

The Texts Collection is a program that accompanies and amplifies artistic practices by generating a collection of monographic texts for Hangar residents. Each artist has the possibility to commission a text about their work from an author of their choice—local or international; known or to be known—in editorial dialogue with Hangar. The intention is to produce publications on their practice in general—beyond this work or that particular work—designed for agile circulation and reedition, ensuring a long life, and contributing to expanding the networks and frameworks of artistic practices.

Through this editorial device, artists can count on a comprehensive and in-depth text that captures their ways of doing and thinking holistically, integrating different projects to build an overall view of their practices. The *Texts Collection* also provides artists the opportunity to establish a writing relationship as a starting point, rather than as the result of a project or exhibition.

But They Weren't Together

Itziar Okariz

I, too, thought the poem with the black schists beautiful and was consumed with envy not to have written it myself. It was simple. Green pastures, black schists. I'd seen those things so many times in the mountains, but it had never occurred to me that I could do something with them. All I had done was observe them. That's what poems were then simple and made of nothing, made of things you observed. I looked around me with watchful eyes. I looked for things that could be like those black schists, those green pastures, and made sure that this time no one would take them away from me.

Natalia Ginzburg, *Family Lexicon*

V We were talking the other day about how to make what is already there, those things that are there and you never know what sense you're using to perceive them, present.

I Yes.

V A few years ago, I had a workshop in front of some orange trees, orange trees that produced bitter fruit. From the window, I loved watching the ripe oranges that had fallen to the ground, and one day I began to replace them with small balls in the same colour. This exercise, which I did every day during the three months I was there, got me interested in the phenomenon of presence, that capacity to place ourselves in a self that is turned towards the world.

I When I was in Rome, my studio also overlooked a garden and there were some tangerine trees next door. I'd always go over to pick a couple in the mornings when I woke up. I had to negotiate with the parrots because they also went there to grab a bite. I'd just take the ones that had fallen, because they'd rot. The birds had a huge presence: besides my dealings with the parrots, there were also those black birds, the crows—they're super

smart!—that threw things at us. My friend, Pablo, whose studio was next door, had planted tulips, and they would snatch up the bulbs and toss them around the garden. We spent all day negotiating with the crows and parrots like that. Never got much done, though I wanted to videotape them, spy on the birds. A few days ago, Pablo sent me some seeds. I planted them today, here in Bilbao.

V Tangerine?

I We're not sure what they are, we'll have to wait and see what grows. He also planted them today. Let's see if anything comes up... It was so lovely picking the tangerines for breakfast... and the parrots...

V Do you know who I used to deal with? The gardener. He'd pick the little balls and leave them in my studio. I often thought of returning the ripe oranges to him [they laugh]. There's a book, I don't know if you've read it: *Living as a Bird* by Vinciane Despret. It's marvellous. She has another called *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* Such a beautiful title, I love it.

I, Izar has one that I've only read excerpts from. It's called *Animals in Translation* and it's written by Temple Grandin, an autistic person; it's an investigation, a sort of translation, into the language of certain animals.

V When I read that book it was summer and I was in Almeria. On one walk through the Tabernas desert, I discovered a canyon. Imagine a plain with a hollow below, and a river. Well, a river...In Almeria the rivers are more like small streams, and there were four massive eucalyptus trees. At night you could hear the two scops that lived there.

I I don't know what a scop is.

V From the owl family... I composed a piece inspired by how these scops owls communicate over distance. I set up two loudspeakers around 40 meters apart and used the space's acoustics to compose it. Despret discusses how birds set up their territory through song. Singing is how they make a place for themselves, identify with their surroundings. I like to think the owls chose that canyon because of its echo, because it made their song carry much farther. I have fond memories of those summer nights.

I How lovely! Could I listen to a little bit of this piece?

V It's a hard piece to show without the distance of the speakers and without the echo of the space where it was installed. I actually chose somewhere that was strategically designed for listening to it.

I Did you do it in the canyon that the river makes?

V No, what I did was a study of...

