

Interview by the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Seoul (MMCA)

Please describe what led you to create *Hutan (Forest)* and its production process, as well as what sparked your initial interest in sound installation. Is there a reason you were drawn to the forest among the various natural environments possible to focus on?

*We started to explore in our artistic process as choreographers and performers the audible dimension in a first collaborative work **from starting to cut the wood**. This work was based on recorded sounds of the of a traditional mask carver crafting a mask. The idea of this piece emerged, because we were reflecting on how sound in rural everyday life in Indonesia is still an essential dimension to connect within the communities.*

We had no idea at this moment, that this will be the starting point for us as artists to reflect for years to come deeper on sound and listening.

In the process of creating this piece of work, we began to realise how important it is to focus on what we can hear and try to understand something by listening. In our rational times, we are trained to trust what we see. However, the auditory dimension contains so much information that cannot be conveyed through images or words.

When we started to brainstorm on an idea for a new collaborative work, Ari was living and working in Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo). Kalimantan is home to one of the world's oldest and most complex land-based ecosystems. We started to wonder what these forests might convey if we listened to them for a full circadian cycle.

We did a field trip into the forest and stayed one day and one night. While we

*were there, we started to question what these sounds meant to us as humans, and how they were connected to our language and culture. Listening is a sensual experience, the complex sound textures that we heard in the forest shifted something within our bodies. When we went into the forest, we were slightly worried about entering unknown territory. But when we left, we felt as if we were leaving a place that was very familiar to our physical bodies in a universal sense. I think it was the first time we experienced something like a collective body memory, which resonates in all of us. That was the moment when we decided to develop the project **hutan**.*

Why have you chosen to focus specifically on the relationship between the forest and the human body? The work seems to be designed for walking freely through and lingering in space, encouraging sensory experiences through the body. Was this an intentional approach to allow for a corporeal perception of the forest?

We created a dome-like sound installation to provide a three-dimensional audio experience. The idea is to recreate the sound space experience as closely as possible to that recorded in the forest.

*An essential part of **hutan** is that the audience is free to move around and find a comfortable place to sit or lie down. When we listen, we perceive sounds not only through our ears, but also through vibrations perceived by the skin. When we listen, we sense and feel, and we want the audience to have their own experience in their own space. We see the role of the performers as being less about presenting something to the audience and more about sharing their perceptions and sensibilities based on their personal listening processes. The audience can choose to watch the performers, share their experience or simply focus on their own listening process. We don't mind if visitors close their eyes or even fall asleep.*

You aim to propose new ways of perceiving, sensing, and listening to the forest as a space that holds political, economic, metaphorical, and emotional significance today. What new perceptions or understandings of the forest have you personally experienced? Through this work, what alternative modes of thinking do you hope visitors will encounter?

By listening to the complex sounds of a tropical forest over a long period of time, we found that we were mostly left wondering and asking questions. One question that has accompanied us throughout our process is how the animals we are listening to perceive sound. How do they perceive the sounds we hear? What do they hear that is beyond our capacity?

Crickets for example sense sounds in a drum-like organ on the front legs; grasshoppers hear through membranes on their abdomens; and many flies hear through a sensor in their antennae. Humans can sense vibrations on the skin as well, but they are quiet blurry sensations compared to the very nuanced body hearing experience of insects.

*When processing this work, an essential part for us is comprehending that what we hear is only one way of perceiving these sounds, among countless others. It is about trying to tune into other ways of being and hearing, while accepting our limitations as humans and embracing the unheard and unknown. So, one aspect of work **hutan** for us is acknowledging diversity and limitations. We will never know how a cricket hears the sound we are listening to in our recordings.*

*We want to offer the audience a space in which to reflect on how much we, as humans, are part of these sounds. However, we also want to acknowledge that there is an unknown territory which we will never be able to fully conquer based on our specific human senses. In this sense, we believe that **hutan** also reflects the importance of accepting otherness. We don't need to understand or control everything. We can simply open our senses, perceive what is out there, and connect.*

You have sustained a longstanding interest in dance. In what ways has this inspired and found itself embedded in the work at hand?

*When we started the process of developing **hutan** as a performative sound installation, we realized that we have to strip off a lot from how we usually process dance works. The forest itself already seemed to have its own choreography with a composition of sound which we feel is a complete work and standing by itself. The rhythmicity of the various sounds is so perfectly orchestrated.*

What we drew from our backgrounds and experience as dancers and choreographers was more the ways to explore specific principles and movement themes. For example, one starting point for us was how our bodies can respond or be part of this very defined sense of time. Can we connect to the motivation behind the timing of each animal producing its sound. Such as the night birds, which are vocalizing very isochronous (at constant intervals in time) throughout the long hours of the night? How does repetition impact our bodies? Is monotony a notion in the more-than-human world?

