

*This text appeared on ECHTRAI 4 spring/summer 2024 – AnMòr Studio*

## We Have Zero Visibility - an interview

Belinda Guerriero, gallery owner, curator and antiques dealer interviews sound designer Andrea Cera about a project called “We Have Zero Visibility”.



From the series 'Fertilia liminale', Waterless car wash, digital negative, 2023, Dimitrije Roggero

Revisiting the almost unknown drama of the Ahvani plateau, Cera managed to witness what remains of its original landscape. In this interview we investigate his quest for the Ahvani lost sounds, a quest prompted by the casual discovery of an archive of documents, whose authenticity has never been established.

BG

Andrea, I would first ask you to describe the landscape, the sounds and the voices you heard and observed during your time in Ahvani and how long did you stay on this plateau for.

AC

It took me a long time to find the plateau. And when I found it, in some way I never came back.

As I told you by phone, in Spring '20 I found in the mail box a USB memory stick with encrypted scans of documents describing an environmental disaster that destroyed a place called "Ahvani plateau".

Two years later, in Summer '22, I managed to climb to the plateau with a rented monocopter, despite my aversion to travel. I quickly located the remains of a fuel station, where the original documents must have been found: three walls with a long, streamlined roof extending a couple of meters beyond, protecting two holes in the ground, where the pumps had been located.

Almost everything in the plateau was covered in a bubbly moss, a kind of withered mold, which stuck like resin, if touched. It diffused a faint crackling sound, and this crackling was everywhere, an insistent, soft background. I remember the first night when I saw the luminescence emanating from the moss. A black wind was pushing toward east streams of low clouds, suddenly gray and dense as the sun slid behind a wall of mountains. In a few minutes the plains around my tent were dark, and a trembling light, light green, or yellow, began to shine abstract shapes on the ground, through the dead trees, across the few remaining pieces of concrete.

Smelling like dried fuel and ozone, this moss was the mixture of nanoagents and vegetal fibers which had contaminated the flora and the inhabitants of the plateau.

BG

What drove you to go to a place like this, so difficult to reach?

From the way you describe it, I don't think I've ever been there.

Visually I don't associate it with anything, but I think I heard that disquieting background noise you speak of. I don't remember where or when and I don't know if it came from above or from the surrounding ground. A sort of wet sound. I really don't know, but maybe I'm wrong.

Sorry, I interrupted you.

My question is: what led you to start such a journey?

AC

When I discovered the documents about the plateau, a subtle nostalgia took me, as if I already knew the place, as if I had already been there. I needed to go and see, if only to

be sure of what was real and what imaginary; and also to find which entity had collected and scanned the documents in the USB memory I had received.

I immediately got hooked to the plateau's delicate mix of sound, smell and light : it was mid-day, the moment when the moss replicates and feeds. The air was dense with the fuel / ozone smell, mixed with nebulized powders of whatever was being assimilated, probably the decrepit plastic covering of the landing platform, or its concrete base.

The crackling sounds were so liquid that I could almost touch them; the pulverized white / pink fog desaturated the foreground hills and reduced the distant amphitheater of giant mountains into a crumpled sheet of paper. How does someone survive in such a desolate landscape? How can you resist? What keeps you from falling into its pull?

BG

I guess that one can survive holding on to memories.

I abide in this wasteland because I'm tormented by the need to understand what happened. Maybe I need to understand what happened. I need to integrate something into the faint images I might still have of someone.

I try to hold on to the remains: the sound of someone's voice or music, however fading due to the perpetual background noise I hear. Night and day. Never ending. Can you hear it too?

This continuous crackling sound interferes with my memory.

This place is driving me crazy.

Everything loses consistency here.

Did you notice the small lake over there? Seems like its waters did not have that color, that smell and that strange anti-clockwise circular movement that dazes me and makes me feel ill.

Why did you place your tent right there? Its waters terrify me.

Can you help me? Can you explain to what extent has the anthropomorphization process altered this landscape? Do you think that the green world will still be able to emerge again? Or is the area too corrupted by the human intervention?

AC

I don't know if I can help you : here, now, there is a new nature, where some essence of "human" has been integrated inside the core of everything, even if humans are no longer

here. The mold is a man-made mixture of organic fibers and self-replicating nanoagents, algorithms. It has assimilated almost all the previous life forms, finding energy also in non-living materials.

Along the centuries it will corrode the mountains, lower their base, dry out the ocean surrounding it, and then other continents, until it will reduce the diameter of the planet, micron by micron, and arrive at its core, and then eat itself into the void and migrate to the infinite : pure greed, pure competition.

BG

Starting from the current state of Ahvani, can you briefly explain to us what has happened to its inhabitants in recent times? And maybe to both of us?

After all, since you are the basis of my reasoning, I feel I must also investigate the nature of my essence, as if I were just a projection of what you are looking for. An investigation within the investigation.

Maybe I shouldn't have insisted on interviewing you right here.

Ahvani really is a sinister place, don't you think so?

