

Immersive Days #2  
*Public Immersion*





**Participating Artists:**

*Justin Bennett*

*Axel Berger & Josh Vyrtz*

*Francis Patrick Brady*

*Jonas Dahlberg*

*Christina Kubisch*

*Patricia Reed*

*Jacob Remin*

*Alona Rodeh*

*Hans Rosenström*

*Sara Wallgren*

*Yann Coppier*

*Charlotte Østergaard*

**On “Immersive Days #2:  
Public Immersion” held at  
Inter Arts Center, Malmö  
22–24 November 2022**

Immersive Days #2 was organised in collaboration with KØS Museum of Art in Public Spaces as part of the project “Sites, sounds and screens – New approaches to sites, locality and technology in public art” supported by The Nordic Culture Fund. The programme included a series of projects in public spaces and one day of lectures and artist presentations. During the three days, the audience was invited to participate in nightly excursions, mixed reality performances, guided and locative audio walks in public spaces around Malmö as well as VR and sound installations at IAC.

To document these days, we asked visual artist Elísabet Anna Kristjánsdóttir to take photos and art critic Christine Antaya to write a reflective essay.

## New artistic problems

As the sound artist Justin Bennett pointed out, "immersion" is as old as the first car radio. With it, landscape became cinema, and the daily commute became a road movie. Once the Walkman was popularised, this practice extended to all other areas of human movement. Music was no longer only created a shared ambience, but could constitute a personal soundtrack, heightening emotions, adding narrative to daily life.

Today, our immersive devices don't chiefly amplify our surroundings or moods but transport us out of our minds and away from our sites. "Public immersion" is perhaps a contradiction, but it is also contemporary mode of being. Communication technology and social media drive a kind of 'being-alone-together-ness' which is exactly that: separated by absorption in devices, yet physically together.

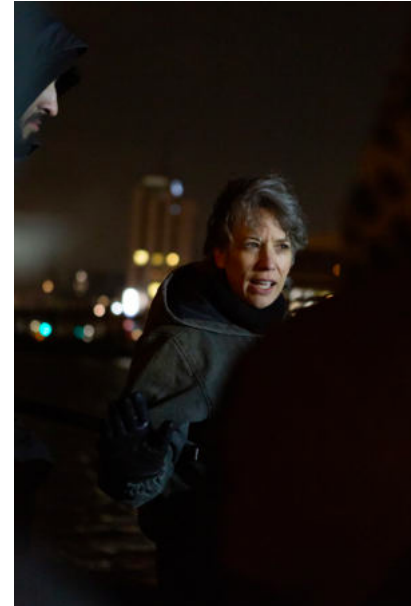
Artistic strategies of reclaiming and emphasizing physical public space and localities have included utopian practices in the vein of relational aesthetics, and modes of site-specificity which include artists travelling to conduct brief research and creating works related to specific communities and places. While these attempts can be successful, new artistic problems have emerged as immersive technologies change our relationships to place and the notion of the local is troubled by the global crisis of climate change.

At the start of the symposium, the artist and researcher Patricia Reed provided a useful framework for thinking about the functions and histories of the site. In relation to artistic research and production she spoke, by way of Donna Haraway, of the imperative of building better accounts of reality<sup>1</sup>. Linking this to answerability and care, Reed framed the notion of care not as an intimate practice between individuals, but as taking responsibility for our accounts of reality, thus allowing us to become answerable for what we see.

With regards to the site, Reed asked: "Where does a site for situating ourselves begin and end, when we consider the climactic impacts of our activities, which are uncontained by any sort of humanly recognizable site?" This interrogation of the boundaries of a site constitutes a major contrast to the idea of the site in the art world of the 1990s and 00s, where the hegemony of site-specificity emphasised the carefully defined hyper-local.

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<sup>1</sup> Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," in *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3. (Autumn, 1988), pp. 575–599.



Israeli artist Alona Rodeh's lecture on artificial light proposed light as far from the sublime, immersive works of artists like James Turrell, and highlighted it as technology that exposes and monitors us, keeping us awake to work and consume. Illustrating the fact that we are commonly supposed to look at things and scenes being lit, not the light sources themselves, she demonstrated the quite unpleasant effects of looking straight at various light sources, which accentuated a wider point about how artificial light affects non-human species in the wild.

