

P e t e r N y l u n d

Chasing Presence:
Between Reification, Disenchantment and Transmutation
2021-22







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One of the most striking things that many of us noticed during the first Summer School in 2021 about the cluster of buildings that make up Borgo Rizza, is that there seems to be a presence around and between the buildings. This sense was described by Sandi Hilal during one of the first evenings we spent at the Borgo during the first Summer School: “I can feel the spirit of Mussolini here, in this courtyard, between these buildings.” These words stayed with me during the first trip. And many others expressed having the same eerie feeling when we gathered at the end of each day in the courtyard as dusk was falling. What was it that we felt? Was there something present? Or more critically, was this a projection, a way for us to reify our own thoughts about this perceived presence onto the buildings, to ascribe onto them what we were there to find ways to counter?

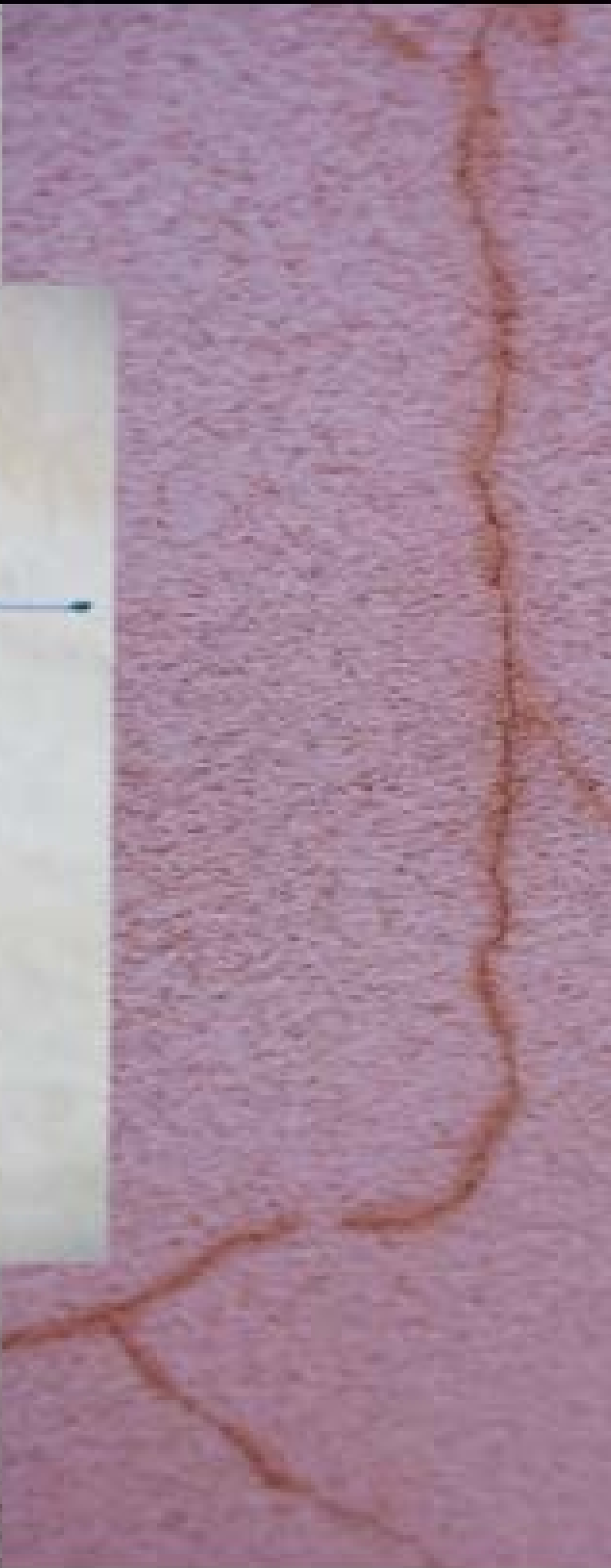
Spending our days together in a big group during this first trip, with students from both the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm and from the University of Basel, there was not much time for contemplation, which I felt necessary in my case to be able to conduct the work I felt I needed to do. I knew I needed to be in the place alone, to be among the buildings by myself, to see if I could discover or come across something that would speak to this sense many of us had of a presence. So, during one of the days when the driver of the small bus that took us up the hill to the Borgo in the morning and down again to the hotel at night, dropped most of the participants off for a walk up the last part of the hill which was going to take roughly an hour, I asked if I could go with him directly to the Borgo instead.



