

Site-specific Performances and Community Activation: Participative Theatre in Florence beyond Overtourism and Gentrification

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Abstract

The presence of site-specific theatre companies in the gentrified and overtouristic city-centre of Florence (Italy) as a form of counter-gentrification and of re-discovery of public spaces for the community is a phenomenon related to the last twenty years. This essay focuses on two specific case studies, i.e. the two local cultural associations and theatre companies Cantiere Obraz and Genius Loci Performance. On the one hand, Cantiere Obraz is rooted in the Florentine area of Oltrarno and focuses its practices on public spaces, especially green urban areas, involving teenagers and young adults. On the other side of the river Arno, the site-specific projects of Genius Loci Performance aim at rediscovering public architectures in a social perspective through workshops and immersive performances. This study benefits from the interviews conducted with the directors of both theater companies and with some of the performers of Genius Loci Performance.

Introduction

In this essay the presence of site-specific theatre companies in the gentrified and overtouristic city-centre of Florence (Italy) is analyzed as a form of counter-gentrification and re-discovery of public spaces for the community through two specific case studies, which are the two local cultural associations and theatre companies *Cantiere Obraz* and *Genius Loci Performance*. Both based in the centre of Florence, Cantiere Obraz and Genius Loci Performance share the common goal of stimulating social awareness and collective memory in tourism-oriented, gentrified, forgotten, and re-qualified urban areas through site-specific performative practices, directly involving the inhabitants of Florence.

Both site-specific and participatory performance are rooted in the history of theatre itself, as Richard Schechner well explains in *Ritual Theater*, underlining the ritual, collective and therefore political potential of drama, from the Greek tragedy until the present¹:

Many think that because participation is new to them, it is new to the theatre. These same people automatically participate in responsive readings at church, flag saluting, standing for the national anthem at sporting matches, cheering, and agreeing to umpire a few innings of sandlot baseball. In fact, participation in theatrical events is a very old, widespread practice. (Schechner 1988, 8)

Coming to the post-modern (and post-dramatic) era, crucial have been the studies of Hans-Thies Lehmann (1999, 2004), who analyzed the works of some of the most important early authors of the so-called *terzo teatro*², such as Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, Augusto Boal, *The Living Theater*, *La Mama*, and Eugenio Barba's *Odin Teatret*, as well as agit-prop actions of the 1960s and 1970s. He located these experiments of non-conventional performative actions in an artistic and socio-political framework. Florian Malzacher (2023) extended the research field to contemporary theatre. Together with Schechner (1988), Rancière (2009) and Bishop (2020), Lehmann and Malzacher underline the central role of the audience members, directly involved in the performative actions, and of the identity of the performers³, more often than not non-professional actors⁴. The second deciding element emerging from the needs of post-dramatic performance is the perception and the experience of space.

“[...] Where then is the new political theatre? It is not absent. Today I can say that I have seen it, and that we have participated in it. The new political theatre, as Julian Beck cried out in the last scene of [...] Paradise Now, is in the street.”
(Malina 2012, 289)

We read in the *Piscator Notebook* of Judith Malina, where the efficacy of the performance and the specificity of the performative space immediately appear as intertwined. For this reason, in analyzing the nature of site-specific immersive performance, it is impossible to overlook the works of contemporary architectural and philosophical theorists concerned with the experiencing and perceiving of urban spaces, such as Henri Lefebvre (1974, 2009) and Bryan Lawson (2001), who suggest that environments, urban environments in particular, are perceived and ‘constructed’ in a variety of ways besides concretely and architectonically, according to social, personal, time-related, cultural, political and geographical factors: “Whatever space and time mean, place and occasion mean more. For space in the image of man is place and time in the image of man is occasion” (Aldo Van Eyck in Lawson 2001, 23). Drawing upon these references, the city of Florence, including its performing artists and its multifaceted identity, is the main object of investigation here.

Cities die in three ways: when they are destroyed by a ruthless enemy (like Carthage, which was razed to the ground by Rome in 146 B.C.); when a foreign people forcibly settles there, chasing away the natives and their gods (like Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztecs, which the Spanish conquistadors destroyed in 1521 and then built Mexico City on its ruins); or, finally, when the inhabitants lose their memory of themselves (Settis 2014, 10)

Thus wrote the art historian Salvatore Settis in his book *Se Venezia muore* [translation: ‘If Venice Dies’], which is dedicated to the discouraging destiny of the Italian city of Venice, nowadays almost literally submerged by tourism and gentrification and progressively abandoned by its inhabitants. Like Venice, the city of Florence, and especially its city center, is now undergoing a social, ethnographic, and housing crisis due to gentrification and overtourism (Celata & Romano 2022).⁵ Gentrification has been affecting Florence since at least the middle of the last century; however, this phenomenon, together with overtourism, has greatly intensified over the past

