve the work, but I also have to consider that I've already reached the operating capacity limit of the pulmonary ventilators. So I've been playing with the idea of creating a version with several pulmonary ventilators.

I believe that with the pandemic crisis, *Ad lib.* has become even more powerful, due to circumstances, once unimaginable, that are now adding new meaning to this work.

"Listening Is Making Sense" is a sculpture with a preponderant physical element, using tactile transducers to propagate sounds through wooden beams. Here again, the silence becomes sound once you come into physical contact with the beams. Do you think sound is gloriously and technically physical? And how essential is our physical body to experience sound (and, as such, reality)?

What we commonly call sound is actually the brain's perception of vibrations in a certain frequency range; we're used to the fact that sound propagates through air, but the waves can spread through any matter. So sound is both physical and psychological, but the energy of vibration is essential in the experience of sound. Perception is the mechanism that puts our body (and our consciousness) into immediate relationship with the world we are part of. As Merleau-Ponty writes in *Phenomenology of Perception*, the world "is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions... man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself".

With the sculpture *Listening Is Making Sense*, I wanted the audience to experience an uncommon approach to listening, by spreading sound waves along the length of a series of wooden beams, thus creating a sort of wooden audio circuit. The audience's attention is at first caught by the massive architectural impact. The sculpture is apparently silent and the only way to listen to it is by getting into physical contact with the resonant matter - by placing the ear straight onto the wood. My aim was to let the audience experience the artwork in a more physical and intimate way, letting them find out that secretly sound flows within it, like a lymph.

Your "Dià" sculpture is shaped like a double horn in a golden ratio proportion. It has been placed in a field on the top of Mount Pal Piccolo (1780 m) on the border between Italy and Austria, a place that was full of trenches during World War I. Through it you can hear nature over the 'silence'. Did you want to invite the listener to focus on the sounds of nature and conceptually also to imagine the sounds of death that were present there in the past but which can't be heard anymore?

This is a work that was first exhibited in the former battlefield of WWI on a mountaintop, but it was successfully exhibited in other contexts, like the Tuileries Garden in Paris. Its message is not necessarily related to war; the sculpture is a device that is meant to invite people to talk to each other, or simply listen to the soundscape, through its double-horn. Indeed, the title *Dià* in Greek means "through" and is the prefix of the word dialogue (*dià-logos*).

On Mount Pal Piccolo, the sculpture had a great impact because it was symbolically connecting, both visually and acoustically, two countries that fought in the war. At a time when borders are emerging again and walls are built anew, the message of dialogue implicit in the sculpture seemed increasingly relevant.



Silence, is, in your definition, one of the elements at the 'core' of your work. Have you experienced a new quantity and quality of silence during the lockdown? How do you think it has influenced our perception of sounds and reality (if at all)?

Normally people do not pay attention to the sounds surrounding them; we live in a society where sound (music) is rather used to isolate oneself from others. During the lockdown we were already quite isolated and the external noise sources drastically decreased. This made it possible for many people to notice sounds (often common sounds) that they usually did not pay attention to, or could not hear because they were covered by background noise.

I can't say whether this new attention has changed the way people perceive sound in any way, but I hope it has raised their attentiveness towards the sonic landscape and also led them to reconsider the value of silence (or at least noise reduction) in our cities.

I believe that the main goal of sound art is to expand people's awareness of the sonic environment (considered in its broadest sense). Artworks like *Dià* or *Listening Is Making Sense* try to encourage people's acoustic sensitivity in a playful way. If people started to pay more attention to the unusual sounds in their neighborhoods thanks to sound artworks or during the pandemic isolation, that's great.

"High Rise" extends the rendering of space through resonance to a whole building, a former six-storey wool factory. It is represented by six horizontal aluminum pipes, each as high as each floor of the building, with loudspeakers inside emitting sound waves tuned to the harmonics of the resonant frequencies of the building. Do you think that this approach allows the creation, as you defined it, of a "new semantic system"?

My creative impulse comes as a reaction to the huge amount of data surrounding us. I subtract, isolate and rework the preexisting matter in search of a new semantic system. I try to stimulate the observer's engagement by subtly altering their perception. This method is clearly noticeable in my

photographic practice and, for instance, in my sound-works on silence. In the case of *High Rise*, I used sound to give a different – not only visually, but also acoustically – perception of a peculiar architectural feature of the factory.

You have performed concerts in art galleries and festivals. How do you imagine performance now, with a drastically reduced audience with social distancing as the best short-term scenario?

For many years I was involved in the world of theatre, and I've seen performances for small groups or even a single spectator, so I think that the current sanitary restrictions would simply push performers to focus on smaller audiences, and maybe that's an opportunity (as often limits become spurs to change).

In my case I will probably perform *Almost Solo* again. *Almost Solo* is a live concert for solo double-bass and field recordings. It's a project I developed many years ago and works best with a very intimate, small audience.

Do you believe that the online acoustic environment has its own resonances? And what does being 'present at a distance' imply from your perceptual perspective?

Acoustically speaking, of course there's no resonance to the Internet, but there's an interesting media resonance, a big – sometimes-loud – echo online that traces peoples' interests and thoughts. It's the background noise of our lives; trying to listen to it without being deafened is one of the challenges of our time.

I chose to live in a peripheral area of Italy, in the "outskirts of the Empire" (to quote the composer Fausto Romitelli), so I am familiar with the concept of being present at a distance. I believe that it's the work that you do that matters; let it generate its own "resonance" and then just listen to it.

BIO Mentioned as "Best Young Italian Artist in 2016" according to *Artribune* magazine, Michele Spanghero exhibited his visual and sound works in various international venues such as School of the Art Institute (Chicago), Hyundai Motorstudio (Beijing), Tuileries Garden (Paris), Museum of Modern Art (Istanbul), Ars Electronica festival (Linz), Klangraum (Krems), Mart Museum (Rovereto), Bevilacqua La Masa Foundation (Venice), Palazzo Te (Mantua) and 16th Art Quadriennale (Rome).

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