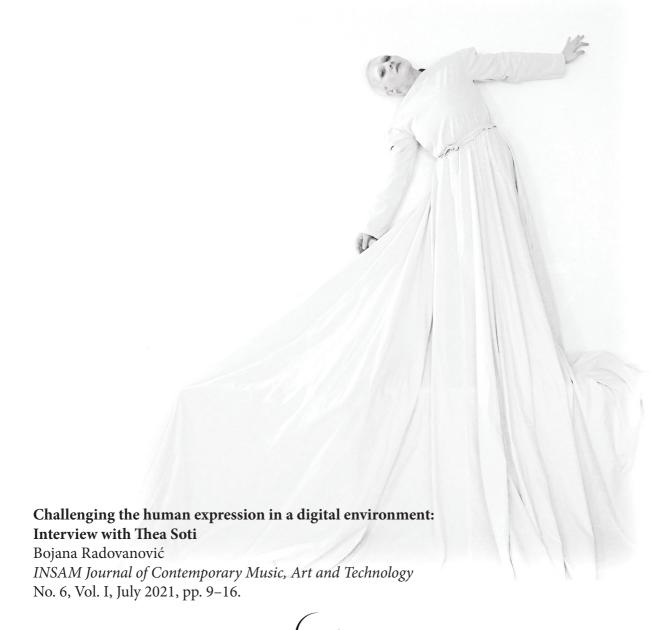# INSAM

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CHALLENGING THE HUMAN EXPRESSION IN A DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT:
Interview with Thea Soti[1]

Current global predicaments shape not only the conditions in which artists are expected to create and perform their work, but also pierce into their very creative process. To explore this issue further, we have had a conversation with Thea Soti, a "new-age vocalist", experimental performance and sound artist.[2] She is mainly researching in the areas of improvisation, electroacoustic compositions and performative arts, focusing on the voice. In her works, Soti gives space to current socio-political issues, modern representation of the female body, beauty myths, collective fear, brutality or extreme psychological states, boundaries of language.

We have discussed some themes that are persistent in Soti's artistic endeavors in the last several years such as the relationship between human and posthuman, voice in a digital context, as well as her most recent projects such as VØICES, Live Solo Sets series, and the White Series. Live Solo Sets and the White Series were directly influenced and, in a way, inspired by the Covid-19 pandemic, thus giving the opportunity for Thea Soti to explore the ways of (artistic) existing in digital and technological contemporary world.

MULTISKINNED
by Thea Soti, Nefeli Papadimouli, Youssef Chebbi

A lot of your recent work dives deep into the question of what it means to be human. Could you explain to us your understanding of the relation between voice and a human?

Ironically, the more I have worked with machines (digital or analog effects), the more I became aware of what the human voice really is without them. Back then, when I was mostly using my acoustic voice in free-improvised setups, I might have just been too close to it. The more I started adding effects to the voice, twisting and manipulating it, processing, altering it both live or in the studio, the more conscious I became about what the real human aspect of the voice was. It sounds contradictory, but exactly the loss of its naturalness underlined its original, naked character. It is not only about how it sounds. It is about imperfection and fragility. For example, a human-made loop (a repetitive phrase) is never going to sound like a computer-generated sample, even if made out of human voice. Whenever I can hear that a voice almost breaks, reaches its limits, it is the most human to me. A computer-generated voice could never have this effect. Furthermore, it is also the distance between the point of creation and the reception. When I sing acoustically, you are closer to the source of the voice. Even if it is just a recording and a not live experience, you can hear that the sound is produced in a way that is closer to your own experience, how you also use your own voice in everyday life. This helps you to relate and thus generates an instant confidential togetherness. In contrast to this, when you hear a digitally processed voice, you lose this proximity and maybe a level of the "humanity" of the voice also disappears. I call it "human warmth". It is obviously a digital signal and it has cold, computer-generated characteristics. Just think of the voice of a web translator, the navigator in the car or Siri. For me, the biggest challenge is how to

balance this proximity of the human voice in digital contexts, how to play with it, stretch its limits. This is what nowadays my solo sets or audio-visual pieces deal with and work around – how far can we operate with and within digital environments and still keep the legacy of the human character of the voice.