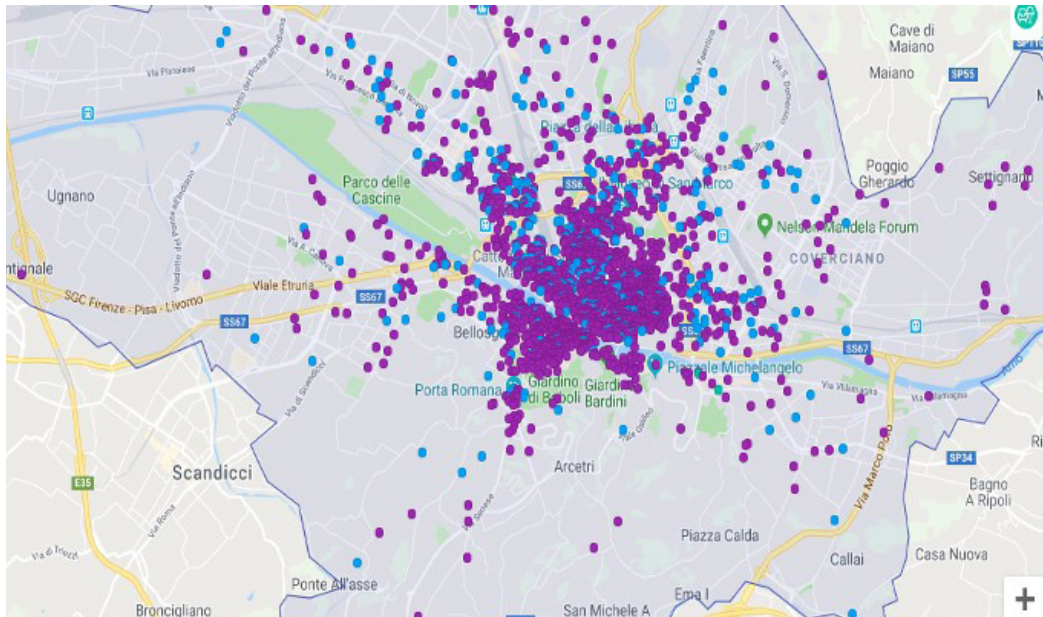


Figure 1: Airbnb offer in the Municipality of Florence in 2019
(Bortolotti 2019, 3)

two decades. According to data from the Florentine Municipal Archive, the city center has lost 30,000 residents since 1999⁶, while the number of short-time rentals has massively increased, despite the *Testo Unico sul Turismo* of Tuscany (Regional Law 86/2016), recently updated, which forbids short-time rentals in the UNESCO-area of town. In the meanwhile, locals have started to protest and many associations and groups have been created which oppose gentrification and the decline of the city center, such as *Ma noi quando si dorme* (area around the church of S. Ambrogio) and the *Referendum Salviamo Firenze* (a political project connected to the Italian left, particularly with *Firenze Progetto Comune*, and the mayoral candidate Antonella Bundu).⁷

The center of Florence is UNESCO-World heritage and home to numerous international cultural institutions⁸, whilst at the same time being a former working-class area. Regarding the status quo of performance and theatre companies in the city, the center has a long theatrical tradition that finds its roots in the 17th century with the Teatro Niccolini (1650), the Teatro della Pergola (1656) in the so-called *Centro Storico*, and the Teatro Goldoni (1807) in the area of Oltrarno. All of them are still active venues of the so-called ‘classical theatre’. Concerning the recent history of participative theatre, the ‘Cradle of the Renaissance’, even without being one of the most relevant Italian venues in terms of contemporary art and performance, is the host of at least three historical and nationally renowned organizations, which opened the gates for many small local initiatives: (1) the *Chille de*

la Balanza, which is the Neapolitan theatre company founded by Claudio Ascoli and Sissi Abbondanza in 1998 in the former Florentine Psychiatric Hospital of San Salvi.⁹ (2) The site-specific *Florentine Compagnia delle Seggiole*, founded in 1999 by Fabio Baronti. (3) The *Compagnia Virgilio Sieni*, which housed the internationally renowned dance company founded in 1992 by Virgilio Sieni at the Goldonetta in the Oltrarno district.

Involving the Florentine community has always played a crucial role for *Chille de la Balanza*, who, with the project *San Salvi Città Aperta* (San Salvi Open City), through theatre aim to socially (re)integrate and connect the history of the psychiatric hospital and its former patients, together with their illnesses and the related prejudices, following the model of the poet and dramatist Giuliano Scabia (1935-2021).¹⁰ Today, Chille de la Balanza, who recently celebrated its 50th anniversary with a public event held at Florence's town hall, Palazzo Vecchio¹¹, is a nationally relevant theatre venue which offers drama and playwriting classes for children and adults, organises conferences, festivals (*Spacciamo Culture*) and lectures. Among the numerous performances that Chille de la Balanza regularly presents throughout the year, all related to human rights, some are specifically dedicated to the area of San Salvi. In particular, *C'era una volta il manicomio...* [translation: 'Once upon a time, there was a mental hospital'] leads the audience through the area of the former mental hospital, while Claudio Ascoli tells anecdotes about its history and reads excerpts from letters and diaries of former patients, and *Siete venuti a trovarmi* [translation: 'Have you come to visit me?'], which is a one-hour monologue based on the real life of a patient.

Compagnia delle Seggiole was also created with the aim to bring theatre out of the theatres, by presenting site-specific performances based on pieces dedicated to the city of Florence and its history, such as Niccolò Machiavelli's *Mandragola* (1518) and *Principe* (1513). After the first successes, Fabio Baronti and his company started 'animating' Florentine venues, such as the Teatro della Pergola, the Charterhouse in Galluzzo, and the Military Geographic Institute, by enacting their history on site.¹² The Compagnia Virgilio Sieni, instead, is famous for its events choreographed by Virgilio Sieni and performed by non-professional local artists chosen among the students from *The School of Gesture*¹³, which often involve works of art of the Florentine Renaissance.

Under these circumstances it is extremely interesting to analyze the two case-studies of *Cantiere Otraz* and *Genius Loci Performance*, which are working hand in hand with the Florentine municipality in two different areas of the city center, respectively (A) *Quartiere*, or 'District 1, 3 and 4'¹⁴

(Cantiere Obraz) and (B) ‘*Quartiere 1, 2 and 5*’¹⁵ (Genius Loci Performance), and with different methods and backgrounds. It is interesting to observe that both organizations define themselves as a permanent learning- and research group and that they focus their theatre on the body and the fight against the ‘memory loss’ of the Florentine community.