*The performers in **hutan** have very different backgrounds and origins: Sisilia Hangin has Kalimantan, Dayak-indigenous roots, Ari Ersandi is from Lampung, Sumatra and Polett is a Hungarian, ballet trained dancer. We wanted to explore how these sounds resonate differently in the body of each of us based on our background and history and origins or just how we respond as individuals.*

In the beginning of the process, we were first listening together for some days. When we exchanged our audible experience, we realized how subjective listening is, not only between humans and other creatures, but also among humans. It was not only in what the sounds resonate within us, but we also simply heard differently.

Opposed to a situation, when we exchange something which we see, we can look at a picture and point on what we see. But in the audible dimension, it gets more complex. What one hears, another person might hear very differently or not at all, especially when it reaches higher frequencies.

So, the essence for us in the process of developing the work hutan was to realize, that each dancer will have its very personal process.

You recorded sounds for 24 hours in the Rungan primary forest of Central Kalimantan in Indonesian Borneo. Were there any particularly striking sounds or rhythms that stood out to you during the process of reconfiguring the material into an 8-hour sound installation? What aspects of the forest did you hope to convey to visitors?

While we were in the forest and when we reviewed the recorded sounds, we mostly looked at the biophony: the orchestration of vocalising animals as a landscape. In bioacoustic research, the 'acoustic niche' theory describes how vocalising animals tend to occupy separate frequency ranges in order to be heard by other sounding species while avoiding overlaps. However, when we listened to the sounds, the animals seemed to be listening collectively. This made us wonder about specific interspecies relationships, as what we heard seemed so carefully crafted.

In arranging the sound material, we were particularly interested in the transitions within the 24-hour cycle: How do the changes happen? Successively and seamlessly, or relatively suddenly? We also tried to analyse the characteristics and atmospheres of the different animal groups that dominate throughout the 24-hour cycle. The night score is certainly more consistent, with the same species sounding for extended periods. We were really fascinated by the transition from night into morning marked by the gibbons starting their calls. Hearing these sounds for the first time in the forest was a remarkably strong experience for us.

We were also really drawn in by a certain kind of cricket, which was sounding with extremely high frequency and loud peaks after sunrise and loud peaks over noontime. These vibratory patterns became inspiration for us to explore later in the studio.

One central aspect we want to convey to the audience is an awareness of the continuous shifts and changes through focusing specifically on these transitional

moments. In reality, change is happening all the time: how then can we tune in to become aware of these consistent processes and their underlying layers?

What are your thoughts on participating in *MMCA Performing Arts: Waiting for the Forest*, and which aspects did you emphasize the most while engaging in the project? In addition, what do you consider to be the role of museums in the current context of the Anthropocene?

*The primary aspect of this work - and its placement within the context of *Waiting for the Forest* - is the complex intermingling of more-than-human species and the delicate balance of sound, space, and environment. In a sense, our versions of 'waiting for the forest' is attending to the forest through a highly detailed sensory engagement with this natural space: a space that is typically hard to access.*

Through a replication of the immersiveness of natural environments, we hope to encourage an enhanced engagement with more-than-human sensory worlds. This desire also encapsulates what we feel to be the space of museum institutions in the face of critical conversations around climate breakdowns that endure in the Anthropocene.

For us, museums have the power to encourage projects that can scale complex issues into sensory experiences that have the possibility to radically transform the ways we perceive the world. Museums represent a critical centre-point where aesthetics and dialogue meet, encouraging audiences to engage with complexity through the senses.

We hope that installations and performances like ours can leave audiences with augmented capacities to listen to scales beyond the human, and perhaps therefore develop not only appreciation for these natural spaces, but perhaps an affinity and connection with previously inaudible worlds.

Are there any tips you can provide for a more immersive experience of *Hutan (Forest)*, or a particular approach you would encourage visitors to adopt?

***Hutan** is a durational work that invites audiences to spend a short or long time in the theatre. We recommend that visitors change their perspective by moving around the space, and that they feel free to make themselves comfortable and take a rest.*

Sometimes the sounds can be very intense, so please be aware of this. If it becomes too much, it is perfectly OK to leave the theatre and come back later. We have prepared some videos in the lobby which provide more insight into our process of recording the sounds and developing the work, and which are nice to watch during breaks.

Overall, we encourage the audience to listen to themselves while listening to the sounds, and perhaps to learn more about their own listening as they do so.