

Performer as activator

Allowing human and non-human co-performance

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ABSTRACT

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<p>In this written part of my thesis, I explore the concept of performer-activator, especially in the context of my solo, (<i>invitation</i>) <i>to be sensitized</i>. I develop a theoretical framework around it, opening up the different layers and nuances of performership by presenting detailed performer-based observations. I introduce three roles which are encompassed in the performer-activator position: the performer-technician, the performer-performer and the performer-experiencer. I write about the experience of inhabiting these roles and shifting between them. I also describe the performance maker side of creating conditions for the performer-activator position to materialise in.</p> <p>Alongside these investigations, I find resonances in Joanne Scott's book, <i>Intermedial Praxis and Practice as Research</i>. To articulate her practice, she uses similar terms to the ones I establish, which makes her writing a valuable dialogue partner. I write about sensitisation as a specific form of activation, the origins of which can be somewhat traced back to reading Timothy Morton's <i>Hyperobjects</i>. I frame (<i>invitation</i>) <i>to be sensitized</i> within my artistic path, using as examples two of my other works where the performer-activator position appears, reflecting on the gradual development of the concept.</p> <p>Non-human elements constitute an important part of the performativity in (<i>invitation</i>) <i>to be sensitized</i>. I explore the formation of co-performerships, which I facilitate with non-human elements in the solo. I study Mette Ingvarstsen's writings on <i>The Artificial Nature Project</i> and Jane Bennett's <i>Vibrant Matter</i> when discussing agency, and examine how the presence of non-human performers can be beneficial in a wider context. I choose to look closer at sound and smoke as performers in my solo and entities in other artists' works, and at the performative relationship between water and lights.</p> <p>I open up the ways in which I activated myself to write this thesis. I mention Bryana Fritz's <i>Submission</i> <i>Submission</i> as another resonance to my work; I recognise in it elements of the performer as activator concept. Overall, I infuse the text with linguistic reflections. I comment on the friction that I experience when it comes to choosing words, locate the relationship between language and agency as well as interrogate how the contexts in which artworks are created influence both the experiencer's perception of them and the titles that the elements in them are given.</p>	
KEYWORDS performership, performativity, dance performance, solo performance, non-human, post-humanism, activator, sensitise	

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this written thesis of my MA in Dance Performance at the Theatre Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki, I explore the concept of performer as activator. I open up what it is and what makes it possible – as well as what it makes possible. I share my performer-based experience of what it is like to be a performer-activator mostly in *(invitation) to be sensitized*, a solo I created in the first year of the master's degree. I also extend my reflections to performance-maker observations and decisions, which I feel are inevitably intertwined with performativity when discussing a work that I have both conceived and perform in. I also interrogate the titles and definitions given to artistic events and phenomena.

Although I am mainly writing about past events, performances and processes, I try to remain curious by imagining future scopes for my practice. I trust that, like with dance improvisation or storytelling, as long as I am interested in what I am doing, the interest will filter into to the receiver's experience of it.

There are four subjectivities inside the text: me as the writer, me as the performer in the pieces I write about, my activator self in *(invitation) to be sensitized* (that contains 3 roles) and the non-human elements that inhabit both the solo and thus my writing about it.

I begin chapter 2 by introducing my relationship with words and writing. I then propose terms for artistic concepts that I utilise in the written thesis and include reflections on the word 'practice'.

In chapter 3, I dive deep into my experience as a performer-activator, an idea that came to me through my solo, *(invitation) to be sensitized*. I mainly discuss the way in which it appears in the solo, introducing Joanne Scott's live intermedial performance practice as a resonance to my work. It has been useful to read about a parallel practice to reflect on the specificities of mine. I then write more specifically about the 'sensitisation' and what is needed to conduct it. In the same chapter, I investigate the performer as activator outside of the solo context, briefly presenting the performer-activator self that

appeared in the Dialogues -course demo presentations during the first year of my master's studies and the performer-activator self in my bachelor's research project *landscapes of loss*. These examples are enclosing (*invitation*) to be sensitized in time, as one happened before and the other after, so I will consider how my practice has shifted or developed, determining a possible continuity.

In chapter 4, I describe how the performer-activator allows non-human elements to perform. I explain what I mean by non-human performers, again in the context of the works mentioned above and juxtaposed with Mette Ingvarsen's writing on the subject. Her doctoral dissertation speaks about "mak[ing] choreography for nonhuman performers" (2013). Finding a lot of similarities with the concerns that propelled the pieces in her Artificial Nature Series, I focus on how she deals with agency in the *Artificial Nature Project*, the final piece of the series. I write about the different agencies at play in my solo and describe the benefits of this practice alongside chosen aspects of Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*. I refer to Yamamoto Mutsumi's book *Agency and Impersonality* to weave language, agency and my artistic practice together. I explore more specifically sound as a performer and reflect on the role of smoke in various artworks including my solo and *Ethereal Fleeting* by Lukas Truniger. I will then look at the relationship of water and lights as co-performers, referring to the piece *Pipes & Hoses*.

I partially worked on this written thesis in Teak so that I 'performed' writing. I resided in the conference booths on the ground floor and invited people to watch me write. In chapter 5, I talk about the motifs for the implementation of this practice and the observations I gathered from it.

In the ending thoughts, in chapter 6, I draw a parallel of my reflections to Bryana Fritz's piece, *Submission Submission*, that inspires me in several ways.

2. WORDS AND TERMS

I usually find it difficult to establish words to express abstract artistic concepts. It is a challenge that I met as I started writing this thesis, but I already recognise it from before. Choosing specific words seems to make the things they describe more fixed and I have wished to avoid this at all costs. Many things are slippery and organically slide away from words. It feels wrong to try to encapsulate them. And when I do find words, it is a frustrating process to choose *the* one that fits best because almost every word has a plethora of brilliant synonyms. I would rather employ a collection of words instead of a single term. It is rare – although it happens – that one single word would capture the entirety of the meaning I am pursuing. Despite this, I do enjoy the process of mulling options over. Especially the English language has an overwhelmingly vast vocabulary and it astonishes me how nuanced it is possible to get. One of my favourite things in writing is to use dictionaries: synonym dictionaries and translating from and to both Finnish and French. I often search from these simultaneously, languages overlapping as I turn variations of terms and phrases over and over. This creates beautiful word-meaning chains that help me underpin what I truly wish to convey. Here is an illustrative example of what I searched to reach the above verb ‘overlap’:

Finnish-English: päällekkäin → one on top of the other

English synonyms: top (verb) → cover

English-French: cover (verb) → recouvrir

French synonyms: recouvrir → superposer

French-English: superposer → overlay

English synonyms: overlay (verb) → overlap

I realised only later that searching the word ‘päällekkäinen’ (overlapping) instead of ‘päällekkäin’ would have saved me from this complex procedure. But this way of activating terms keeps my writing process dynamic and stirs all the languages in my brain. I try to embrace the difficulty of wording because there is a juicy friction between the letters that form the words and what the words describe. I enjoy working with what seems to not make sense; and the relationship between words and the things they signify is mostly arbitrary anyway. Words are just one tool to communicate what I am

expressing in this written thesis. I also believe that it is possible to momentarily feel entirely satisfied when finding a word-thing match. I will try to achieve these moments of pleasure in the process, probably through failing at occasions and prospering at others.

Overall, I would like to generate vocabulary and challenge myself to stick to it in order to articulate specific ideas for myself and the reader. Naming will help solidify those ideas, although I proceed with the intention of not freezing but rather crystallising (ultimately clarifying) them. I also accept that they are only semipermanent terms that feel fitting right now. They are those that have emerged in this period of a few months in spring 2025.

2.1. Forming vocabulary

I wish to agree on a term for the type of performership taking place in my solo (*invitation*) to be sensitized (Auvinen, 2023) and beyond. My selection is already reflected in the title of the thesis but here, I am further opening up the process of choosing. The term aims to be broad enough to encompass a multiplicity of actions that mobilise the performance space in both functional and poetic ways. I will talk about these actions more specifically later. ‘Activator’ from the verb ‘to activate’ was my initial thought and the one I have predominantly used to refer to my work so far. Its etymology suggests ‘to put into action’, ‘to make active’ and ‘intensify’ and is therefore very clear in regards to what I am doing in my solo. I had already chosen the word when I encountered Joanne Scott’s book, *Intermedial Praxis and Practice as Research* (2016). In her text she describes her live intermedial performance practice and the performer role it generates. She, too, utilises the term ‘performer-activator’ and although her understanding of it partially coincides with mine, I began to think of alternatives, also to distinguish myself.

The synonyms activate and actuate are almost analogous but they serve slightly different purposes. Activate translates to *käynnistää* (start, initiate, switch on, trigger) or *virittää* (tune, adjust) in Finnish and actuate to *liikuttaa* (move, manipulate, affect). This additional nuance of moving someone is meaningful: it reminds me of how (*invitation*)

to be sensitized intends to affect its audience. However, it tends to lead too much towards either technical fields such as engineering, or motives, two dimensions that are not so much at play here. The verbs ‘actify’ and ‘activise’ are fun variations of activate that do not really have individual characteristics. They result in creative but strange titles, ‘actifyer’ and ‘activiser’. A bit further, there is ‘effectivate’, which I like but it naturally emphasises more the outcome than the process. ‘Activite’ also came to mind, as in a mixture of activate and invite.

