ABOUT
PRESENCES

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PRESENÇAS
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This essay addresses questions about the process of creating the short film *Presences*, and its influence on my research on the sensory aspects and the physical presence in the free musical improvisation (FMI). To develop this study, I employed platforms of virtual communication to improvise and submit musical improvisational performances to the internet, seeking to find elements that elucidate discussions and promote new perspectives on this matter.

The musical performances found in *Presences* were recorded between June and July, 2019, mediated by the platform for virtual communication Google Hangouts, and recorded (in both audio and video) in three consecutive days by Miguel Antar[1] (a bassist resident in the neighborhood of Butantã São Paulo/Brazil) and I (Fabio Manzione, a drummer resident in the neighborhood of Vila Mariana, São Paulo/Brazil). Such performances, which will be addressed later, took place on online platforms, so that Miguel Antar and I would be in virtual environments, differently from the conditions under which we often perform our improvisations sessions[2]. This experiment allowed us to observe situations where the physical absence of the other may interfere in the real-time processes of sound creation.

The audiovisual recordings also allowed us to verify the trends and uses of the sense of sight within artistic expressions in which sound is the materiality, and to reflect on the issues concerning this field in contrast with those of the sense of hearing.

During the course of the recordings, we noticed that problems with internet connection and its latency could impair the watching of the performances. Such adversities lead to sound trajectories that are unrealizable in a presential performance, becoming a key matter of reflection cited in the film reports.

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On June 14th, we started the first recording tests in Miguel`s living room and my home studio simultaneously. After connecting to the internet via Google Hangouts, we decided that both should record video and audio; thus, each of us used a digital camera and a portable audio recorder. The cameras focused on the screens of each computer, our body movements and, when possible, our faces. This frame allowed us to verify how often we used our sight during the performances.

Before starting the recordings, I suggested three things to Miguel:

(1) Each session should last, at most, ten minutes;

(2) During the performances, we could close our eyes whenever we wanted so that, later on, we could compare the need for the sense of sight with the need for sense of hearing during sessions;

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1. Miguel Antar is a PhD student in the Music Graduate Program of the University of São Paulo, and my coworker in Duo Cóz - a duo engaged in researching free musical improvisation performed only with bass and drums.
2. We often perform free musical improvisation in theatres, squares and other cultural places. They are fundamentally composed by the presence of both of us, which entails that we are interacting and listening to each other.

(3) After the recordings, each of us should, individually, report what we felt/perceived/intuited during the performances, and what we could conclude from improvisations via internet, based on the aims of the research.

During the first recording session we realized how challenging it would be to synchronize clapperboard`s sounds and, consequently, the audio and video during editing: the few kilometers that separated us revealed the issues of internet latency and the desynchronization between sound and image that would possibly occur during the subsequent sessions. We performed two sessions on this day and kept only their respective audio recordings; video recordings were not captured due to camera problems.

On June 15th, acquainted with the desynchronizations between sound and image, we also performed two sessions: one eighteen minutes long, and the other ten. By the end of each, I noticed that the amplifier connected to my computer was failing or not faithfully reproducing the sound produced by Miguel. In short, I had to improvise more with the image reproduced by the computer than with the sound coming from the amplifier. I considered completely changing my equipment - computers, amplifiers, internet network, and recording rooms. However, we chose to make a last attempt on June 20th, using the same devices and places we used on the previous days.

In this last attempt, despite the lagging and the numerous equalization tests we had to do on the amplifier before the recordings, everything went well. At the end of two ten-minute sessions, we proceeded to the individual reports, and I began planning the editing of the material we had produced in the three days.

Miguel sent me his audio and video files and started editing the film to establish an audiovisual unit, which would allow a simultaneous visualization of our two recordings on the same screen.

While scripting/editing, I suggested developing audiovisual relations that would engage spectators reflect upon *Presence*s making. I added a complementary aim within the research: to build an audiovisual dialogue that would enhance the spectators experiences close to those lived by Miguel and I during the free improvisation sessions via internet. Thus, I avoid the patterns of documentary film - in which images are accompanied by *ipsis litteris* descriptions made by off-camera commentaries. I also propose moments that suggest an acousmatic[3] hearing FMI sessions, and employed sudden image blackouts, representing failures on networks service.

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3. Acousmatic music is a type of electro-acoustic music transmitted to the listeners only through the speakers. As these works are conceived exclusively with recorded and/or synthesized sounds, musicians are not required.

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Practitioners of FMI must establish a degree of self-research as a performer and creator, exploring both the instrument (or voice) and the real-time listening of the sound environment. Following these precepts, we proposed improvising in a virtual environment in which the rules of the game were set during the process. This dynamic held us in a "urgency state" regarding the emerging fields of sound, which we could seek, reach, and freely abandon over the course of the performance.

