

Benni
Bosetto



Ambiente X
with Xenia Perek

3 Giulia Civardi
Introduction



I.

One of the first conversations I had with Benni Bosetto was about a mysterious object: a leaf. What made it so peculiar was not the colour or shape, but the fact that it had all her past lives written on it. The leaf was waiting for her in a library in India. A library that anyone with a plane ticket and a visa can visit. Apparently, this encyclopaedic place has a leaf for each person who visits. She told me that a man read her past and decoded the strange object, of which she has both a photographic and written testimony. I did not see these, so I had to imagine. Even though this story seemed odd and inexplicable, it somehow still felt possible.

Benni Bosetto's practice operates at the crossroad between fact and fiction, magic and superstition, what is other and what remains invisible. Spanning from drawing and sculpture to performance, operating individually or incorporated into one another, the work maintains a physical approach that aims to expose the connections between seemingly unrelated worlds.

Corporeal to the point of visceral, her artistic output emerges from physical and theoretical research, expanding into everyday rituals, belief-systems, news and fictions alike. I once stumbled upon her YouTube research playlist, which gave me a sense of the depth of her practice. Among the videos were documentaries of spiritual healers, historical references to dancing mania and public hysteria, dance traditions like minimalist theatre and tarantism, and erratic dances of people connecting with gods. These elements do not enter her practice directly but rather form a conceptual echo that, in contact with her intuitions, reverberates into shapes and gestures. Using non-verbal language, Bosetto's works map bodies across time and species. Her drawings often picture inflated bodies which interconnect erotically and transform with other life forms and objects. Meanwhile, her sculptures suggest mythical creatures, disassembled body parts and magic wands. Concrete works and performances alike become instruments to perform primitive ways of life and to conjure other worlds. While her physical works encompass a recognisable visual style, her performative aesthetic often fluctuates depending on the space and conditions it is presented within. Nevertheless, throughout her practice, the environments she creates maintain a sensual and therapeutic approach - almost holistic - that envelops viewers in an intimate trance-state, where time feels suspended. To borrow Donna Haraway's terminology, her pieces unfold as "situated

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knowledges".¹ In Bosetto's work, as in Haraway's text, objectivity and monolithic explanations are abandoned in favour of a fragmented conception of reality, an assemblage of different enquiries, of "views from somewhere". 'Somewhere' is positioned in a geographical and historical milieu, embodying a type of corporeal sight. This corporeal vision is embraced by the artist when making sculptures and when choreographing performances. In her new piece at Kunstraum, however, it is the first time Bosetto intervenes as a performer herself. This work is created for the audience, a public that is not involved as participants that in turn have to perform, but as observers and witnesses of the ineffable.

II.

For her first show in London, Benni Bosetto presents a new performance at Kunstraum that explores the transformative power of magical thinking through carefully designed sets, sounds and choreographed gestures. Developed and performed with Xenia Perek, the work combines diverse streams of research - trance, behavioural codes, magic, the primitive - to construct a different experience of daily rituals of labour and time.

Ambiente X takes the form of a day at the office. Two workers perform mundane tasks and repetitive work activities: they file paperwork, make coffee, talk on the phone. Gradually, this conventional setting transforms. They begin to walk in reverse, they spit coffee on mirrors. As the pages of a book are frantically turned, time speeds up. Gestures lose their ordinary meaning. *Ambiente X* conflates various temporal layers in a progressive negotiation of linear time. It fuses the measurability of work performances with symbolic gestures that belong to the magic -

namely that which is ineffable, belief-driven and therefore, technically inoperative.

Bosetto turns to 'magic', not as a mode of escape into pure irrationality or illusion, but rather to expand the space of what is possible. In *Ambiente X* gestures and movements are used as devices to propose alternative experiences of reality for therapeutic purposes, to preserve one's autonomy in moments of uncertainty and to create new body-languages. Within an economy that increasingly relies on feelings and attention, and turns bodies into resources from which to draw, there is a proliferation of psychopathologies that span entire communities, entailing a loss of individual agency. As Federico Campagna explains in *Technic and Magic*, the current reality-system or 'Technic' – partly based on absolute language, measure and seriality – is in crisis and poses "the threat of losing both one's own presence in the world and the presence of the world itself".² Campagna suggests that in order to recover our autonomy, we must challenge the idea of what defines 'reality' itself, rather than conceiving of our given reality-system as the only possible option. Moreover, he explains: "neither Technic nor Magic are actually 'things' that we physically encounter (...) [but] massively distributed, invisible entities that are perceivable only through the mark that they leave on the world".³ Although Campagna speaks from a metaphysical perspective, one can attempt to test his concepts in practice. By displaying and modifying everyday 'rituals' from the dominant economic and social order with bodily gestures that belong to alternate social realities and magical thinking, the performers create small interruptions. They leave subtle marks on the world. These marks, in turn, open up different frames of reference through which we can view reality, reinforcing it and making it known again.

