

# Evaluation white-paper on pilot project for ASK:

Artists' Climate Think-tank 2023, "Unrelated Narrations"



by Mathias Schønberg

# Introduction

Before defining the ASK-project (Artists Share Knowledge), a pilot project tested how such a project could best be conceptualised. During the festival *Time to Listen – The Climate Crisis in Sound and Music* at the Berlin Academy of Arts in the late summer of 2023, a short residency for six artists was established by Art Music Denmark and the Danish Composers’ Society in cooperation with Initiative Neue Musik/Field Notes. The idea was to test a new format for artists to work together on sharing knowledge and artistic practices. The short residency was initially dubbed “an artists’ climate think tank” by the Danish initiators, and the aim was to address “how the arts can contribute to new ways of thinking about sustainability and green transition”. In this paper we share insights gained from the residency with the aim of further developing a model for how artistic work can be imagined to further contribute to understandings, perceptions, affective experiences, and actions for the climate. The title ‘Unrelated Narrations’ is what the group of artists in residency chose for the collective work they presented publicly at the festival in Berlin, in the Cultural Summit in Mors, and the festival Struer Tracks.

The scope of this paper is twofold. It evaluates the organisational circumstances of the short residency with the aim of guiding similar future projects in matters of duration, format, etc. and it furthermore lists topics and artistic approaches that came up during the residency with the aim of providing possible avenues for further precision of thematic work-questions and/or methodological focus in similar future projects.

## **Content:**

1. We describe the organisational and practical framework of the residency as it played out in the late summer of 2023.
2. We present the artists selected for the residency and clarify how the selection was made.
3. We evaluate these frameworks and present possible ways to further develop them.
4. We present main themes, topics, and artistic approaches that came up during the residency.
5. We formulate recommendations for similar future projects based on these evaluations.

This white paper is not peer-reviewed but part of a field study by Mathias Schønberg (project manager of NEUSTART for Art Music Denmark) who conducted extensive field research on the residency as part of a master’s thesis.

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*Layout: Thinh Duc Tran*

# 1 Organisational and practical framework of Unrelated Narrations

The idea to make an artists' climate think tank was conceived in Art Music Denmark and the Danish Composers' Society and planning and structuring it was a joint effort. The Berlin based network-organisation Initiative Neue Musik is a partner organisation to Art Music Denmark and the initiators of the festival Time to Listen at the Berlin Academy of Arts which would provide a fitting framework. The background for the idea was an increased culture-political demand for knowledge of how art can contribute to answers and responses to current crises. This demand is expressed in the Danish government's 2022 foundational text and reflected in culture funding schemes on a national and European level. As a response to this – and as a genuine desire to contribute to responses to the climate crisis – the idea to create an artists' think tank on sustainability and green transition came about accordingly.

The project was part of the Danish-German

cooperation project NEUSTART and thus largely funded by the Danish Arts Foundation under the premise that it should inspire further cooperation between artists and organisations in Denmark and Germany.

The duration was three days of workshop at the Berlin Academy of Arts with a public presentation immediately the following day during the Time to Listen festival, and two different days of public presentation in Denmark one week later at the Cultural Summit in Mors and Struer Tracks sound art festival. In this period the artists worked quite intensely together after having only met online in initial meetings one month and one week before the workshop. During their time in Berlin, the artists were meant to live together in one apartment but they mostly split up due to practical challenges and convenience. During and between the presentations in Denmark, they lived together in one house.



The six artists at *Time to Listen – die Ökologische Krise in Klang und Musik*: Eduardo Abrantes, Heðin Ziska Davidsen, Marina Cyrino, Samuel Hertz, Miguel Angel Crozzoli og Tania Rubio  
Photo: Mathias Schønberg Jørgensen

# 2 The artists and how they were selected

The six artists were selected, firstly, on the premise that three of them were professionally connected to Danish music, art, or research, and three to German. Then, they should have a resume of some weight of involvement with climate change as part of their artistic practices. An important matter for the Danish Composers' Society was that at least one of the artists should be related to the Arctic region and represent previously Danish colonised peoples. An open call was established and communicated by all three organisations who then together selected from the applicants. The selected artists were:

**Samuel Hertz**, PhD student in Geography at the Center of GeoHumanities at the Royal Holloway University of London. Originally from the USA and currently residing in Berlin, Hertz investigates from a sonic-materialistic perspective the scales of climate changes through the mediums of text, performance, interstellar radio-transmissions, deep-sea sound installations, and doom metal concerts.