None of them somehow manages to be as unambiguous as activate, so I will keep using ‘activator’. Hence, I will specify in the coming section where Scott’s usage of the word and mine differ and where there are resemblances. Later in the text, I will also use the term ‘sensitisor’. It sounds amusingly complex and long but I discarded its alternative, ‘sensitiser’, as it suggests a substance or chemical that causes allergic reactions.

2.2. On orthography

When I write the name of my solo, (*invitation*) *to be sensitized*, I orthographise ‘sensitised’ in the American way as it is the version appearing in the solo programme notes. Otherwise, I write in British English.

When I use the term ‘non-human’, I adopt the form with the hyphen. The version ‘nonhuman’ may appear when I cite other writers’ words. Same goes for post-humanism.

2.3. Alternatives for the word ‘practice’

For a stretch of time, I have wondered whether a good alternative for the noun ‘practice’ exists. I find the term useful especially when I am talking about performing arts, because practice encompasses such a broad spectrum of things. However, I also have trouble identifying with it. ‘Practice’ is very widely used among artists that I know and my relationship to it feels distant. I use it sometimes, also in this written thesis. Utilising

it activates an impostor syndrome reaction in me occasionally, which may come from the way that “the use of the term ‘practice’ in the world of art is often highly abstract and intellectualized” (Boon & Levine, 2018, 12).

When searching for synonyms, ‘process’ and ‘method’ are among the first ones to appear. For me, process is one constituent of a practice and it usually is not broad enough as a term to illustrate a larger scale of activities outside one specific project. A practice may also include diverse methods, ways of doing in accordance with a certain plan. Practice could be said to be a collection of methods.

When writing, the word practice seems incomparable in its functionality. It can design a specific series of procedures or serve as a more general term for my ways of working, artistic and not artistic. It may imply repetition on some level, noting its adjacency to the verb ‘to practice’ but, unlike its said synonyms, ‘routine’, ‘convention’ and ‘habit’, the noun practice offers a more open-ended approach to repetition. Also, it is loose and does not have defined edges unlike ‘form’, even if I could very clearly define the boundaries of my practice. Very liberatingly, I can imagine the elements a practice has once held inside itself floating out when they are no longer needed. The word practice allows to convey something which is not rigid in nature, even though what it is composed of might be.

I had waited for a good moment to map out the network of terms I associate with the word practice. The above discussion will serve as a useful lexicon for me in the future. Putting the possibilities I have pondered upon in parallel with each other and having them all in the same place is soothing. I also wished to verbalise my relationship to it before using it inside my text. When I use it, it is because it is an easy way to refer to my artistic doing. After what felt like essential premeditations on words, names and terms, I will keep exploring them further where necessary in this written thesis.

3. PERFORMER AS ACTIVATOR

The idea of writing about the ‘performer as activator’ came to me through the solo I created in the first year of my master’s degree studies at the Theatre Academy. In this chapter, I will display the continuity of these reflections by unpacking where I believe the performer-activator in my practice was born and the direction it has taken since the solo. It is a concept that I have carried with me for some years but I am only now beginning to understand it.

3.1. Performer-activator in *(invitation) to be sensitized*

I will describe the context of my solo and the course of events in it briefly and plainly to provide a base on which to add details further along. Studio 709 in the Theatre Academy, where the solo took place, is essentially a white box and there were 30 tiered audience seats on one side of the space. The full performance was composed of four solos, each one of them created and performed by a master’s degree student in Dance Performance, mine being one of them. *(invitation) to be sensitized* is a 15-minute solo in which I operate a hand-held smoke machine, sing harmonies over my pre-recorded voice and run, in this order. It is not reduced to these actions, but they are the most explicit ones. In theory, the solo is constructed of three tableaux or scenes. The seams between the sections are distinguishable, but I predominantly intended the sections to form one functioning entity together. The transitions are as meaningful as the scenes themselves.

In *(invitation) to be sensitized*, I am an autonomous, self-reliant performer, who is independent of the input of other humans. I manage my own lights and sound. And everything in the solo is activation.

3.1.1. A multilayered position

As mentioned in chapter 2, the activation happens through both functional and poetic impetuses. There is a fine line between the two. When I push the switch on the hand-held smoke machine, it is a tangible activation and when I sing over the pre-recorded voice, it is a poetic impetus. I wish to not further separate them because they bleed into each other and require the same degree of precision and virtuosity. Both modes of activation require poetic intentions and they are in the same continuum of performership. They take place in a dimension of heightened concentration and tuned presence. The technicality of sliding the faders on the sound and light boards feels like more than just a practical task. The sliders are almost extensions of my fingers.

There are three different roles functioning within my solo that, all together, form the performer-activator position. The following graph (figure 1) is not a visual representation of how the three roles inhabit the performer-activator, but rather a tool to clarify the textual relationship between these words that could get mixed up with each other. As I will explain later, the relationships are more complex and irregular.

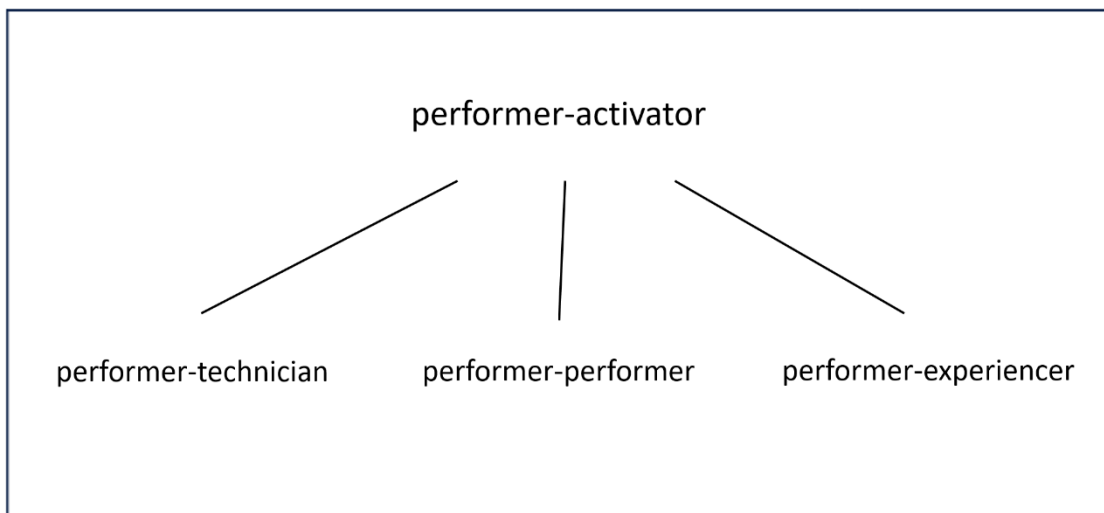


Figure 1. The performer-activator position contains three roles. 2025. Inka Auvinen.

Like in Scott's practice, in my solo the performer-activator "represents a site of fluidity [...] and productive instability" (2016, 58). The performer-technician creates circumstances for the non-human elements to actualise in and the performer-performer

to perform in. To do so, they (I use ‘they’ as a neutral singular pronoun) operate devices like the smoke machine, run the lights and sound during the performance and turn the house lights on at the end. They spend time both within the white box and in the side-stage area. This stems mainly from the setup fixed with the assignment of the solo production and the need to simplify the transitions between the four solos performed: in addition to the audience seating having been installed on one side of the studio, the light and sound boards had been placed in the ‘wings’, close to the exit. Especially the latter premise highlights the shifting of the roles as the performer-activator needs to leave the stage-area to reach light and sound equipment.

The performer-performer moves in the ambience generated by the performer-technician. They act upon prompts, for example by singing harmonies over of the pre-recorded singing sounding from the speakers, started by the performer-technician. The performer-performer pauses to watch the smoke float in the studio air. At the end, they run in the space shaped by the pulsating lights. With these poetic actions and non-actions, they activate sensitivities and at the same time, they offer a platform onto which the non-human elements, like light and sound, can reflect on. They co-perform with the non-human components. I will speak about this in more detail in chapter 4. However, they are not reduced to the physical visible body as their activative presence also extends to whispering in the darkness when the lights are turned off.

Then there is the performer-experiencer. They act simultaneously with the two others – this role permeates the whole performance event. The performer-experiencer tries to actively perceive everything throughout. Although the order of the solo is preset, the performer-experiencer senses durations and volumes which the performer-performer and performer-technician subsequently regulate. The performer-experiencer tries to adapt to the mood of the room by maintaining awareness of the audience’s attention. An intricate system, where the pores of their skin almost open as they make themselves as lucid as possible, unfolds. Simultaneously, the performer-experiencer attempts to attune themselves to the frequencies of the non-human elements. It is not possible to entirely attain the same wavelength as them but the effort to do so is a significant part of the performer-experiencer’s responsibility. They are between the audience and the non-human elements, mediating the encounter of the two. For example, by letting their eyes

contemplate the clouds created by the performer-technician and the smoke machine, they subtly attend to what the audience may notice. Along these crossing directions of awareness, the performer-activator's actions should seem unhesitating and precise. This creates a dual task, an oscillation between certainty and spontaneity, and makes the performer-activator position quite unstable. They know what they will do next, but because of the different attunements of the performer-experiencer, it is as if they could always choose to do something differently, or something else entirely.