In your opinion and experience, how does the voice represent a body and its identities?

I used to work at a radio station, when I was younger. It was a super small local station in Hajdukovo, Vojvodina. I was 15 or 16 and was reading the classified ads and the news. Regardless of the topic or program, I was fascinated by the thought that hundreds of people can hear my voice, I can tell them "good morning" but they never see my face or body. I still think, it is magic. That was my first experience separating the body from voice. Unconsciously, of course. Later, I got my own radio show and I was given the possibility to do interviews on air, receive calls from the listeners, etc. I found it so amazing to carry out human communication with this "limited" exposure. This fascination probably accompanied me all along the way, even when I started using my voice in more music-based settings. I often wonder, how would we perceive each other, if we didn´t have bodies or couldn´t see but only hear each other. You hear a voice and you think you can tell so much, male or female, approximate age, maybe race or geographical affiliation, origin (based on language and accent), level of education, personal character, mood, approach to the conversation partner or situation, and so on – just to mention a few elements. I get more excited though, if we separate these things from each other and try to challenge these deeply embedded expectations and beliefs. My solo research also deals with this topic: how to challenge and re-interpret identities through decontextualizing the human voice. What if you see me (a female vocalist) with a voice pitched down on stage and it doesn´t fit your imagined looks or character. What if I use "artificial avatar languages" but you don´t see a robot, but a human? Can I challenge your daily micro-stereotypes and discriminative behavior by showing you that your systems aren´t always working?

What is intriguing and provocative for you in the relation between voice and modern technology?

The human voice is so diverse, rich and full of possibilities on its own that you would never have to reach out to live electronics, sampling or digitalization and you would still never run out of innovative ideas. On the other hand, for me personally, starting to process the voice and indulge into digital environments, was both an aesthetical and conceptual decision. I always make an effort to stay

in touch with the "here and now", because I do believe that an honest dialogue can only be established if we decide to stay connected to the people of the street and current happenings. In our technology-infused world, where we hear robotic sounds, AI assistants, Siri is talking to us, I felt a strong need to react and explore this further. I am intrigued by the challenge to investigate various artistic solutions, expressions and methods on how to integrate modern technology and my way of working with the voice.

Compared to human/humanism, can you define what posthuman means to you in a contemporary context?

Initially, posthuman refers to something that is beyond human, that expands the traditional possibilities of our humanly world and blurs the boundaries between technology, imaginary and human. In my case, I use the computer to extend my sound world. Even though the majority of my work is based upon improvisation or composition with my voice, the computer plays a huge role in it, both as a technical factor (digital working space and sets of tools, effects) but also as an improviser. I use a lot of randomized tools where the choices are made by the computer. This way the machine takes over a new role and also extends my human possibilities. This is a game between controllable and uncontrollable, but also composed and randomized. And if we carry on with this example, we can definitely see that this restructures not only my conventional work flow, but also the creative process: I compose, I improvise and I even sing differently. If I know I have a huge reverb on my voice with a randomized glitch delay, I will definitely use my voice differently, as if it was "just" a simply amplified natural, pure voice. In a further contemporary cultural reference, this way of working with the voice also reflects upon many other phenomena that are part of our daily lives: constant change of personalities, virtual presence, filtering our photos, IG filters (natural or avatar-like), etc. In my opinion, this is rooted in a kind of modern-day escapism. Everybody wants to find another "me", another life, another reality. Through our present technology, it is also (almost) possible. I have this sensation that if I extend my voice through machines, I feel closer to the reality that we are currently experiencing.

What, then, can make a voice posthuman? Can anything? Or does the voice remain human in the posthuman environment?