**Tania Rubio**, composer, sound artist, and researcher originally from Mexico and currently residing in Berlin. Rubio focuses on the interface between biology and sound art and studies sound landscapes and acoustic ecologies with emphasis on indigenous peoples' relation between nature and music practices. Rubio works in formats such as contemporary music, multi-channel electro-acoustic music, and sound installation.

**Marina Cyrino**, a Brazilian flutelist, sound artist and researcher currently residing in Berlin holds a PhD in Music Performance and Interpretation from the University of Gothenburg. Cyrino works with improvisation, composition, video and performance art as well as self-built instruments.

**Miguel Angel Crozzoli**, an Argentinian composer, saxophone player, and researcher currently residing in Copenhagen has released more than 21 albums largely focusing on mediation of knowledge through art and relations between big data, AI, and sound.

**Eduardo Abrantes**, originally from Portugal, holds a PhD in Philosophy from the Nova University in Lisboa and the University of Copenhagen focused on sound phenomenology, bodily change, and voice. Abrantes teaches Performance Design and the course Art and Technology at the University of Roskilde and as a sound artist works with performative strategies, site specific and collaborative composition.

**Heðin Ziska Davidsen** is a composer and musician from the Faroe Islands with an MA-degree in music from the Art Academy of Iceland. Mostly established as a guitar player, he also works with live sampling, modular synthesisers and has written music for classical ensembles. His music has been performed at ISCM, Nordic Music Days, Happy Days, Dark Music Days, and Summartónar.

# 3 Evaluation of organisational and practical framework

In an evaluation meeting one month after the residency and public presentations, the participating artists and Danish project managers discussed what practical circumstances worked well and what could be improved.

The first and most salient topic was the matter of time. It was evident from the participants' inputs that the shortness of the residency was an unusual experience that had both positive and negative effects. It was experienced as a time pressure that functioned to motivate intensity and to get the ball rolling fast. Meanwhile, it was also experienced as a framework that would require a clearer focus on either discourse and knowledge sharing or artistic production. The immediacy of public presentations after the three workshop days added to a sense of urgency to come up with something quick, which took time from an otherwise productive conversation. In return, the conversation took time from a possibly higher quality artistic cooperative production and planning of a publicly engaging format.

Several remedies were suggested for this problem: It was suggested that the residency could be doubled in time with three days of discursive activity and then another three days of artistic production; and it was suggested that a

longer and more structured knowledge sharing correspondence could take place before meeting physically in residency.

The element of living together during the residency and presentation-tour was highlighted as a very positive contributing factor to mini-dialogues, unpressured conversations, and mid-process evaluations. Relaxed and spontaneous talk would emerge which reflected productively on the scheduled work.

Also the contexts for the public presentations were addressed. They were all considered relevant and interesting, but also very different from one another. This posed a difficult constraint to the production of presentations and artistic work as audiences and physical affordances of space varied wildly. From a fully corresponding thematic framework of the festival at Akademie der Künste with an expert audience to an unpredictably compiled audience and much wider thematic frame of the Culture Summit in Mors to finally answering to an enclosed network of sound artist colleagues at Struer Tracks, the participants – not knowing the latter two events beforehand – had to constantly reinvent their format on the go. Not just format but also language, mode of address,

degrees of complexity and scope of content had to be readjusted for the situation differently to each event. This reflected on the participants' work in a way that pressured a high level of adaptive generative thinking, but also a lesser chance at modelling internal coherence in the productive work or starting points for continued artistic exchange or cooperation.

