

Composing with a Polluted Planet

Pia Palme

Abstract. The current COVID-19 crisis is yet another symptom of the Anthropocene. As a composer, I take notice of how my artistic practice is deepening with renewed urgency during this crisis, and, as a feminist, I locate my practice *with* the planet. The term ‘with’ defines a specific kind of relationship that oscillates according to engagement. This contribution presents my recent investigations into several aspects of ‘with.’ I begin this discourse by explaining how I work with my everyday surroundings as an artist, how I direct my ears beneath the surface, tuning into a particular environment. The aim is to tap into the potential of a certain location or community, allowing the process of composition to unfold as a situational and political process. Handling my instruments, I rely on my ears: listening provides crucial information to playfully balance a situation. During this artistic research, I identify and investigate four different stages of connecting *with* an environment. I first investigate the term *with* from the philosophical stance, then from the position of an artistic researcher, thirdly from that of an environmentally engaged artist, and finally, within the context of a feminist position. To conclude, I propose that the process of composing resembles organic growth rather than strategic action and is sustained by balance, empathy, resilience, and courage. This experimental investigation characterizes composition as a kind of compassionate activism grounded in listening.

To the reader

This essay is based on a manuscript which I wrote for an online video presentation at the symposium ‘Performing, Engaging, Knowing 2020’ at the Lucerne School of Music, Sursee. The video was part of the joint panel ‘Interferences of Writing, Researching, and Composing’ in collaboration with the theatre scholar Irene Lehmann and the musicologist Christina Fischer-Lessiak. It was composed as a polyphonic work, featuring experimental filmed sequences, very few sound compositions, and my voice reading the manuscript as an overlay. I wanted to evoke the atmosphere of my specific situation, as part of my research and practice. Let me invite you to follow me to the small village of Poschiavo in the Swiss Alps, close to the Italian border, in the summer of 2020. Imagine the sound of my voice speaking these words in a sunlit living room, with the fresh fragrance of mountain forests coming in through an open door and mixing with the warm smell of old wood paneling.

Introduction

Since the pandemic crisis began in March 2020, my situation as a composer and artistic researcher has radically changed. I am writing this text in Switzerland, as Artist in Residence at the Uncool Residency. Although the symposium ‘Performing, Engaging, Knowing’ in Sursee, which invited me to present my research, cannot take place physically, it has been possible for me to travel to Poschiavo—so, here I am, for the entire

month of August, living and working in an old house in this Alpine village. Adapting my plans to the situation as it is now, I invite you into my residency home. I have to use what I find at this place, coming right to the core of what I want to explore: my art and research is situational, it manifests with a situation. The title of my presentation mentions 'composing' as my practice, and the polluted planet. The state of the planet has become even more significant for my work since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis.

My activities take root in my surroundings; my music and research grow in, from, and *with* the specific place, time, and cultural situation around me. They manifest in different forms—as they do right here and now, in this mountain village. My focus is on the term 'with.' What does it mean to be *with* someone, or something, or *with* a place, in the context of my practice?

In the kitchen of my residency house there is a magnificent iron stove for cooking with wood, probably from around 1900. It is still used during the cold seasons. The design is clever, compact, and practical—a Swiss product. It looks very technical, more like a historical steam engine than a kitchen stove. It has a number of features to facilitate the procedure of cooking. A water basin made from copper is embedded on the left side; copper is a great material in combination with preparing food. I have been experimenting with the stove and with several objects which I discovered, making films of performances in my kitchen. In so doing, I place my presentation alongside artists such as Chantal Akerman¹ and Martha Rosler,² both of whom did iconic performances in kitchen spaces in 1975. At this moment in time, I find their pioneering feminist work quite inspiring and want to extend their experiments, towards the current fields of artistic research and compositional thinking, towards a discourse about the present crisis and the state of the planet, and towards contemporary feminist practice. In my understanding, these various terrains are intrinsically connected; they interact and interfere *with* each other and *with* my own research and artistic process.

Aspects of 'with'

To begin, I want to explore the term 'with' from a more philosophical position to describe my connection to you as my audience. The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (2015) writes about the importance of the 'place of community,' the 'being-in-common.' He reminds us that we rely on that particular sense of community to be able to confront the intimacy of an 'inside' with an 'outside.' This idea is interesting in the context of my presentation, which happens in digital space [and has now emerged in written form]. In writing, speaking, performing, and filming all this, am I sharing my singular existence with you, as a community? In a certain sense, I have you, the audience, in mind, as I work/speak/write. My feelings extend towards you—my fictitious audience. Is that a

¹ For example, see her film *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) see under <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073198/>.