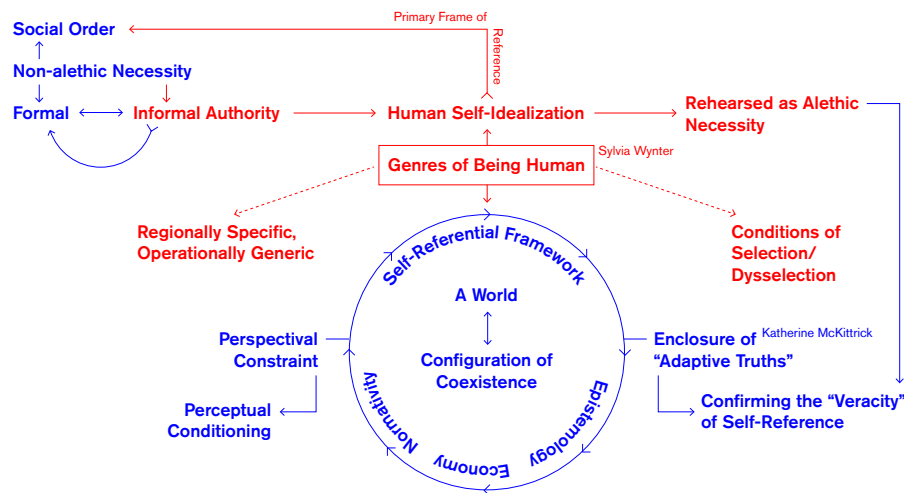
Alona Rodeh. *Night as other frontier or The Well-Being of The Nocturnal City*. 2022. A guided walk in Malmö harbour and a boat tour to reclaim and investigate darkness anew.

## The planetary we

Reed also reminded us of Sylvia Wynter's assertion that climate change has created the unprecedented condition of humanity for the first time in history being confronted with a common environment (albeit currently distributed with different degrees of acuteness).<sup>2</sup>

While this terminology wasn't necessarily used in the other presentations, prioritising the planetary's "we" over the static "I" of modernism was a common thread in several of the artworks on view and presented in artist talks during the Immersive Days.

2 Sylvia Wynter, "A Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism". *boundary 2*, Vol. 12, No. 3, On Humanism and the University I: The Discourse of Humanism (Spring–Autumn, 1984), pp. 19–70. Published by: Duke University Press.



© Sites and Localization at Planetary Dimensions by Patricia Reed





A smaller scale "we" was emphasized in artists Charlotte Østergaard and Yann Coppier *inside out – outside*, a proposal for a textile and audio work amplifying the presence of others by having the participants wear a shared "world-costume" in which they perceive the space, including themselves, through the other participant's ears, using headphones and omnidirectional microphones, that enable a switching of perspective using live binaural sound. This setup allows the audience to simultaneously hear from one unique point of view, or from each other's.

During the feedback session, the participants play-tested the costume without associated headphones and microphones. The possible effect of using sensors and sounds to blur the lines between me, the other, the costume and the environment beyond the costume were discussed. Perhaps the experience of the "physical universe" that the shared costume offered was rich enough without the sound setup? At least that's how the audience present felt, but we also discussed a more scripted or choreographed use of sound to connect the individuals to what Yann called our "non-human" counterparts (the space below and above the costume).



Charlotte Østergaard and Yann Coppier. *inside out – outside*. Lecture and workshop at IAC. 2022. Photo: Magnus Pålsson.

## Immersion as spectacle and habit

Several of the art works highlighted the implicit performativity of taking part in attentive listening works in shared spaces. Justin Bennett's *Secret Garden Malmö* was a soundwalk located in Pildammsparken, a large city park in Malmö. The audio consisted of sounds recorded in the park – birdsong, the rustling of branches, footsteps. It created a heightened awareness of the surroundings, which discreetly altered the walking patterns of the audience.

I experienced it on a Tuesday afternoon in late November, when the park was quite deserted. I wandered into the amphitheatre, which in the summer is usually filled with some 2000 people for free open-air concerts. Now it was completely empty, save for a teenage couple huddling on one of the benches. I walked slowly down the steps and finally stepped up onto the stage and stood still for a bit, gazing up at my audience, a pattern of movement that was completely conditioned by the act of listening.

As I walked on, through a wooded area, the recording played the cripesound of walking through the heaps of dry, dead leaves alongside the path. It felt like being accompanied by a ghost, someone walking alongside me in the leaves. This was also a way of tracing the temporal aspect of environmental sound, as a place sounds different in fall than in spring.

To experience the work, the viewer needed a smartphone and a pair of headphones, an interface and technology closely resembling what they presumably use in their everyday life. This facilitated the work, but it also seemed to risk the audio walk becoming just one of many options on a phone – subsumed into the same categories as podcasts and spotify. Or perhaps this should be seen as an opportunity?