Cantiere Obraz: A Performative Reservoir in Oltrarno

Cantiere Obraz is a theatre company founded in 2008 by Nikolay Karpov and Maria Shmaevich, with a strong focus on theatre training, following Vsevolod Meyerhold’s approach of Biomechanics (1922) and the playful and experimental approach of Anatoly Vasiliev, who is still a teacher at Cantiere Obraz’s Summer Schools. Cantiere Obraz has been in residence at the Teatro del Cestello since 2010, offering theatre classes¹⁶ to approximately a hundred pupils aged 5 to 99.¹⁷ The Teatro del Cestello as venue was founded at the beginning of the twentieth century and is known for its tradition of vernacular prose, as the theatre of the Florentine working-class. In fact, the ‘Cestello’ is situated in Piazza del Cestello, in the heart of the area of San Frediano in Oltrarno, the most important working-class district of the city center¹⁸, which is now suffering the progressive dismantling of its community life¹⁹ as a result of increasing gentrification. The theatre,

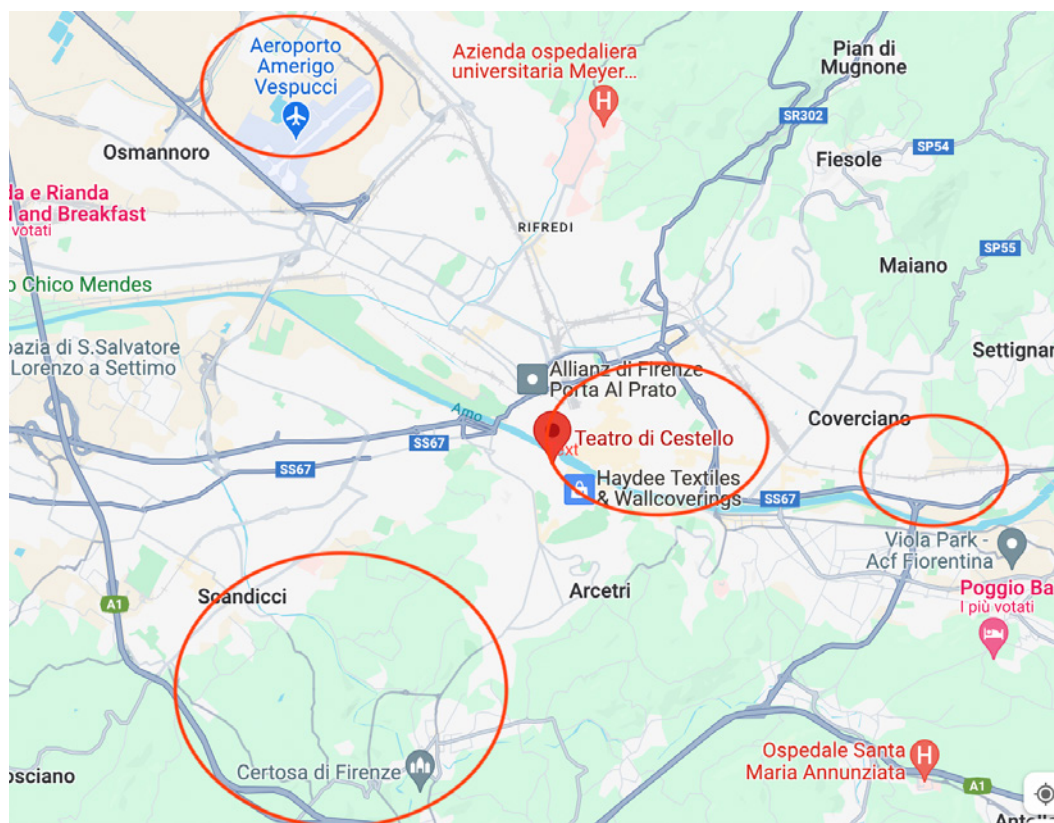


Figure 2: Performing areas of Cantiere Obraz in Florence.

together with the public library, the Biblioteca Pietro Thouar, located in Piazza Tasso, can be considered as the most important cultural institution for the community of Oltrarno, which is now multi-ethnic, extremely temporary – considering the number of students and tourists among the inhabitants -- and progressively ageing, like the rest of the city; the average age of the Florentine population (approximately 400,000 inhabitants) is 48 (ISTAT 2022). As Alessandra Comanducci, director, teacher, and actress from the association, explained in our recent conversation²⁰, the area of San Frediano is still alive because of the children who live there: “There are still children here, there are mothers, and they fight for a livable area”. In fact, the Amici dei Nidiaci, born from a group of parents and residents who have been fighting to keep the public garden Giardino dei Nidiaci²¹ open for their children, has been one of the most active social associations in Oltrarno since 2012.

