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Curating Islandness

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Curating Islandness The Case of Marosi Festival (Stromboli, IT)

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Abstract

This paper stems from the ongoing research project *Performing Islandness. Performance, Dramaturgy and Curatorship of the Island since the Seventies* (@Peril, 2022–2025), which investigates the island as a generative space for performative, dramaturgical, and curatorial practices. It explores how islands operate both as theoretical objects – symbolic, metaphorical – and as specific places where artistic practices are situated. By intersecting Performance Studies with Island Studies, the project seeks to develop a non-continental and decentralized account of performative practices, with particular attention to the Italian context. The first section of this paper outlines the theoretical framework, situating recent debates within Island and Performance Studies. While earlier approaches considered islands “on their own terms” (McCall, 1994), subsequent scholarship has emphasised relational perspectives (Baldacchino, 2018; Pugh & Chandler, 2021). In this context, islands appear as epistemic paradigms: not isolated enclaves, but thresholds where ecological, cultural, and political entanglements converge. Performance Studies provide a productive lens for this paradigm, as highlighted by Schneider’s (2020) reflections on liminality and littorality. The second section focuses on Marosi Festival (Stromboli, 2017–ongoing), a long-term initiative founded by Giulia Ferrato and co-directed with Anna Basti. Conceived as an experiment in “insular curatorship,” Marosi anchors its programming in dialogue with the island’s landscapes, communities, archives and memories. Over time, it has evolved into a festival that weaves ecological sensitivity, live arts, and local knowledge into situated curatorial practices. The paper then turns to the 2025 edition, *Variations on the Singularities of the Sea*, which approached the sea not as scenery but as co-author. Central to the program was *The Last Lamentation* by Valentina Medda, a multimedia work rooted in Sardinian traditions of lament and reimagined as a contemporary ritual for the Mediterranean. Through minimal gestures and layered sound, the work became a performative archive of mourning and transformation. Taken together, these reflections suggest that performance and curatorship, when situated in island contexts, can foster ecological ways of inhabiting, opening imaginaries of care, connection, transformation.

Keywords: islandness, island studies, performance studies, insular curatorship, Marosi Festival

Curating Islandness

The contribution stems from the ongoing research project *Performing Islandness. Performance, Dramaturgy and Curatorship of the Island since the Seventies* (@Peril, 2022–2025), which undertakes a critical investigation of the island as a generative space for performative, dramaturgical, sound-based, and curatorial practices, with a specific focus on the Italian context. @PERIL seeks to systematically analyse the relationship between performance and insularity. The project’s overall objective consists of an analysis of artistic theories and practices that have engaged with the island as specific territories, both theoretical and material.

The island functions both as a *theoretical object* (symbolic, metaphorical) and as place and context, where performative practices are situated and dealt with. The aim of the research is to outline a “non-continental” (Glissant 1990) and decentralized history of performative practices, which remains “isolated” even in historiographies.

The overall methodology is grounded in Performance Studies and their potential intersection with Island Studies. This approach wants to establish links with Architecture, particularly concerning territorial planning related to living policies. The project is situated within the broader framework of Environmental Humanities, weaving together feminist thought and political ecology.

A key case study is Marosi Festival (Stromboli, 2017–ongoing), a long-term initiative that integrates performance, research, and place-based practices to articulate an “insular curatorial” perspective. This paper offers a critical reading of Marosi’s curatorial politics, with a specific focus on its 2025 edition. It examines how the festival articulates a mode of situated curatorship that foregrounds live arts practices, ecological sensitivity, local knowledge, and collaborative processes. By doing so, it reflects on the potential of performance and curatorship to contribute to emerging ecocritical and relational paradigms within island geographies.

Island as a Theoretical Object

Over the past few decades, Island Studies — emerging in the mid-80s — have offered new critical perspectives for understanding how knowledge and practices take shape within insular geographies. Islands appear not only as localised laboratories of complex ecological relations, but also as conceptual devices for reading the tensions of today: autonomy and separation, tourism and belonging, habitability and risk, fragility and healing. As Deleuze (2007) suggests, “to dream of islands — whether with anguish or with joy — means dreaming of being separated, far from the continent, of being alone and lost; or it means dreaming of starting again, recreating, beginning anew” (p. 7). In contrast, Derrida (2007)

frames insularity as an irreducible condition of singularity, marked by interruptions and separations that resist any stable passage or translation.

