



Silvia Mercuriali: The Making of *Swimming Home* (2020)

Aural/Oral Dramaturgies artist in residence Silvia Mercuriali treats us to a making-of documentary of her new performance *Swimming Home*, one of the projects co-funded and co-produced by this project.

Silvia tells us about her fascination with swimming pools and municipal sport spaces, which goes back to her childhood ice skating in Milan, and about how over the decades she has developed the desire to make a performance for the viewing gallery of a swimming pool and for swimming as a practice in itself, in which 'everything dissolves, everything is simpler, less dramatic'.

We hear about how the idea for *Swimming Home* fits organically into Mercuriali's long-honed theatrical language of 'autoteatro' as a headphone piece in which 'the whole show is about you', and about how she developed the piece from her own experience, from collaboration, and from interviews with swimmers about why they swim and what it feels like. We also learn about how the artist reframed the project practically and conceptually as her process occurred over the time of the Covid-19 pandemic: indeed, the first iteration of the project, which premiered on 5th October 2020, is a sound-piece to be listened to in one's own bathtub.

Swimming Home is a performance about swimming, but it is also and fundamentally about relationships between the body and the imagination, sound, space, time and water – which, Mercuriali reflects, always contains a duality: on the one hand the lightness of weightlessness, of floating, of joy, and on the other hand the sense of the abyss, the threat of drowning, the depths that water allows us to access and imagine.

[00:00:23 to 00:00:50] Trailer for *Swimming Home* (2020)

[00:00:51] THE ORIGINAL IDEA

Hello. My name is Silvia Mercuriali and I'm going to talk about the making of *Swimming Home*, which is a show that I've had in the back of my head for a very long time. And it's a show that follows on from my weird passion of using public space and, through the sound, transforming it into film sets for audience members, hidden in various places, without interfering with the space, allowing it to be what it really is, and bringing in reality and real life and real people and randomness into a sort of pre-choreographed, fictional story that only exists for the audience that is listening through headphones to this pre-recorded story.

So let's say that I think I decided to look into swimming pools probably because I have spent most of my teenage years in sport halls and, actually more precisely, in ice rinks and I just really love the space. I love this – the empty seats whilst you're training. And I remember going very early morning to train before going to school and it's very cold and there's nothing there. And there's a particular smell, there's a particular thickness to the air, and it's just the perfect kind of whiteboard for something to happen. Not only because of the ice but just – so I'm just here and I'm going to share a few images that I like.

So here, this will go nicely. [A black and white photograph of an ice rink with younger Silvia skating.] I just really love the possibility. I think all of these spaces are full of possibilities for stories to happen, but then also without them being written. I remember my mum sitting in the seats over there to one side and looking at us ice skating, and I remember myself sitting there and watching other people just before my training hour. And just all of the stories that you can make up in your mind, and all of the dynamics and suddenly everything that's happening, which is completely random and absolutely, you know, everyday – there's nothing necessarily strange happening – becomes quite heightened in your head. And that happens, of course, in all sorts of different sports centres. I actually had a few



images and then I realised they're really small! But I also have a real love for abandoned spaces, for slightly falling apart spaces, car parks and places like that.

And then one day, I stumbled across this picture. [*A black and white photograph of a shimmering swimming pool.*] Which was taken by a friend of mine and I completely love it. I've had it hanging on my wall for now 20 years. And I think it was really this picture that made me want to write something for swimming pools. I love swimming pools, this sense of the change in the rules of engagement with people: suddenly, you're naked in front of loads of people and you're completely – in a way, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter anymore that you're not with your feet on the ground, quite literally, you're floating in water together with loads of other people, which you are completely ignoring. And again a bit like the ice rinks, the smell and the thickness of the air is completely different from what you normally get. So I just decided that I wanted to make something for swimming pools and especially for an audience sitting in the viewing gallery of a municipal pool.

