Transcript
S02 | F08: I AM YOUR BODY | Marco Donnarumma

Sophie Emilie Beha (Sophie):

Welcome to the next episode of "Behind the Screens, Behind the Scenes". I am Sophie, a journalist and curator, and today I'm going to talk with Marco Donnaruma, who's in Berlin, and I'm in Cologne. We do this as an online conversation. Hello, Marco. A few sentences to Marco. Marco Donnaruma is a Medienkunstfellow by the State of North-Rhine Westphalia, and an artist, performer, a stage director, and a theorist. Weaving together, contemporary performance, new media art, and interactive computer music since the early 2000s. So, he works in various disciplines and genres. He manipulates bodies, he creates choreographies, engineers machines and composes sounds, thus combining different disciplines, media and technology. Marco, I'm very happy that you are here and we can talk together.

Marco Donnarumma (Marco):

My pleasure.

Sophie:

We are going to talk a little bit about one of your newest projects, it's called "I Am Your Body". It started a few years ago, I think, 2022, and it's an ongoing project. The from this project we will hear during this episode, underneath our words, underneath our talking, as an atmosphere and as a room for its own. Marco, maybe would you like to introduce us to your project shortly?

Marco:

Yes. So, thanks, Sophie. Pleasure to be here. Hello, everyone listening. "So, "I Am Your Body" emerges from different kinds of reflections about listening, sound, technology, and deafness. And I've been thinking about deafness because I'm deaf myself. Technically, I'm a late-deafened person, which means that I was born with what would be considered as the medical level, "normal hearing". Although maybe we'll talk about what that normality really means.

Sophie:

Yes, definitely. What is normal and what not?

Marco:

Exactly. And then about 10 years ago, when I was in my 30s, I was diagnosed with something that doctors indicated as a genetic degenerative condition that is making me increasingly deaf. So now I'm between severe and profound deafness. And I can talk to you now, and in general, I can hear something with my hearing aids.

Sophie:

You need your hearing aids in your everyday life. If you communicate with the hearing normal world, you need your hearing aids in order to communicate with them?

Marco:

Yeah. And also in order to navigate the basics of the world. That's also the curious position of being a late-deafened person, because if you are deaf from birth, you may - not necessarily - but you may grow up being accustomed to live in the world without hearing. Instead, I have this double identity, this first culture of mine that stops me from inhabiting the world without the support of the hearing aid. And now, it's been 10 years since I was diagnosed. So in the meantime, of course, I started getting a bit involved with deaf communities and with deaf culture. Of course, it's not something that I can say it's mine because it's not yet, at least. But it's becoming part of my identity, too, in many ways. And well, coming back to your question about the project, yes, so in the past 10 years, I've been wondering and wanting to work with deafness. But exactly because I'm someone who arrived at deafness from a different point of view, from a hearing person point of view, I never felt I had any claim to deafness and deaf culture and everything that comes with it, which is an enormous It was a super rich word.

So eventually, I understood that maybe a good way of working about deafness was by involving other deaf people. And this is pretty much the core methodology of the project. I talk about methodology because I'm also a researcher, I'm a theorist, and I do care about the methods that I use in a particular project. And the methodology here was very simple. Engaged with a group of deaf people. In the case of the first part of the project that we did, where we met in Essen at PACT, we we're in Essen, so we engaged the local group of five deaf people. When I say deaf people, I include a broad range of hearing conditions. Yeah. So, deafness, it's never been a binary thing, whether you hear or you don't hear. There's actually so infinite combinations of listening conditions or non-listening at all. But we will also discuss what listening means from different perspectives. So, to just wrap up all this very long introduction, "I Am Your Body", is a project that is based on participative research made with a group of deafened people. And together with them, I spent almost basically five months doing regular sessions and thinking about sound and our experience of listening. And then together with them, I created a short film and a performance, which were based on our findings. And in the case of the film, the people from the group, literally, were in the film with

their own voice and their own ideas about the topic that we were working with. So, deafness, but also artificial intelligence and the role of prosthesis, mediating sound experience.