Justin Bennett. *Secret Garden Malmö*. 2022.



A more obviously performative aspect was included in the artist duo, Josh & Axel's walking performance *PLUG-FAIR. Through a glass, darkly*. Axel led the way, with a laptop strapped to his head. On the computer screen, Josh spoke to the participants through Zoom, taking us on a fictional tour of some seemingly random sites in the city. The spectacle of a group of people following a man wearing a helmet with a computer on it turned heads as we passed by. Whereas the "secret" in the title of Bennett's work seemed to refer to the audio work being invisible, a discreet encounter between the flaneur and the artist, *PLUG-FAIR* produced a feeling of having one's status as an insider on display, of being part of a select few who were obviously having a much better time walking down a grey Malmö street than most other passers-by.



Axel Berger & Josh Vyrzt. *PLUG-FAIR. Through a glass, darkly*. Malmö. 2022.

The issue of moving against the grain of the city and being noticed also has a darker side. In speaking about her *Audio Walks* (2004–), in which a group of people follow a curated path, listening to the electromagnetic sounds of the city amplified in bespoke headphones, Christina Kubisch noted that an exhausting part of her work is having to interact with non-participants in the public spaces she works in. Each new iteration of the walks often entails having to negotiate and explain the piece all over again. "As soon as you move 'abnormally', people get suspicious."



Christina Kubisch. *Hidden waves about the audible and the inaudible*. Artist talk at IAC, Malmö. 2022. Photo: Magnus Pålsson.

## Turning it off

Several of the artists spoke of sound works that had been turned off or disrupted in different ways and noted that people have a propensity to complain about new sounds. "Is it because sounds we are used to disappear?"

In the final discussion of the day someone mentioned a work by the Danish artist Jakob Jakobsen featuring an off button. If it became annoying the audience could simply switch it off. Another participant countered: "I like the idea of living with pieces we don't like. It's a soundscape and you don't like it and that's fine."

The act of turning off was also present in Francis Patrick Brady's work *Finding the Real Thing* which included a virtual reality part and a walk in 'real life' while listening to audio in headphones. During the first part, the viewer was asked to close their eyes, a banal yet radical request while immersed in the heightened visuals of VR.



Francis Patrick Brady. *Finding the Real Thing* (ongoing) 2022 . Participatory Mixed Reality artwork/game IAC. Malmö.



Several of the art works highlighted the use of headphones, not by any means a novel technology, but certainly a more ubiquitous one. Today, headphones can be used as a signal that you want to be left alone, and this shield against other can even be a measure of safety, for example on public transportation. Headphones make you potentially more oblivious to the world, but they can also be a "superpower", as Christina Kubisch put it, allowing you to hear what others cannot.

In the programme as a whole, there seemed to be a tension on the one hand between attentive practices and "hidden sounds", as Christina Kubisch described her field of interest, and on the other more atmospheric works, often mirrored in the difference between headphones and speakers.

The artist Sara Wallgren spoke about her work being developed for a new hospital being built in Malmö. The sound consists of a wordless choral song referencing different musical traditions, which will be played in bespoke speakers at intervals in a 14-floor staircase, and a voice saying "Andas" (Breath) in the elevators. Here sound is conceived of as something universally soothing.