Early approaches framed islands “on their own terms” (McCall, 1994). Hau‘ofa’s (1994) seminal text *Our Sea of Islands* articulated a decolonial vision in which islands are not “tiny spaces” but nodes of expansive oceanic connections. More recent perspectives have shifted toward a relational understanding of islandness (Baldacchino, 2018), which describes islands as both phenomenological sites and epistemological challenges (Hay, 2006), like the Anthropocenic one. As Pugh and Chandler (2021) argue, “working with islands as sites of relational entanglements, affordances, and feedback effects has been crucial for the generation of correlational analytics in Anthropocene thinking” (p. 195).

The island emerges as an epistemic paradigm: not a mythic enclave of separation but a material and symbolic site where the most turbulent effects of the global eco-political crisis — and the most radical desires for transformation — converge. The performative arts have been particularly responsive to this paradigm, engaging insular spaces as liminal laboratories for reimagining dwelling, belonging, and world-making. Rebecca Schneider (2020) has offered one of the most compelling arguments for bridging Island Studies and Performance Studies:

Performance studies may share something with island studies if the shifting aqueous netherworld of sea and shore shares something with the movement into and out of materiality and immateriality that characterizes zones of performance. Dance, theatre, orature, and gestures that repeat are at once singular and citational, continually de- and re-composing. Considered in relation to the larger landmass of ‘the real’, theatrical or performance-based acts such as stories, dances, and plays are not real but not not real, just as Landship dancers are not at sea but not not at sea. In the netherworld of performance, solid states oscillate toward becoming undone, and fluid states syncopate with stasis. The so-called human, too, laps at its own borders as one so-called human plays at becoming another, speaks through another, or takes the shape of a spirit, a stone, a tree, a ship, a wave, a dream, a bird. (...) The suggestion here is that thinking with shoals, and liminality/littorality in general, may enable a capacity toward what we do not/yet/know. (p. 207)

In this light, Schneider’s insight underscores how both fields, Island Studies and Performance Studies, are engaged in theorising liminality, threshold conditions, and the generative potential of oscillation. Islands, as both concept and territory, are cast as theoretical figures to which the performative arts respond with their own utopian

imaginaries, negotiating the thresholds between separation and relation, reality and dreams, memory and projection.

Island as a Specific Place. Marosi Festival, the project

A key case study of this research is Marosi Festival (Stromboli, 2017–ongoing), a long-term initiative that integrates performance, research, and place-based practices to articulate an “insular curatorial” perspective. Marosi Festival was conceived by Giulia Ferrato, whose background spans dance and choreography, a PhD in African Studies, and extensive work as a cultural programmer in the field of performing arts. Giulia Ferrato also holds a deep, emotional bond with Stromboli, one of the Aeolian Islands, the most remote from the main island of Sicily. Stromboli is reachable from Naples by a night ferry that arrives at dawn at the foot of the volcano that dominates the island. The island’s imagery is deeply tied to one of the most iconic films of neorealist cinema: *Stromboli, Land of God* (1950) by Roberto Rossellini, starring Ingrid Bergman. The film focuses precisely on the stark exceptionality of this isolated land, shaped by the moods of its volcano, wild and resistant to contamination and change.

Marosi, however, shifts focus from the rootedness of land to the fluidity of water: the very name, *Marosi*, means stormy seas, evoking the waves’ energetic and transformative force. The festival is grounded not in the idea of separation, but in the interconnectivity that flows through water. With this vision, Giulia Ferrato founded Marosi Festival in 2017 and later began directing it together with Anna Basti.

Its first iteration, Edition 0, was titled *Dans Festival*. It issued a call to gather and connect artists, primarily from the world of dance. It was a phase of exploration, an experiment in working together within a specific insular site, adapting artistic practices and inventing new compositional methods inspired by the terrain, the landscape, and the local community.

