



The Rhythm of the Archive: An Interview with Filippo Michelangelo Ceredi

[00:00:19] INTRO

Duška Radosavljević: Hello! Welcome to the Gallery.

Filippo Michelangelo Ceredi is an Italian artist whose performance work is deeply characterised by an interest in speech, sound and silence. His first solo performance *Between Me and P.*, made in Milan in 2016, was an autobiographical work using archival research to piece together the story of voluntary disappearance of his adult brother Pietro in 1987, when the artist was only five years old. This work combines desktop projections with ritualistic movement and sound to explore the performance of memory, and family trauma as a shared experience. The success of this piece led to a commission from [the Centre for the Humanities and Social Change for] the Venice Biennale in 2019 for Ceredi to create a performance work for Edmund de Waal's porcelain installation *Psalm* about migration, exile and lost libraries taking place in the city's 500-year old Jewish Ghetto.

In the conversation that follows, Ceredi casts some light on his professional journey from documentary film to live performance, his interest in communication with the audience, his artistic collaborations, and his ongoing explorations of the oral and aural in live performance.

This interview took place on Zoom on 25th May 2020.

[00:01:50] FROM DOCUMENTARY FILM TO PERFORMANCE-MAKING

Duška Radosavljević: Shall we start with how you started, and how you decided to make performance?

Filippo Michelangelo Ceredi: It wasn't my intention at the beginning to be a performer. I was working mainly in audio-visual and I then started as a video maker, then assistant director on various projects. I was very influenced by this experience of being assistant director for Marco Bechis. Then, I continued my experience as a video maker, I've contributed to some documentary projects, to some web journalism projects, but I was more and more asked to make videos for theatre and performance projects.

DR: And how long ago was this?

FMC: It started in 2012.

DR: I understand that you studied philosophy, is that right?

FMC: Yeah, that was before.

DR: And then how did you start thinking about making your own performance?

FMC: When I was working with this video-making projects of other people I was also making a research of my own. It was about some family issue that had for me personally to be looked into and developed, and I gathered a lot of materials about it. I felt an urgency at a certain point that this might become something that had artistic output, let's say, and I thought maybe it could be a documentary, so feature film, but that really didn't happen. So, I was a bit struggling to understand how to give birth to something that was also respectful of the intimacy of this operation that I was doing, and some people I was working for told me: 'Why don't you go performative?' And they offered a cycle of residencies in Milan. For some months I could go, I could spend one week or ten days over a six-month period in a studio. And there I gathered all the materials I had and started to develop them in a performative way. That was the beginning and I was actually telling myself: 'Well, let's try, it might be a good trial then I'll have a date and we're going to see what's going to happen with the audience'.

DR: And had you seen any similar performances – any live performances that were doing something like that? Had you had a chance to see how other artists were using archives or documents in performance?



FMC: Not really at that moment. I had seen documentaries that were doing some kind of similar thing, one you might certainly have heard about – it's about the Vivian Maier's pictures. And the other one is *Un'ora sola ti vorrei* by Alina Marazzi, she's an Italian film maker and she's done marvellous work about her mother, and actually I've been talking with her – that was personally a very strong meeting, and being able to talk with her was very, very important for my research.

[00:05:45] PERFORMING *BETWEEN ME AND P.* (2016)

DR: So you performed [*Between Me and P.*] for the first time in Milan? Whereabouts, in which context? Was it a venue or a festival?

FMC: Yes. It was in the same studio theatre where I developed the project with the residencies in the context of Danae Festival. Danae Festival is a performative theatre dance festival in Milan. It was also the festival for which I was sometimes shooting videos for the coverage and producing films to upload on the web and make some promotion of the festival.

DR: And how was it for you? I mean, doing a live performance – did it open a new way of thinking about what you were doing? You know, how did the audience response feed towards your thinking about how you make performance?

FMC: The audience responded very, very well. I think that people didn't expect me to do such a thing. But I worked on an essential language, to be able to give the best possible relevance to the materials that I was working with. Then, I think, this modesty that I was working with was appreciated by the audience.

DR: Considering that you were working with very personal material, this particular framework of live performance and sharing something very personal for you, did it have an effect on your thinking about artistic creation in anyway? Because, obviously, doing it live with an audience, as opposed to doing it as a film that you originally intended, is crucially different – especially when it comes to such personal material?