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5 Among these gestures, Bosetto crafts a series of archetypes: highly symbolic figures that stimulate an emotional, non-verbal recognition of the world. Bosetto recreates the symbol of seriality and productivity: the office. As one BBC news reporter commented in 2013: "The office is where we spend most of our time. It's practically where we live. Our colleagues and our bosses see more of us than our families do. (...) I imagine archaeologists in the future having a pretty easy time working out what matters to us today. The Egyptians had their pyramids, the Romans had aqueducts, Victorians their railways. What we've got are gigantic glass and steel boxes of desks, whiteboards and water coolers".⁴ This may appear as old fashioned in light of our current gig economy, yet the office is more than a space alone, it embodies the prototype of work, repetition, and absorption of time.

Of course, reality is highly contingent and is not the same for all. Yet, in the 'flexible' work economy, we are always on. The office is a state of mind, not a place. Correspondingly, Bosetto starts from a personal level that refracts into a collective space. She takes behavioural codes visible in the office and begins a process of deconstruction. The act of cleaning the office, a task the artist repeatedly performed in previous jobs, is no longer only maintenance work. In a ritualistic fashion, it is also a therapeutic form of cleansing, or clearing a space for changes to come. Mirrors and coffee – another common presence in the workplace – here become instruments for divination. The performers eat roasted chickens, which hint at objects of sacrifice: living animals killed on stage during rock concerts, in minimalist Japanese theatre performances of the early 1960s, in religious rituals. Mixing spiritual references with those of radical performance art and entertainment culture, Bosetto strips the layers that constitute reality; reality in

theory, on fictional stages and in gallery spaces. The bones of the chicken morph into totems. The skeleton of a reality is constructed, x-rayed and placed before the very eyes of the public. The performance score is played on a loop to reach a state of trance that alters our perception of time. Through repetition and endurance, the body records gestures like a mechanical device. We are invited to witness the soothsaying nature of labour, this remedial repetition, the re-claiming of one's world.

III.

The reason for this extended introduction, is also the reason for the existence of this publication. Besides documenting an ephemeral event that lasts only a few hours to date, this publication remains the first printed account of Benni Bosetto's work in the English language. Though a young artist, her work is known throughout Europe, particularly in her native country, Italy. The publication includes a number of texts and images that expand on ideas explored in the performance and provide insight into Bosetto's drawing practice. An extract of the book *Technic and Magic* by Federico Campagna sheds light on the definition of 'magic' as intended in this work. Campagna, a comparably young voice in philosophy, presents a brilliantly revised understanding of magic, following *Il Mondo Magico* by De Martino – a milestone in Italian anthropological research and a major influence in Bosetto's practice. Another text by London-based curator and Assistant Curator of International Art at Tate Modern, Dina Akhmadeeva, brings in the historical and symbolic meaning of a recurring object in the performance: the mirror. Akhmadeeva – whose current research explores bodily, internal, irrational, sensual and spiritual dimensions within modern and contemporary artistic practices –

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expands on notions of doubling, of conjuring the other realm and of the performance itself as a mirror. Doubling is an essential element in the project. The research and practical development of the performance itself would not have been possible without Benni Bosetto's double: Xenia Perek. Perek, who has previously collaborated with Bosetto, here accompanied the artist in choreographing the performance. Therefore, the book also includes a statement written by her, with which she guides us through her practice. Finally, behind the scenes images shot by Benni and Xenia throughout rehearsals can be found in the pages of the publication, as well as sketches of scenes in the performance.

There is still no testimony of the leaf. For that, you will have to use your imagination.

Footnotes:

1. Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 575–599.
2. Federico Campagna, *Technic and Magic: The Reconstruction of Reality*, London: Bloomsbury, 2018, p. 52.
3. Ibid, p. 8.
4. "How the office was invented," BBC News Magazine, BBC, July 22, 2013, bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-23372401

9 Federico Campagna
An extract from:
*Technic and Magic, The
Reconstruction of Reality*

There is little doubt that choosing 'Magic' as the overall term to define one's philosophical proposal, sounds immediately like a foolish idea. Nowadays, anything called 'Magic' has a cheap ring to it, bringing to mind the misuse of this word in TV series and perfume commercials, or the confused notion of witchcraft entertained by some teenage subcultures. Nonetheless, there are important elements to the term 'Magic' that perhaps no other word can convey in such an evocative form. Before starting our exploration of a system of reality that I wish to present as a possible alternative to that of Technic, we should begin by casting a closer look at the term that defines it. What does 'magic' stand for in the context of this volume? And how is its meaning, here, different from its general understanding?