Sophie:

I think it's interesting to put the basis of your work in a group, which it combines not only many different angles and perspectives, but also it's a little bit also hard. As you already said, it's not a group of deaf people or people who identify with that, but it's an infinite variety of possibilities also. I would be interested in how to find then maybe common grounds or topics that you all deal with in your everyday life or in your artistic life, and then how you would you put this on the bottom of your artistic research and your artistic work.

Marco:

Yeah. So that's quite a complex question. Let's see.

Sophie:

Sorry. Very good to start. It will get easier from now on.

Marco:

Oh, that's good to know. No, I'm kidding. But yeah, it's an interesting question. Well, I mean, as you introduce myself a little bit, So maybe it is clear, at least, that I work with the body, with technology, with sound. Now, maybe what we could add to that is that I have always, since the past 10 years or so, actually more, but yeah, more or less, have a strong interest in body technologies. So technologies that work on the body, with the body, through the body. Now, the clearest example would be a prosthesis. But also there, the common understanding of prosthesis, it's often very strict. So a hearing aid like the one I'm wearing, it's a prosthesis.

Sophie:

Something to help you, for example.

Marco:

Well, that's an argumentable point. So, yeah, of course it helps me, but it also takes something away. It doesn't amplify all the frequencies that are out there. Not at all. It has a very strict frequency response. So it helped me, but it's also taking away stuff from me. And it also implies social stigma for myself and for the other people that relate to me. And it also implied economic and class issues, because these kinds of prostheses, especially, are very expensive. I mean, any prosthesis that has any electronic in it normally is very expensive. At the same time, a prosthesis

can very well be just a wooden leg. And a wooden leg, oftentimes, it's a lot more useful than a bionic hand and a lot cheaper, too. So anyway, these are all the issues and concepts that I've been working with since the past 10 years, even before I was diagnosed with my hearing condition. So I've always been passionate about the body. And then I worked a lot. Like 15 years ago, I developed a musical instrument that is based on sensors that capture sounds from the body. So I always had this interest in the connection between body sound and technology. And then when I was diagnosed with this hearing condition, somehow I felt it organic to expand this approach to the specificity of listening through deafness.

Sophie:

I think this is also with what we began our conversation. If you maybe talk about listening or you talk about hearing, there's a certain opinion in the general society that this is listening and this is not, or this is how listening works, a certain that's normal, so to say. I think also with this normativity, you also work a lot, or also this project deals a lot with what is actually listening or that listening is so much more than just sound or something that is coming through your ears. Yes, maybe we could dig a little bit more deeper into that. Which listening do you circle around or does this project deals with and how can you experience this listening? And also maybe what can you learn from this different tasks of listening also?

Marco:

Yeah, this connects a bit also to the other part of your question before, which I didn't address then, I can address it now. What is listening? Well, working with this fellow deaf people in my group, then it emerged that listening is just a lot of things that may not even have anything to do with hearing. And that's already quite something.

Sophie:

Yeah. Can you give a little bit of examples of that, maybe?

Marco:

Yeah, sure. So, in our society, at least, listening is hearing, which means listening happens through the cochlear, through your ears, through the nerves, and through the brain. That's how normally, in this world, how normatively we are taught what listening is. Now, it's the experience of everyone, I think, to listen to sound through their body. When you are in a club and you're dancing to loud music, you do feel, perceive the music through your body. When you are in a bus driving and you're sitting there, you feel the vibration of the engine that is driving the bus, and you're also listening to those sounds with your body. Now, I mentioned this example because these are examples that hearing people may easily understand. And you don't have to be deaf to feel those sounds with your

body. What is sure is deaf people have a much higher sensibility to those sounds and to that mode of perception. Among deaf people it's also very strong visual perception of the world, of language, but also of sound. Many deaf people can look at something moving and know that there is a sound there.

Sophie:

Yeah, which makes totally sense because I don't think that anything is moving without making a sound. I mean, even an owl is making some sound.

Marco:

Yeah. Exactly. And we all have a heartbeat.

Sophie:

Exactly, yes.