Cantiere Obraz, led by Alessandra Comanducci, Paolo Ciotti, Michela Cioni and Alessandro J. Bianchi, has focused on theatre training and education since 2008, specifically targeting children and teenagers. There are theatre classes in residence at the Teatro del Cestello, and, at the same time, Obraz works in cooperation with several schools²² in the area of Oltrarno. Crucial in their theatre, together with the physical approach, is the city as “the

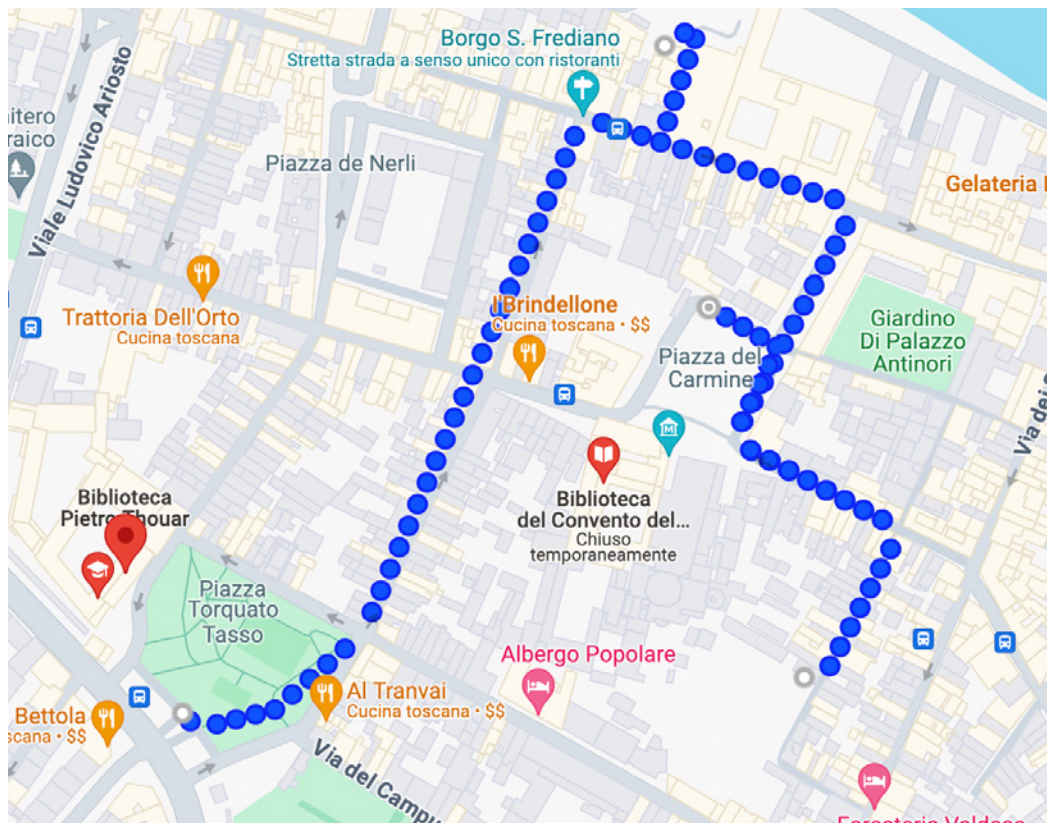


Figure 3: Performing areas of Cantiere Obraz in Oltrarno.

greatest invention of mankind” (Wilson 2020), which Comanducci quotes, thus confirming the civic, political role of theatre as necessary and unavoidable: “*We need to win back the political, participative value of the ancient choir. Theatre is first and foremost an assembly*”.²³ Nonetheless, the experience of participative and site-specific performances is quite recent for Cantiere Obraz, since it began because of the Covid-19 Pandemic, “*when theatres were necessarily closed*”. As Comanducci further explains:

“Our approach has always been bringing theatre to the people, this is what we are doing. Instead of bringing people into theatres. People who wouldn’t go to the theatre, who don’t know or even care about it, are the ones we want to reach, and that we find more interesting” (Comanducci).

The first experiment of participative performance took place after the first ‘lock-down’, under the sign of Lewis Carroll. *Alice nella Firenze delle meraviglie* [translation: ‘*Alice in the Florence of Wonders*’] is an itinerant performance made by the characters of *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) through the area of Oltrarno: “*The area of San Frediano was literally invaded by the characters*” (see figure 4). The performance was devised to involve children and teenagers who had been isolated for a long time during the pandemic. At the same time, the performing spots in the neighborhood were chosen not among those which were most beautiful or artistically relevant (for



Figure 4: *Alice nella città delle meraviglie* in Piazza del Carmine, 2019.
Photograph by: Cantiere Obraz.

example *Piazza Pitti*, the *Chiesa del Cestello*, or the Boboli Gardens), but among the most inhabited and used by the locals.

Three of the chosen spots were (1) Piazza del Carmine, an historical, extremely gentrified, and strongly discussed square in the district of Oltrarno, (2) the Giardino dei Nidiaci, and (3) Piazza Tasso, which is both a children's playground and an urban dark spot at the same time²⁴. *Alice nella Firenze delle meraviglie* was presented twelve times for twenty-four spectators at a time, without being announced or advertised in advance. Comanducci remembers as particularly relevant the scene performed in Piazza Tasso, inspired by the chapter of *Alice in Wonderland* which takes place in the croquet court of the Queen of Hearts. The square was invaded by 'playing cards' (the Queen's guard) running through the square and interacting with the young audience, with passers-by, as well as with the homeless people who were waiting for the shelter to open. Unexpectedly, the improvised and spontaneous interaction between the audience and the performers was a success, and it lasted longer than initially intended. Two further projects were born after this first experiment: *Il respiro del pubblico* [translation: 'The Audience's Breath'], and *Urbano fantastico* [translation: 'Fantastic Urban']. As Paolo Ciotti, co-director of *Il respiro del pubblico* says in his editor's note:

"Nowadays, a participating spectator is necessary for a live performance, not only for his or her power of interrupting the performance itself at any moment, but as essential frame for a living theatre. It is not only about participating in an art performance, but also about being part of a collective, a ritual, a political moment" (Ciotti).