It was suggested to choose the contexts for public presentation with even greater consideration of thematic frameworks, audiences, and technical/physical affordances. Public events could be chosen in closer strategic correspondence with work-questions and consideration of what the think-tank was expected to deliver to whom. A

future similar project could be organised in relation to other relevant spheres, but more deliberately so in relation to e.g. a certain scientific conference, activist or political event; and work questions could be formulated with more integral accordance to such events.

A desire for presenting in more climate politically rooted events was expressed.

Yet another idea was accumulated from the evaluation to include participants in the think tank from other backgrounds in activism, politics, or science. This could possibly also help further elevate the status of art in other contexts.

**“We’ve all heard the arguments and seen the graphics and charts – but how do we make it feelable?”**

# 4 Central themes, topics, and artistic approaches that aspired in the think tank

To possibly narrow the scope and thematic focus of a future similar think-tank residency, we present some of the thematic and methodological perspectives that took form during this years' first edition. These were, naturally, to a great extent pre-shaped by the participants' academic, artistic, and personal backgrounds, and not everything was agreed upon or given equal degrees of importance. But some observations can be made from what themes continuously reappeared in the conversations and what problems seemed most prevalent in the group's conversations. This list below does not express a chart of importance, rather the observations appear in order of timeline of their appearance throughout the residency.

**a) Providing affective experiences of the climate crisis.** It was expressed already in the initial meetings the job of art in this matter is to supplement with appeal to the senses and emotions other means of argumentation and calls for action: "We've all heard the arguments and seen the graphics and charts – but how do we make it feelable?" This statement reflected a pre-established common understanding within the group of their purpose as artists and functioned as a base guideline in many of the following conversations. Later in the evaluation too it was mentioned as a main question in the group's work: "How can we make people sensitive to climate change?"

(nb: It is worth noticing already that the group unanimously articulated the topic of the residency as "climate crises" (pl.) and not "sustainability and green transmission" as it was originally articulated in the open call. This reveals perhaps a different more activist approach to the topic than the implied continuation of things as they are, transitioned into a greener version that can be sustained). Also the pronunciation of crises in plural

marks a shared understanding of it as a composite phenomena.

**b) Global North <> South-problems of different experiences of climate changes and different degrees of power.** Possibly given the large spread of national background in the group, the topic of global climate-inequality pervaded most of their conversations. Personal stories and accounts were shared of how climate change is felt more materially than abstract in global southern regions while having less power to change that than global northern regions. For example, Marina Cyrino who comes from one of Brazil's largest mining regions which is operated in great part by German and other northern corporations expressed in her art how globally entangled environmental catastrophes can be experienced locally. She told about mining catastrophes, the deaths of Brazilian miners and enormously negative impacts on local ecosystems caused directly by Northern European economic interests, and questioned how these all determining events to her region were completely absent in German climate-narratives. Tania Rubio would convey from her research with indigenous communities in Mexico and the Amazons how disappearances of animal species would affect local cosmologies as well as material conditions. On these topics, it was a further implicit, unanimous perception that Northern European countries such as Denmark were among the few geographical and economical areas less likely to be negatively affected by climate changes relative to anywhere else, and at the same time to hold relative more power to choose what global problems to engage in or take responsibility for and not than those affected by them.

The group chose a title for their work based on these problems and on the differences of their accounts as exemplary of global problems:

'Unrelated Narrations' – the climate crises are felt and narrated differently and often not narrated as related events.

**c) Global horizons for conveying experienced climate crises.** This question is closely connected to the topic b above. In the evaluation, a discussion emerged about whether it should be a central goal for continued work to actually "relate the narrations" and further develop methods for translating experiences of climate crises from one global context to another. It was also expressed as "making incompatible knowledges and ways of knowing compatible". Behind this expression lies a much larger conversation about western/northern vs. indigenous epistemologies and relations between nature and human subjectivity and agency.