² *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuZympOIGC0>.

‘place of community’ or not? I would argue yes, it is, because my imagination re-creates the world.

Secondly, ‘with’ defines the closeness of artistic practice and artistic research. Both emerge together. Within moving and working, writing and performing, knowledge is gathered—for me, that is the essence of artistic research. Via Brian Massoumi (2019), I understand that knowledge can be gathered directly from doing something, not only by reflecting upon music or a performance afterwards, or by reflecting from the outside. For example, we, the collaborators on this panel, often write and do something together. In talking and discussing, insight may spontaneously surface, right within our conversation. Or, when I improvise with the bass recorder, my mind and awareness are simultaneously at work *with* my fingers, legs, *with* the entire body and my breath. This has to do with how perception and awareness function: insight arises when one feels, touches, listens, smells, tastes, or sees the various materials one is working with. In this context, it may be helpful to turn to recent discoveries in neuroscience. One can talk about the *brainbody-in-culture*, a term that illustrates the nexus between the physical and mental activities of a human being, and the surrounding culture, with reference to the book *Gendered Neurocultures* by the scientists Sigrid Schmitz and Grit Höppner (2014), or to Eric Kandel’s (2012) findings. The human brain creatively explores and re-creates the world through sense-perception.

Thirdly, we could explore ‘with’ as regards the state of the planet. During the past few years, I have noticed how my practice is changing as a result of my observations. I have traveled extensively and lived in remote places, in natural environments as well as in urban centers. I found that humans leave their traces everywhere—to an extent that is quite shocking. For instance, here in Val Poschiavo the beautiful landscape of this Alpine valley has been altered over the last century, mainly in order to produce electricity. Dams and power plants were built, as well as roads and train lines; the water level of natural lakes is either raised or lowered, according to technical needs, and massive power lines climb all over the mountain ranges. I certainly understand this: I need electricity for my computer, for example, and for presenting and writing. Yet, in another way, I feel helpless, I want to do something. I feel an urgency, the need to act, and this feeling translates into my art and music. Or rather: the urgency fires my practice, I feel driven, but I don’t exactly know how this process will unfold.

Interestingly, Bruno Latour (Davis & Turpin, 2015) describes similar experiences in a recent interview about art in the Anthropocene. Latour mentions that he observes a kind of urgency that is emerging in discussions with scientists and artists. Listening to conversations, he notices a ‘narrativity’ in what people explain—it seems to be important to include one’s personal experience when talking about the Anthropocene. Apparently, personal stories add to the understanding. Thus, regarding the planet, ‘with’ turns into an urgency, a relationship which is fueled by a strong emotional fire.

Finally, the fourth aspect of ‘with’ is the feminist practice. To be more precise, I could

use the term ‘feministing’ here, a term which I recently found in an essay by the curator and art historian Gill Park (2020). Her idea that artistic experimentalism, theory, and activism belong together resonates with me. Feminist aspects in music and music production have brought me to artistic research. For my practice, it was important to find out more about the general contexts and connections in music business and music history. I felt the need to become socially active, in order to compose without reservation, to compose in a genuine way, in my own way. My wish to actively participate in the field of music and composition is slightly different from the urgency described before. With Gill Park (2020), one could say I’m interested in women*’s (that is, people identifying as women in the widest sense) ‘experiences while investigating urgent theoretical questions about art and our social relations.’ There is a need for women* to represent themselves, artistically and politically. In particular, this seems to be important now, during the pandemic crisis. All over the world, women* are beginning to state their ideas and needs with more urgency. On the one hand, the crisis affects women* in many ways: often, women* care for others. On the other hand, they engage in environmental activism. Interestingly, *The Guardian* recently published a conversation about the importance of indigenous women activists in Brazil, who try to prevent the destruction of the forests. In the article, tribal leader Célia Xakriabá and the author V (formerly Eve Ensler) of the *Vagina Monologues* discuss the state of the planet. It originally appeared under the title: *The Amazon is the Vagina of the World—Why Women Are the Key to Saving Brazil’s Forests*. Shortly afterwards, the title was changed; it is now: *The Amazon is the Entry Door of the World: Why Brazil’s Biodiversity Crisis Affects Us All*. However, the link to the article still reveals the original title, which was far more provocative (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/aug/10/the-amazon-is-the-vagina-of-the-world-why-women-are-key-to-saving-brazils-forests-aoe>).