As mentioned before, these three roles blend to form the performer-activator. They are layers between which the performer-activator navigates throughout the performance. In the section of *(invitation) to be sensitized* where the running begins, the performer-performer and performer-experiencer take the lead together in the scene created by the performer-technician. In the essay *On the poetics of running* (Auvinen, 2024), which I wrote in the first year of the master's degree, I unpacked the performative potential of running. I referred to the running in the solo as the 'Elevated run'. The elevation comes firstly from directing my attention to the lights on the ceiling (see figure 2). The illusion that I visit in that moment is that there is a mutual activation happening between the lights and I, even if the patterns in which they move have been programmed. I imagine, as the performer-experiencer, that the increasing pulsation of the lights animates my running and that my running boosts the intensity of the pulsation. The performer-performer translates this experience to the audience by performing the run with "breeziness and buoyancy", "carry[ing] a volatile pulse" with their steps (2).

This is an example of the roles interacting with each other. There are several ways in which a role gives way to another or disrupts it. For instance, when the performer-technician turns lights on and off, they mostly do it as a slow transition from the actions of the performer-performer. However, they also interfere suddenly: when the singing is still resonating in the room, they turn the lights and sound off more abruptly.



Figure 2. *(invitation) to be sensitized*. 2023. Inka Auvinen. Photograph: Sanni Siira.

As I mentioned in chapter 2, Scott uses some of the same terminology to speak about her practice. Her performer self includes both the performer and the activator. The performer role acts as a “bearer of signs” and the activator is “a tool for the activation of technical mediums” (2016, 8). She also talks about the performer-activator as experiencer. These constitute what she calls a live intermedial performance event. Unlike in Scott’s practice, in *(invitation) to be sensitized*, each action is part of the activatorship; however, I am on a similar plane with Scott regarding the instability of the performer position. She writes that the different “roles are encapsulated within a single body, but the point of intersection, if indeed it exists, is a shifting and elusive one” (ibid.). The movement between the roles within the performer-activator during *(invitation) to be sensitized* is irregular and fleeting. The three facets are unevenly distributed along the solo and I embody each for different amounts of time. They coexist and overlap sometimes, replace each other at others.

3.1.2. Sensitisation

Before I go more into detail about sensitisation, I wish to tentatively explain my idea behind it. In chapter 4, I will discuss what the benefits of the human performer-activator/non-human performer combination could be, but here it is more about the very initial thoughts on why I created *(invitation) to be sensitized* in the first place. My life is shaken and shaped by the knowledge of global warming and I try to address this with art and activism. Timothy Morton claims that climate is a hyperobject, the change of which it is not possible to fully understand as a whole. In *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, he writes: “[a] hyperobject exists for us as a map in a high-dimensional phase space, because it is impossible for us to grasp as a whole with our senses” (2013, 75). He sees art as “attunement” and “a collaboration between humans and nonhumans” – in the threatening sense of the non-human, as forces that can destroy humans, like harmful radiations (174-176). I wish to somehow turn this around in my solo. If I cannot fully take hold of a hyperobject or understand it by approaching it directly, I can circulate and navigate the map in the said “high-dimensional phase space” with non-human entities which are not harmful. The sensitisation allows me to spend time by the hyperobject. I am not trying to resolve it for myself nor the audience; I am rather floating in the vastness of the hyperobject to get a tiny bit closer to it.

In *(invitation) to be sensitized*, I, as the performer-activator, finely manipulate the performance space. I orchestrate the event precisely and delicately. A specific type of activatorship is at play. As the sensitiser, I am responsible for keeping the detailed network of actions refined. I maintain a ‘performative ecosystem’ (a term that Mette Ingvarsen uses in her doctoral thesis, *Expanded Choreography: Shifting the Agency of Movement in The Artificial Nature Project and 69 Positions*, 2016) that is subtly meshed together.

Before the solo took its final shape, I questioned whether there should be any structure to it at all. I wanted to find a configuration with the highest potential of sensitisation. The supervisor of my solo process, Simo Kellokumpu, encouraged me to test out different logics of composition. Until the week before the premiere, I thought that I wanted to maintain a fluid constellation in the performance event, similar to the way in which ideas reach me when I am creating. Without a predetermined order, the piece

would be a series of spontaneous activations and random successions of occurrences, having a 'gaseous' formation. I like this word pair as it could be an antithesis, but it is illustrative of an organically proceeding arrangement which still has to fit a certain length and space. By improvising with set elements, my solo would have come closer to Scott's live intermedial events, where everything is conceived in the moment and live and pre-existing elements meet in unplanned ways (2016, 4). This would have placed a more heightened focus on the performer-experiencer role. I then made a somewhat pivotal switch in composition. I realised that with the short time that I had for try-outs, such a loose organisation posed a risk of giving a cluttered impression. Ironically, the clearer and more specific the configuration and actions were, the closest I got to the sensitising atmosphere that I was seeking. In the final solo, with the exact knowledge of what was happening next, I was able to fully direct my focus on how I activated. As a result, my precarious inner scape was not shown as clumsiness to the audience but rather as evidence that there were ongoing processes simmering beneath the activations.

Rehearsing to be a sensitiser was, firstly, a very technical process. I learned some of the technicalities of the elaborate light board grandMA3 and I practiced to become more fluent in knowing which button and slider to activate, when and how. I developed an intricate choreography for the performer-technician to perform with the lights, sound and a laptop. On the next page is the map or score that I used when performing *(invitation) to be sensitized* (figure 3) and its English and digital translation (figure 4). It may not be entirely up to date as 'talking' was eventually replaced by whispering, but it illustrates my attention to detail in configuring the solo. It is to be read in the order of cloud-singing-talking-running.

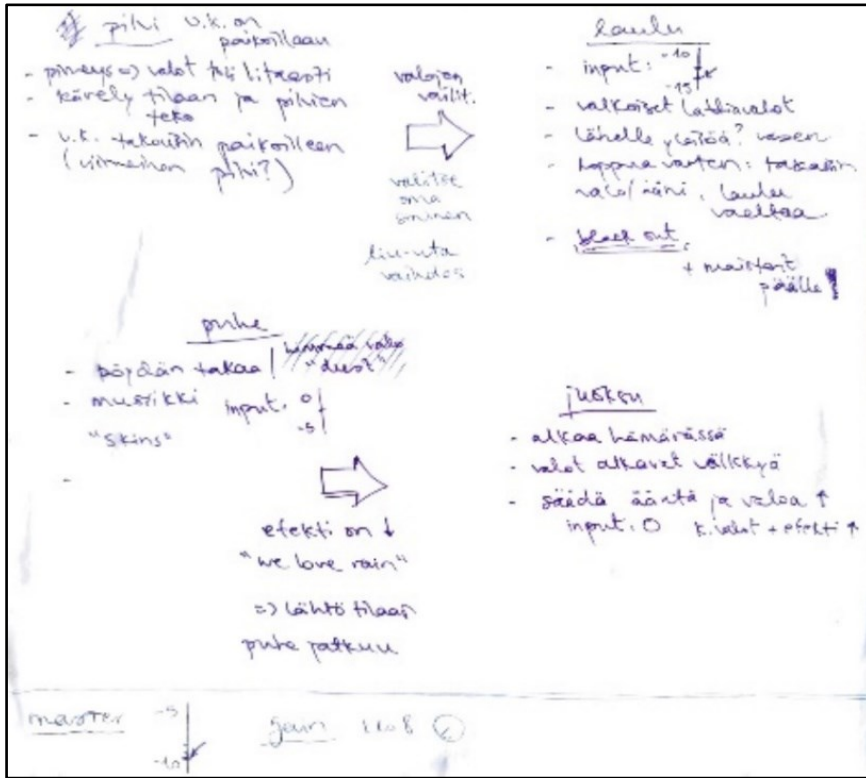


Figure 3. Score for (invitation) to be sensitized in Finnish. 2023. Inka Auvinen.

