

Essay from the text *A World Is Always As Many Worlds As It Takes to Make a World*<sup>i</sup>  
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## SOUND

It begins in a corridor, a neutral space that belongs to nobody, a space not intended to be inhabited but to serve as an indication of the beyond to which it leads. Only the sounds of what happens nearby are heard: the dull thud of something hitting against a hard surface, rustles, rushing water, an occasional chirping of birds, and the din of city life. The absence of images increases the powerful presence of sound, underlining its surprising capacity to alter space without physically intervening, to allow us to construct images from nothing, to reveal to us the world through absence.

The sound in *Giardino Perduto* (Lost Garden), as this 2005 video installation by Donatella Landi is called, is the path that leads to the work and at the same time is the work itself. It is the element that triggers our imagination, but also allows us to “really” see the image, as the two videos the viewer then confronts are placed behind a tall wooden structure and can only be partially glimpsed through the slits between the boards.

Landi has used sound without images in previous works as well. In *Zoo*, 1994, the artist created a work—for her exhibition at the Museo Pecci, Prato—comprised of two separate but related parts: a darkened room animated by the joyous voices of the visiting children and the anguished cries of the caged monkeys, and, in another room, two monitors playing silent video loops of a bear compulsively pacing back and forth from one end of the screen to the other. Here, sound and images are totally disconnected. Sound is used to heighten perception and thus to reinforce the concept of coercion and unhappiness that the work addresses.

In *Plan de Paris*—presented in 2001 at MACRO, Rome—Landi brings the public into a room, soundproof and illuminated by only fourteen red LED lights that indicate fourteen sets of headphones, which together offer an acoustic map of the Paris subway. Equipped with a special (holophonic) microphone that records sounds as

they come in from a surrounding area and so reproduces our way of hearing, Landi traced the fourteen lines of the subway system, charting them through sounds and noises and scraps of conversation.

In a 1978 interview in which she discussed women, pornography and eroticism, and the relationship between the body and vision, Luce Irigaray states, “More than the other senses, the eye objectifies and masters. It sets at a distance, maintains the distance. In our culture, the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch, hearing has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations. . . . The moment the look dominates, the body loses its materiality.”

*Plan de Paris* is a space in which sight is no longer able to objectify and dominate. Landi pushes the spectator to “see” through sound: earphones project us into a subway car, among strangers, and we imagine their faces, clothes, and expressions. This work foregrounds the intimacy of listening—as emphasized by the use of the earphones—and at the same time draws attention to sound as the necessary space for interaction. As Jean-Luc Nancy has said, “Being cannot *be* anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the *with* and as the *with* of this singularly plural coexistence.”<sup>ii</sup>

In *Giardino Perduto* the emotional and narrative capacity of sound become less important; noises and sounds fill and transform the space. The sound contains no human voices and, perhaps revealing a new aspect of Landi’s work, does not narrate, describe, or depict reality, but rather assumes the role of memory not as the reconstruction of an experience but as the recording of an absence. (...)

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<sup>i</sup> The title is taken from Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>ii</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1963, 55

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<sup>ii</sup> “In fact, such a Freudian distraction or discretion concerning the ‘problem of foreigners’—which appears only as an eclipse or, if one prefers, as a symptom—might be interpreted as an invitation (a utopic or very modern one?) not to reify the foreigner, not to petrify him as such, not to petrify *us* as such. But to analyze it by analyzing us. To discover our disturbing otherness, for that indeed is what bursts in to confront that ‘demon,’ that threat, that apprehension generated by the projective apparition of the other at the heart of what we persist in maintaining as a proper, solid ‘us.’” Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York and Chichester, UK: Columbia University Press, 1994), 192.