10 Throughout Western history, magic has acted as the silent shadow of most hegemonic cultural forms, from philosophy to theology to modern science. Yet, any attempt to provide a complete and detailed history of magic is necessarily destined to fail. This is partly because magic doesn't recognize 'history' as its own temporal category,¹ and partly because this branch of practical knowledge has always veiled itself in mystery and secrecy – both on account of the peculiarity of its horizon, and due to its marginal place within society. Unsurprisingly, then, the prevailing Western understanding of magic throughout the centuries has been plagued by gross inaccuracies, that have at times entirely distorted not only the factual history, but also the meaning and the spirit of magic's work. As it is usually presented today – most notably in films and literature – magic amounts to little more than a set of spectacular technical skills, reducible to the equivalent of as-yet undiscovered scientific advancements in the field of technology. Magic is thus considered as merely another, possibly more exotic way to exploit the world as a stockpiling of standing-reserves, which the magician is able to mobilize through his/her individual powers. As we shall see in the next and final chapter of this book, this understanding of magic is exactly opposite to that which characterized the late ancient practice of theurgy and, more generally, the tradition of 'true magic' spanning from late antiquity to the end of the Renaissance era.² The present conception of magic is the shadow of its own time; like medieval 'black magic' was often presented as the demonic equivalent of then prevailing forms of orthodox Christian theology, magic today is seen as the phantasmagorical equivalent of the currently prevailing technological forms. And indeed, since its earliest definition as such, magic has been bound to be understood as the shadow of whatever society knows and calls its own.

11 The very origin of the word magic, points towards a form of 'otherness' that is constructed purely through a negative relation to what is already known and familiar. The first instance in which the word appears in its present meaning is in Greek language as *Magike Techne*, which refers to the art (*techne*) of the Persian Magi. In his *Histories*,³ Herodotus explains how the term 'Magi', originally the name of one of the six tribes of the Medes, had come to indicate the members of the priestly cast of the Zoroastrian religion throughout the Persian Empire. Perhaps few other cases of enmity are as notorious as that between the Greeks before Alexander, and Zoroastrian Persia at the time of the Magi. Even more than the barbarians to Rome, the Persian were truly, for the classical Greeks, their own troubling shadow. And if we consider how in non-modern societies, religion synthesizes in ritualistic forms the specific ways in which a social group deals with the world – acting as a vessel for their cultural identity – we can understand why the Magi were considered by the Greeks to embody the most peculiar characters of their people. To the Greeks, the Magi represented that very 'shadowy otherness' that was the quintessence of the Persians and of their power. Yet at the same time, the otherness of the Persians was understood only in terms of a relative alterity to the Greeks' own identity. *Magike techne* was literally the art of the Greeks' own shadow, that is, the art of shadows themselves. For those who see themselves as external to it, magic appears, since the earliest use of the terms, as the embodiment of what can be defined only in relation to the identity of 'our' power and of 'our normal' way of dealing with things and with the world.

The notion of magic that is proposed in this volume goes against this conception, stretching from the times of Herodotus to this very day. When we talk of

magic in this book, we don't mean anything to do with a dark, exotic equivalent of the very same technical regime that rules over our present age. In fact, by this term we mean a reality-system that is fundamentally alternative to that of Technic: an alternative cosmology originating from an alternative cosmogonic force. A different reality, based on a different fundamental metaphysics – though still following the rules of metaphysics and of cosmogony. The specular opposite of Technic, rather than its shadow. Nonetheless, an aspect of the common notion of magic still colours this book. Magic has always been something disquieting to the hegemonic community of a certain age. Even in the case of our cosmogonic experiment, proposing a reality-system based on Magic means pushing forward a proposal that might seem troubling (if not downright ridiculous) to those who hold dear the cosmology derived from Technic's principles. In this sense, the troubling otherness that has always characterized the usual understanding of 'magic' remains relevant also to our own interpretation of this term as the name of a cosmogonic project.

Yet, the relationship between Magic and Technic, isn't just one of fundamental alterity. From a certain perspective, Magic can also be considered as a form of therapy to Technic's brutal regime over that world, which it built in its own image. When we began looking at Technic, our earliest observations concerned the present paralysis of our ability to act and to imagine, and the crisis of our very sense of reality. To explain this condition, we borrowed the words of Ernesto de Martino, who defined such a state of crisis as a situation in which everything turns into everything and nothingness emerges. However, when we quoted de Martino we didn't mention the original context of his original definition of a crisis of reality. For de Martino, this disintegration of reality,

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13 and particularly of the presence of the individual and of his/her world, is a recurrent state of 'crisis', that is, etymologically, a moment which calls for prompt judgement (*krisis*, from the Greek *krinein*, to judge) and intervention. The essence of magic, concludes de Martino, consists exactly in this form of intervention, aiming to restore the conditions in which both the individual and his/her world can regain their presence, and thus can continue in their mutually active and imaginative relationship.