I Of the owls' sounds?

V ...how the sound of the owls' song behaved in that canyon, and how they used acoustics to lay out their territory through sound. I focused on rhythms, distances; reflected on how sound can transform space but most of all I researched listening itself. What I did was collect data to then compose and install the piece. And the sounds I used are like whistles traded between me and a friend.

I Oh, how lovely!

V The piece only reveals itself if you listen from that distance... Plus, more than the aesthetics of a sound composition, the piece dealt with the situation of listening. I can send it to you, but if you don't set up speakers 30 metres apart...

I It's funny. I did a piece in a river canyon with a lake that had a lot of echoes. What I did was let out *irrintzis*¹, wanting the wall and water to echo them back. It was a disaster because it rained the whole week we were recording, which meant there wasn't much echo. Finally, I recorded the *irrintzis* and the most beautiful part was that the animals "answered" me – the sheep responded. In a canyon, the *irrintzis* bounce off the walls. You let out an *irrintzi* and someone far away can hear it clearly because the water and walls bounce the sound, carrying it off.

V I'm reading a book by Marianne Amacher. I don't know if you know

¹ It is believed that the *irrintzi*, the traditional Basque high-pitched whistling cry that is used to express joy or respect on special occasions, originated in the Basque valleys as a way for people to communicate over long distances.

her work. She said what she did wasn't music and that recording it was meaningless. She mainly investigated the relationship between space and sound but was also interested in otoacoustics and what she called the "third ear", the tone produced by the cochlea when stimulated by certain frequencies. Her work makes me think about the relationship between inner and outer listening.

I That's lovely. You know, I once heard a guitarist play who amplified his guitar in such a way that, if you were lying on the floor, you could get the sound via vibration. It was really loud.

V Yeah, when you work with listening... lately I've been working with really low volumes, adjusting to the minimum audible threshold... There comes a point where you no longer know which sense you're perceiving it through, it becomes more tactile, a kind of awareness of being affected.

I You know, it's quite strange. We're not really very conscious of listening, we hardly ever listen. I mean, we only interpret what we hear. The same thing happens with sight and the other senses. We're made to interpret, not to pay attention.

V The title of Despret's book, *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?*, makes me think that if we want to ask the right question, we have to listen without interpretation, and to do that we've got to transcend a part of ourselves we take for granted. What happens is that this part is the foundation of our identity, and to question it shakes the pillars of that identity.

I Where did you show the owl piece?

V In Barcelona, on the ground floor of Tecla Sala. It's a space divided by walls and I wanted to use the bouncing and reverberation to develop the piece. For me, sound has form and takes up space.

I Did you create it just with the whistles inspired by listening to the owls, or did you use other sounds too?

V The reverbs started to build up, so the whistles turned into a continuous tone. They were merging into the echo of that space, at the same time

that the origin of the sound source itself was being lost.

I Really lovely piece!

V I wrote a lot about it. I really enjoyed understanding how listening from a distance felt so intimate to me, because I was born in a desert. I thought deeply about the processes of self-assimilation through listening, the distances...

I What do you mean by self-assimilation?

V I mean the perception of yourself in relation to your surroundings. We assimilate ourselves through a process of referencing. I mean, we understand ourselves as small if we use a big mountain as reference, but big if referencing an ant. If we hear a distant sound, this motivates a self-assimilation process that situates our body, locating it in relation to that distance. This is what intrigues me about listening, its capacity to turn attention toward the perceiving subject in relation to...

I Yes, when you practice meditation, you can concentrate on the body and on what is outside the body, and you get a peculiar perception of space, like you can feel everything. José Luis, my Feldenkrais² teacher, gave me a session on a stretcher and the bodily sensation at the end was like in *Ghost in the Shell*³. That feeling that you lost your body. You just realise that you're... The body is part of the room and the room is part of the building and the building... The feeling like in *Ghost in the Shell*.

V[Laughs] The desert is a place that puts you in that state of expansive yet real attention.