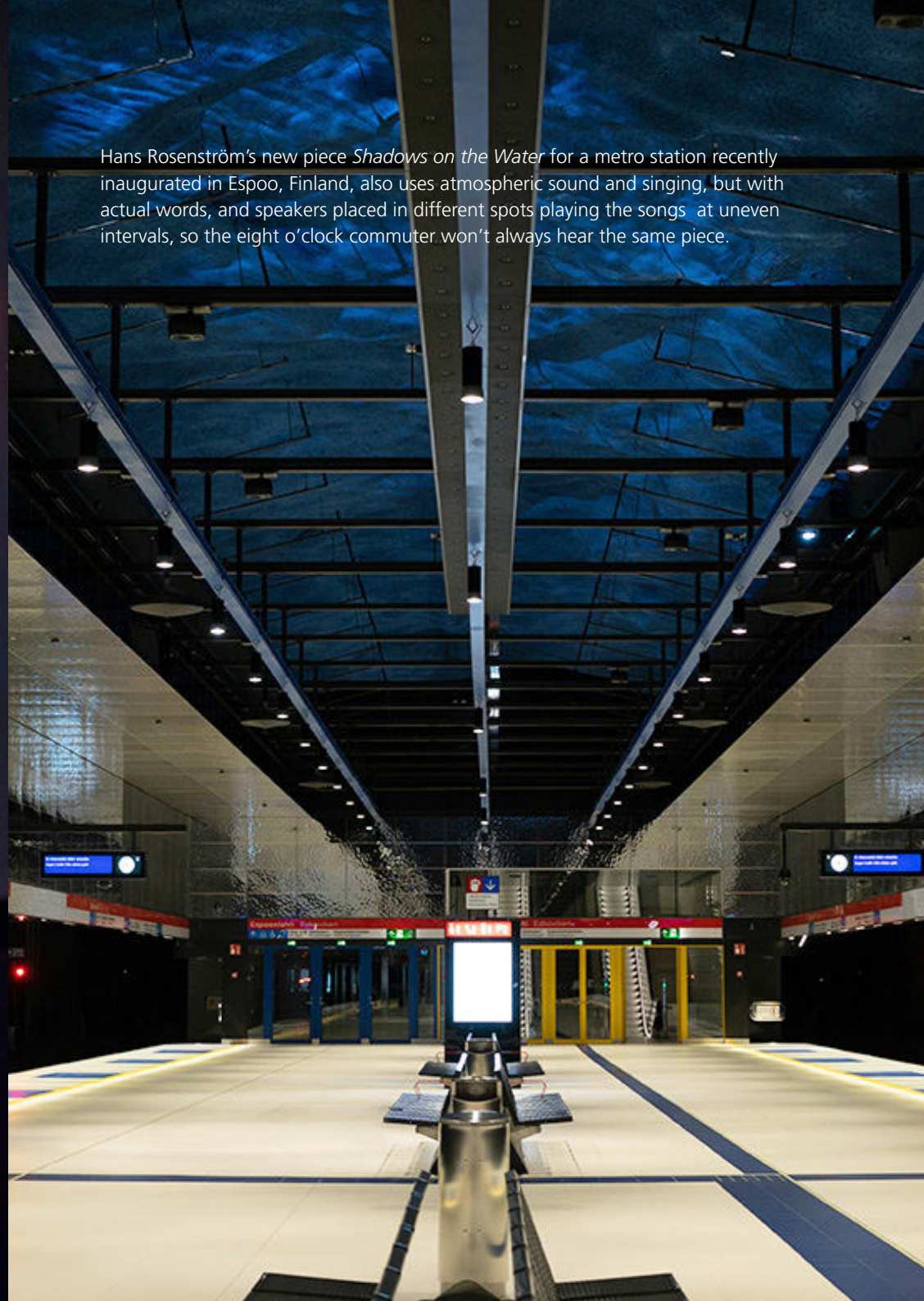
Sara Wallgren. Artist talk at IAC, Malmö. 2022. Photo: Magnus Pålsson.



Singers from Sara Wallgren's *Rösternas Geometri / Geometry of Voices*. A public commission for a hospital in Malmö to be inaugurated 2026. Photo: Erik Danielsson.