Under certain circumstances, the loss of horizon undergone by presence reaches the point where it becomes an echo of the world, that is, one becomes possessed, prey to uncontrolled impulses. There is a dangerous 'beyond' to presence, an anguishing crumbling of its horizon in themaking: correlatively, also the world enters continuous crises of horizon, and endlessly exceeds into such anguishing 'beyond'. At its peak, this situation entails that every relationship between [individual] presence and the world becomes a source of risk, a loss of horizon ... akin to the situation that forces a schizophrenic person to a state of statuary immobility and catatonic stupor. ... Magic attempts to move back towards the top of this edge, while resolutely opposing this process of disintegration. Magic sets up a system of institutions through which this risk is signalled and fought against ... so as to make possible a ransoming of presence. Thanks to this cultural moulding and to the creation of such institutions, the existential tragedy undergone by each person ceases to be isolated and unresolved; rather, it enters a tradition and becomes capable of using to its own advantage the experiences that such tradition preserves and hands down.⁴

Shamans or magicians employ their magic powers with the primary aim of overcoming this state of crisis. While tracing back the symptoms of the malaise to their originating cause, they seek to offer an immediately workable alternative to the reality-conditions that produced them in the first place. In other words, a magician can be understood as a reality-therapist,⁵ acting not merely on the symptoms of an individual's illness, but also on the reality conditions that allowed the state of illness to take place. Similar to de Martino's interpretation, this section of the book wishes to propose Magic not just as alternative to Technic, but specifically as that cosmogonic system that is capable of tackling therapeutically the state of annihilation in which Technic has reduced the contemporary individual, their world and their claim to a liveable reality. As we shall see in the following pages, Magic's first principle can be traced back to that pain which we found at the bottom of Technic's chain of emanations, and which in turn Magic assumes as the symptom of its own cosmogonic beginning.

– an extract from *Technic and Magic: The reconstruction of reality*, London: Bloomsbury, 2018, pp. 113–117.

Footnotes:

1. For a critical appraisal of the common notions of history and of temporality, from a perspective that is largely close to that adopted in the present volume, see A. Coomaraswamy, *Time and Eternity*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2014.

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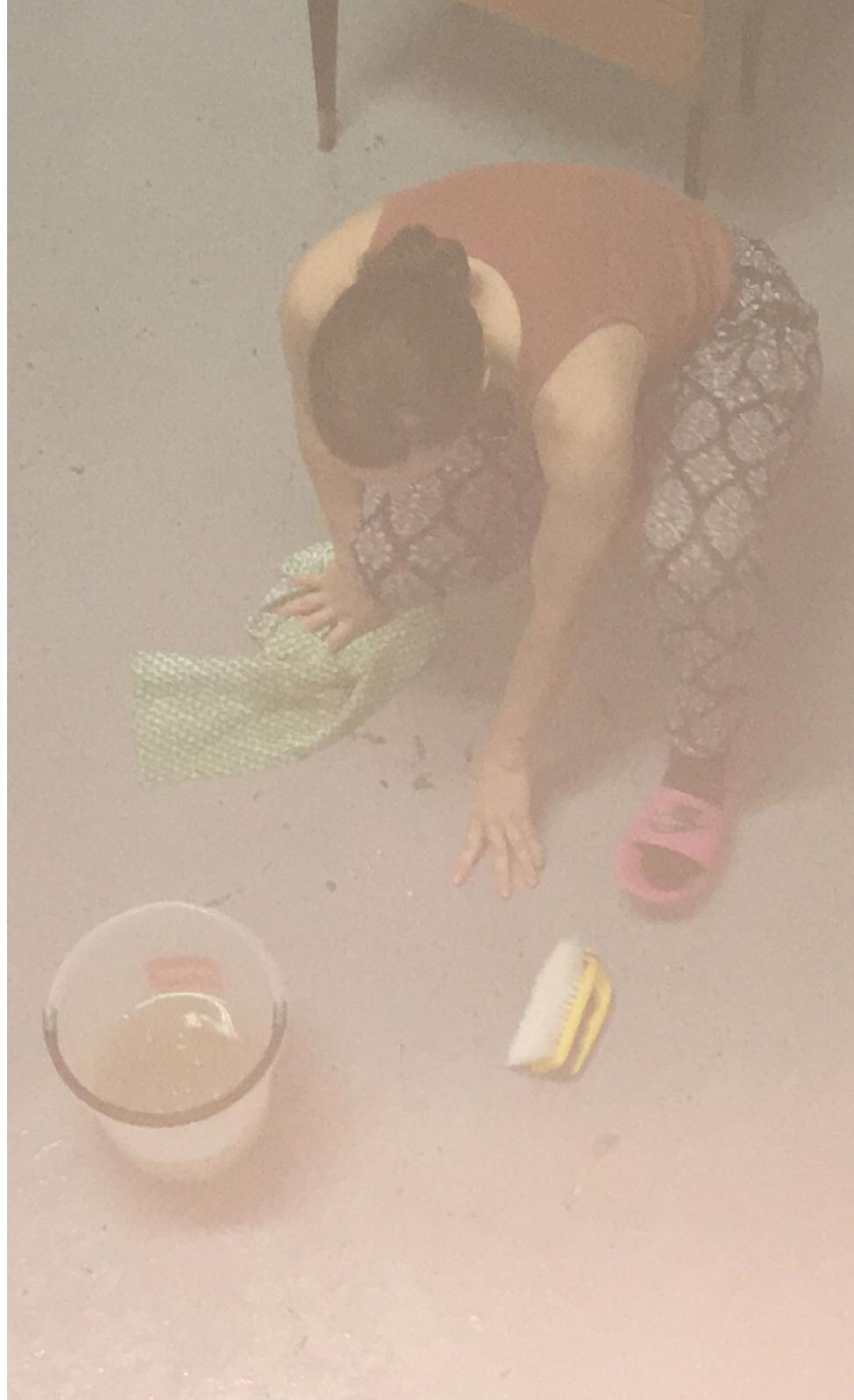
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2. For an interesting introduction to this particular notion of magic in the Renaissance era, and an overview of the main (Anglophone) scholarship on the topic, see J. S. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992.