2 Somatic learning method created by the Israeli Moshe Feldenkrais in the mid-20th century that involves reorganising the connections between the brain and the rest of the body to improve body movement and psychological state. The stretcher sessions of this practice are called 'functional integration'.

3 *A Ghost in the Shell*. Science fiction manga by Masamune Shirow, brought to the screen several times. In the plot, the main character gets a new synthetic body in the form of a cyborg, where the self-consciousness (the "ghost", the only thing he retains from his old biological body) remains housed in a small neuronal part.

I I've never been to the desert.

V It's a strange place, Itziar [laughs]. I like it a lot, people are a bit rough, it's normal because: "What are you doing here, how did you get here, what are you looking for here? There's nothing here, just me". [laughs]

I I was going to ask you to tell me about the piece on darkness, but you described the owl piece instead.

V That piece is really beautiful. It's called *Hacer oíble lo audible* (*Making the Audible Hearable*). This performance came after working with sounds at an extremely low volume and then asking myself what conditions this work needed to be shared. I think that sounds can go unnoticed at this level, and I don't just mean their aesthetic qualities.

I Because it's too low?

V Yes, it can be missed. You need to train your body and attention to be able to hear the sound, otherwise it blends in with the ambient noise. I was interested in the nature of listening at that low volume because the auditory device concentrates attention and sharpens hearing. The performance was quite simple: I turned off all the light sources in a room one by one until it was as dark as possible. Then I took away the sound. You notice that there had been sound only once you notice its absence. Then, what you perceive is no longer the sound itself, but an immediate projection of its memory. It's in that lapse of time, the instant the sound ceases, that the attention necessary for listening happens and its memory is perceived.

I I've worked with sound too, but in a more unconscious, intuitive way; for example, separating image from sound. When you separate an image of something that produces a sound—like a screaming face—from that actual sound, you realize the image is just an image, without an inherent sound of its own. It's "something", something else. Suddenly, there's a kind of separation. You see the image by itself on one hand and hear the disconnected sound on the other. They take shape, each one separate from the other.

V I suppose it will seem quite strange. You give autonomy to things that used to go together, and each has to find its own identity...

I That's the *irrintzi* piece I did at the Guggenheim Bilbao, using the

walls' reverb. You see how it gives it form, how the space takes shape with the *irrintzis*. But of course, if you make the image big, on a screen, and put the *irrintzi* sounds 15 metres away, they separate.

V Of course, it's like revealing the individual sense of the two things. But not the arbitrary, consensual sense, rather...

I Rather the other sense.

V There's a kind of revelation in that strangeness.

I It's something I enjoy, separating image and sound and seeing that... but they weren't together after all!

[They laugh]

V But they weren't together! It's true, what a lovely title!

I It might work for us.

V But they weren't together.

I But they weren't together. It happens with more things: oranges, tangerines... In New York I had a backyard; well, it was a mess, with a tree, lots of cats, birds, hawks... Everything passed through because it's a secluded area. When I moved here to Bilbao into an industrial building, it was all concrete. I thought "Where am I? I used to live in just 45 square meters, but I had a courtyard. Now I've got 200 square meters, but no grass". And next door was a playground. I'd go there with my daughter Izar, who was little then, and in the evenings, we'd hear a noise like a mobile phone ringing: [imitating the sound] *cucuk cuh cucuh cuh cuh*, like [high-pitched] *umm mm* sounds, like mobile phones, but they were toads.

V Oh!

I But they were toads this small, like a fingernail. We found them by following the sound. They were in the fountain. If you took off the drain cover, they were inside. Tiny, really small. They were inside the fountain and also on the wall behind the weeds. We didn't see them at first, just heard

them. I took a picture of one.

V How lovely!

I Really lovely. It was like the sound wasn't natural. Completely...

V Electronic.

I Electronic! Amazing. Really lovely. That feeling... They only came out at night, after a certain time. When it got dark you started hearing the toads. Not before.