FMC: Yes. I think this was the experience that allowed me to better understand what is specific for me about performing, rather than showing and developing a theme into a movie or video, and it's really about being there with the urgency of telling something and not having, at least for me, the necessity of being someone else. I can be myself and at the same time be a character that the audience can identify or not with. So what was crucial for me about being there it's to be able to share this urgency of talking about something, which was vital in that moment.

[00:08:43 to 00:11:16] Excerpt from *Between Me and P.* (2016)

DR: And how many times did you perform the piece?

FMC: I think about 35 times.

DR: How does the repetition affect the experience of performing and thinking about the content of it?

FMC: Since I wasn't a performer before this project, I was impressed about how the different spaces and the different audiences were affecting the development of the performance, of the live performance. So, yes, the relationship that is established with the audience since the beginning and how it could be developed through the performance – I must say, especially at the beginning it's very strong – there is a gap that in some ways I felt should be filled between me and the audience. It was very important to be humble and listen to what were really the possibilities to connect to the people on the other side of the scenic space and perceive the vibrations and the coughs and maybe some people that were a bit stressed, but after a while I think this rhythm that I was working on, especially at the beginning when I was introducing the theme and writing about what happened in this story was really helpful to establish a proper connection.

[00:11:17] TOWARDS INNOVATION

DR: Did you have any collaborators in developing it?

FMC: Yes, there were some important collaborators and also mentors, Daria Deflorian was one of



them. She is a very important actress and playwright here in Italy. And yes, there was Teatro delle Moire, which is a small company which organises also this festival – so there was Alessandra De Santis and Attilio Nicoli Cristiani, and also Cinzia Delorenzi that helped me with choreography. So it's an older generation of artists I was able to work with, in terms of having a direction of work, of what could be proper development of a language, which I could put there on my own but it was, kind of, rough, in its terms.

DR: It's really interesting that you say that you worked with an older generation of theatre-makers and actually the piece comes across as very, in a way, cutting edge in relation to how performance-makers, contemporary performance-makers might think about wanting to make performance nowadays. For example, the way in which you share with us your desktop, the way in which your computer becomes a protagonist in this piece, it's very 21st century – it's very contemporary. Because this piece was so complex in the sense that it was a personal project that had a certain, possibly, I don't know, cathartic function for you maybe as a person, but also it was maybe an initiation ritual into the world of performance-making. Was there any awareness on your part that you were innovating in terms of how performance was made, that you were also contributing to the current trends or current thinking in terms of what performance can be?

FMC: For sure, it was an element to know that I hadn't seen something quite like that before. I wasn't copying anybody that I had known about, and I had even limited knowledge of performance, I didn't have such a vast knowledge of contemporary performance, but at the same time I wasn't excluding at all that there was, somebody was working in that direction.

DR: Given that you studied philosophy as well, I wondered whether you have been reading any of the works in the area of performance and philosophy and theory of performance, and I ask this because there has been quite a bit of work in performance theory around archive and around liveness and around repetition and so on. I wonder whether you had any of that input in the back of your mind when you were making this particular piece?

FMC: I'm sure there is something but it's not that explicit in my mind. There was some kind of spiritual and philosophical approach to the matter – and when I say spiritual it's also about very, very concrete terms of conceiving things and relation between people and the environment, and it was the dialogue I had with Luca, who was my brother's best friend at the epoch when my brother disappeared. I had this incredible email exchange with him over four years. It's still ongoing but we talk about other matters – that was very important to approach the sense of being among presence and absence. There was something involving also his own experience because he was living for 20 years in India, without disappearing, but he felt the need of not being here, here in the sense of the Western world.

DR: Did Luca ever see the piece? Or any of the other people who we encounter through the piece, like your mother, for example? Did they have a chance to see it and how was it for them?

FMC: Actually, the only important person involved in the story that hasn't seen the piece is my mother because she was already ill in the moment the performance debuted, but all the other people involved, at least the people that wanted to know this project, they showed up, they've seen the piece and they were mainly very grateful for the job I made. And Luca himself, he was, I think the most sceptical because he wasn't really – at a certain point he said: 'What? You want to make a show about this?', but I was trying to explain what work I was doing. It was not about making a proper show, maybe he would have imagined a more classical show with characters and big dialogues and scenographies, but at last when he saw what it was about, he understood and said: 'Good job.'