3. See Herodotus, *The Histories*, London: Penguin, 2003, pp. 48–49.

4. E. de Martino, *Il Mondo Magico* (1948), Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2010, p. 165 – my translation from the original Italian.

5. With particular reference to shamans in the Amazon forest, it is interesting to follow Eduardo Viveiro de Castro's analysis of their function as 'reality-therapists' also in reference to the relationship between humans and nonhumans. 'On account of their capacity to see other species as the humans that these species see themselves as, Amazonian shamans play the role of cosmopolitical diplomats in an arena where diverse socio-natural interests are forced to confront each other. In this sense, the function of the shaman is not entirely different from that of a warrior. Both are "commuters" or conductors of perspective, the first operating in a zone of interspecificity and the second in an interhuman or intersocietal one. ... Amazonian shamanism, as is often remarked, is the continuation of war by other means. This has nothing to do, however, with violence as such but with communication, a transversal communication between incommunicables, a dangerous, delicate comparison between perspectives in which the position of the human is in constant dispute.' In E. V. de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, Minneapolis, MN: Univocal, 2014, p. 151.









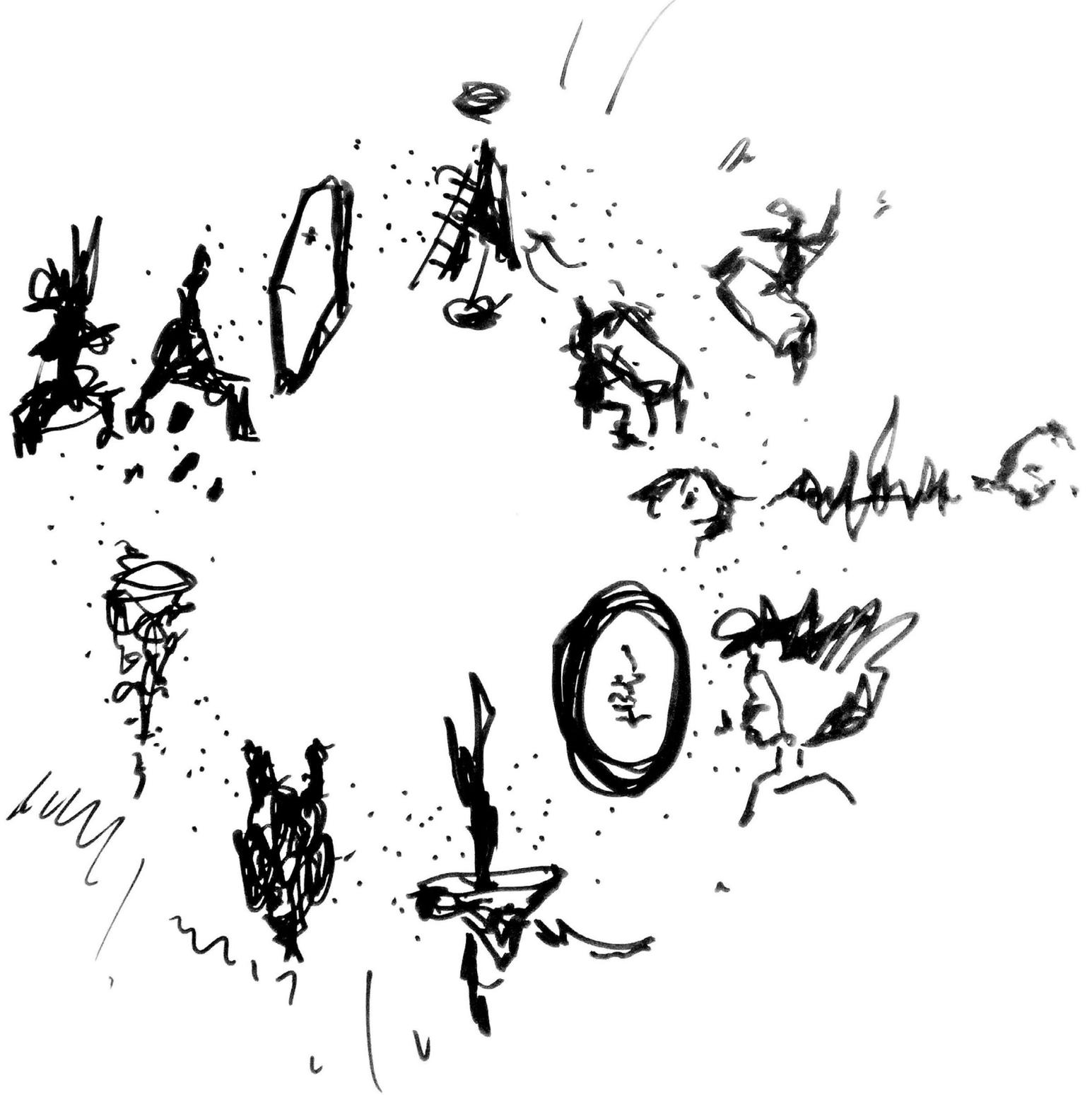


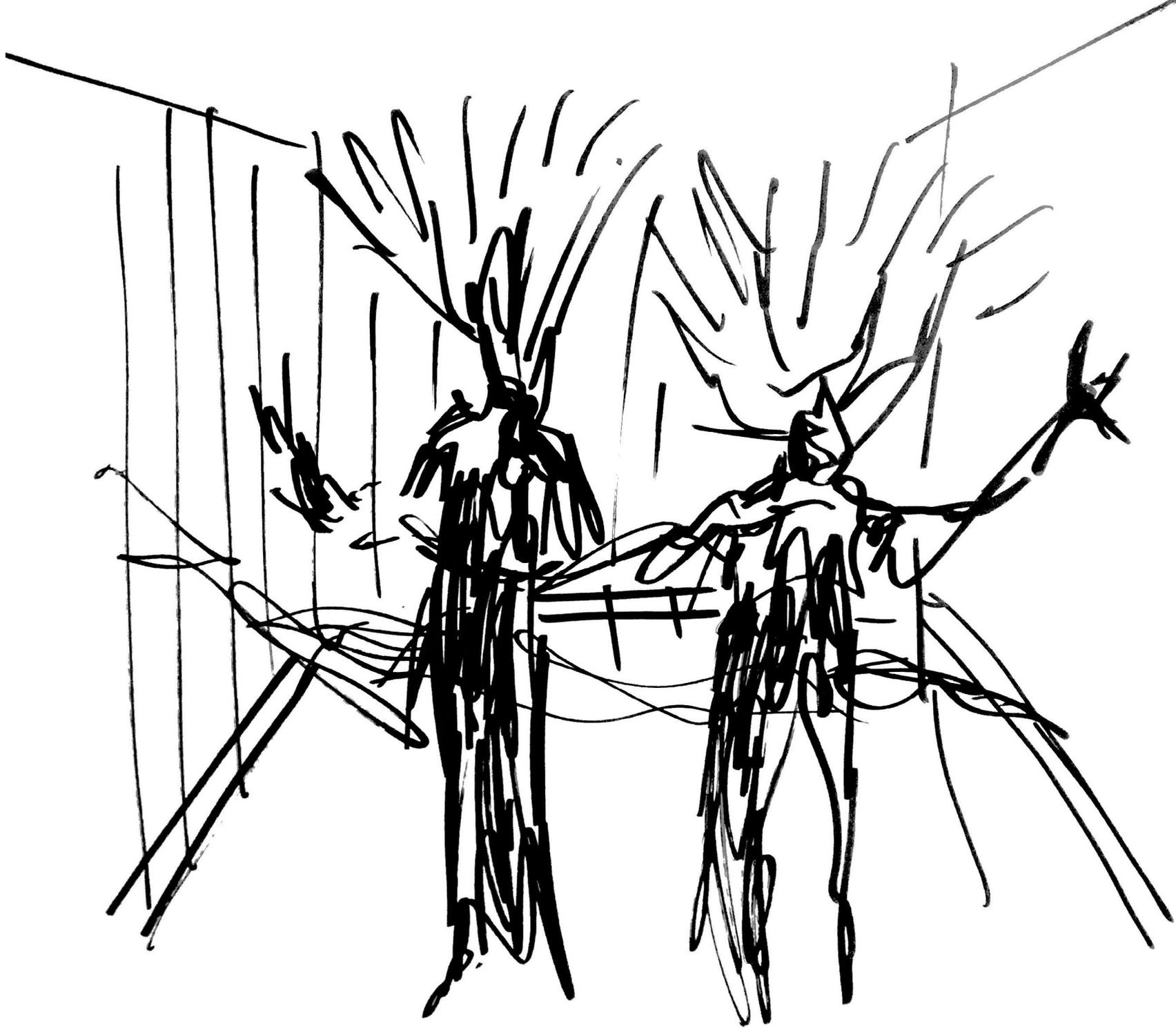
25 Xenia Perek