Marco:

It's not that I'm trying to equate the experience of sound of deaf people with the experience of sound of hearing people, that are completely different. But what I'm trying to say is first, there are some overlaps, which normally people don't think about, hearing people don't think about. And second, deafness is, at least that's what I claim with this project, is a mode of listening. It just doesn't happen through the cochlear, but it happens with the rest of the body and with all the other senses.

Sophie:

Yeah, that's a nice sentence. Deafness is a mode of listening. For me, it was super interesting because at Essen, where we met at PACT Zollverein, you also showed the film you made with this group together. And there it was also a lot about the visual aspects of listening. For example, I'm looking at the field where the wind brushes through the grass or looking at birds flying. I could so very well relate to that because that's also what I like a lot, for example, looking at the field where the wind brushes through. Then I just realized, it's the visual component that I like about it. Also the bodily component that you at the same time feel the wind on your skin. And then at the third hierarchy position comes the sound. So that was also for me super interesting also to see how this perception maybe changes depending on in which situation you are. Yeah, super interesting. I think if deafness is a certain kind of hearing, the question now circuits back to what I thought before, that we have this normativity that we think only hearing through ears is listening, and only that can be called listening. I mean, it's a very narrow-minded, also maybe snobby way of thinking, maybe. Do you also want to break with these certain rules or normativity or maybe status quo, so to say?

Marco:

That's something I try to do in general with my practice because as an artist, a performer and a maker of the technologies, working with the body, I think it's my responsibility to at least resist or go against all these regimes of normativity that tell us what the body should be. Because we live in a society, again, our society. I speak of the society where I live in and in Western society, very strict ideas about what a body is and what it shouldn't be. And of course, this intersects with all the battle about gender and race and class, and of course, about ability and disability, however one wants to define it. Now, what's interesting about sound is also that it could be almost intuitive to think, well, let's explore how sound is perceived by deaf people. Now, if you are a sound artist. And this is actually so uncommon. I think it's just a pity because it would be a wonderful expansion of the whole field. I'm not saying this doesn't exist. I'm just saying it's very uncommon. There are other people that work on that, but it's quite rare.

Sophie:

Why do you think that is so? Just general ableism in the art scene?

Marco:

I guess it depends how strict you want to be. Because certain implicit understanding constitutes ableism in the same way as certain implicit understanding of gender constitutes sexism. Now, I wouldn't go as far as to say that sound art is ableist in general, but the fact is that this topic is really rarely touched upon. I'm a sound person. I was born as a sound artist, and sound is central to my practice. And most of my colleagues are sound practitioners, and I don't hate them for this. But most time as I go to an exhibition of sound art, I don't hear anything. And that's a shame.

Sophie:

That shouldn't be the way.

Marco:

Exactly. So, I think that ignoring the fact that deaf people are out there and could possibly enjoy sound art pieces. It's a shame. I mean, it's just a wasted opportunity. And even more, it's a wasted opportunity not to research, not to work with deaf people and with deaf culture in terms of sound practice. I mean, it seems very intuitive to me, but it's apparent that it's not. And there is an emerging discipline, an academic discipline. It's called aural diversity. And they also speak a lot about this topic because it's a community of sound practitioners from sound arts to acoustic engineering and so on. And they talk a lot about this. Now, they don't focus only on deafness, but on all diverse hearing conditions. But they make a very good point there. They have a book that just came out last year, "Aural Diversity" by Hugill and Drewer. It's an edited book. It's very cool for

people who are listening and who are interested in this. And they also make an example in the introduction of the book. There are plenty of artistic positions on listening. There is deep listening and listening here and listening there. But none of these take into consideration that maybe people hear different differently from one another.

Sophie:

I mean, it also makes sense because, for example, if you take deep listening, the listening itself is very narrow-minded. Only people who are able, who have ears and are not deaf, they can listen in order, for example, in the understanding of Pauline Oliveros or something like that, who is a person who worked with a very great variety of people, actually. But still, she didn't think about that. Interesting.

Marco:

Yeah, that's a thought from that book. I love Pauline. I met her once. I mean, she is a fantastic artist. Nothing against it. But again, I do think, for example, deep listening could very well include also deaf listening.