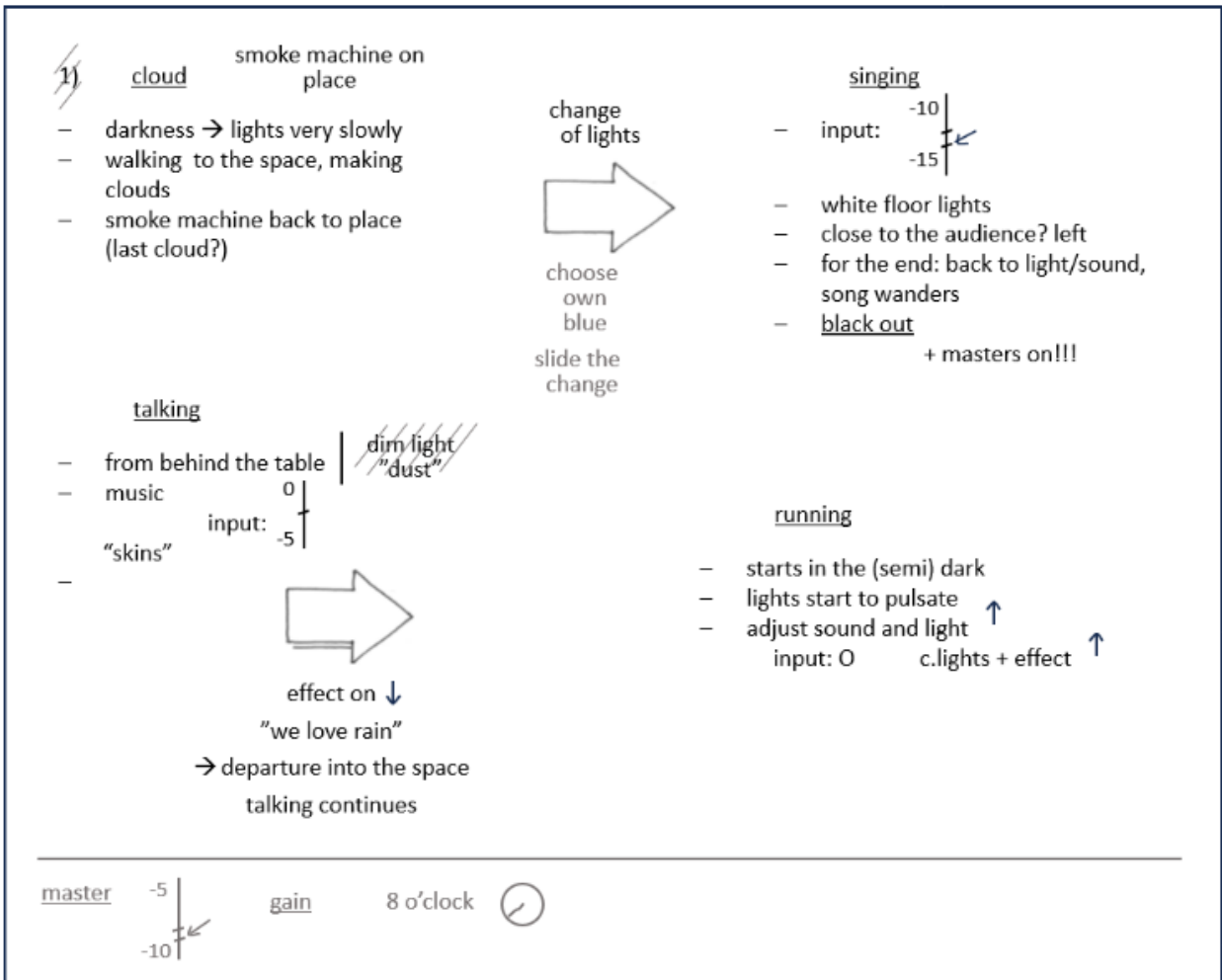


Figure 4. Score for (invitation) to be sensitized in English. 2025. Inka Auvinen.

I followed my precise annotations for volume settings and timings conscientiously, and hence, part of the activator position was to look at these notes whenever I did not remember all the instructions by heart. Between ‘black out’ and ‘starts in the (semi) dark’, I have taken into account the process where my eyes get accustomed to the darkness and begin to distinguish again.

In addition to this technical choreography, I built endurance in waiting and time regulation during the performances. In the creation phase of my solo, I experimented with working in unhurried and meditative tempos but when practicing it, I usually skimmed through it, making sure to hit the cues in the score and only imagining the contemplative pauses in theory. I never completed an actual, full-length and spacious version of the solo when I was alone. In the premiere, I felt all the meaningfulness that I had awaited enter along with the audience. With their eyes on me, my actions felt more valuable. In fact, the presence of audience set the pace in each iteration of the solo. Their act of watching encouraged me to slow down and linger in moments like the one in the below picture from the first part of the solo (figure 5). There, I am making a long cloud upwards and will soon stop to look at it float above and around me.



Figure 5. *(invitation) to be sensitized*. 2023. Inka Auvinen. Photograph: Sanni Siira.

What would usually happen intuitively to my performer self, due to habits ingrained into my body and potential adrenaline caused by the performance situation, is that I would be likely to accelerate and rush through the actions. However, as the performer-experiencer, I also see the smoke, smell it, and it slightly softens my vision. I find the situation beautiful and do not wish for it to end just yet. It feels like a collective experience to contemplate, together with the audience, the clouds forming and moving. However, as the activator of the piece, I cannot surrender to the desire to just experience, I have other commitments to take care of. I need to keep leading the performance, the non-human elements are waiting for my cues and activations. But if I were a witness, I think exciting questions would arise such as *How much does a cloud weigh?* and *Does smoke make sound after it has exited the machine?* and *Where does the smoke go, does it disappear through cracks in the ceiling or change into an invisible form when it dissipates?*

After the smoke-machine-activating section comes the singing. My movement score in this part only includes listening to the soundscape and reacting to it in any subtle manner. The soundscape features an a cappella version of *Graines d'espoir*, a song that I wrote and composed in early 2023 (Auvinen). I join my pre-recorded singing after a while and sing harmonies on top of it. Harmonised singing calls me to inhabit a sensitised state as I tune into the pitch. Listening to my own voice sensitises me in a very personal way and brings up memories of the places where I wrote the song in and the people I have sung it to. Then, I walk back to the technical equipment whilst the last part of the chorus continues looping by itself. In chapter 4, I will talk more in detail of the processes unfolding in this moment. When I have turned the lights off after the last loop of melody has sounded, studio 709 is dark. I whisper the following text from the side-stage:

“we are enveloped in a thin veil covered by a layer of dust

light is sieved through creating textures on our translucent skin

we are near and close

and we shine

rain dripples down our armless bodies

had we got arms we'd raise them up and dance

sans cesse"

((invitation) to be sensitized. Programme booklet.)

The experience of delivering text in this way feels performatively strange. It is counter-intuitive for me to be hidden and read a text quietly during a solo performance. Usually when I need to communicate with speech in any public event, I have to concentrate to project my voice loud enough. Here, I am not very visible – only the light of my laptop screen faintly illuminates me and I am at a 90-degree angle to the right of the audience, so it is not straightforward to look at me – and the content of the text is hardly audible. And yet, I am still performing the text with precision and meaning, giving weight to each detail pronounced in a light, low volume. An intriguing contradiction forms in this way of being present. I am also thinking about tenderness. By lowering my speaking voice to a whisper, I condition my body to soften and release. It is comforting to perform like this, almost concealed and still choosing to be eloquent. It is as if I was enchanting the space with a spell or telling a secret. To accommodate this form of expression, I need to calm my breathing down. Non-voiced, the words that I say are practically just articulated air released into the darkness. In order to grasp, not necessarily the message of the text but the essence of it, one has to attend to the fragility of the atmosphere the whispers are floating in. And I am responsible for holding the space with these ephemeral rhetoric tools.

So that the sensitisation would have something to anchor onto, I try to ground the eerie world of the clouds, voices, and pulsating lights with my body. Although open, I try to appear tangible enough to offer my body as a platform for the non-human elements. Groundedness aids the purposeful attitude expected from the performer-activator.

When running, although elevated in intentions, I am also grounded. This involves thinking about extending energy beyond the floor beneath me. The diagonal pull between the lights on the ceiling and the floor is somewhat visible in figure 2. It is part of the sensitising mechanisms at play. I am activating a joyful urgency within my body. Urgency of running *with* rather than of running *away*.

My wish is to offer our chaotic world of decreasing attention spans a moment of subtlety and lucidity with (*invitation*) *to be sensitized*. Each showing of the solo calls for practicing both openness and self-containment as a preparation. The piece is shaped by sometimes minimal actions to offer a range of inputs and sensitise those who are present to different frequencies, both human and non-human. I have confidence in the fact that the activations are as meaningful as I perceive them myself. I also believe that anything is enough to be a performative action. However, the self-questioning that sometimes appears when in front of others could destabilise these thoughts and pierce the fragile performative ecosystem I create.

3.2. Performer-activator in Dialogues -course demo

The performer as activator has followed me since the solo process. It also entered into the Dialogues -course held by Simo Kellokumpu and Maija Hirvanen in the spring of 2024. The course ended in a demo, where each pair presented what they had been working on during the five weeks. In dialogue with Marjukka, I explored words and expressions as a source for performed movement and the effect of someone watching on my dancing body. In the demo, I facilitated three tasks on myself, verbalising them beforehand to the people present. In the first one, I put on a podcast into my Marshall headset and tried to dance like I was alone in the space. I attempted to focus on the podcast and on my movement enough to forget the presence of the witnesses. I opened up the results of this experiment in a few words before going to the next task. The second exercise involved pens and post-its: I asked people to note down what my dance inspired in them. My body was activated by words and terms we had played with during the process with Marjukka and my body activated ideas, words and small texts in the

witnesses' minds and hands. I also requested that once they were done with a post-it they would come to stick it onto my dancing body. This activated further movement in the room and generated touch with paper as the mediator. The third task was a secret task, the logic of which I did not expose. The idea was that the audience would guess what the exercise was and either keep it to themselves or write it on the post-its. This activator-practice is more immersive than the one in *(invitation) to be sensitized*. There is an invitation to actively participate and therefore a more reciprocal activation between performer and audience. I invited the experiencers to inhabit the space in the way they wished, much like Scott in her live intermedial performance events (2016, 10).