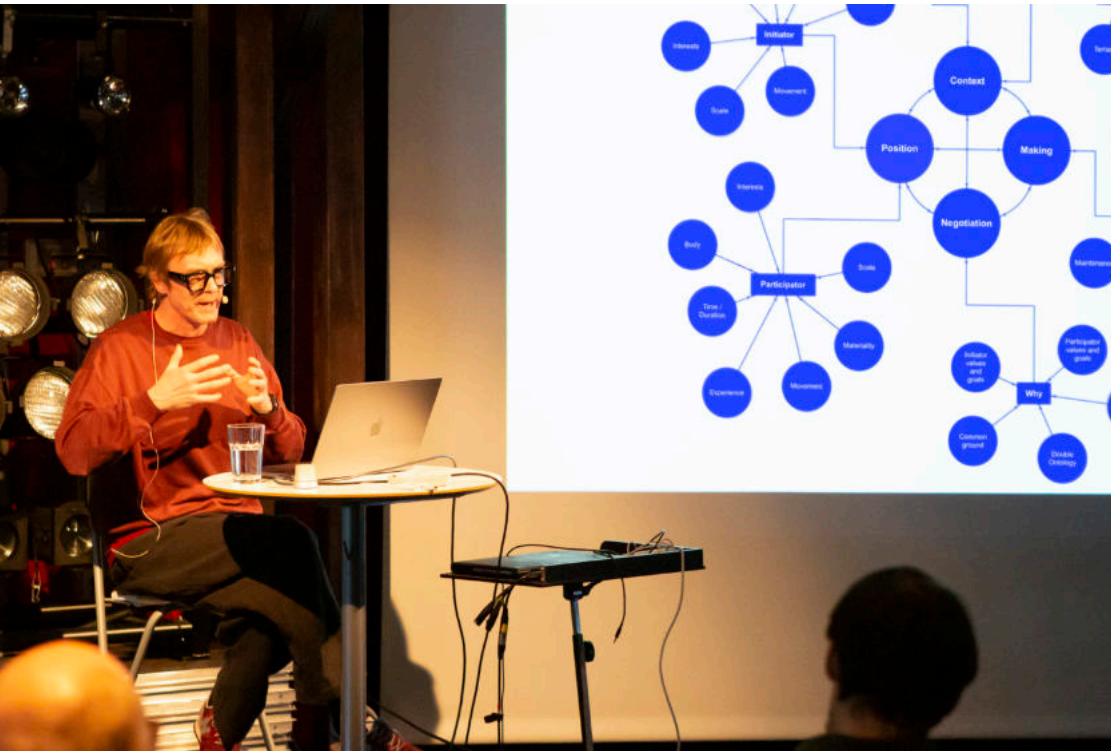
Hans Rosenström. *Outside Within*. Artist talk at IAC, Malmö. 2022. Photo: Magnus Pålsson.



Hans Rosenström's new piece *Shadows on the Water* for a metro station recently inaugurated in Espoo, Finland, also uses atmospheric sound and singing, but with actual words, and speakers placed in different spots playing the songs at uneven intervals, so the eight o'clock commuter won't always hear the same piece.

## Conclusions on the site

Justin Bennett put forth the idea that ephemeral art, such as sound, allows for a critical distance. The work retains a function as "art" which cannot as easily as, say, a permanent work or a gallery space function as a signal of "interesting". The sound works exist as they are being listened to and listening cannot be gentrified. This appeared to be a concrete answer to the question of whether the reconfiguring of dominating site-specific approaches through new technologies is possible. Sound works that are site specific, such as Bennett's and Kubisch's walks, immerse listeners in their surroundings, with ostensibly the only byproduct being others perhaps witnessing the immersion and thus themselves becoming more aware of that is going on around them.



Jonas Dahlberg. *On the laboratory research work conducted at Of Public Interest (OPI)*. Artist talk at IAC, Malmö. 2022.

As a whole, the speakers and artists disrupted modernist notions of "the site", acknowledging virtual sites and online lives, while also providing templates for engaging with place. Christina Kubisch's research, recording sounds, can be seen as a careful act of mapping globalised cities, staying attuned to that which is not always visible.

Patricia Reed questioned the superficial site-specific engagement which demanded artists to travel and immerse themselves in communities in attempts to understand places, before traveling on to the next one. As a response to this, in her artistic practice she made the decision to only work generically, to look at certain forms that were universally agreed upon, such as currency or the nation state as an organising principle, and in relation to the planetary she has also worked with maps, highlighting the discrepancy between the logic of carving out space into nations and geological data.

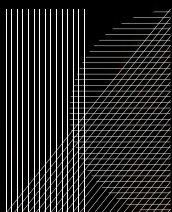
Another example of how to conceive, experience and engage with sites was provided by Jonas Dahlberg who spoke about *Of Public Interest*, a research hub at the Royal Academy of Art in Stockholm. OPI is based in a former storefront in an area of Stockholm set for significant redevelopment. The area functions as a case study for immersive research, a basis from which to teach a way of thinking around how to conceive of site and situation. Dahlberg pointed out that while continuity is important – the space functions as a kind of living archive for ongoing research, the new people who come in build upon what has already been done – each year sees new participants and local people in the area might come expecting to meet someone they had gotten to know, only to find they have been replaced.

This imperfect model can be seen as an example of how to open up a site while refusing superficial commitment. Deep, imbedded knowledge is not always possible but immersive practices and technologies can render places visible, and audible, providing a place to start building those better accounts of reality.

Christine Antaya, 2022

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Inter Arts Center (IAC) is a platform for artistic research and research in music education, research education, cross-disciplinary art and research, and cooperation with both academic and artistic partners. It is part of the Faculty of Fine and Performing Arts at Lund University and operates in close dialogue with the three academies Malmö Art Academy, Malmö Academy of Music and Malmö Theatre Academy.



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