Xenia Perek creates physical and mental scores located in nocturnal venues and nightlife. The sensorial imagery is for her the content and means of narration. Thus her shows are body-built from momentums which can be seen separately, if not even as a photograph.

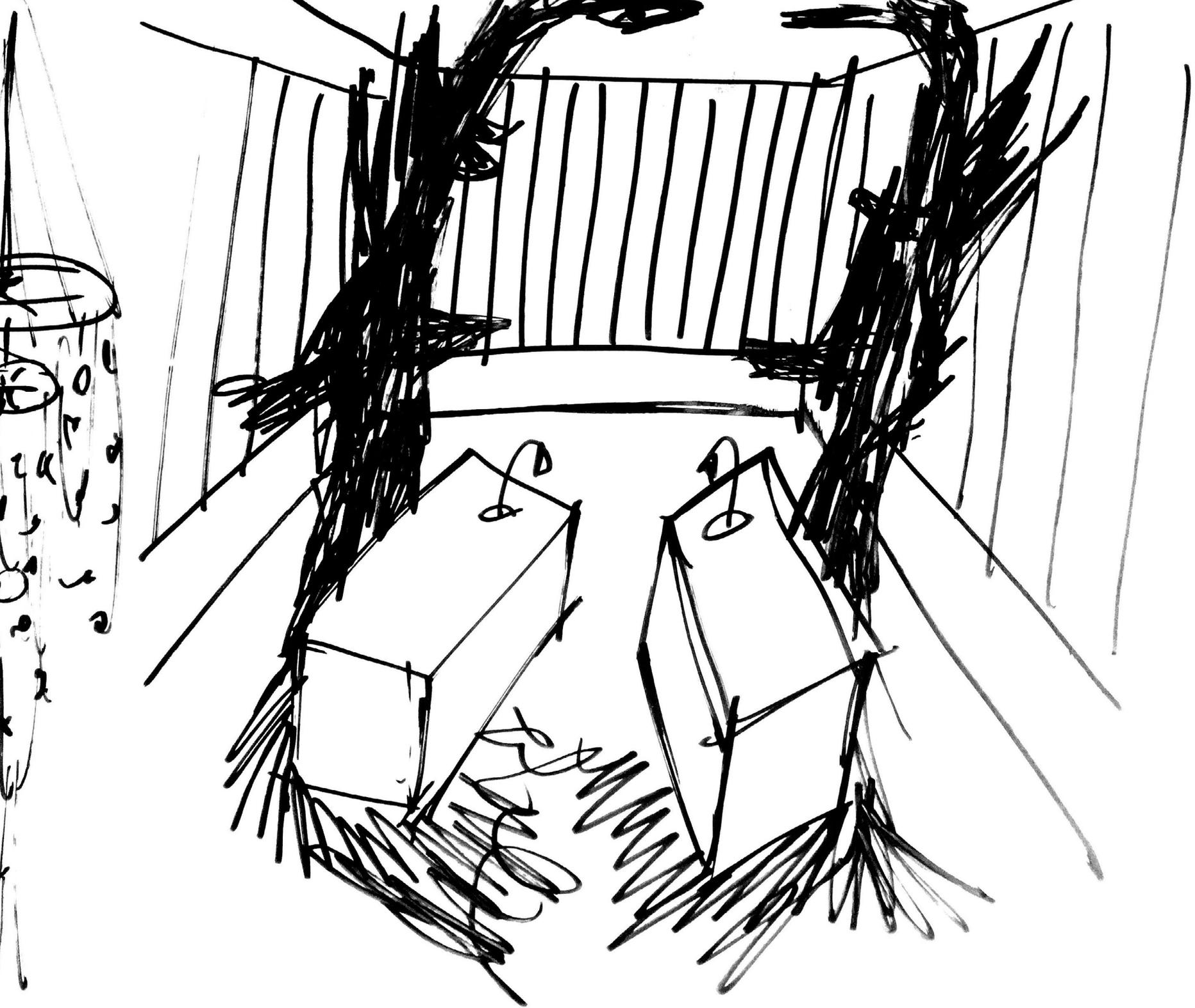
She gets triggered by explicit stories, dreams, live situations, physical states, mine or others. Perek looks for a phenomenon of lust for life, love or its sad or brutal missings, equally important death drive. A non-dual theory of Eros & Thanatos is a central locus of her practice. She renders it through the use of symbols, non-logopedic discourse, non-symmetric logic, and motorics. Perek's characters are creating various un/effectiveness and energy in the socio-economical world they been placed at as a quest for negotiations on how we live.