3.3. Performer-activator, a ghost from the past (a.k.a 2021)

I created *landscapes of loss* (2021) as the practical part of my bachelor's thesis at Trinity Laban, London. I believe that the performer as activator is rooted in that work. *landscapes of loss* was a durational piece or moving installation exploring environmental grief. It was divided into tableaux reserved for one spectator at a time. Each audience member had 5 minutes to inhabit the space and each landscape was different so they all experienced a unique scene. The materials I worked with were fans, projections of image and sound as well as a sheet providing both movement when activated by the fans and a projection surface. I activated the ensemble of these elements between the audience slots and while they were visiting, I was completely still. I wished then to deviate attention from myself: a moving body usually attracts focus and is seen as the main subject that overpowers the rest. I tried to be a background element and switch the human/non-human roles around. I no longer performed a breathing being. Instead, the décor was alive, sighing and moving at its own pace. This also raises similar questions about what is enough for it to be considered a performative action. There was a vibrant scape of non-human actions but I, who was graduating from a contemporary dance bachelor's degree, was immobile in the set that I had activated.

I can trace a progression from *landscapes of loss* to *(invitation) to be sensitized*. Both deal with global warming and during the time separating them I have come more aware of the complexity of the phenomenon. Strangely, the growing knowledge led me to use less elements, to simplify the visual aesthetic. In *(invitation) to be sensitized*, I approach complexity with subtlety as perhaps accumulation and excess would further blur understanding. I have realised that sometimes stripping down to more minimal conditions can be more impactful. I have also gained confidence in both the effectiveness of subtleness as well as trust in my performer self.

4. ACTIVATING THE NON-HUMAN

Why do I keep returning to the performer as activator? As already mentioned in the previous chapter, the activator role allows the performer a distinctive relationship with non-human elements. I will mostly speak about how this manifests in *(invitation) to be sensitized* but also expand into other works. I use more poetic language in the following chapters in order to allow the non-human elements to appear closer to the reader. By referring to the ‘non-human’, I place myself in the framework of post-humanism. I find particular resonance with the “posthumanist space” defined by Andrew Pickering as “a space in which the human actors are still there but now inextricably entangled with the nonhuman, no longer at the center of the action calling the shots” (1995, 26; in Barad, 2007, 414). I indeed seek alternatives to anthropocentric perspectives and my artistic aims include decentring the human performer. In my work so far, I have focused on non-humans in the sense of ‘things’ or ‘matter’, as advocated by Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter* (2010). Her book aims to undo the separation between inorganic matter, seen as “inert” or “dull”, and living, vibrant beings (vii).

Through acts of generating, triggering, guiding, giving and creating space, the performer-activator activates the non-human to perform. The non-human performers in *(invitation) to be sensitized* include ephemeral elements such as smoke, sound and light. I also consider the smoke machine a performer, although it is also a tool to produce the smoke. It is present throughout the performance and mostly remains in the same spot. I only operate it in the beginning and so for the rest of the performance, its presence serves as a reminder of prior events. When working with choreographer Fabio Liberti in 2021, I remember him talking about this idea of leaving evidence in the space. In *Solo(s) for Real* (2022), a group work based on a solo he had made previously, I melted on the floor around nine minutes before the end of the performance. The other dancers flocked over me and clustered together to finish the piece whilst I stayed laying in the same position until the very end. He wished to leave me there as a memory, not to clean up the stage of all the former happenings. Similarly, the smoke machine is a solid reference that I did not want to clear away. It is performing throughout, embodying both itself and the history of the piece.

More fleeting, the smoke partly remains in the space as well and slowly dissolves into the atmosphere of studio 709. Although vanishing, it acts like a hazy lens through which to witness the rest of the performance. By looking at the following images (figure 6 & figure 7) one can see how the clouds affect vision. The first image was taken when I first activated the smoke machine and the second a bit later on, when I returned to reproduce the beginning image. The smoke impacts the focus of the camera as the apparatus attempts to capture both the smoke curtain and what is in the midst of and behind it. This mechanism mirrors the one of the eye. Everything seems a little bit less solid, the same world but with softer edges. As the performer-experiencer, I find it pleasurable to let this illusion invade me, no more sharp edges and boundaries.



Figure 6. *(invitation) to be sensitized*. 2023. Inka Auvinen. Photograph: Sanni Siira.



Figure 7. *(invitation) to be sensitized*. 2023. Inka Auvinen. Photograph: Sanni Siira.

I like to think that all the elements leave traces in the room. Voices, recorded and live, continue to inhabit the space as echoes, uncapturable with any device or medium. And the light; at the end of the solo, it is fading so slowly that, in full darkness, it still seems to flicker.

4.1. Agencies at play

When thinking about ‘agency’, I connect it to the word ‘actant’ in the way that Bruno Latour understands it: “an actant is a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events” (in Bennett, 2010, viii).

I try to connect the way that I am writing to the way that I am creating in my artistic or performative practice. Linguistic methods can be powerful tools in activating the inanimate. This is important because the way that we choose words indicates how we

see the world and at the same time, influences how we operate in it. I try to recurrently attribute a semblance of agency to the elements in my solo, both in the ways I described previously and in my writing. Mutsumi Yamamoto has reflected on the relationship of language and power as well. He says that “[a]t least a part of the ‘enigma’ of agency lies in the point that it may be highly illusory, when encoded in a particular way by means of our language” (2006, 2). I believe that language can be a powerful initiator and propellant for matter that does not initially seem to hold agency. It is like a tool to reveal the agency of matter which has not yet been recognised as having it. Likewise, responsibility, blame and intentionality can be given or taken away depending on the language used. Prime examples of this are biases in the media. For instance, a subject heading commonly used in the Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* is ‘the war of Gaza’, which omits important information, i.e. that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza. When writing about the situation in Ukraine, journalists rarely forget to mention that it is a war of aggression from the Russian side. Similarly, it is possible to move or remove responsibility by strategically using the verbs ‘die’ and ‘kill’ as well as their variations. In her PhD thesis, which she wrote in 2009, Aziza Zaher meticulously analyses the writings on the Israeli/Palestine dispute in different newspapers. In her observations, she remarks that ‘killed’ is may be utilised as “an agentless passive” that “conceals agency and responsibility”. She also states that some headings “naturalise[] death using the nominal ‘death toll’”. (143) These examples of racial and other political biases reflect the news reporters’ or the media’s political views and widely affects the picture that the uncritical reader paints in their mind. The choice of words reinforces certain narratives over others and I am aware that so do mine in this thesis.

Yamamoto discusses the relationship of English and Japanese: how in Japanese, the organisation or arrangement or nature of forming sentences conceals or partially erases the human agent, thus honouring the non-human agencies (2006, 68). Likewise, in French, there is no ‘it’ pronoun which means that from animals and plants to inanimate objects all is referred to with ‘il’ (he) or ‘elle’ (she), depending on the *gender* of the words themselves. It is interesting to imagine how this non-hierarchical systematisation of calling *something* or *someone* affects the world-view of the speaker. It is yet another question to divide genders into a binary, the masculine and the feminine only – a fact

that maintains a conservative tone in the language and participates in keeping a certain world-view alive.

I am practicing writing in a way that attempts to provide the non-human elements more agency. This is not something that overrules the whole of this written thesis but I want to mention it as an informal methodology. I try to emphasize the potential of the things themselves where possible, similarly to when conceiving (*invitation*) *to be sensitized*. I make stylistic choices like personifications to bring out the life that the elements carry, instead of always precisising that the actions they are fulfilling are activated by me, the human performer. Personification is in itself not a term which supports the views of my written thesis. Personifying means to ascribe human traits or behaviour to non-human entities (Edens, 2018). It implies that the human is the epicentre of comparisons. Moreover, a personification is a ‘figurative’ expression and thus insinuates that the personified elements cannot actually embody the characteristics and behaviour it is granted textually. The concept of personification is limiting in its anthropocentrism and bypasses – yet does not disregard – the possibility of other-than-human agencies. However, the style figure in itself has potential to shift agency. When writing about non-human elements, I wish to also use imaginative language to bring them closer to the reader.

Mette Ingvarsten has dedicated a whole series of works to choreography for non-human elements. Her *The Artificial Nature Series* stem from these ideas of “the vibrancy of matter, the agency of things, the capacities of materials, light and sound to act as triggers for the production of sensations and affects” (2016, 1). This greatly resonates with the non-human elements in my solo. We both allocate importance to the things that often stay in the background and invite them to co-perform with the human performer(s). Particularly in her piece *The Artificial Nature Project* (2012), the human body serves as the facilitator of non-human agency. Like in my solo, the point is not to prove that the elements placed in this context have the capacity to move by themselves without any prompt or stimuli. It is rather “producing stage realities that [aim], through their theatrical fictions and imaginations, to compose a feeling of autonomous material expression and agency within non-human worlds” (2016, 9), as she phrases it beautifully. Therefore, the agency of the non-human to decide or initiate is illusionary

in these performances. In *The Artificial Nature Project*, theatre is a place of artifice, and the non-human elements are staged into this context. Ingvartsen tries to further dissimulate the human in favour of the non-human. I subscribe to her wish to “try to disrupt theatrical anthropocentrism” and show the staged reality – that I recognise aspects of in *(invitation) to be sensitized* – as an “analog[y] of how to implement anti-anthropocentrism in the world outside the theatre” (11).