Finally alone, I walked around the Borgo photographing, and listening. The only persons present were the municipal firefighters who live on site. The incessant noise from the Chicadas. After waving my arm to the firefighters as a salute from across the courtyard, I went on photographing and filming. The idea was to try to get to the view from “inside,” to not focus on the imposing facades or the buildings themselves, but on what could be “inside” and “behind” it all. To, with the naive gusto of a photographer, try to “capture” the presence we said we could feel, but nevertheless could not define.

After the first Summer School, when returning to Gothenburg and going through the footage, I could tell that something was missing. I had made photographs and recorded video, taken from many angles, some maybe even quite unexpected and maybe even interesting. But an image is still a representation of what is visible, and all I had gathered seemed to only be more of what we all had gathered during the week: photos of buildings and of things that caught our eyes (which in all honesty seemed to be pretty much the same things...). I was missing something important. I then reached out to Sicilian artist collective Vacua Moenia, who have made sound recordings around the Borgo, and asked if they would be willing to collaborate in this investigative work. They agreed and I was sent the recordings they had made earlier in Borgo Rizza. I then put together a first attempt to combine their sound recordings, my photographs and video, to see if I could find something there, to see what that w/could do. What could emerge from this kind of collage, where seemingly disparate pieces, all recorded and separated from one another by time, would be combined? Sadly, not much, I discovered. It was a digital collage of sounds and images. Not much else. It didn't say anything. It didn't do anything unless a narrative was constructed to drive it forward. But that wasn't what I was after.

(This first attempt and collaboration with Vacua Moenia can be reached here <https://vimeo.com/698586350>)





After months of searching for a suitable method, and as an attempt to unify my artistic and spiritual practices, I started to test out ways of recording silence. I wondered whether sound recording equipment could be pushed to record the minute vibrations that make up the silence inside of the buildings in the Borgo? How could these vibrations then be amplified and made audible? I found in the work of Jens Kierkegaard a clue to make this possible. If I could create a feedback loop of the “silence” (i.e. the resonant vibrations inside the room/building), and record them on top of one another, the sound would be amplified with each subsequent iteration and the building would be allowed to speak for itself, so to speak.






The School Building

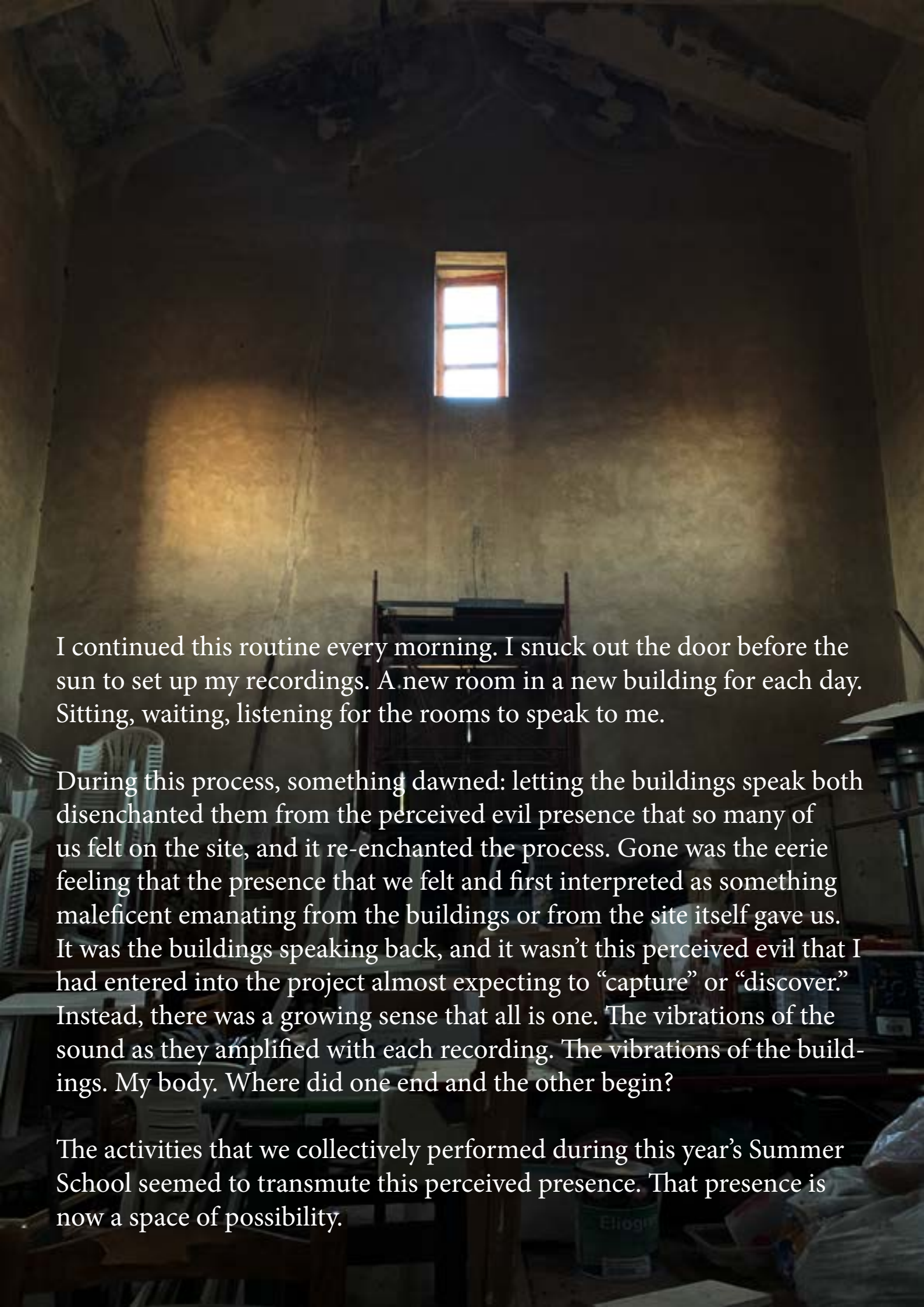
During the second Summer School in 2022 I therefore started my days in the Borgo about three hours before anyone else was up, to not get any disturbing sounds picked up by the microphones. I was hoping this would be the way to record and “capture” this presence that we all thought we felt at the Borgo.