Here there's this image that I'm going to share now because I just really love it. [*A colour photograph from the 1960s of a crowded swimming pool.*] This is a completely crazy swimming pool in Milan. This is obviously the '60s, it's not quite like this anymore, although all the structure architecturally is still exactly the same, but I just love this. I love this, like we're just little creatures, like little insects, like little lemurs, gathering all together doing this really weird thing, which is completely, in a way, not natural to us even though – we will get to that – it's completely natural. But being naked, splashing around, loads of people that we don't know, without any inhibitions, without any problems, there's no agenda other than being quite happy in water. So I guess that's what initiated this idea, my desire to create something in swimming pools.

And especially I wanted to make it for a viewing gallery of a swimming pool. [*A colour photograph of a municipal swimming pool.*] I imagine an audience arriving at the pool and wearing their headphones and making their way into this auditorium, basically, and the pool is our stage. We are a real audience; I mean, it's exactly like going to the theatre, and you're looking down at a pool which – well, this one is completely empty, but I imagined it animated by people who are normally doing their lengths, nothing strange, all very daily, all very normal. But then I had this idea of hiding somebody in the pool – hiding somebody in the pool who would be swimming exactly in sync with what we are hearing in our headphones. The idea is that through the sound I wanted to create the illusion of the space changing, morphing, being right here, right now, with the sound of a real swimming pool to the point you think you're not actually hearing anything special in the headphones, it's just the normal sound of the space you're in. But then slightly, in fact, slowly, slowly and slightly changing it to completely take away that world, and then slowly starting to sprinkle in different worlds. So from a normal pool as it is, I wanted to take people out into the pools of Hollywood, following Burt Lancaster in his little adventures as he swims home pool by pool. And then again, breaking it and coming back to this pool, and then breaking it again, and suddenly this pool is not an empty pool any more but it's a pool full of people, and there's maybe a big competition happening, just through sound.

And I really believe that sound is this brilliant thing that makes us believe whatever it wants. Because our brain always needs to hold onto things that are concrete, that are really happening, it always makes sense of the things around it according to our senses. So if you hijack one sense completely then suddenly you can morph the way that you perceive the space around you. This was the idea, and the idea was also to create this illusion that everyone in the pool is actually there just for us, the audience, even though the reality would be that everybody is just there doing their normal swimming. But there is one person hiding among them who will also be an audience member, and this audience member is, sort of, swimming in sync with what I'm hearing, me – 'audience member'. And suddenly I realise that they're not at all a random person but that they're part of the fiction that I am part of. So they've also gone through an outdoor pool, a big competition, an empty pool, gone through all of these different scenarios and films, let's say, that use the same set. And then as I'm asked to imagine, as I'm looking at this person with maybe a red swimming hat on, as I'm looking at them, I'm asked to imagine – imagine if they sat on the side of the pool, turned around and waved. And as I'm asked to imagine that – that exactly happens! From that point onwards, I wanted everyone to have this feeling



of the pool becoming animated just for me – every single person then could be a character. Then how many of those people who are swimming there are actually swimming in sync just for me? This idea that I can transform reality and make it play for me only so that I become, at the same time, the person who is watching but also the real subject for whom everything is being choreographed. And this is what I'm interested in, in all of my shows. Whether it's in a supermarket, whether it's me just looking at a tiny little mirror, or if I am sitting in a bar, or driving through the city in a car with two crazy performers, everything is always just for me – the audience, and I am in fact the main character in what is being written. This was really what I wanted to do.