Il respiro del pubblico is a project initiated in 2020 and further developed throughout 2021, which recognizes the audience as the focal point of any theatrical action. Cantiere Obraz started to explore, both in theory and practice, the performative world from the perspective of the spectator, organizing: (A) a series of one-to-one performances (2020, 2021)²⁵; (B) a class of history of dramaturgy from the point of view of the audience (2021)²⁶; (C) a one-to-one 6-hour online performance with fourteen performers (2021); and (D) a series of participative story-telling actions for children (4-11) called *La fantasia va in città* (Fantasy is coming to town, 2021)²⁷. Particularly relevant in the context of this essay is *La fantasia va in città*, which involved almost three hundred children in inventing the ending of one to four stories, focusing on the city as protagonist and told by the

actors in a one-to-one performance. The four actors and actresses, without being specifically introduced through any form of advertisement, positioned themselves in four plastic wheels on several of the Oltrarno's playgrounds (for example the Giardino dei Nidiaci, the Giardino dell'Ardiglione and the Giardino degli Allori), waited for the arrival of children and told them the beginning of a tale. The children could then invent and propose to the actor or actress an ending to the tales they had heard²⁸.

After the pandemic, *Il respiro del pubblico* became a festival, which is now in its third edition (2021-2023) and still expanding. It extends across various Florentine venues, transcending generations, and continues to focus greatly on dramaturgical education. Comanducci elaborates on this, emphasizing its aim to “reach out to those who are completely unfamiliar with the theatre, while using theatre in order to involve them in moments which are significant for the community”. The festival is structured as follows:

Ciuchi mannari: a forty-hour workshop for teenagers and young adults (14-24 years old) dedicated to theatre criticism and theatre journalism throughout the fall of each year. At the end of the workshop, every young participant writes a review for three performances presented at the festival. The reviews are then published in the nationally renowned blog *gufetto.press*²⁹.

Site-specific performances in the Teatro del Cestello, on the streets of Oltrarno and in specific venues, such as the Cimitero degli Allori, Biblioteca Thourar, or the Associazione Progetto Arcobaleno. Among the invited performers, it is worth mentioning: the Apulian company Teatro dei Borgia (invited in every edition with *La città dei miti* and *Antigone*), the Florentine UBU-Prize winners *Sotterraneo* (Shakespeareology, 2023), Catalyst (*Non vorrei parlar d'amore*, 2023), Teatro C'Art (*Lei Lear*, 2022), and the British-Italian pioneer of the so-called 'auto-teatro' Silvia Mercuriali (*Macondo*, 2023). Some of the performances, such as Ugo Chiti's three monologues entitled *Bottegai* (2023, Shop owners), are explicitly dedicated to the area of Oltrarno and tell the story of its inhabitants; some others, such as *Cane* by Cantiere Obraz (2022, inspired by Michail Bulgakov's *Heart of a Dog*) or *Antigone* by Teatro dei Borgia (2023, performed at the Cimitero degli Allori cemetery), are immersive events which connect past and present, fiction and reality. As said, and according to the numbers below, the festival is evolving and growing:

	Ciuchi Mannari	Lectures	Performances	Audience
2021	13 teenagers + 1 guest	40 hours / 11 teachers	7 (X 12)	460
2022	13 teenagers + 2 guest	40 hours / 18 teachers, dramatists, theatre critics	8 (X 10)	520
2023	15 teenagers + 2 guest	40 hours / 11 teachers, dramatists, theatre critics	8 (X 9)	680

Figure 5: Table of Cantiere Obraz’s projects 2021-2023³⁰.

Beginning in 2022, another project, *Urbano Fantastico*, has been developed in parallel to the Festival. This project, which is dedicated to the city of Florence, has the specific aim of bringing fantasy into public spaces, following the path of previous experiences, such as *Alice* and *La fantasia va in città*. Part of the project is the series of four performances or immersive walks entitled *Fiorentini Fantastici* (2023, Fantastic Florentines) dedicated to four famous Florentines: the architect Giuseppe Poggi (1811-1901), planner of the current shape of the center of Florence; Antonio Meucci (1808-1889), best known for developing the first prototype of a telephone; the cinema-pioneer Filoteo Alberini (1865-1937), and the astrophysicist Margherita Hack (1922-2013)³¹. Even more relevant for the history of Florence is the second part of this project, called *Naturesimo* (Figure 6)³²: In open contrast with the so-called Anthropocene, which is affecting the environment and the future of mankind as well, ‘*naturesimo*’ literally means ‘the Age of Nature’ (the word does not exist in Italian and was made up by Cantiere Obraz, editor’s note). In this way, Nature reassumes the role of the protagonist, even within urban spaces. The project was undertaken together with Gaia Bigiotti, researcher in biology at the *Centro di Ricerca Agricoltura e Ambiente*, and involves a series of lectures and performances dedicated to the re-acknowledgement of nature and public spaces in both urban and suburban areas. Indeed, with *Naturesimo*, Cantiere Obraz took its idea of site-specific performance far outside the city center and was able to involve the five biggest areas of Florence, choosing as venues both iconic places of natural beauty, such as the Garden of the Medicean Villa of *la Petraia* in the northern outskirts of town, and abandoned urban green spaces, such as the area around Peretola Airport or the public garden of Villa Rusciano in the southern part of town, wich is continuously under threat of closure. *Naturesimo* has already had two editions and the third is already in preparation. Both the editions of 2022 and 2023 had as focus a hidden presence inside the Florentine landscape: Florence’s six monumental trees (officially collected) and their (forgotten) history. The 2022

edition consisted of six lectures-performances with the following topics: (1) *Plants and Cities*, (2) *Plants and Sex*, (3) *Plants and Migration*, (4) *Plants and Civil Engagement*, (5) *Plants and Theatre*, (6) *Plants and Magic*, and a conference called *Humans/Art/Nature*. The 2023 edition consisted of six lectures-performances with the following topics: (1) *Plants and Beauty*, (2) *Plants and Cities*, (3) *Plants and Sex*, (4) *Plants and Humans*, (5) *Plants and Water*, (6) *Plants and Migration*. Comanducci recalls how one aspect turned out to be particularly relevant and effective in the effort of involving the municipality in the performances:

“On numerous occasions, locals gathered to listen and unexpectedly joined the lectures, initiating a dialogue with the audience. For example, in Mantignano (a rural area in the northern outskirts of Florence, which has a monumental oak tree, editor’s note), an elderly man approached us and began to tell us the true story of the monumental oak, drawing from his childhood memories. This was an important moment of connection among locals and potential tourists and between Florentines and their territory” (Comanducci).

Similarly, in its second edition (2023), *Plants and Magic* sparked conversations among the audience on *Plants and War*. Indeed, during the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict the world biggest seeds-bank, the National Gene Bank of Plants in Ukraine was destroyed³³.

“Sometimes locals came around, or even wrote on our social networks, to criticise what we were doing, for example the idea of presenting an open-air performance in the abandoned area around the airport. Even in that case, we knew we were doing something useful, which directly involved them: To criticize also means to consider something as important.”

A final project that is worth mentioning, which connects *Naturesimo* to Cantiere Obraz's commitment to dramaturgical training for young people, is *Aria e i bambini cavalieri* (*Aria and the children Knights*, 2022)³⁴. Here the young spectators (and *de facto* protagonists) of the performance find out they are the *Knights of the Round Table*. Their quest is to save the planet from the terrible grey fog which is slowly engulfing it. To achieve their goal, the children must interact with magical creatures and guides,



Figure 6: *Naturesimo at the Medicean Villa of La Petraia, Plants and Beauty:* Florence 2023. Photograph by: Cantiere Obraz.

such as Merlin, King Arthur, witches and fairies. At the end, they will find out that the magical element they have been looking for is clean, fresh air.

Genius Loci Performance: Ritual Theatre in Florentine Public Space

Differently from Cantiere Obraz, *Genius Loci Performance* is an emerging theatre company and cultural association. The director and playwright Francesco Gori and the percussionist and table player Francesco Gerardi rediscovered the physical and ritual approach of Schechner and Grotowski and made it the key to interact with specific urban spaces. The association was officially founded as a cultural association in 2022, although its co-founders had already been working together in site-specific performative projects in Florence since 2018.

This second case study is symmetrical and somehow complementary to the experience of Cantiere Obraz, starting from the method of bringing theatre to the people. In fact, it is possible to say that this company was born to perform outside of theatres and proper dramatic spaces: One of the main goals of Genius Loci Performance, as its Latin name already indicates³⁵, is indeed to take people (audience and performers) to specific urban and

natural places to re-generate and re-qualify them. So far, the most relevant venues for the performances have been (1) the *Manifattura Tabacchi*, which had been a tobacco factory until 1999 and is now re-qualified as a cultural centre in the northern section of town; (2) the *Parco del Mensola*, which is an almost abandoned green lung in the southern area of Rovezzano, Florence; and (3) *Grotta all'Onda*, which is a prehistoric cavern on the Apuan Alps. Although Genius Loci Performance has performed throughout the whole of the Florentine and Tuscan area, it may be said that it is deeply connected to a specific Florentine venue: The Murate Art District (MAD), which was built in 1340 to be a monastery and later served as a jail until 1984. The building has now been re-qualified as a public art space in the heart of Florence. The MAD is located in the area of the Sant'Ambrogio market, on the opposite site of the river Arno from the Teatro del Cestello. Additionally, for this reason, Genius Loci and Obraz can be considered as two complementary poles in the Florentine cultural offer regarding site-specific performances. The area of Sant'Ambrogio is in very close proximity to the heart of the Historic Centre (Piazza Santa Croce, Piazza del Duomo, and Piazza della Signoria are a ten-minute walk away). The area is suffering from overtourism, gentrification and the progressive substitution of retail shops by tourism-oriented restaurants and food stores, together with the invasion of temporary house rentals. But on the other hand, it keeps its identity and its peculiarities: for example, both Florence's Synagogue³⁶ and the Mosque³⁷ are located in this area, it is still populated by locals, which are being served by two large elementary schools. This is where Gori and Gherardi have been holding their weekly workshops over the past five years.³⁸ Taking forward the parallel analysis of Cantiere Obraz and Genius Loci Performance, it is interesting to observe