Although I wrote that the agency of the non-human elements is illusionary because of a non-capacity to produce independently, it is strange to even think about things like smoke as inanimate bodies. Seeing the way that it floats and glides makes me think that there should be another word for it, like ‘almost-animate’. Clouds’ and smoke’s sensitivity in reacting to the movements of air makes them unpredictable and lively. I have come to regard the non-human elements as important as myself.

Furthermore, the performativity of Ingvartsen’s works “is neither in the humans nor in the materials alone, but in the intersection between them” (2013). Indeed, these performances would not exist in the absence of either the human or the non-human. It is dependent on both to function. *(invitation) to be sensitized* would be impossible to reproduce without the non-human performers. They are the content and substance of the performance. Likewise, without the human performer the piece would not function: the non-human performers need a catalyst to perform. Things are given space and time, but they also require activation in order to act. I came across two terms which could encompass this performative interconnectedness, ‘interdefinition’ and ‘intra-action’. Both have been articulated outside of the performing arts sphere. The “interdefinition of human and material agency” comes from Andrew Pickering who, again, sees the humans and non-humans as interlaced (1995, 26). Although I argued that there is no such thing as equal agency taking place between me and the non-human performers in the solo, there are still some more-than-human agencies at play, interweaving with my performer-activator agency. What makes me doubt the adequacy of the term ‘interdefinition’ to complement my work is that Pickering sees the human and non-human as interlinked but separate from each other (Barad, 2007, 414), whereas I favour a view where the human and non-human are not strictly distinct from each other. ‘Intra-action’ is Karen Barad’s term which entails that there is no prior individual existence of

elements independently from each other. For her, too, agencies are entangled (Kleidman, 2012). Rather than looking at entanglement ontologically, I transfer it into the performative context of *(invitation) to be sensitized*: there are performative intra-actions between me, the human performer, and the non-human performers. Our individual performativities depend on each other as the solo would not exist in the absence of either.

What I am not able to analyse in depth is how the non-human elements interact with each other in the solo event. I can only assume that the smoke might intercept some of the sound or there might be some other type of reaction between the two, thinking both according to the laws of physics and poetically. Where the lights and smoke meet, I know that it looks visually appealing but perhaps there is also some chemical activity or conversation there. I find it fascinating to imagine all the secret dialogues that may occur in parallel with the human/non-human interface.

4.2. Benefits of working with non-human performers

For me, there are two main benefits in enabling non-human elements to perform. The first one stems from the sensitisation and it is an overall benefit of the activation performance. For example, as the smoke has space to perform in the way that is characteristic to it, the effect on the witness is one of slowing down, experiencing a non-human timing that sensitises them to a different frequency than the human one. Sound travels from speaker to speaker and activates hearing to follow it. To discern the nuances of a quiet voice and where it originates from is a great practice of concentration and patience. The whispering and the darkness that encircles it allow someone who is used to prioritising the visual as their dominant sense, to change their way of giving attention. They may end up in a more vulnerable state as their main tool for making sense of the world is disabled. The sensitising process in *(invitation) to be sensitized* involves gently, layer by layer, getting deeper into the spectator's perception, also touching emotions. I have not yet mentioned feelings, as engendering them is not the main goal of my solo. However, removing the possibility of seeing is directly linked to a more intuitive approach to the world. Like Bernd Schulz articulates it, “[w]e may

consider the ear to be closer to the world of the dream and the unconscious than the eye. Yet as the most sensitive organ for the exploration of reality, it connects our inner experience with the world around us” (in Di Benedetto, 2010). After having been used to subtle frequencies, the audience is flooded by a growing volume of both sound and visual stimuli. And something that would not necessarily be noticed in a more human oriented performance – for example the very gradual, at first barely visible, pulsating of the ceiling lights – becomes perceivable.

The process of sensitisation with non-human elements makes one more open to notice even the smallest phenomena. It prepares the spectator for the world, makes them more available to receive subtle information such as signs and symptoms that the planet Earth is sending. This for me is one of the underlying parallels between *landscapes of loss* and *(invitation) to be sensitized*, further connecting the latter to the theme of climate change and environmental awareness that I have been exploring for several years. Of course, there are less subtle manifestations of global warming, explicit proof of the changing climate. However, even these demonstrations do not seem to have truly hit everyone in the Western society. Or they at least do not provoke change that would be necessary for humanity to sustain in the future. Perhaps if one could sense the changes in their own body sphere instead of only being informed about them, it would activate a more urgent response. I believe that generally, artists have a higher capacity to grasp undertones because we are often interested in observing our surroundings, trained to pay attention, and encouraged to react to what society and the universe projects on us. Particularly with a dancer’s training, when this openness towards the world is maintained, it is possible to detect messages sent into the atmosphere. I also think that with the experience also comes the responsibility to help others become sensitised, too.

The second benefit is related to a certain scalability of the sensitisation process. The pseudo-agency discussed earlier serves an important purpose. The way in which the elements are brought forward and seen as potential co-performers shows how non-human elements could be recognised outside of the theatre space as well. It offers new perspectives and brings up questions such as: “What would happen to our thinking about nature if we experienced materialities as actants, and how would the direction of

public policy shift if it attended more carefully to their trajectories and powers?”
(Bennett, 2010, 62).

With her book *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett challenges the idea of things as being passive and inert (vii). Her text “present[s] non human materialities as bona fide participants rather than as recalcitrant objects, social constructs, or instrumentalities” (63) which is particularly of interest to the performativity of the elements in *(invitation) to be sensitized*.

4.3. Examples of non-human performers

I have selected a few non-human elements that perform in *(invitation) to be sensitized* or *landscapes of loss* to have a closer look at them. I have already written about the performership of some of them but I now expand to how they appear in other artists’ work as well.

4.3.1. Sound and its amplifiers

The Forty Part Motet (2001) is an artwork that I only remembered the existence of one year after creating *(invitation) to be sensitized*. I encountered it at the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris in 2017. In the piece, there are 40 speakers placed in an oval formation in eight sets of five. The speakers emit a version of *Spem in Alium*, a sixteenth-century choral composition by Thomas Tallis. The forty voices have been recorded separately and each speaker plays one vocal track. It is an immersive experience for the visitors, who can freely move where they choose. I would describe my experience inside the artwork followingly:

As I inhabit the space inside the oval shape, I am directly sung at from forty directions around me. Approaching one specific speaker, the singer who seems to be trapped inside it comes closer and closer, until my ear is almost touching the speaker and they are singing right into it. It feels personal. The intensity fluctuates, now only a few speakers are sounding, the one I am standing next to is silent. I am moving towards the centre, and more voices join again. It is as if both the speakers and the sound were

alive. The sound travels over and through me in powerful waves. I am submerged and do not wish to resurface.

This work is interesting in its many layers of activation. The way it is arranged, the installation invites its witnesses to navigate their own experience in the work. It sensitises to listen carefully and offers a multiplicity of sonic input that feels almost overwhelming after the lower volumes. The author Janet Cardiff refers to *The Forty Part Motet* mostly as an installation or sound sculpture. It is fascinating to think how the sculpturality of sound is formed, how the intangible yet palpable substance of sound is taking different shapes. *The Forty Part Motet* could also be regarded as a piece of music or a performance, but with the fact that it has been mainly exhibited in museums, it makes sense to call it an installation or a sculpture. I wonder if this makes the sound a visual arts material, as part of the fine arts tradition. I will continue interrogating the terms employed for the non-human elements in the upcoming sub-section.

In *(invitation) to be sensitized*, the movement of the sound is more subtle than in *The Forty Part Motet*. The volume of it is also quieter and the speakers are further away from the members of the audience than it is possible to reach in Cardiff's artwork. Within the restricted composition of the speakers, I still wanted the sound to move across the space. The last two measures of the song that I had pre-recorded loop and are heard at random from above the audience on the right, then perhaps further, from the left corner at the back of the space. I am activating this by alternating which speakers are muted and which ones are not. When some channels are intercepted, the sound is more subdued.

There is a similar effect as with certain songs that use directional audio. They are programmed so that different parts of the music are played from the left and right earplug or speaker. In *Space Oddity* by David Bowie (1969) for instance, the main melody is heard in the right ear or speaker and harmonies in the left. This creates depth and makes the sound appear more alive, as if it travelled independently. A similar layering occurs in *(invitation) to be sensitized*. The sounds come from diverse sources, from speakers and my performer body. My on stage singing supports the pre-recorded sound with harmonies, which flips the idea of a backing track: the melody comes from

the speakers and my live voice is the accompaniment. By subtly subverting the roles I wish to again dissolve my human performer self slightly. The sound loop at the end also dances in the dimly lit room and leaps across the space. It inhabits the different corners of the room and travels at its own pace from speaker to speaker.