Now, what I wanted to do and what I ended up doing is a little bit different. It morphed in a way that made me quite excited actually. I'm just going to put this because it's a nice image. [*A black and white photograph of a female swimmer mid-air, diving into a pool.*]

[00:12:41] RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

So before I move onto what happened as we all got locked in due to Covid-19 and the idea of having an audience in a public space was obviously completely out of the question, I started doing a bit of research and I started thinking: 'What is it? Why is swimming so interesting to me?' I do go swimming quite regularly, and 'Why is it that if I don't swim I'm in a really bad mood?' And then suddenly, if I go swimming, everything dissolves, every problem becomes much easier to address, everything is simpler, less dramatic than I thought. I then started interviewing a lot of swimmers, and I also started having little chats with people who are actually dealing with mental health and swimming, and this is one of the bits of documents that I got from Swim England that deals with mental health and swimming, and the relationship that there is between sports and wellbeing. [*Opens up a chart about swimming and wellbeing.*] And, of course, everything makes a lot of sense. This idea of not having weight, of being supported by water, floating in a different matter, this lack of sound and noise and everything is just completely different and allows you to take your brain away from all of your worries for a bit – apart from the fact that physically it also allows you to create all sorts of brilliant endorphins and make you much more excited about life, and calmer. So it was really interesting because, of course, I talked to the experts and that's what they said. But then also talking to the actual swimmers – swimmers that are not necessarily Olympic swimmers, swimmers of all levels and skills and ages – and they've all pretty much said the same thing, that they just feel much calmer and that swimming allows them to face any problem that they have in a much lighter way.

I'm just going to open this. So let's see... [*Opens up Ableton Live software on her desktop.*] Maybe it's this. I'm going to – just because it's fun. Here it is! This is the craziness of Live – this is all of the interviews that I did, and I cut them out into the different stories that they came up with. And I decided to give them a set of questions, like: 'When did you learn to swim?', 'Can you remember the first pool you've ever been to?', 'What does it mean for you to swim?', 'Are you still swimming?', 'What do you do whilst you swim?' And I collected all of these interviews and lined them all up trying to make sense of what was there, and apart from it being super interesting to see how the reactions to swimming are very, very similar and there is this sort of polarity between it being really uplifting and really joyous and really kind of light, at the same time it carries with it a real darkness. Just water itself has this duality: it's both positive and incredibly scary. The idea of depth, the idea of monsters under the water, the idea of drowning, not being able to breathe. Some of the things that I was asking was even just looking at word associations or expressions – that's it, like 'diving headfirst' or 'holding my breath'. All of these things are quite scary. Water has both the idea of: 'I was so happy I felt like I was floating', as well as 'I was drowning in thoughts and worries', and all of that. So I started doing all this collecting of interviews, and it was really nice and lovely, but then I started off having people, having the swimmers with me and interviewing them live, and then suddenly we were all locked in. So here is where everything kind of changed. And I had to reconsider everything because obviously the idea that I had wasn't possible anymore, and I started imagining a different way of doing the project, which would allow me to still carry on with this sense of really transforming a space, which is an everyday space, into a film. Still bringing the audience as the first person of this fictional story as the main character.



[00:19:13] PROJECT STRUCTURE

So I started imagining – also through conversations with Duška and Flora – imagining the possibility of creating a podcast. Maybe a little podcast for people in their own bathroom, but then I also started making tiny little videos. Let's see if I can show you something, whilst I talk... I started making little videos using the interviews with swimmers that would place the swimmers themselves into a tiny little jar. But then I had to really try and think about how I was going to make the actual show that I wanted to make, which wasn't easy.

[00:20:16 to 00:21:00] Silvia Mercuriali's video of a paper swimmer in a jar

And I think you'll probably be able to see this anyway. I'll bring the volume down. I wanted to use the interviews to create something and this something started off as little videos and then I decided to make a podcast for people in their own bathroom, transforming the bathroom into the film set that I wanted to make. So still using the same concept. And then slowly, slowly, I realised that, actually, I could probably still make the show I wanted to make but I was going to do it in stages. Slowly, slowly. And so I decided to divide the piece into three shows in fact – the first of which will premiere on the 5th October and it will be Act One of this triptych that is *Swimming Home*, and it will be about the bathroom.