This is the main question of my solo works. So I tend to answer this question with further questions. When does the human voice lose its human touch? If I create a synthesizer-sounding live effect with my voice, can you tell the difference, if it's a digital instrument or a human voice with digital effects? How will the

human expression be challenged in a digital environment? Does the legacy of using a human voice ever disappear? I think the topic is immensely interesting and questions not only the human voice in a musical context but even in a larger context our human being as a whole. How long do we feel comfortable listening to Siri? Can we get attached to an AI voice? Can we cry at a machine-generated (fake) folksong? Where does our imagination and a computer-based new reality end? Playing and experimenting with these thoughts and elements are the main topic of my current work in very different formats.

What is your technological basis for Live Solo Sets 2020? What are the elements of the performance, except your voice?

I am mainly working with precisely crafted and designed sets of Ableton Live. As I am quite an impatient person, I wanted to be able to create instantly, so I decided to work with Ableton as I find it very user-friendly and fast to learn. Even though, I am very much intrigued by the endless possibilities of other programs, such as Max Msp or Supercollider. My solo sets are very different from each other. I usually create a whole concept for every single set. This could be based on a specific topic or sound aesthetics, but even a technical setup. Sometimes, I exclusively use my voice as a musical element and create everything through live processing. Other times, I do prepare and create complex instrumental environments (select and prepare synths and / or drum sounds). In one of my sets, I used a lot of pre-recorded samples created by field recordings, home recordings of everyday objects or news snippets. I also work with text-based environments: for a Budapest-based gallery presenting a show for contemporary jewelry, I exquisitely created a story-telling set in the Hungarian language with a sound poem written by me. For the Melbourne-based session, I am reflecting on the topic of "Black Lives Matter" as back then in 2020, it was the loudest topic screaming out of the media.

What is the sound material you were using in these sets?

I started recording these home-made solo sets as the pandemic hit the world. I was asked to do some streaming concerts for different digital festivals. First, I didn´t want to do it, but then it was so much fun and such a good challenge, that I decided to record at least one live set per month – for myself. The sets are consciously built upon my voice, but sometimes I choose to integrate digital instruments, play the keyboard, prepare live recordings or pre-recorded materials, often field recordings. I enjoy creating these sessions. It is like designing artificial environments and making rules for the sound. I know what kind of elements are at my disposal and I can use them to generate a set any time with this material, which

then will always turn out to be very different yet super similar – as the elements and tools are defined. It is like a fun new way of composing. It will carry my personal note made by the decisions beforehand, yet leave the space to combine the elements freely in the moment. Thus it stays fresh and improvised, yet inside of a composed frame. I feel always challenged to balance these two ends. Even back then, when I was working with only acoustic instruments, this used to be a big topic. Especially when writing for orchestras or larger setups.

How do you manipulate the initial idea and sound, both in your vocal interpretation and technologically?

I think, it works similarly as in a live improvisational setup with real musicians. It is reaction and interaction. I sing, then I manipulate my singing. Then the sound that I created manipulates my singing, so I react to myself again, but differently. So it works both ways. Interacting with machines does exist on this level, too. Regarding the interpretation, funnily, I sometimes become a character through this process, as I don´t even recognize my own voice anymore. I often play with this feeling triggered by the danger of not exactly knowing how the computer will make me sound. It is a thrill.

How do Live Solo Sets differ from the VØICES series? Both projects center voice and include technology. Are they situated on the same line of self- and posthuman discovery?

I think, they only differ in chronology. VØICES was my very first initiative to do concerts, also uniting the process with a kind of research character, where I was allowed to experiment, try out different things and invite collaborators. The solo sets carry on this idea to dig deeper and explore vocal possibilities, but as collaborations were not possible last year, I concentrated myself on my solo. VØICES was also created with the idea to interconnect various art scenes, encourage collaborations between different cities and disciplines. In Budapest, I created a huge performance concert with a choreographed, self-trained free-improvising choir, video installation and a live band. In Helsinki, I re-worked the piece for a huge underground tunnel and a different constellation of participating musicians. In the Cologne Edition, I wrote a new-age opera performance for 11 solo voices, featuring my favorite vocalists of the town. VØICES always tried to integrate space and movement, too. My solo sets are mostly static and aiming to function as mini concerts. Even though I started exploring the idea of connecting the "solo sets" with something else and this is how I came up with the White Series (audiovisual miniatures) or with my poetry installation "Waiting For My Feet To Dry", both conceived during my artistic residency in Paris.