4.3.2. Smoke

In *Ethereal Fleeting* (2018b) by Lukas Truniger “[a] continuous series of clouds, generated by a silvery machine-like sculpture, float above their surroundings and then slowly dissolve into the air again” (*Lukas Truniger, 2018a*). Here the clouds are created as part of an installation that has taken place both in rural and urban settings. Could the cloud therefore be seen as coming from the visual arts field, like the sound from Cardiff’s work? Truniger himself calls it an “artificial weather installation” (*ibid.*). The smoke clouds in *(invitation) to be sensitized* are born in the context of a live performance as part of the MA Dance Performance programme. Does that make them performers – or even dancers? I personally consider them my co-performers and although I have not really touched upon dancership in this thesis yet, I think clouds have great potential for dancing for the same reasons for which I question the use of the term ‘inanimate’ to describe them.

As seen in the images on the next page (figure 8 & figure 9), these two clouds look very similar. The apparatus used to generate them is framed out from both pictures and so the drastically different environment and lighting situation are the only indications that these may be works by different artists. In general, the framing of photographs redirects focus e.g. by including or omitting elements. From looking at figure 9, it seems that photographer Sanni Siira understood something about the importance of non-human performers in my solo. My human performer self is absent in the picture and the eye is drawn to the cloud only. Truniger’s photo is also cloud-centred. Both have managed to capture the expressivity of smoke and these pictures illustrate how a cloud can be an actant that captivates its witness.



Figure 8. *Ethereal Fleeting*. 2018. Lukas Truniger, Itamar Bergfreund & Bruce Yoder.
Photograph: Lukas Truniger.



Figure 9. *(invitation) to be sensitized*. 2023. Inka Auvinen. Photograph: Sanni Siira.

I have used the words ‘cloud(s)’ and ‘smoke’ almost interchangeably, although I acknowledge that the chemical composition may be different in all three cases: clouds appearing in nature, the clouds in *(invitation) to be sensitized* and the clouds in *Ethereal Fleeting*. ‘Smoke’ entered the vocabulary of this thesis through ‘smoke-machine’, although I realise that the term may carry negative connotations as it can be associated with combustion and potentially harmful substances.

4.3.3. Water and light

Water is an interesting non-human performer as it embodies properties that invite movement. Movement is not a fundament of performership, but water’s potential to be expressive, lively, and move independently when placed in certain conditions, can be of interest in performative works. For example, the transition between water’s solid phase, ice, to liquid when placed in a temperature above 0 degrees Celsius has delicious performative potential. The ice exudes liquid water, which is visible in different ways depending on how the ice is positioned. The water that melts from the ice drips, pours or suffuses, usually gradually. This was enough to create a performative action in *landscapes of loss*. Several ice blocks, which hung on strings and were lit with a heat generating spotlight, wept onto metal trays. The melting process was irregular: each ice individual dematerialised at its own variable pace. The sounds that the waterdrops made created an erratic beat that suspended the atmosphere gently. The rhythm was so random that it seemed like the ice pieces had a will of their own.



Figure 10. Making of *landscapes of loss*. 2021. Photograph: Inka Auvinen.

In *Pipes & Hoses* (2024) by MimoArt Company, water is both the theme and the main character in the piece. It is omnipresent in many forms and its performance is framed by the ones of five human performers. The rich world of lighting takes into account the different states and intensities that the water takes throughout the work. When a cloud of fine vapour is diffused from the stage rigging, the lights give it enough substance that it appears almost tangible. When a shallow lake forms in the trench on stage, the lights make even the smallest ripples and waves visible.

Like *landscapes of loss*, *Pipes & Hoses* contains an environmental message. It displays 2000 litres of water, which is half the amount one Finnish person uses per day (Stoa, 2025). The piece makes its point clear: people should watch their water usage because water is a limited resource.

4.4. Contexts of activations

In wondering how to frame the name of the role that each element carries in artworks, I wish to expand into the question of naming the events themselves. My purpose is not to force artworks into stiff categories but rather to inspect what may lead an artist to use certain words over others. They are just words, but by choosing one places oneself into a continuum or an artistic tradition. Ultimately, I am interested in how the context in which an artistic event occurs influences the way it is perceived and which words are given to digest it. For example, the solo performance evening consisted of four solos created and performed by human dance students from Uniarts Helsinki. I wonder whether this is more likely to invite people to watch what I *do* as actions and what *I* do, rather than what the non-human elements do. Also, I do not explicitly communicate in the programme note that I am performing with non-humans, although the text – found on pages 19-20 – originates from a writing exercise where I place myself in the position of a grape.

If someone would witness *Ethereal Fleeting* from a distance, would they see the clouds and think that they are naturally formed and not ever know that they were created with artistic intentions? And would this mean that the artwork has succeeded in its “weather installation”ship as it aims to simulate cloud formation in nature (*Lukas Truniger, 2018*)? If *The Forty Part Motet* would be framed as a performance – which I believe it is in a lot of ways – on stage or in another comparable space, how would the speakers be perceived versus the human choir performing the same song? Or if it was made explicit that *The Forty Part Motet* was a sculpture, how would art experiencers react? What is then the element perceived as more sculptural, the speakers – which the artist has not made herself – or the sound itself? Finally, if (*invitation*) *to be sensitized* would be transferred into a gallery context, would anything change? The activator position is almost like the one of a house-keeper or administrator, and in a museum context, other activations beside the running could be seen as pedestrian, making them blend in.

5. ACTIVATING WRITING

I have occasionally struggled to write this thesis because of the frictions mentioned in chapter 2, but also because I have been reluctant to channel my creativity into the writing process. I have preferred to direct my inspiration towards activities like knitting or singing. And yet, I have felt the need for some kind of creative spark to write a thesis between 30 and 60 pages long. I have therefore had to figure out various approaches to invite the writing to happen. For example, I have found that my writing flows better if I attune myself artistically beforehand. I do this by listening to music quite loud from my Marshall headset and walking to Torkkelinmäki or somewhere else on a hill to see far away. This attunement opens up pathways into my artistic thinking and animates my inner writer. I do not wish to find out more about this state and open it further here because it is a mysterious, magical state and I want to keep it that way.

If the above has not been sufficient, I have tried other ways to activate my thesis-writing. My favourite one might be the one where I trick myself into writing. I do this by placing my laptop somewhere and locating myself next to it, usually standing up, as if ignoring the laptop. I might do some club dance moves and just glance at the word document every now and then. The aim is that ideas would appear to me almost surreptitiously because I am in a dynamic and unsuspecting mode. This only works occasionally.

I also decided to make my writing a more public event to make it more exciting for myself. I was curious to see what that would generate. Some of the questions I had were: What does having others watch me write do to my writing self? How does it affect my focus and motivation, my thought processes? How does it activate me? I created a kind of performance setting for my thesis-writing. I put up a sign (see figure 11) on the door or window of a conference room on the ground floor of the Kookos-building, on the Sörnäinen Campus. I spent a few hours there each time, making observations in parallel to writing the chapters preceding this one.

Writing in a conference booth with the door open and an invitation to join me inside felt funnily conflicting, considering that these spaces are made to have a private and quiet

environment. The simple fact of having the door ajar and the sign up there made me feel very seen. I would say that this ‘thing’ that I could even call a practice, gave me adrenaline to work faster and more effectively when it came to editing and reformulating text. On the other hand, it hindered memories and made it more difficult to properly revisualise myself in performative situations which I wished to revisit to write about them. It was both a stimulant and something that weakened my mind’s connection to my bodily sensations and memories. A bit like in the demo Dialogues - course that I wrote about in chapter 3, the presence or even potential presence of other humans made accessing my inmost layers more challenging, yet was beneficial for other aspects of getting the thesis done.