This also triggered another little project, which is a series of portraits of people in their bath swimming in their full swimming gear. And, so – let me just do this. [*Looks through files.*] So whilst I was working with the people and making interviews with swimmers I also started asking each person that I interviewed to send me a picture of themselves in the bathroom, in their bath, and some people in their showers, and basically what happened is that from one show I started having loads of different projects: one is the films, which are using snippets of the interviews and are tiny, little 20-second films, the other one is these portraits, and then of course, the actual podcast – which is not a podcast, it's actually an autoteatro show which sees you as the main character, 'you' as in the audience, and it will be triggered for every audience member at exactly the same time. At seven o'clock you are asked to be ready with your swimming costume, with your goggles over your forehead, and your towel around your neck, and the bath full. And – a bit like this. This is another one of the tiny little films that we're creating.

[00:23:39 to 00:24:00] Silvia Mercuriali's video *Home Swimming 1*

So you will be in your bathroom, you'll be listening to a soundtrack which will allow you to get back into the water. The idea is that now the show is in three parts, the first is Act One, also called 'Introduction to Water', and then there will be a Part Two, which will be for people to experience as they go swimming in swimming pools, and I'm looking into using bone conductor headphones, which I will leave in particular swimming pools for people to access. So this will be quite limited to certain swimming pools. And, then finally, hopefully, in 2022 probably, doing the final piece, which will be the original piece that I envisaged. But this will have had two phases before that and a few projects – a few projects that accompany the finished piece.

[00:24:50] THEMES

In terms of themes, as I said, a lot came from interviewing people, but then a lot came from reading and listening, watching films. There is just – I'm going to show this because it's very good and it really is the first film that I watched as a sort of inspiration. This is a little montage that somebody did and I found it on YouTube and I thought it was quite good for today's presentation and I'm going to show it because – why not? Here it is. This is *The Swimmer* with Burt Lancaster.

[00:25:42 to 00:27:23] A YouTube montage of clips from *The Swimmer* (1968)

So this is obviously the main inspiration for the title of the piece, *Swimming Home*, and just here where I stopped it, when he says: 'I can make-believe I'm swimming through this empty pool', there is something that was just so perfect. It's exactly that: I can make-believe, or at least that's what I'm aiming for. I'm aiming to make-believe things through the sound. And there it goes, and he swims



away, and he swims his way home. The film is a really sad film about a mid-life crisis and somebody who has completely lost it. So it's not light at all, but there is something there – and why are there so many films, there are so many films about water, why do we feel so attracted by water? So I started doing a little bit of research – or at least I started thinking about us as human beings and the water, the water we have, where 70% of our body is water. We are surrounded by water all the time, whether it's rain, or condensation, or water – there's water in our food, we drink water to survive. We tend to find our homes near water, we want to build a house near water. There is so much, we're so attracted by it, we depend on water completely.

So I started looking at also quite amazing, kind of fantastical theories like the 'ape phase' theory which states that we, at some point, possibly between being up in the trees and starting to walk, we had this – 'aquatic ape hypothesis' – this aquatic phase where possibly we were already near water and, being near water, we would have been around it gathering little bits of food because there would have been more creatures around rivers and all of that. And we would have probably gone into the water and the force of the water would have allowed us to almost be in an erect position, almost walk on two legs. Obviously, this is completely discounted as a theory, it is not a theory that is scientifically proven, but it is one that tickled me. And I started reading a little bit of *Manwatching* by Desmond Morris, that talks about this aquatic ape theory, and which, as I said, has completely been discounted by scientists. It's a bit too hopeful to try and find – but it's really interesting! It's interesting to look at how our tear duct is quite similar to certain mammals, you know, aquatic mammals like dolphins and whales that also expel excess of salt through orifices in the same way that we expel salty water through our tear ducts. The fact that our nose is a particular shape because when we're in water it would allow water not to go straight in, because if you're swimming it would almost act like a beak. And loads more: I think our fur, our hair, how the way that it is would follow the movement of the water when we're forward swimming. So all of these things have been used to prove this theory which obviously hadn't been proved, but then I started reading a little bit about the amphibian brain and connection with autism, and ability to float in water, certain movements that autistic children seem to have, which are quite similar to a sort of reaction that you would have in water, and all of that. There is definitely a connection, which is physical, which is almost like an evolutionary connection to water that interested me and that, sure enough, made its way into the piece. And then again, I started reading about water itself as an actual physical entity – like a being.