Over time, Marosi has transformed from a platform for encounter and exchange into a fully-fledged festival, one that anchors its artistic programming in ongoing research around themes and works. The starting point is always a question addressed to the territory — a conversation with the place — not a program imposed from outside, but a curatorial approach shaped in dialogue with the land, the people, and the delicate relational intimacies that define the Stromboli context, one densely layered in both environmental and symbolic terms. In this framework, relationships and programming are deeply intertwined, giving rise to a situated curatorship grounded in live arts, ecological sensitivity, local knowledge, and collaborative processes.

Island as a Specific Place. Marosi Festival, 2025

The latest edition of Marosi Festival was entirely dedicated to the sea. Its title, *Variations on the Singularities of the Sea*, affirms a plural conception of the sea: not as a flat, romantic backdrop, but as a force, an agent, a “body of water” (Neimanis, 2017) that receives and gives back, and that heals and wounds. The festival approached the sea as an epistemological alternative to land, as a living body claiming its right to the future, and as an archive of submerged stories. The program unfolded through conversations called “shores”, as well as installations, storytelling, and itinerant performances across and around the water.

It opened with the presentation of an initiative still in progress: the *Experimental Sound Archive of the Aeolian Islands*, a research and artistic platform by Marosi Festival and Edizioni Brigantino, dedicated to collecting oral and sonic memory from the archipelago. One full day of programming took place, quite literally, at sea: it was a boat journey from Stromboli’s main dock to Ginostra, the island’s remote western edge, closest to the volcano and unreachable by public transport. During a three-part concert by the singer Maria Violenza, rooted in the Sicilian folk tradition, the sound of the sea moved through the performance, sometimes amplifying the singer’s voice, sometimes swallowing it. Sound drifted across the water, reshaped by waves and distance: the sea became an acoustic filter, a live effect. The curatorial intention was clear: to treat the sea not as scenery, but as co-author.

The edition’s core project was *The Last Lamentation*, a multimedia work by Valentina Medda, launched in 2022 and presented here in its performative form. Medda had undertaken an extended residency in the abandoned interior of Sardinia, searching for traditions such as lamentation and embroidery. As the dramaturg and curator Maria Paola Zedda (2020) notes, the work “could be described as a funeral rite for the Mediterranean, conceived as a place of suspension, of absence, of disappearance. The work narrates the tragedy of the sea through a hypnotic vocal and choreographic score, rewriting ritual codes into abstract, contemporary form” (pp. 207–208). Medda gathered recordings and personal archives from women, carrying those memories to other shores, to other voices, to other women. She transformed this fragile repertoire into performance. The choreographic score drew on minimal gestures — the brushing of hair, the tearing of it, the soft touch of fabric, the sob rendered as breath — sealed by a sound composition that layered voice, breathing, recorded traces, and the live sound of the sea.

Can we, through ritual, tell new mythologies, new stories of origin? How? In yet another attempt to cross boundaries — here between artistic practice and world-making — and starting precisely from mourning, I imagine taking this dramaturgy of lament that I have elaborated out of the space of art, and turning it into a structure

through which to confront unresolved crises: an instrument of shared care, a grassroots healing practice that allows us to reclaim the process of recovery and rebirth, and that, in doing so, binds us together beyond kinship (Medda, 2025, p. 353).

In this way, *The Last Lamentation* situates itself between memory and sea, loss and resonance, translating the Mediterranean into a performative archive of grief, but also into a space of re-inhabitation and potential reconnection.

Conclusion

This paper has moved from theoretical perspectives on islandness to the situated practices of Marosi Festival, showing how islands work both as conceptual figures and as lived contexts for performance. The island appears as an epistemic paradigm, fragile and generative, bounded and relational, that informs curatorial approaches grounded in dialogue with place and community.

Marosi Festival exemplifies this mode of insular curatorship, shifting attention from land to sea, and from separation to interconnection. Its 2025 edition emphasized the sea as co-author, revealing how aquatic epistemologies can challenge established frameworks and open new imaginaries. Through projects such as *The Last Lamentation*, performance carries memory across waters, reframes ritual languages, and offers new modes of imaging the relationship with the environment and the archives.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that performance and curatorship, when situated in island contexts, can contribute not only to ecological and artistic reflection but also to wider imaginaries of culture, care, politics and transformation.

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