Sophie:

Yeah, for sure.

Marco:

So maybe there is some work to do there. But in general, I think also another important point that people often forget about is everybody has a non-normative hearing. There is this myth that human hearing is between 20 hertz and 20 kilohertz. That's just not true, or at least it's true, maybe until you are six or seven years old. From when you are a baby until that age, then maybe you can hear those frequencies. But once you become a teenager, already around 20 years or so, you cannot perceive - most commonly, people do not perceive anything beyond 10,000 hertz already. And then naturally, even if you are completely healthy, your hearing frequency response is restricted with age, and that's normal. How many of us have parents that have problem hearing, even though they are not deaf or they don't identify with deafness and whatnot. Yeah, there you go. Me too. Why is it so difficult to understand that there are many different ways of listening and not just one?

Sophie:

Maybe it's just easier to ignore that every one of us or every one of the people who think they are hearing properly actually will not hear properly very soon and that the hearing will decrease and decrease and decrease as they grow older. Yeah, but maybe it's a lot easier to ignore that and just pretend you can listen perfectly fine. I mean, also in our everyday life, we can also live great in our

everyday life if we just cannot hear these frequencies and if we cannot hear super well. I mean, probably it will be easier with a different surrounding, but it works enough, I think.

Marco:

Yeah. I mean, in general, of course, it's easier to rely on a standard. But the problem is that the standard doesn't make any sense if you look at the reality of things.

Sophie:

I wanted to come back to the topic of the prosthesis. Yeah, because I liked thinking about it. What is the prosthesis? And maybe also how differently can we look at a prosthesis? We touched it already a little bit, like that maybe in our everyday life, we think of prosthesis as helping tools or helpful tools that help us in going through the day or our life. But they can also be maybe a hurdle or maybe also some stigma, as you already mentioned. Also in your work, I AM YOUR BODY, the prosthesis play a very important role, I think. Maybe you can explain it better than I, but I remember you had bodily elements, maybe an adaption to your body. It looked a little bit like bones that you put on your chest and your belly. Yeah, they stick to it, I think with magnets. Were it magnets? Yeah. And then during your performance, you played with them. You could also take them away from your body, detach them and attach them again. And also you could give or you were giving them to the public. So you were putting a part of your body into the hands of the public, literally. And for me, this was a super touching moment to hold in my hands a part of someone else's body, which he just gave me. And I still, when I remember it, I'm getting emotional. So maybe we can talk a little bit about this sharing part also that these prosthesis have.

Marco:

Well, I'm glad that moment is still with you. That's very nice to hear. So okay, let's start from the beginning of your question about prostheses. Well, we already mentioned a little bit about prostheses. So as I said before, prostheses are not just tools that help someone. Yes, they do help, but they also do many other things that we say. They have an emotional, psychological layer, physiological layer, social layer, cultural layer. In this sense, maybe I'll make one example which is very good, and also I think it's very informative for hearing people. Cochlear implants, which are, for those who don't know, basically like hearing aids, but they have a part that is literally implanted onto the skull, so it's connected directly to the brain. So cochlear implants, in a large part of the deaf community, are understood as a means of repression of deaf culture. Why? Because when a child is born deaf to hearing parents, which is the case in, I think, about 80% of the cases in Germany, or maybe even more. So when that happens, normally, the parents, the hearing parents, don't really know, or maybe they're not familiar with deaf culture, deaf society as a whole. And this is complicated by the fact that doctors most often address the deafness of a baby as terrifying

disability that they will bring ruin to their life. Again, I'm generalizing, but this is what happens most of the time. And therefore, the proposed solution is a cochlear implant for the little baby.

Sophie

Even as a baby, you get a cochlear implant?

Marco:

Yeah, I'm not sure exactly what ages, but you can get one very, very early. Now, what happens? Of course, hearing parents that do not know anything about deaf culture. Maybe they don't even know the deaf community exists. And they are told this by a doctor, then they would decide, Okay, well, of course. Yeah, let's do this for our kid. Then the kid gets a cochlear implant. And first of all, it's unimaginably difficult to learn to hear with a cochlear implant if you're born deaf.