As I set the recorder in the middle of the large room, I realized that this was where children had been taught their A's and B's and 1+1s, and they had also been taught about the inherent goodness of fascism. It's inevitability, even. I turned on the recorder and quickly left the building to not pollute the soundwaves more than absolutely necessary. In unease and anticipation I waited outside for ten minutes before returning inside to start the recording again while playing it back out into the same room through a speaker.

A photograph of a room, likely a dining area. In the foreground, a wooden dining table is partially visible, surrounded by wooden chairs. On the left wall, there is a large framed picture or poster. To the right, a window with a wooden shutter is open, letting in bright light. The room has a warm, slightly dim atmosphere.

After nine takes, and 90 minutes of sitting in silent anticipation listening to the silence, I thought about giving up. This idea seemed to not have worked out, after all. There was nothing. No sound emerging from the building. Just more of the same silence. But something told me to go on. I played the silence out into the room again. I pressed the button to start another recording. Then another. And then, during the twelfth recording of the feedback loop, something started to happen. Faint sounds started to form. I kept going, and the sound grew on each subsequent take, getting louder each time, as the feedback loop turned on itself and the vibrations amplified. After fifteen recordings, the sound was so loud it could be heard through the walls where I was sitting outside. I decided to stop. I went inside and played back the last recording through the speaker. The sound covered the whole room in droning and sweeping frequencies together with an underlying higher frequency noise that could be heard “talking” rhythmically above it. An architecture of sound engulfing the room.





I continued this routine every morning. I snuck out the door before the sun to set up my recordings. A new room in a new building for each day. Sitting, waiting, listening for the rooms to speak to me.

During this process, something dawned: letting the buildings speak both disenchanted them from the perceived evil presence that so many of us felt on the site, and it re-enchanted the process. Gone was the eerie feeling that the presence that we felt and first interpreted as something maleficent emanating from the buildings or from the site itself gave us. It was the buildings speaking back, and it wasn't this perceived evil that I had entered into the project almost expecting to "capture" or "discover." Instead, there was a growing sense that all is one. The vibrations of the sound as they amplified with each recording. The vibrations of the buildings. My body. Where did one end and the other begin?

The activities that we collectively performed during this year's Summer School seemed to transmute this perceived presence. That presence is now a space of possibility.

Our interventions into the Borgo, and our staying there at night changed our relationship to it. It was no longer the scary fascist Borgo with evil spirits haunting it. It was us. It changed, was change. We changed it. And this gives me a reason to feel some hope. That even if we are currently living through a period of what seems to be a global contraction, a violent conservative pushback seen in the resurgence of the ideas that built this Borgo now on a frightening scale set at an alarming pace, nothing makes this inevitable. And it can be transmuted.

The recording from the school building can be reached here:

<https://soundcloud.com/peter-nylund-586569945/borgo-rizza-school>