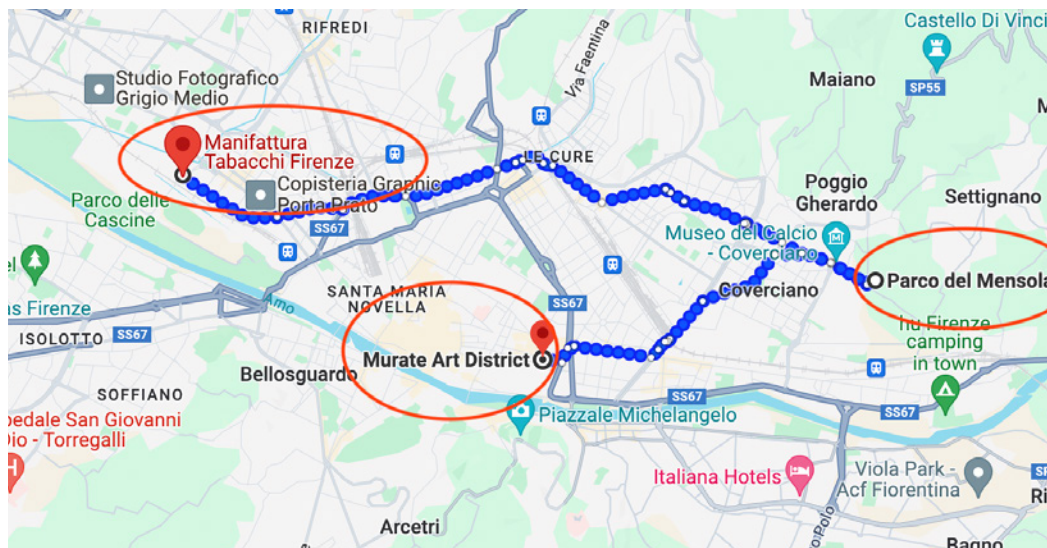


Figure 7: Performing area of Genius Loci Performance.

how both companies focus on training, but with different targets and *modus operandi*. The theatre of Genius Loci Performance is always participatory, since all its actions are the result of long-term performative workshops, or of a training group (normally six months long) called *Laboratorio di Teatro Rituale* [translation: ‘Ritual Theatre Lab’], which is open to the community and for non-professional actors and actresses/dancers to explore the ritual and binding potential of theatre.

The *Laboratorio* is addressed to participants aged 18-70 years old, ranging from proficient performers and dancers to absolute beginners. There is only one training group per year³⁹, under the direction of Gori and Gherardi, who aim to construct a site-specific and immersive performance to be presented in the summer, where the trained performers are a collective of ‘conscious dancers and citizens’, ready to involve the audience and make it part of a choral ritual, dedicated to a specific topic, or ancient myth. Bringing back theatre into the society as a civil and political practice, charged with the values and of the social function that it had in ancient times, is the main purpose of the collective, who aims to combine self- and body-awareness and social awareness in urban and extra-urban public spaces. This is the meaning of *Teatro Rituale* [translation: ‘ritual theatre’], the name given by Genius Loci Performances to describe its own productions, which often are reenactments inspired by Greek tragedy⁴⁰, such as the legend of Pentheus⁴¹, son of the Queen of the Maenads Agave, who died after refusing Dionysus, which is the referring point of *Penteco Un rito iniziatico* (2019). As Francesco Gori explains:⁴²

“In ancient times, every year men and women, both free citizens and slaves, flocked to Athens from all parts of Greece to celebrate Demeter, the Mother Earth, goddess of fertility and nature. Through this practice they affirmed their belonging to the community both of human beings and of nature. The ceremony began in the centre of the city and culminated in nature, with a procession in honour of Dionysus, the god of vegetation, rebirth, and transformation”. (Gori)

The Eleusinian Mysteries are instead the inspiration for *Mysteries*, *Mysteries 2.0* and *Mysteries 3.0*: An immersive, site-specific performance in the rooms and former prison cells⁴³ of the MAD, which leads the audience and the performers through an initiation journey through the underworld, aimed at the discovery of the self, of the individual’s relationship with death, and of hidden areas of the Florentine public space. As Gori explains to the

audience in the short introduction to *Mysteries*: “*These are the last words you will hear*”. Very characteristic of the works of Genius Loci Performance is indeed the almost complete absence of spoken text⁴⁴. As usual in rituals, discovery and disclosure are mainly achieved through the body and through the power of music (acoustic choir and percussions) performed live by Francesco Gherardi, the performers, as well as the audience. This is also the leading principle underlying *Body Revolution!* (Figure 8), an ecstatic dance in the yet to be restored areas of the Manifattura Tabacchi.

The site-specific performance of 2023, *Snake Dance. Un rituale per il pianeta* (Figure 9), was inspired by *A Lecture on Serpent Ritual* (1939) by Aby Warburg and from the Rain Dance of the Hopi Indians, and was performed in the recently re-qualified, and still abandoned, green area of the Parco del Mensola in the southern outskirts of Florence.

The number of participants to the annual training lab has been constantly increasing since 2019, from 15 to 60 in 2024, considering the break of 2020-2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.



Figure 8: *Body Revolution* at Manifattura Tabacchi, 2022. Photograph by: Genius Loci Performance.



Figure 9: *Snake Dance* at Parco del Mensola, 2023. Photograph by: Genius Loci Performance.

	Ritual theatre performance	N. of performers	N. of participants (audience)
2019	<i>Penteo. Un rito iniziatico</i>	15	600 ⁴⁵
2021	<i>Mysteries</i> ⁴⁶	25	60 (15 X 4) ⁴⁷
2022	<i>Body Revolution!</i>	35	450
2023	<i>Snake Dance. Una danza per il pianeta</i>	40	600
2024	<i>Le Baccanti alle Cascine</i>	60	Premiere in June 2024

Figure 10: Table of Genius Loci Performance’s projects and performers 2019-2024.⁴⁸

The project of interviewing the participants of the training lab and filming the trainings of Genius Loci Performance commenced in November 2023 and will be carried out throughout the upcoming season. So far, fifteen performers have been interviewed. The performers were asked to answer to the following questions, either with a written text (email or private message), in person (the interviews have been recorded) or by sending an audio fragment to the author:

1. *What does Genius Loci Performance mean to you? Why are you participating to the Laboratorio?* Feel free to answer with a text, a poem, a song or even an image.
2. *Which areas of the city do you live the most?*
3. *Has it changed after becoming a performer of the Laboratorio?*
4. *How do you live the Florentine city-centre?*
5. *How would you describe your group of performers?*

The participants to the survey have been pseudonymized; they will appear with their first and last initials: LS, MM, MR, DT, FL, CC. Not all of them have given permission for their answers to be published.