Altogether, I perceive the fourth kind of ‘with’ as a deep connection that inspires me to engage, act, and manifest.

I’m with the stone bench in the garden, with the snails, with the compost, with the stove, the church bells, the helicopter and the rain, with the grass and the plum tree. With the plastic waste and the virus. Nobody can escape. We have become entangled beyond repair. The Anthropocene will never go away, never again. It will be with me until I die. I will never be free from pollution anymore.

Balance and natural growth

How do I explore my connection *with* an environment? We can *tune into* a situation in order to understand its complexity (Norman, 2014; Oliveros, 2005; Bregman, 1990). With my ears, through the activity of listening perception, I precisely orient myself in an environment. The sense of hearing is important; taking in sounds from all directions, from around oneself, from above and below. For me, sound and space are interconnected. Sounds contain spatial information, and space (or volume) is sonic. This

idea motivates my practice—composing is all about sound or voice, being or moving in space. Hearing perception connects to balance. Balance is something I find crucial in the current crisis. At this very moment, the public and private space penetrate each other right here on my desk, in my room. Many things are happening simultaneously, many influences and interferences are coming in, from all over the world: these spheres begin to interact, I cannot keep them separate any more. It's impossible to control this situation. I experience an interwoven, interconnected, polluted system of interferences. What I can do is keep a balance. Balance differs from control. Interestingly, balance is guided by the ear.

Let me return to composing and performing: I don't want to control performers and sound productions, I prefer to balance possibilities. I prefer musical settings where multiple elements or performers are free to interact with each other. Thus, the sounds become more fragile und unpredictable; I find that pleasing to watch and to listen to. In my understanding, the compositional process unfolds like the growth of a tree or a plant. I experience it as a process that happens by itself. The music emerges within its environment and continues to grow further. Nature is not something outside myself (Deuber-Mankowsky, 2019). I belong to the natural dimension, much in the same way as a tree or plant. *My brainbody-in-culture-is-in-nature*. I grow hair and nails, I shed skin cells, eat and digest, I will die and this body will decompose. In the same way, I compose music, texts, films, or research papers—they grow much in the same way as grass, or my hair. My kinship with nature and the environment is not something that I can choose, pick up, look at, and discard again. My connection with the surrounding situation is an ongoing bond that provides the ground and soil for my practice. My activities, my imaginings and ideas take root in this very foundation—nature, culture, the planet—in sum, they belong *with* the planet.

Thank you for reading, listening, watching—for being *with* me. I would be curious to hear your reactions.

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Pia Palme is a composer and artistic researcher from Vienna, Austria, with a focus on experimental music theater and interdisciplinary formats. Her practice often involves interactions with electronic music, writing, and visual art. The backbone of her work is the physicality of performance, a theme she regularly revisits as a musician with her bass recorders. From 2019 to 2022, she directed the PEEK artistic research project 'On the Fragility of Sounds' at the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz, Austria, where she explored contemporary forms of music theater and composition as feminist practices, cooperating with the theater scholar Irene Lehmann and the musicologist Christina Fischer-Lessiak. She recently collaborated with the ensembles PHACE Vienna, Airborne Extended, Schallfeld, KNM Berlin, Quartetto Maurice, Kontrapunkte Vienna, with the singers Juliet Fraser, Anna Clare Hauf, Rosie Middleton, Kaoko Amano, and Annette Schön Müller, and the dancer Paola Bianchi. She regularly works with young people, such as in the scenic work *My room, until yesterday* (2017) for seventeen performing musicians between 6 and 22 years. Palme's music has been presented at the festivals Wien Modern, Klangspuren Tirol, hcmf, Ars Electronica Linz, Ultima, BTzM Bludenz, or at Q-O2 Brussels. Her collaboration with the composer Éliane Radigue led to the realization of pieces for the bass recorder as part of Radigue's OCCAM series. Her recognitions include the 'Outstanding Artist Award' of the Republic of Austria as well as scholarships and residencies from Sound and Music UK, the City of Vienna, Siemens Foundation, the Banff Centre of the Arts Canada, the Öro Residency Program and the Saari Residency of the Kone Foundation Finland.

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