[00:17:32] SHARING WITH THE AUDIENCE

DR: Okay. You've also made *Psalming*, which is a very different kind of performance work and with a different type of dramaturgy, which we can talk about as well in a bit more detail, but I just wonder, do you intend to or have you in the meantime also made any other works where you are presenting or sharing things with an audience live? Having discovered this form for the purposes of this particular piece, can you envisage, or have you been able to envisage using it to deal with any other material, any other topic or issue?



FMC: Yes, I've worked on another performance that was dealing with our perception of images, of the world at the beginning of the 21st century, and I asked people to recall what were the main images or facts, global facts, happening at the beginning of the 21st century. So I tried to bring some personal contribution to an archive that collected a visual memory of this first 20 years. That was a very interesting operation. I think this should be developed in a deeper way but it was also interesting to relate this experience of the imagery, of the collective imagery, with the experience of a blind person. So this blind person was telling just through the aural editing of his voice during the show and in darkness, in complete darkness, he was telling his experience of dramatic global events, and how for him the oral reporting of these events through radio or TV broadcasting, was allowing him to draw a situation. And how also, the very small sounds that we might not perceive in a soundscape, for him these sounds were a very, very big grip for understanding the concrete situation where the things happened.

DR: What was the name of this piece?

FMC: This was *Eve #1*.

DR: And, in *Between Me and P*, you perform but you don't actually speak to the audience. You have your archive speaking to the audience, and of course in the archive there are some audio materials as well, and yet you are primarily an audio-visual artist. So, can you talk to us about how you think about this element of communication through sound, through the visuals, through the silence as well?

FMC: So, I think sound is a key element for establishing a relationship with the audience from the beginning. It works, at the beginning especially, more than the visual part on a subconscious level. So, the choice to start with a silence or with a sound or with a music is actually a very big choice that must be done. All the development, all through the performance, the choice of rhythm and juxtaposition between music recordings, interviews, so the aural parts of interviews edited, so voices that can come from different characters is an essential flow to be able to keep the audience with the story. A good part of the success, let's say, of the performance lies in the ability of the aural part to keep this engagement of the attention – at the same time it doesn't mean to fill with elements, it means also to be able to use, to make a good use of pauses, and to make a good use of 'ellipse' – how do you say that, 'ellipse' [ellipsis]? So, there's a part of the world that the sound and images evoke that must be filled by the audience's imaginations. I don't want to give all the pieces of the puzzle but I am confident that everybody can with his own imagination fill it in his own way and it'll always be the good way.

[00:22:44] RHYTHM(S)

DR: When you talk about rhythm and the use of rhythm, are you talking as someone who comes to this from the background of being trained as a musician or a composer? Or is this compositional thinking something that is entirely intuitive for you?

FMC: I think it's a lot about being a video-maker first. So, being able to find the good rhythm for the images to be there and in relation to sound is essential to be able to give an effective result for a video work, also that has a proper focus on the aesthetics. I have never perceived video works just as documentation, it was also about evoking maybe somebody else's work, but with an original way of relating to it. And this should be done essentially with a good sense of rhythm and dancing with images and sound.

DR: So is it primarily intuitive for you then? The compositional choices are primarily intuitive rather than thinking about them in a more, kind of, technical way of knowing what produces the desired effect?

FMC: It's a fruit of trials. When I edit video work maybe I'm working on different timelines or different versions of the same edit and I, therefore, work on variations of the rhythm and see what's best.

DR: Great. And – to kind of put this in a very simple way – how do you make musical choices for your work for the two that we've seen and for the third that we haven't that you've spoken about? What determines what sort of music you choose?

FMC: I must say I don't have a huge music knowledge. I therefore base my choices on my memory. So things that might come from the past and some random things I've heard through different means



– either videos, or movies or radio podcasts et cetera. I think I also accept advice from other people, but also there, I think, a good part is made by intuition, like I might hear a song walking on the street and then, pop!, I realise: ‘Yes, this is the good song for this part of a piece’.

[00:25:38] MAKING PSALMING (2019)

FMC: This is the case of *Psalming*. Also the person that assisted me on this project, Mercedes Casali, is a musician and singer as well. And she first introduced me to this song many years before. We were walking in the streets when we were making the ‘sopralluoghi’ [R&D], when we first went to Venice to see the installation and try to figure out what could be that performance dealing with this installation that was already very powerful, so there wasn’t so much to be added.