Within this frame, I sought to understand the facets of physical presence in FMI performance, focusing on the visual and auditory motivations and stimuli that led us to perform certain physical gestures and sound that were stronger or weaker, unison, and in smooth or striated times, as well as other sound aspects elaborated during the sessions.

To this end, during editing, I placed myself as a self-observer and an articulator of free improvisation. In doing so, I did not aim to evoke a specific aesthetic or isomorphic place, but rather to highlight the experiments created from my poetic choices and at the same time, shaped by the sound contexts proposed by Miguel and the third "character" introduced during improvisations: the sound resulting from the failures in internet connection and the resonant frequency of audio feedback[4] in speakers.

As previously mentioned, the film attempts to reproduce situations where internet service failed through the sudden inclusion of black backgrounds at times when only the instruments are heard. I suggested this approach in an effort to foster an aesthetic experience based on the dialogue between sight and hearing for both the musicians and the spectators. This approach also aims to dislocate, in random moments, the spectator`s attention - from hearing to seeing and vice-versa -, as it may occur during a presential FMI session.

I also sought to elaborate an aesthetic/ethics of the lack: the mute image of musicians simultaneously assembled with the interlocutors off-camera commentaries may inflict a feeling of strangeness and the need for hearing on the spectators. Such needs may encompass hearing instruments reverberating sounds, perceiving sounds synchronized to images, or to understand physical gestures performed by the musicians. This resource provides off-camera commentaries and instruments to be clearly heard, as they produce sound at different moments; yet, it serves only to explicit this short film`s sensorial experimentalism, rupturing

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4. Term used by sound and music technicians to designate when a microphone captures not only the sounds directed at it, but also the frequencies emitted by the speaker where it is connected.

the usual pattern of documental descriptive videos, in which the researcher`s off-camera commentaries are superimposed to the sound of the musical instruments or the contexts where they are inserted.

After completing film editing, I verified the trend of my aesthetic choices regarding their relevance for an analysis of audiovisual assemblage:

(1) Lack of instrument sound + off-camera commentaries;

(2) Presence of instruments sounds + corresponding image;

(3) Presence of instruments sounds without image;

(4) Multiscreen (two actions simultaneously displayed);

(5) Sudden/random failure (blackouts) of images while sound proceeds.

I believe the audiovisual relation that I intended to establish in the film are shaped in a non-literal dialogical way: the reports present in it often comment on issues not clearly depicted by the images; but rather, they can be understood as interpretations of what one sees or as an aesthetic context in which what one sees can mirror what is being heard in countless ways.

The reports presented in the film were made individually so that we would not be influenced by the other`s capture and they would not turn into a discussion - we could be more spontaneous and ground it in free associations.

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Creating *Presences* allowed me to develop and play two roles: interlocutor/researcher and musician/editor, underpinning a self-ethnography. It also unfolded technical and conceptual aspects related to producing, recording and editing a work that seeks to place the researcher as both a participating observer and an active agent in the field to be analyzed. Moreover, the researcher is responsible for generating experiences and information to be examined by audiovisual material and observing himself in his relationship with the other.

The scenes in *Presences* were designed to question physical presence and sensory aspects during FMI performances other than the sense of hearing; yet, this essay and the reports in the film are inconclusive. This ethnographic audiovisual research on performances of free improvisation sought to foster aesthetic paths that corroborate scientific analysis, and to develop critical observations, provoking new artistic proposals. Thus, I will list some questions that may encourage discussions on this matter:

How do representations of the other, transmitted over the internet, operate in us? Does the asepsis of virtual communications disturb us? Do we neglect the tactile capacity of

our bodies by "believing" that the virtual will replace the real? Regarding FMI performances in particular: how much our leering sight can capture from the two-dimensional images (and movements) of the computer screen? How much of the presence of the other can be measured by our olfactory, gustatory, and tactile senses? How much of what we hear is captured through the proprioception (our inherent tool to understand spatiality and the movement of our body parts)?

This last question may be answered from observing our daily life: to listen, we do lipreading, witness and intuit gestures, feel with the body the vibration of sounds. We thus acknowledge that sounds are decoded in our brain, presenting more objective meanings or less, not solely through hearing.

The questions addressed above are not intended to fight against devices of virtual communication, let alone to enforce value judgments on the quality of presential or virtual performances. They are rather intended to stimulate debates on the production of ethnographic films, approaching the notion that the hierarchy within the stimuli induced to our sensory capacities can be flattened.

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ABSTRACT

This essay addresses questions about the creation process of the short film *Presences* and its influence on the research I develop on sensory aspects and physical presence in free musical improvisation. To develop this study, I employed virtual communication platforms to improvise and submit musical improvisation pieces to the internet, to then locate elements that clarify discussions and promote new perspectives on this matter.

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