She is inspired by former and current psychoanalytical theories to how different performing arts disciplines create and develop contextual implications, an affect, time and space.











A mirrored surface is a space of conjuring and foretelling; of making visible something from the other side.

An obsidian mirror that survives to this day is said to have been in the possession of John Dee, adviser to Elizabeth I. He and the medium Edward Kelley summoned visions of angels in the mirror's smooth, reflective surface during a series of séances in the 1580s.

Chinese and Japanese bronze mirrors, the former of which can be traced back several thousands of years to the Han Dynasty and which include one polished surface and one pattern embossed on the back, exhibit a curious tendency. Continuously entralling those who come into contact with them, they have gained the name 'magic mirrors': when a bright light source is directed at the mirrors, they project the pattern inscribed on their reverse.

Catoptromancy is the art of divination using mirrors. 38

Marie Anne Lenormand, a professional fortune-teller of great fame during the French Revolution, claimed to own the mirror of 16th-century Italian astrologer Luca Gaurico, which Lenormand placed on the table where she predicted the fortunes of her clients.

The practice of mirror divination continued well into the 20th century across the world. In Russia, it was said that one could make the face of one's future spouse appear by sitting in a bathhouse alone at midnight facing a mirror and – according to certain variations – by opening a door or reciting a formula of words.

One performer spits coffee onto the surface of a mirror.

A mirrored surface is a site of reversal.

My reflection – even in a perfect mirror – is not a perfect copy but its inversion, a rearrangement of the elements present in a manner that shows the converse. The visual elements on one side of the cool, glassy surface are present on the other, yet they are arranged precisely in reverse.

Two performers move across the space in reverse.

Withershins, 'to walk against', specifically against the course of the sun: witches in the European cultural imagination have long been depicted walking backwards, dancing backwards while facing away from one another at sabbath, riding brooms backwards. Visualisations and utterances that embody these anxieties of reversing the 'natural' order of things also – conversely – suggest the power and potency of opposition, of doing otherwise.

39 A mirrored surface is a space of doubling

Two performers. An office space like but unlike the one you entered or left recently. Two modes: the movement, gesture, rhythm of ritual enacted, and the act of witnessing.

A mirrored surface is a site for the ineffable to emerge.

One performer spits coffee onto the surface of a mirror. Two performers move across the space in reverse. Two performers chant. Two performers move in patterns of gestures, building up into a trance-like state. Two performers go against the order of things.

Two performers turn the invisible, ineffable and abstract into material and tactile forms. These forms – as if themselves conjured onto the smooth, cold, mirrored surface of obsidian, bronze, silver or mercury – give shape to new parameters (if we read the sign as such) of what is possible.

Colophon

Published by Kunstraum, London to accompany:

Benni Bosetto:

Ambiente X with Xenia Perek

Saturday 30 November 2019, 2–6pm

Curator: Giulia Civardi

Sound composition: Vito Gatto

Costume design: Timna Weber

Text editor: Tamara Hart

Publication design: Kristin Metho

Kunstraum's Co-Directors:

Hannah Conroy & Thomas Cuckle

Kunstraum's Associate Curators:

Jindra Bučan, Camille Houzé, Lawrence Prebble and
Sonja Teszler

Ambiente X and the publication are kindly supported by Q-International, La Quadriennale di Roma and patrons Diego Bergamaschi, Oliviero Falconi, Marco Martini, Paolo Mauri Brusa and Massimo de Palma.

Benni Bosetto's work is shown courtesy of ADA, Rome.

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