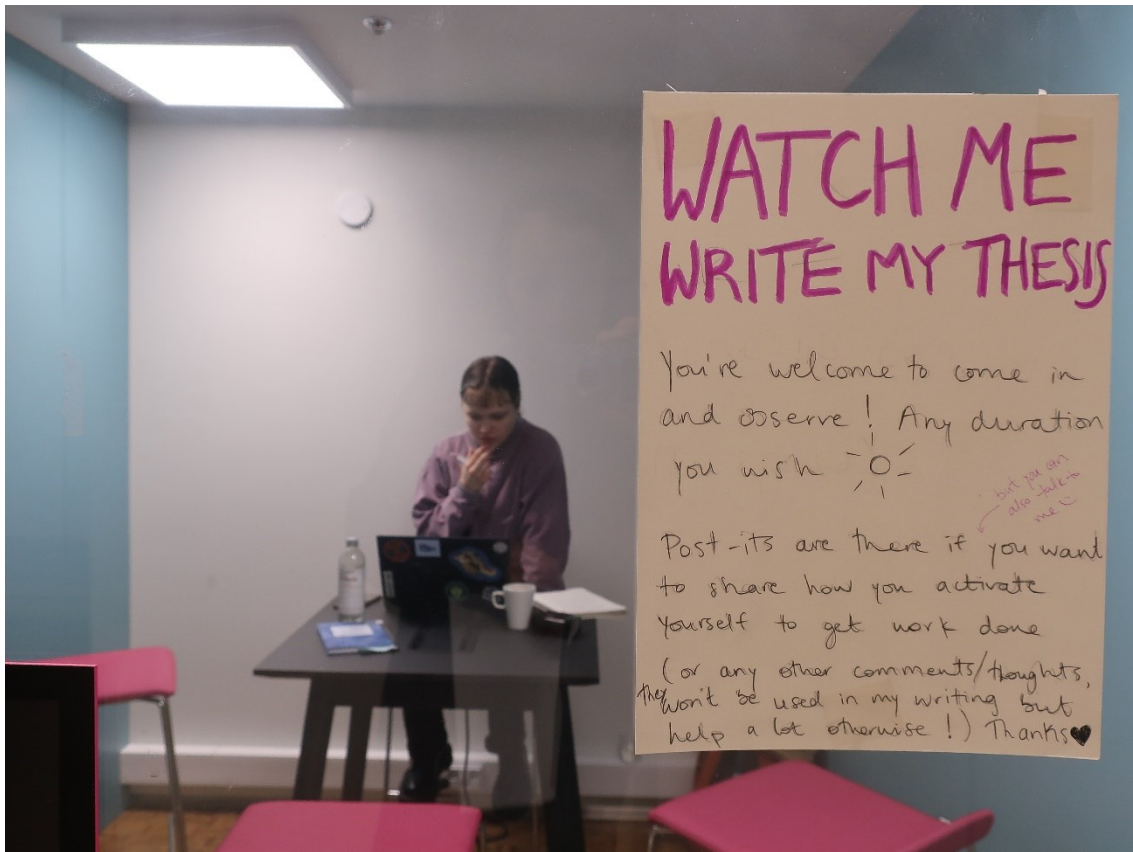


Figure 11. Thesis-writing in a booth. 31.3.2025. Photograph: Eero Tahkola.

People mostly walked past me without even looking inside. A few of my classmates visited me as well as Eero from the BA Dance. Otherwise, on very rare occasions, other people stopped to read the sign, and after we had exchanged smiles, they left. With

hindsight, this practice offered me the insight that it is possible to be in the position of the performer-activator without an audience.

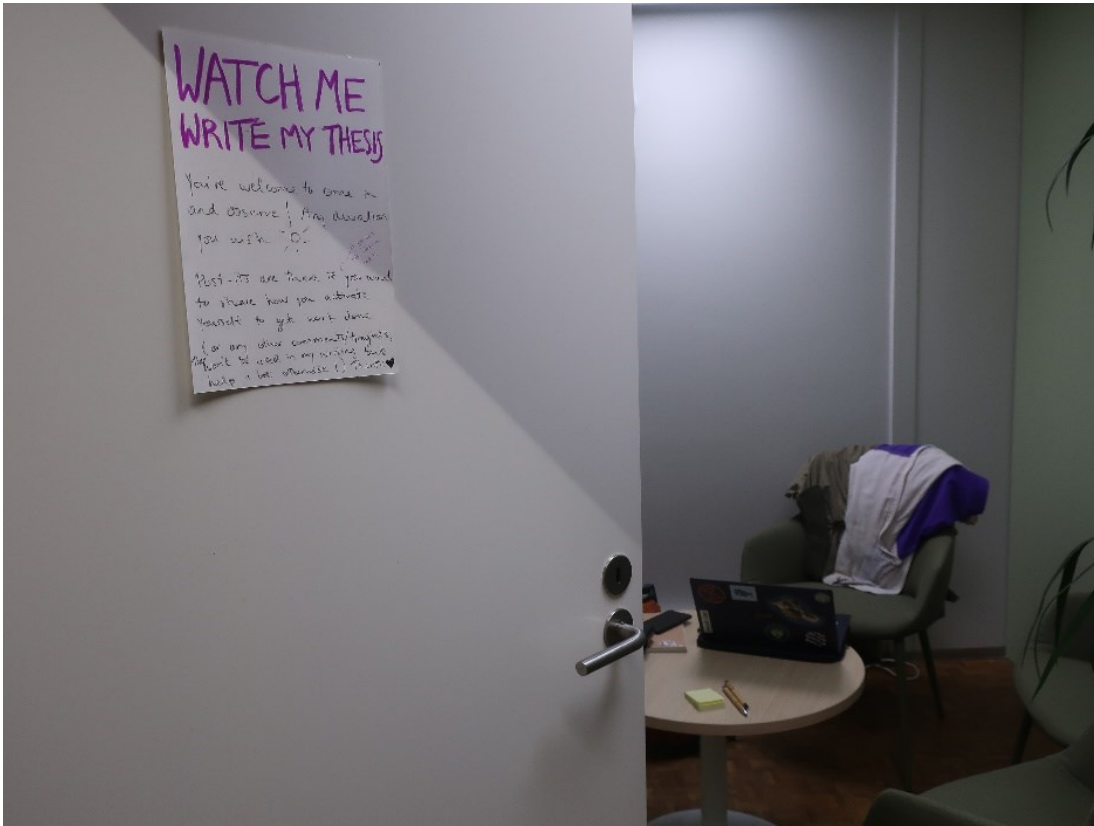


Figure 12. Thesis-writing in a booth. 10.4.2025. Photograph: Inka Auvinen.

6. THOUGHTS TO END WITH

So far, I have unpacked in detail what the performer-activator role is like and the relationship with non-human performers it makes possible. I now wish to articulate something specific that I cannot wait to try next. I then reflect on one last detail from my solo before I eventually conclude this written thesis.

If the possibilities in the solo production were different – not constrained by practicalities – I would have preferably placed all the technical devices within the sphere of the stage, closer to the audience. I am curious to experiment with what that does to my performer self. I wonder whether some of the analyses in this text would be drastically altered as a result of this change. Recentralising the sound and light boards would further open up the activations of the performer-technician, and show the audience more of the precise processes that the performer-activator goes through. In Scott’s practice “the mechanics of constructing intermediality in the moment are actively revealed to the experiencers” (2016, 46), and although lucidity is intrinsic to the performer-activator in *(invitation) to be sensitized*, it is not my aim to unravel all the mysteries and illusions offered by theatre effects. Somehow, Bryana Fritz manages to maintain both dimensions parallel to each other in her piece *Submission Submission* (10.11.2023).

I was often thinking about her solo when writing about mine. In *Submission Submission*, the operating devices are with Fritz on stage and she activates them to create diverse performative situations by and for herself, into a space originally devoid of any poetic or mystical intention (Lapadat, 2024). Her solo is an ever-updating series of portraits of medieval saints. Around the portraits, different in each iteration of the work (*Moving in November*, 2023; *Submission Submission*, 2019), she manipulates gadgets and activates projections from her laptop, which form the décor for the following portrait. These projections include multiplied layers of Word documents that unfold and scroll on the wall behind her and on her performing body. (Lapadat, 2024) There is a mixture of pre-recorded and live activations. In her words, she “tr[ies] to integrate and interrogate what it might mean to physically, aesthetically, and practically use [her] computer as a participant in the performance” (*Moving in November*, 2023;

Submission Submission, 2019), which connects to my affiliation with non-human performers to some extent. The placement of the equipment openly on stage allows the audience to see the situation in the making but in her case, a mysterious element is added when the activations keep on happening when she is no longer operating the devices. There is a play between revealing and obscuring which I want to bring a sense of into my practice.

Discussing the placement of the devices brings up questions about the hierarchy of different spaces. In the context of the solo evening, containing three other performances, the space behind the control boards was predominantly used as nonperformer-technician space. It is then more natural to classify the tech corner as off-stage, although each solo of course sets its own logic. In *(invitation) to be sensitized*, I extensively used both the 'main' performance area, where the stage lights reach, and the side-stage area, where they do not. I enjoy contemplating the following: what if the performance space has no limits? What if there is no 'audience' space either and the audience is also performing, something that I was already experimenting with to some extent in the Dialogues - course demo. And if the performance space extends outside of studio 709, outside of the Theatre Academy building into the world, it is perhaps possible to directly transfer the attunements from the performance into real life as there is no separation between the two.

During this thesis-writing process, I have delved more deeply into concepts that have fascinated me but that I have not had the occasion to inspect this thoroughly before. The performer-activator is a concept that I am hoping to keep investigating in the future. I am not interested in sustaining a systematic performance practice based on *(invitation) to be sensitized*, like Joanne Scott has done. I do still want to keep exploring the directions and shapes that the performer-activator could take by continuing that research within a continuum of new, singular pieces of work.

When it comes to my work with non-human performers, I know that I will keep coming back to the question of decentralising the human in performances. I find it important to create alternative realities where non-humans are presented as actants as this hopefully unravels some of the separation between humans and non-humans outside of the

theatre, too. Ultimately, questioning anthropocentric structures helps me justify my dancing, performing and art-making in a world defined by global warming, biodiversity loss and irreversible environmental destruction. *(invitation) to be sensitized* and *landscapes of loss* instigated a very soft form of activism that I wish to further cultivate.

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