So looking at water – this is the smallest image ever, isn't it? [*Image of a book cover.*] *How To Read Water*. This is one of the books that I was looking into, by Tristan Gooley, which is brilliant. And he talks about how you can, just by observing certain movements of the water, discern what's ahead of you, whether it's an island, whether it's a storm coming, whether – all of these things you can, just by looking at water, understand the world around you. The power of water, not only as this beautiful thing that allows me to float and feel in connection with nature and all of that, but it's an incredible way of reading the world, and it's an incredible way of understanding our evolution as well. And it is something that is common to everyone.

So I started looking into all of that and got really into discovering the cave of swimmers in the Gilf Kebir plateau in the Libyan desert section of the Sahara, where they found these cave paintings of people swimming like this one. [*Image of a cave painting of swimmers.*] And I love this one. I just love the imagining us as apes still developing and already having fun swimming and floating. And these are brilliant, they're just so nice. They're not doing anything useful, and that I love. I suspect that that's what I really love about swimming: it's not useful in itself, apart from it's incredibly useful for not drowning, but you entertain yourself [with it]. It's something light, you don't have to produce, you can just be, but you don't have to be anything in particular, you can just be yourself, i.e. a body which is floating in water. And I love that. I mean, there's so much. There's so much and I'm probably talking too much about things that I just got quite into!

[00:35:25] PRODUCTION PROCESS

But to talk about more practical things then: I started getting all of these interviews ready and cutting them up, and then I started editing them to have little scenes. And I started working with sound



designer Lewis Gibson, who did a lot of underwater recording. Apart from all of the theories that I was very interested in, I started being interested or I then looked into the quality of the sound, which is the key part of the piece, because it's all about the sound. And so I wanted to really recreate this underwater world, which we can all imagine in our ears, but it's not the easiest thing to capture!

And so Lewis went to his neighbour's pool and did a bit of recording with his kids and they did a lot of splashing and recorded from the outside and from inside the water, and they did singing, they did all sorts of diving and swimming, and all sorts of things, just so that I could gather a lot of material. So some of the sounds that I used are in fact from films, directly from films like *Water Lilies* – loads of films that I used. And I used them as extracted audios and did a bit of collages, but then there's the actual sound that we recorded for the piece, like these underwater sounds, a lot of sounds from the bathroom because of having decided of course that for the moment given our current situation, the safest step towards the creation of the final piece was to be in your own bathroom. Then I did a lot of binaural recording in my own bathroom. It's quite interesting how suddenly I'm working in my own bathroom, spending hours and hours opening taps, closing taps, moving the bath water, putting my feet in the water, getting them out, to gather as much as possible all of these sounds and to create this library which then will help me ultimately create the piece.

Also as I gathered all of the sounds and I combined films with real sounds of pools, real sounds of water, bathroom sounds and all of that, I started doing a bit of rehearsals. And again, this has been a somewhat difficult process because I couldn't be in the same room as the actor that I wanted to use, Gemma Brockis, to help me create the choreography for the person who was ultimately going to be the swimmer, the hidden swimmer. And I'm still talking about the original idea of the show in the pool with the audience sitting in the viewing gallery. So in order to know what was going to be interesting, I had this plan of sitting for many, many hours in a swimming pool watching Gemma swimming up and down the lanes.