V How interesting. In the classes of 12-year-olds I used to teach at the school, I'd tell them to go look for something I'd hidden around the school, tracing its sound. They went crazy trying to find it!

I There's a piece by the Collective Actions group in Moscow that involves putting a group of people on a train and taking them to a field where they had buried some clocks, so you could only hear their sound.

V Excellent!

I I'll send you the text if you'd like, though they didn't document everything fully. Just narrations from people who experienced those pieces and some photos.

V How lovely.

I What do you teach?

V I was invited to do a project with teenagers for a year. The first week of the course we decided that those two hours a week would be devoted to sleeping in class.

I [Laughs] Is that the piece you showed me on the phone where people go to sleep?

V Yes, that one. In the end we managed to get rid of the school bell because it woke us up.

I Because of the breaks! I did some classes with children too... I'm going to turn on the light, though I like the dark.

V See this little lamp? My father made it.

I I taught some 4-year-olds... I brought in *Respiración oceánica (Oceanic Breathing)* on a little speaker. Izar on one speaker, me on the other. And I put each in a box. Manu [Muniategiandikoetxea, the artist who invited me] and I had two breathing boxes, each with a different breath. We asked what they thought it was and they said the sea, so they started drawing the sea. At the end, we did a performance with microphones and they did the *Ujay* breath like in yoga. They wanted me to open the boxes at the end, but we didn't [laughs], because we wanted to keep the secret.

V The ocean in a box. That's really beautiful... We also had the teachers sleep. The picture of the students watching the sleeping teachers is engrained in my mind.

I Sleep... I recorded Sergio [Prego] sleeping for a long time. It's nice because there's no movement. My daughter says light wakes you up more than sound.

V Yes, it's the light, the circadian rhythms! Of course, the synchrony with the environment. I wrote about this for the Halfhouse piece, the movement of synchronisation.

I Like when you travel and go somewhere in a different time zone, you can't sleep and wake up at odd hours.

V And like when you start walking slower because the person next to you is walking slower?

I It also happens with speaking: you speak in the same cadence.

V I used to take naps with my grandmother!

I When I had my daughter, I'd go to bed with her when she was young and fall asleep at 8 pm. What you've told me is all really lovely. If you'd like, I can stop now since we have a lot covered. It's funny, it's like we're going

down similar paths, owls, sheep...

V It's strange, but it's really lovely.

I My mum used to get like this after eating, she'd lie down at the table and fall asleep. A cat nap.

V Those are the best: power naps!

I Power naps are what they call cat naps now. You can't tell me that cat naps aren't nicer.

V Power naps sounds like an energy drink. [Laughing]

I Violeta.

V Itziar.

I You look really pretty.

V Well, I've got a cold! You can't tell, but last night I had a cough...

I You look very pretty there, in the dark, with your books and a loudspeaker behind you. Is that a loudspeaker? It's a black spot.

V It's a basket to put snails in.

I What now?

V Yes, wait, now I don't know where it opens.

I So it's to catch snails and they get slimy.

V Yes, you put them in here and then you can carry them.

I Wow!

V It's a handcrafted basket from the places where esparto grass grows. In the summer I visit a man I know, but he doesn't have much time left. He's

the only one who knows how to do a certain type of plaiting and I want him to teach me, otherwise it'll be lost with him. He has knowledge! It's life, you've got to let go.

I When someone close to you dies and they have a particular knowledge, all that ceases to be in your life, it creates a kind of void. Before you had that person's musical skill, or food or hunting skills, what they knew how to do... I really liked that snail bag... Here's my cat jumping around. Come on, Conan, I'll introduce you to Violeta!

V Is that a dog?

I No, it's a cat.

V It's a caaat!

I It's a cat, a wild cat that ambushes and attacks and hisses and just saunters by without letting me pet her. There she is, bouncing all over.

V She's wild. Will she let you pick her up or nope?

I When she wants to! I have to trick her; look, I'll show you. This is Conan.

V Conan! [She laughs, then they both laugh]

(The cat appears on the screen and runs away)

[They laugh]