[00:25:51 to 00:28:22] Excerpt from *Psalming* (2019) – Fragments of ‘Amara terra mia’ by Domenico Modugno, interpreted by Mercedes Casali

But there was an important aural part to be taken care of because the installation was actually at a point close to the Fenice Theatre [Teatro La Fenice], which is very crowded, so even though you go inside, you can clearly hear the people outside and there are bars and restaurants. It’s not really giving that sense of, you know, intimate possibility of contemplating and reading and staying there. So we said: ‘Yes, we need a song. We need something that allows us to keep the people there with a kind of continuity and intimacy’. And we found this very beautiful song and that was a good match.

DR: How did it come about, this commission to make a piece in response to De Waal’s installation?

FC: It came from a professor at the Ca’ Foscari University in Venice, Susanne Franco, who was a curator for all the collateral events that were organised along the period of the installation in Venice. She heard about my work that was, you know, working with memory, archives and that was a good challenge for me to go there.

DR: So how long did it take to create the performance in response to the installation?

FMC: We first went there at the beginning of May, when the installation was open to the public, and we made the performance mid-June – so maybe one month, a bit more than one month. But we only had the chance to – I had the chance to be there with the installation and work on it with my collaborators, the other performers, just for five days.

DR: What was the process for this like? Because, unlike *Between Me and P.* which was a solo show, here you worked with a number of collaborators who took part in the performance, and also there was a very specific relationship with the audience, which we might call ‘participatory’ that the audience are involved in the score as well. What was the process of developing this particular dramaturgy?

FMC: It was essential to establish a bond between the audience and the installation, which wasn’t really there just with the installation. There was something to be activated, and I thought since the *library of exile* contains books of exiled authors or books that talk about exile, what could be an experience connected to all of us? I thought exile was a kind of separation. I could feel, for example, exiled by some part of my life, some people from some sense of my being and so I asked the people to give their contribution actively, to think what was something that they’d lost forever. So it shifted a little bit on the experience of loss, but through this I think they could find an equal of their experience in the real, in the content of the library, in a more direct way. And, of course, the first part of the performance – where this getting the book wasn’t already there but the people were asked to sit and watch what was happening – the presence of the performers in relation to this music, to this Italian popular song, that was a bit transformed and expanded through the use of long notes, I think that this was making the people more able to get first into an atmosphere of contemplation and getting more deep in touch with their emotional side.

DR: So it was led by this concept primarily, or the decisions emerged out of thinking around the concept of exile and then loss, and the shared experience of that. The piece was performed how many times?

FMC: Five times, over one day.



[00:32:52] FUTURE PLANS

DR: Great. And what else? What are you currently working on and what are you developing or planning to do in the near future?

FMC: I'm currently working on another performative work whose title is called *Eve #2*, and it's about violence in communication, especially in verbal communication. That's also an old theme that I was looking at through the years, this presence of violence in communication through television, and then it became more evident and spread in society with social networks. So the hate speech that some politicians use to enhance the rage of some parts of the population against the elites, so-called elites, and I think this is a kind of contagion. To work on it, to gather materials and to make transcriptions of hate speeches of Italian or American leaders, it helps me to make me less powerless.

DR: What stage is this piece at, at the moment?

FMC: I still haven't had the chance to work on it in the studio because of the Coronavirus crisis, but I will soon start the studio work in Italy. So around half of June, and I will have the first showing, so a preview of the work, in Sansepolcro in Tuscany at the Kilowatt Festival at the end of June. It will be between the 24th and the 26th June. Yes, I have to move very quickly towards some kind of scenic work because all this crisis was slowing the process. But I could make the archive work as a collection of these speeches and also visual materials that has come from the web, which is enormously full of it. I could do it online also with my collaborators. It was a very good process, also helping us to maintain a tension with our artistic work.

DR: Thank you, Filippo.

FMC: I hope it was helpful.

DR: It was really insightful, thank you very much. Really helpful, thank you.

Transcription by Tom Colley

Clips Summary

[00:08:43 to 00:11:16] *Between Me and P.* (2016)

[00:25:51 to 00:28:22] *Psalming* (2019) – Fragments of 'Amara terra mia' by Domenico Modugno, interpreted by Mercedes Casali

Audio available at <https://www.auralia.space/gallery5-filippomichelangeloceredi/>.

To cite this material:

Radosavljević, Duška; Pitrolo, Flora; Bano, Tim; Ceredi, Filippo Michelangelo (2020) LMYE Gallery #5: The Rhythm of the Archive – An Interview with Filippo Michelangelo Ceredi, *Auralia.Space*, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, <https://doi.org/10.25389/rcssd.12593750.v6>.

