

ROMA Villa Maraini Via Ludovico 48 00187 Roma +39 06 420421 roma@istitutsvizzero.it

Nina Emge

Lately I've Been Listening Again or Memorymemorymemory123!

Date

03.10.2024
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Location

Officine Bellotti
Palermo

Istituto Svizzero

Category

Art, Exhibition

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Nina Emge's exhibition at Officine Bellotti in Palermo explores the political potential of listening through sculptures and installations that intertwine reflections on music and marginalized voices.

Her work, influenced by postcolonial and feminist theories, raises questions about who has the right to be heard, transforming the exhibition space into a resonance chamber where sounds, voices, and silences converge.

The large, hand-painted, and embroidered cotton panels, along with metal sculptures inspired by musical instruments, shape the acoustics of the space. Texts from politically engaged musicians are inscribed on thin ceramic plates, inviting the audience to engage in active listening that generates memory. Nina's goal is to deconstruct dominant canons and amplify often-ignored voices, creating a polyphony that resonates on a sensory level as well as an intellectual one.

Nina Emge is a Zurich-based artist who reflects on the social dimensions of sound, voice, silence, and practices of listening. Her work is centered around issues such as decentralization, shared working methods, and redistribution. Nina is an active member of the Transnational Sound Initiative. She has exhibited at institutions including the Lagos Biennale, Kunsthalle Zurich, Kunsthalle Bern, Istituto Svizzero in Rome and Milan, Shedhalle Zurich, Halle für Kunst in Lüneburg, Frac Bretagne + Centre culturel suisse de Paris, Uferhalle Berlin, Kunstverein Braunschweig, WAF Vienna, Helmhaus Zurich, Kunsthaus Zurich, and other national and international institutions.

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Special thanks to Officine Bellotti

Nina Emge

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Nina Emge spent the summer months in an artist residency in Berlin. Inside her spacious studio on Lindowerstrasse, amidst the sweltering 30°C heat, she begins sketching ideas for sculptures for her exhibition in Palermo. Alongside these initial drafts, she conducts her first spatial experiments using large pieces of hand-painted cotton fabric, tests various materials, and crafts her first small ceramic works. The dimensions of Nina's temporary studio in Berlin coincidentally mirror those of the Officine Bellotti exhibition space in Palermo, helping her to better envision and adapt her work to the space. During a Zoom call from Berlin, Nina shares these early sketches, arranging them on a floor plan of the Palermo venue.

Spatiality is a fundamental component of Nina's artistic practice—though not in the conventional sense of site-specific installations. Rather, she approaches space as a resonance chamber, a place for voices, sounds, music, and even silence to come together. For Nina, space is also crucially a place for listening. Her work often engages with the sociopolitical dimensions of listening, viewing it through the lens of postcolonial and feminist theories and understanding it as an inherently political act. While hearing is a passive sensory function, simply registering sound waves through the ear, listening is an active process that requires attention and intent. As composer Pauline Oliveros notes, "Hearing happens involuntarily, listening, on the other hand, is a voluntary process that produces culture through training and experience".¹

We can learn to listen. And when we do, listening becomes a political, even subversive act, a means to challenge entrenched power structures. These reflections resonate in Nina's new works for Palermo. The term 'resonate' feels particularly apt here, as we enter a space that functions like a resonance chamber—a quiet room, where the sounds and echoes of a concert that may have ended just moments before seem to linger in the air. As Nina describes it, "the room as a silent concert".

The large cotton panels in the exhibition play an active, acoustic role in shaping this resonance, influencing how sound moves through the space. Painted with layers of highly diluted acrylic paint and embroidered with glass beads, the textiles subtly vibrate. In this silence, we begin to listen;

in this silence, a new space for communication opens up. The sculptures—fragile and almost organic in appearance—are forged from metal and held together at various points by tuning keys, which are used to adjust the pitch of stringed instruments (the tighter the string, the higher the tone) and optimise their sound. Nina emphasises the relationship between these fabric panels, which shape the acoustics of the space, and the sculptures, which she refers to as "instruments" that have "something to say".

In the second room, a large sculpture with five music stands recalls the presence of bodies and voices. At the same time, the sculpture also formulates an invitation: I can position myself at one of the music stands and join the polyphonic choir.

With her work, Nina intertwines reflections on the political potential of listening—posing questions about whose voices are heard—with specific considerations of music. The artist's grandparents were professional musicians, and Nina has acquired a deep understanding of music theory and history. The bows, repurposed music stands, and tuning keys featured in her sculptures and installations highlight listening as an intrinsic part of music—essential to its creation—while also critiquing the exclusionary mechanisms of the Western musical canon, which dictates how and what we listen to.

At the same time, music is profoundly linked to political movements and diasporic experiences, where certain songs can convey political messages, embody resistance, and provide strength and solidarity. In the Palermo exhibition, Nina incorporates paper-thin ceramic plates inscribed with lyrics and quotations from a diverse range of musicians, such as Milton Nascimento, EBOW, Tina Reden, Erykah Badu, and KRS-ONE. Many of these songs have long accompanied Nina, their lyrics resurfacing in her previous exhibitions and performances. Revisiting them for Palermo, she draws attention to an active form of listening that generates memory. This idea is encapsulated in the exhibition title: *Lately I've Been Listening Again*. The second part of the title, *Memorymemorymemory123!*, carries 'memory' within it and highlights the importance of knowledge, referencing Nina's personal password-creation system. It serves as a metaphorical key—much like the tuning key that holds the knowledge of an instrument's sound. The artist also connects these considerations with her understanding of the musicians she quotes in the ceramic works—musicians who have consistently expressed critical

views, some dating back to the 1970s, whether they were speaking out against war or advocating for marginalised bodies. Equipped with this knowledge, we can also understand the tenor of the exhibition.