Sophie:

Because it doesn't just put up the volume from everything you hear, but it also makes this sound strange, right?

Marco:

Well, it's a matter of how the brain processes the information, and the brain and the body. It takes a lot of effort. It's like you've never seen light, and then all of a sudden you see everything. Now, I don't have the experience of a blind person, but as a comparison, it's similar. So you don't have access to a certain sense. And then all of a sudden, that sensorial channel is overloaded with information that your body doesn't know what to do. And this also happened to me, for example, when I was wearing hearing aids for the first time, and I was not entirely deaf, but it took me three months to get used to it.

Sophie:

Because it was so much...

Marco:

Yeah, the body get tired because it's an overload of information that your body doesn't know how to deal with. So, there is a learning process. So that's the first thing. And then, of course, the more people wear a cochlear implant and start to communicate as if they were hearing people, the less people will participate in deaf community and learn deaf culture and learn sign language. And that's why in deaf community, many people see cochlear implants as a repressive means of their culture. It's also important to say sign language for deaf people is just a minority language. They're not

missing anything. They just speak another language. That's how deaf communities position themselves. So, they fight for the recognition of sign language as a language. And this happens in Germany actually very recently.

Sophie:

Oh, wow.

Marco:

Yeah, I don't know. Maybe 10 or 20 years ago. I'm not sure right now, but recently in this sense. Now, coming back to the prosthesis. So, this all complicates our understanding of prostheses. And these are some of the aspects that I've been working with. Then because I've been working with the concept of prostheses since a very long time, as I mentioned earlier, I also started growing a bit diffident of the stereotypes that surround the idea of prostheses, because those are also very normative understandings of what a prosthesis is. And in the arts as well. So, for instance, you described pretty well the prosthesis that we are used in this new performance. And yes, these are bony pieces of body that are attached to my body, but they can also be detached with it, and they can be distributed to other people. They also make a body just on their own. And inside this prosthesis is a very simple acoustic transducer. This is a sort of, you can imagine, like a loudspeaker, but without the cone and the membrane. So, you have only the vibrating part, and you can apply this transducer to any surface or body, and sound is transmitted acoustically through vibration and resonates that body, and then you can hear the sound through that body or that object. And so, I designed this prosthesis in this way because I also wanted to get away from the understanding of prostheses as limbs or things that are external to the body and are somehow supporting some function that you are missing. So, I really wanted to work artistically on a completely different idea. So, I forget about what I'm missing because that's already a complicated question, what I'm missing in comparison to who. What are we talking about? So, in order to work around that, I created this prosthesis as something completely new and different. So, they are prosthesis that can be shared. So I like to call them 'organ of sharing' because through them, for example, combining them also with another sensory instrument, it's also a prosthesis, my opinion, these instruments that I made that amplify sounds from the body. For example, I can take the sound from my body, a sound of my heartbeat, and pass it onto the body of another person with this prosthesis. And this prosthesis then can be passed to another person. Or we can have three prostheses that are in the hands of three different people, and all of them have my heartbeat in their hands, for example. I talk about the heartbeat because that's the most recognizable sound, but you can have all kinds of sound from the body that can be amplified through that. Or the prosthesis, I also program them with a system for interactive music that uses AI, and so they can generate sounds by themselves, which is not really music, but it's more or sound as if they were a little creature on their own. And there is a mechanism whereby they produce sound either autonomously or in response to my movements as a performer. So, there is this interactive layer between the two.

And then I can also use the prosthesis as a new musical instrument, and I can create all kinds of varying feedback through the vibration or resonating metal plates and stuff like that. So, I see this prosthesis as organ or sharing because they are modular. They can connect the perception of sound of different people. And also, I really like the idea that they do not help anything. They just expand, if you want, what we can imagine as sound perception.