AC

What I see now in the plateau confirms what can be suspected from the documents : that an industrial incident caused a contamination of pseudo-intelligent chemical nanoagents mixed with natural elements. These agents embodied various life forms, on a slow process which lasted probably some centuries. The civilization of the plateau was initially similar to the civilization of any industrial country. But after the regional government isolated the zone, the Ahvani population drifted into a strange culture, filled with grief, desperation, music, and a slow descent into a form of mental disfunction. Probably humans lasted no more than three or four generations.

The documents I found possibly refer to one of the last persons who died, surely someone from the last generation. It seems that the name sounded like "Evar Oristoy", referring to a failed musician from the so-called "Sgak" scene.

What, on your side, got you initially interested in this "Evar Oristoy"? Are you sure "Evar Oristoy" is real and not imaginary? Are you sure of your nature?

BG

The presence of Evar Oristoy always managed to calm me down when I ran away and hid in the basement. This thought allowed me to squat in a corner for hours : every now and then Evar looked at me, and spoke to me and advised me to be very careful, because the plateau had become too dangerous to go around alone.

I told him that I felt safe only there with him. Nobody was looking for me anymore. There might have been only a few of us left. Maybe almost everyone had fled or disappeared or...

To calm me down he always repeated that something would change, not mutated, only changed. Maybe someone from far away could have helped us.

Sometimes his voice would tremble and then he would start playing again.

But now Andrea I'm starting to doubt my faint memories and I'm more and more attracted to these soft expanses of moss, where I often lie down on.

I don't understand how it can quietly alter the nuances of my thoughts.

I perceive myself just as a thought, hybridized with notions that are not mine.

I read what you write about people "segregated in an exclusion zone, the Ahvani plateau, where music rituals, called Sgak, have an unusual importance."

Can you explain this music to me? I don't remember it anymore.

Am I one of these people? Are you?

AC

Maybe you remember it differently. It is just a change. It's not amnesia. But we are still immersed in that subtle background of cracklings. Only the wind creates some variation, moving clouds of cracklings around, channelling them through valleys and plains, making them move like swarms around the head. No other sound exists. This fake silence is sometimes broken by the crumbling of a piece of wall somewhere, the falling of a dead branch, my steps squishing the moss.

Talking about the plateau's lost civilization, we know very little of their musical expressions: we have some documents about their so-called Sgak musical rites, a reconstruction of the genre's origins and just one recording, probably one of the last pieces of music produced in the plateau.

But it seems that the plateau was full of music, especially towards the end of the civilization, when people lost ability to talk and bonded through sound. The Sgak rites

lasted days, accompanied by never ending, perpetually morphing musical tracks, which merged one after the other. They had bands, usually formed by four musicians. We know some of their names, some song titles; we know that Oristoy had been a member of a Sgak band called "The Thrizters".

Public was heavily intoxicated with a substance called "Sab", a fluorescent drink made from contaminated herbs, which gave confusion and energy. Even if the climate was cold, these rites were performed in open air. They dressed strangely, a mixture of ski-wear, bandages on the head and ankles made of vegetable wool, kept together with hand-made metal clamps, and plastic protections for body parts compromised by the moss.

BG

Have you met other people who connected you to the figure of "Evar Oristoy"? Do you think you'll come back here? How will your research evolve now?

But don't you think that maybe I could accompany you and be useful in some way, if only I could focus my memories well. The more your landscape description progresses, the more I feel sensations that have long been dormant. I would like to come with you. Maybe you know a lot more than you think. After all, you are the only one who can do something for Evar, I'm sure of it.

You know about other people too, right? You know a lot about me too.

I'm afraid you're not here just to give this interview, are you?

AC

I think I'm meeting someone, I know of other people, but it is strange, I'm not sure why I'm here now. In Summer '23 I placed my tent close to a small lake, filled with a kind of green yellow cream which slowly moved counter clock-wise, as if a giant hand had been nursing a cup ages ago, and the movement was infinitely close to stopping.

At night, the fluorescent emanation from the moss created a gas over the lake, and sometimes this gas took tridimensional forms. Once it became a human figure, floating distant and close at the same time. The crackling morphed into a hiss, then a gurgle, then a broken voice. I think it was some kind of mutation of one of the last inhabitants, probably a once-real person, imitated by the nanoagents and replicated with features fading night after night. For a few moments I talked with this voice, which sounded vaguely feminine. I even transcribed some parts of our dialogue, when she seemed to be a little less fading away, desperately clinging to vanishing memories, droned out by the soundscape of the plateau.

In the golden years of Ahvani, she had a kind of shop where she sold strange things, like small paintings, pieces of clothing, rare books, jewels, and of course bottles of “Sab”. At that time, the Ahvani population was still able to verbalize and use written words, and even when we talked she had the instinct to ask me to do some kind of interview for a small ‘zine’, as she called it. This magazine was used to connect people from the Sgak scene.

Here you see? It's this one. I bought it in her shop too.

But only these few phrases I was able to transcribe, remain to witness that dialogue.

This is a fictional project