At the core of Nina's work is an effort to deconstruct dominant canons and reconstruct alternative genealogies—amplifying previously unheard voices and allowing them to resonate. To listen to their political, resistant messages. For her, these voices form a polyphonic choir that echoes throughout the exhibition space—an open score that visitors can tune into and engage with. A choir whose voices we can not only hear but also feel—when we truly listen.

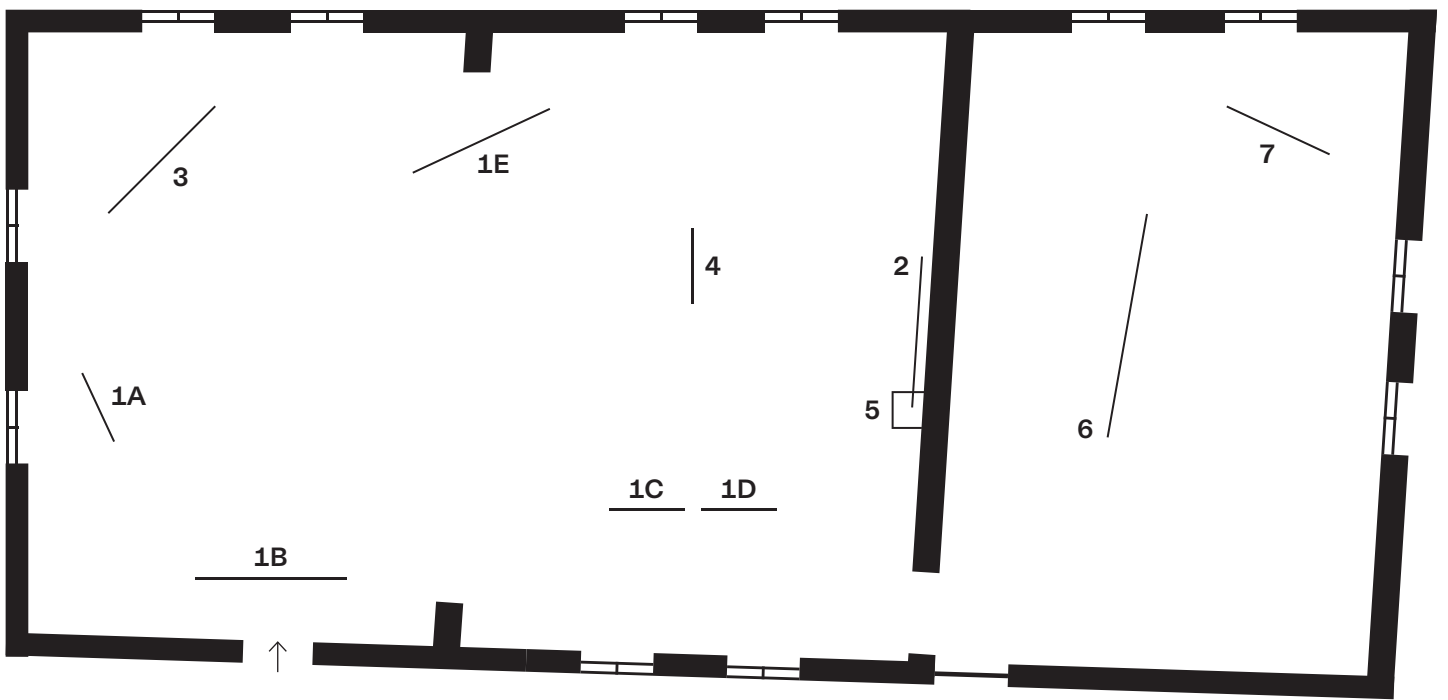
The Italian verb 'sentire' means both 'to hear' and 'to feel'—underscoring the connection between acoustic perception and sensory experience. Both are acts of the body, and both can require courage. "Listening is risky, it might require change from us."²

Gioia Dal Molin, October 2024

1. Pauline Oliveros, *Quantum Listening*, Terra Ignota, London 2022.
2. Lucia Farinati, Claudia Firth, *The Force of Listening*, Errant Bodies Press, Berlin 2017.

Listen to Nina's suggestion of a concert program for the exhibition:





1A
A Chamada or absorb

1B
it's a long way or memorize

1C
Shape of it or preserve

1D
A Friend or keep

1E
acalanto or integrate

Cotton, wooden frames, iron, glass beads

2
Lovers Rock or show solidarity
Iron, violin strings, drum felt, grand piano tuning knobs

3
Player one: interprets a-c
Iron, violin strings, drum felt, grand piano tuning knobs

4
Player two: interprets d-f
Iron, violin strings, drum felt, grand piano tuning knobs, tuning peg

5
Player tree: backs player one and two
Iron, violin strings, drum felt, grand piano tuning knobs

6
it reminds me of a dream or The Quintett
Iron, ceramics

7
Player four: accompanies the Quintett and/or plays during interval
Iron, violin strings, drum felt, grand piano tuning knobs

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