Sophie:

I also like that they are forming connections. They wouldn't be there otherwise. So, they are forming connections between the technological body and the physical, like flesh body. They're between digital also sound creating and physical sound creating, for example, through vibration, but also between the performer part and the listener part. I mean, everyone is talking about, please, let's connect the performers and the listeners. I don't know whether there can be more connection than to hold the body in your hands. You know what I mean? Also expanding the limitations of what is a body, where ends a body, where begins the next body. I mean, this whole thing devolves and certain bodies morph into each other and connect on different layers. I think this is what for me was super interesting to experience, that in the end, you have this great network of pulsating creature thing from different bodies and sounds and mechanisms that together create a new mechanism itself.

Marco:

Yeah, exactly. The way I see the performance is a ritual for reconfiguring senses collectively. I think that's what's fascinating. And I hope that this makes people think, especially hearing people, makes people think about how listening is really a communal experience. And as you say, there cannot be movement without sound. And in order It has also to be movement. It has also to be something other than you. Then, of course, you can listen to your heartbeat and to your own sound, absolutely. But still, you need to be in commune, either with yourself or with something outside of you or with another person. And the beauty of it is exactly that we all listen in different way. That's the beauty of it. Otherwise, it will be incredibly boring.

Sophie:

Just thinking as this is an ongoing research process also for you, where are you now in in this point, in this process? Maybe what has changed since the performance in Essen, which was, I think maybe half a year ago by now?

Marco:

Almost, that was September.

Sophie:

Well, time is fast. Where are you now or what were your newest thoughts on that?

Marco:

Well, I've been reworking the performance, actually, because there were some things I was not so happy about in the previous piece. So, we made a premiere at the CTM Festival in Berlin of this revised version. And there I was really happy. And apparently, also the public and the critics, too.

Sophie:

What did you change?

Marco:

Quite a lot, actually. I kept the principles that were the basic, but then I changed a lot, especially in terms of choreography and stage set up. Because back in Essen, during the rehearsal, I injured my tendons, so I couldn't really do the choreography and the dramaturgy that I wanted to do. So, I worked really greatly on that. But yeah, I will be publishing some documentation soon. So, we'll see the difference. And so now the two works are touring the film and the performance. And then it is in my plans to have another iteration of the project where I can with another group of deaf people, ideally connecting this group with the previous group in some ways, and then explore further the idea of the connection between prosthesis, deafness, and musical instruments in particular. So, starting from the prosthesis that we just talked about, trying to expand them, also using other mechanisms from robotics and other technology for sound reproduction and expand them in full musical instruments.

Sophie:

So, you would like to build also new instruments?

Marco:

Yeah. Starting from the prosthesis. I mean, essentially expanding those prostheses because I see a lot of potential there, which I also maybe understand better now with a bit of distance from the research phase I understand a bit better. Also, because the whole project had many different layers, and it was also a process of discovery for me. I learned a lot, and I'm still learning a lot about deafness and deaf culture and about myself as well, which is part of the process inevitably. I am sure I want to keep working with this same methodology of participatory research because I think that's enlightening, really. There is so much to learn from the experience of people, and it's also very good for people to have this chance, this room for sharing their experiences and analyzing them and

comparing them with the experiences of others. Because there aren't really many spaces available for that, especially with groups that are heterogeneous. So, in our group, there were people who were deaf from birth, other people who had maybe a condition like I had, people wearing cochlear implants, people who didn't wear cochlear implants because they didn't want to. There was a very young person, 15 years old, and an older person, 57 years old, and everything in between. So, I also like the idea that that with my artistic practice, I can open up these spaces for interaction and sharing within the community. And in general, I think it's important for something like that to involve directly people who a work is trying to talk about. Never something about someone without them. Those are the basics.

Sophie:

And also, I think in the end, this is also why we need art. I mean, that sounds so pathetic, but to bring people together and to create communities, because in everyday life, this doesn't work at some points, obviously.

Marco:

I'm totally with you. It does sound pathetic, but that's the reality, especially today. I mean, spaces for getting together are less and less, and they are becoming more spaces to resist than just to be together. So, I agree on that.

Sophie:

Yeah. Nice. Thank you.

Marco:

You're very welcome. Thank you.

Sophie:

Looking forward to what you find in this process.

Marco:

Me too. We will see. I mean, there is just so much to discover and to learn, and that I find very exciting.