Obviously, that suddenly wasn't possible anymore and we were in bathrooms. It was incredibly difficult and somehow very, very rich. I loved it. I loved the process. And so we had these weird rehearsals where Gemma was in a swimsuit in her bathroom splashing in a bath whilst I was telling her what to do, and she would tell me how she felt and what worked and what didn't work, and listening to weird bits of sound, and trying out scenes, in this completely weird way of rehearsing that, as I said before, allowed me to – suddenly I was not just making a show but I had a project that was multi-faceted. So there was a photographic project, which was the portraits of people in their bath and I suspect actually that it was watching Gemma in her bath that made me think: 'This is a really nice thing to do.' It's really lovely to look at people in their baths doing experiments. [*Screen-sharing images from her archive.*] This is Giusi, my producer, doing weird experiments with lights and trying to understand what is interesting in the space.

So in fact nothing changed in terms of what I'm interested in. The space is what I'm interested in still. And how I perceive the space and how I can change it through sounds, it's exactly that that I'm doing, but suddenly I'm doing it in a different environment – suddenly I'm in a bathroom. And, in a way, it's even more interesting to look at how you can really transform such an everyday space, such a common space that everybody knows and has access to. You don't need to go anywhere special, but then this very not special place that is your bathroom becomes a stage, becomes a thing that changes and morphs and somebody just decided to choreograph a way of getting into the bath. And then also, as well as a photographic project, it's become this little film project and I also love how it's now in these three separate steps. So it was pretty intense and weird and completely brilliant how a really, quite – how can I put it? This very, kind of, disruptive element made things more interesting. Also, because I love being a bit crazy like that, and I love experimenting, I went and did a little swimming lesson session in one of these swim analysis centres where I was in a tiny tank and there's a film here – I was in a tank. I'm going to let it play as I talk.

[00:42:42 to 00:43:27] Swim analysis video footage of Silvia swimming

I was in a little tank, swimming and discovering I'm not actually that great at swimming, discovering where my problems are! But it was really beautiful too, because how it works is that you've got all these cameras underwater and above the water, and you can see yourself, and see all of the things



that you do completely wrong. This is from above. Above I was almost happy with, until I took a breath and I was like: 'Oh my god! That's it, I've done it all wrong!' I discovered that I'm not a very good swimmer, even though Ray the teacher, was very magnanimous and he said: 'You're very natural.' Anyway, so I loved doing that and he was really great because he really explained to me exactly the dynamics and all of these things that are things that you don't normally look into, and it was a real opportunity for me to challenge myself, look at something in a completely different way. Not the usual way of approaching water.

So this has been the crazy rollercoaster of my process, which started with already a pretty crazy idea of placing an audience in the viewing gallery of a swimming pool and making everyone in the swimming pool become a character for me who is watching, to then slowly, slowly turn to making it into this triptych that will be developed over a year and a half. I'm hoping that by summer of next year, we'll be able to go back to using public spaces without too much distancing, or at least that we will have put in place the right things, the right methodology of distancing and dealing with each other so that we can still do this. But I loved that – I loved finding a way of making it still possible, exactly the same idea, transforming the water that you have – like Tristan Gooley in his book, *How To Read Water*, says: you can read water in a tiny little glass of water, you can see waves, you can see ripples, you can see reflections, and you can in fact study how when you're in the sea you could use the way that you observe the water to actually look at the world, considering water as a living being, and us, another living being that, inside water, transforms, and the whole world around you transforms, the sound transforms, gravity doesn't work in the same way, and – anyway, it's been incredibly interesting and quite challenging, but in a very exciting way, and now I can't wait to start, and share it.

Transcription by Tom Colley & Duška Radosavljević

Clips Summary

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To cite this material:

Radosavljević, Duška; Pitrolo, Flora; Salazar Cardona, Juan Felipe; Mercuriali, Silvia (2020) LMYE Laboratory #1: Silvia Mercuriali - The Making of *Swimming Home* (2020), *Auralia.Space*, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, <https://doi.org/10.25389/rcssd.13065923.v5>.