Your voice is also one of the crucial elements in the White Series. Short commentary in description boxes give us snippets of your thought process. Can you elaborate on the basic idea of this series? What would you like to escape and what do you fear (or just acknowledge, as in White Flood's "The most essential element of human life can also kill us")?

First, it just started with experimentation by connecting my sound environment with visual elements. I wanted to do research around that without too much thinking or planning. As this all happened during the complete lockdown in Paris, I just took the camera and filmed myself. Sometimes, I filmed specific ideas to the sound, sometimes I sang to the images. Soon, I realized that all the images were kind of white or using shades of white. I collected the pieces into a series, as I found that they resonate with each other even beyond their color. They also don´t have a beginning or ending really, but they are intertwined in topic and aesthetics likewise. They are pieces of a big whiteness, confusion, floating, something untouchable, an indescribable experience that I was going through. I felt totally losing control of what was happening around me. I guess, everybody did. So I just let the camera move in my hand without control. For example, if you observe the piece called "Overwhite", this is very strongly present. Later, it evolved into something more organized and conceptualized. For example, the piece I created as a commission for

ON – Neue Musik Köln (Office for Contemporary Music in Cologne), was already based on a mini-study about futuristic soundscapes and an avatar-guided initiation process. This way the video and the sound were scripted as a video performance. I decided to create these electronic compositions by only using my own voice. Of course, it is processed and recycled all the way through, but still everything you hear, comes out of my body. "The White Series" is somehow a huge contradiction: the human voice is manipulated into something that doesn't even sound human anymore, yet you are ought to feel the human touch, the warmth of a living body in the sounds and the images. It's like the color white: They say, white collects all the colors, yet for me, it is undoubtedly the most colorless phenomenon, it is not even a color, it's a complex and yet simple mood.

What is the role of voice in uncovering or exploring the "futuristic initiation rites", "virtual parallel realities" and "isolated civilizations on the edge of human and non-human"? Can the voice here be – analogues to our breath that keeps us alive – the one element that keeps us human?

In my video performance "White Entering", I aimed to explore the idea, how it would feel like if we arrived into a parallel universe. We didn't speak the language or recognize the sounds, thus being forced to re-define our whole communication system. The audiovisual miniature gives us an absurd world where this alien or avatar sings a folk song that is obviously a way of communicating. The avatar presents a (symbolic) movement that this new being also tries to learn to do by simple repetition – just like we learn to walk or talk as a child. I was interested in the experiment creating artificial universes through creating artificial sounds, languages, folksongs. It is like going backwards into a futuristic heritage of non-existing worlds. Can I build up a futuristic universe with its "history" based in the present through manipulating my voice? That was my main question. I don't know if it is the breath that keeps us alive or the capability to learn and adjust to different communication methods. Language, singing, speaking are all simple means of communication. We don't have to professionalize in speaking or singing to be able to communicate. We just learn it as a child. This naturalness of the human voice and that of the language carries all the beauties and – I am more than sure – all the solutions to the world. The question is, when we grow up, can we still remember and consciously use our voice for communication, exchange, learning, extending realities by not only speaking, but also listening and understanding. "White Entering" stands for this, too: the readiness for re-structuring realities, opening ourselves up to new concepts, understanding new languages, going against stereotypes and beliefs, entering new worlds through staying curious, adventurous, hungry. The video presents only a symbolic story in form of a micro-study, but hopefully its statement manages to resonate longer than the four minutes.