This conversation was essentially about fundamental differences in how the western subject is traditionally separated from nature, and human subjects in indigenous cosmologies are in many cases ontologically integrated with natural surroundings. Indigenous knowledges of nature-and-self were dichotomized with western enlightenment thought which was in turn related closely with extractive practices and, consequently, colonialism and historical extraction of bodies and labour. How inter-species and inter-environment intimacies can then be shaped across such a fundamental gap was prevalent in the discussions.

**d) Extractive practices vs. sustainable approaches to climate and nature.** At the core of the group's understanding of the climate crisis was an implicit and shared vocabulary about extractivism understood as the tradition from industrialism to extract natural resources and transfer them to energy and carbon emission

as a philosophy grounded in colonialism and the extraction of bodies and labour. How other philosophies and counter-approaches to resources, nature, and bodies can be learned and fostered was a central and constantly underlying goal for the group. "How we culturally can imagine relating to earth-systems" was one expression that came up during the evaluation. No specific or closed-end answers was given to this, but an increased understanding of non-human species and nature as life-entities and an increased and sensed understanding of humans as intertwined and codependent with nature seemed an implicit ambition with the conversations and work.

**e) Perspectives for intersections with activism.** Questions of the impact of art were a matter of concern to the group too. A frustration was raised that art might simply entertain and not have an impact as a medium for change. Creating art around the climate crisis was problematised as mere aestheticising and even potentially fetishising it, and doing so for career purposes was also questioned. It was then considered if intersecting with activist communities could be an avenue for future continuations of the project.

**f) Sonic observations and methodologies.** Given the artists' practices as sound artists, sonic aspects of climate changes and crises, naturally, were in focus. They work with ways in which sound is among contributing factors to climate changes in cases of e.g. sound pollution and sonic disturbances of animal habitats, and how sound also can reveal otherwise unnoticed changes and non-visible aspects of climate changes, as well as methods to reveal such aspects and to introduce sound to different environments as agent of change or experiment.

# 5 Recommendations for similar future projects

A positive aspect of this first edition of the short-residency was the openness of the work-question "how the arts can contribute to new ways of thinking about sustainability and green transition". Little to no interference was exercised by the initiators with the artists' work and they were entirely free to go any direction with the question. As this evaluation has shown, they mostly answered the problem of climate crises and not the question's more solution-oriented articulation of sustainability and green transmission. Instead, they rapidly expanded the scope of the conversation bringing more questions than answers to the table and addressing more deep rooted determining factors of climate change such as extractivism and colonialism as well as globalism and dissemination and translation of information across fundamental differences. This had a valuable generative function that helps us better recognise sub-topics and possible ways of precisising work-questions.

One way of moving forward with the project that was suggested by the group could be to substitute the current group with a platform to continue the work in other formats that doesn't require physical co-presence. This could be a written version of the think-tank idea or another form of dynamically evolving co-production.

The group could possibly be expanded with participants from other sectors such as scientists or activists to create further intersections with other fields.

The aforementioned idea (in section 3. Evaluation of organisational and practical framework) to

organise a future residency in relation to a relevant event in other spheres, e.g. a certain scientific conference, activistic or political event, could be a way to determine a more focused work-question.

It can perhaps be recommended – depending on whether the desired outcome of a future project should be similarly generative or it should relate its work to more particular questions – to articulate the work questions with more specificity to a certain sub-topics or climate-event. Such an approach could possibly relieve some energy from debating what the question should or could entail and set more direction to the work. The above list of themes and topics could be used as a catalogue of options in this regard.

None of these suggestions should be considered mutually exclusive or critical to a possible next version of the residency – they are possibilities to choose from. Critical to a future residency is, however, made clear from these evaluations, that the level of publicness should be determined by a clearer idea of audience and context. It should be considered how and for whom an artists' think tank should produce what type of knowledge and how that knowledge can be deployed. While this was indeed considered in this years' planning, the three public contexts because of their difference raised a sense of indirection while the event-based short-livedness of contexts did not form a model for continued collective work. A model for a future similar project could benefit from taking this into further account.





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