The interviews show that in most cases the interest in Genius Loci Performance and the choice to become a performer have been aroused after assisting to a performance as a spectator. A few performers also underline the role of word of mouth. In both cases, it is interesting to notice the importance of direct experience. Furthermore, all the participants describe the *Laboratorio* as a nourishing experience, both at the personal and collective levels, as well as a playful experience. Some describe it as a hotbed of freedom of expression: “*As individual, as dancer, as mother, as citizen*”, says LS. MM and MR, on the other hand, underline the importance of proximity, of spatial and physical connection in a society that does not offer space and time for genuine sharing and gathering. MR explains:

“I moved to Florence in 2019 to study. Through the Laboratorio I have the chance of meeting people that I wouldn’t get to know otherwise: everyone has his or her own very special story and path of life. Here everyone is special. We have different ages, different educations, and jobs, but a very strong energy flows through the room and what we share is intense” (MR).

She also points out, that after becoming a participant of the *Laboratorio*, she started observing tourists “*as human beings, as real faces, real people: How may faces must I have seen only this year!*”. MM underlines the ability of the *Laboratorio* to encourage the coexistence of differences, of ‘creating beauty’ (an expression that occurred in many interviews) and teaching care. Many of the fifteen interviewees agree that the *Laboratorio* is a civil community and that taking part in it has changed their perception of the city itself.⁴⁹ LS speaks of a “*political seed to create an open, poetic, conscious and revolutionary community*”. FL tells us about his previous experience as ‘classical, prose’ actor and about becoming a performer of Genius Loci Performance for “*personal and civic reasons*”, to have a real impact on the Florentine context. CC, instead, would not describe the *Laboratorio* as a community, but rather as a “*group of citizens who has learned a new language, which is transversal and non-judgmental*”. DT, who comes from Apulia, but has been living in Florence for many years, describes the Tuscan capital as a vibrating cultural centre, and the possibility of experiencing it through Genius Loci Performance as a further privilege. It is important to note how almost all the interviewed participants, even the native Florentines, describe the city center as an area with a high living and cultural potential, even though all of them chose to live in other Florentine districts. The empirical study that follows from the observations presented in this essay, will be developed and updated in the following year as part of a broader study about Florentine site-specific performances between 2000 and 2024. Further investigating will include interviewing:

1. The participants to workshops and annual theatre classes of Cantiere Obraz;
2. The audience of Cantiere Obraz’s festivals;
3. The participants to workshops and theatre classes of Genius Loci Performance;
4. The audience of Genius Loci Performance’ events.

Conclusions

The current results show two different approaches, which lead to interesting outcomes. On the one hand, Cantiere Obraz has been able to become a gathering point and a point of reference for locals, using Teatro del Cestello as residence, but also getting involved with activities in public and municipal spaces, such as elementary schools. On the other hand, Genius Loci Performance is bringing Florentines (meaning non-tourist inhabitants of Florence) to the city-center, and it is promoting public urban spaces

as artistic and social gathering areas, where the identity of the places is involved in the process.

In both cases, participatory and site-specific performance are the key to develop a new perception of the urban space, as an aspect that shows how these practices meet a specific need for the community, as well as social and historical re-acknowledgement of spaces in the central and suburban areas of Florence. Whilst engaging with re-acknowledgment, they also encourage the development of new, transcultural and transgenerational networks and forms of community and social interaction.

“[...] participatory and site-specific performance are the key to develop a new perception of the urban space.”

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Endnotes

- 1 It is with Schechner's *Dyonisus in '69* (1969) that the contemporary performance emancipated itself from dance and theatre.
- 2 The so-called *terzo teatro* (third theatre) is a theatre field born in the second half of the 20th Century, based on the physical and social engagement of its participants. The actors of *terzo teatro* were often non-professional performers. The name '*terzo teatro*' was first used by the Italian actor and director Eugenio Barba in his *Manifesto del Terzo Teatro* in 1976 (Barba 1996, 174). Among the numerous relevant companies of *terzo teatro*: *Odin Teatret* (Italy/Denmark), *Living Theatre* (USA), *Teatro Nucleo* (Argentina/Italy), *Théâtre du Soleil* (France).
- 3 Richard Schechner recognizes in what he calls 'professionalism' a limit in the free experience of theatre as a collective ritual practice (Schechner 1988, 9).
- 4 The Berlin-based theatre collective Rimini Protokoll will call 'experts' (Rimini Protokoll 2012), giving the non-professional acting members of their performances the authority of whom is directly involved in the reality on which the performance is based. Rimini Protokoll, active in Germany since 1999, are one of the most important references of this study, especially with their works *100% City*, the *Cargo-Series* and *The Walks*, which focus on the interaction between the audience and urban spaces. rimini-protokoll.de/website/de/projects
- 5 The study of Celata and Romano is dedicated to Venice and Bologna.
- 6 According to the recent survey by Franco Bortolotti, chief researcher of IRES (Istituto Ricerche Economiche e Sociali), the prices of real estate in the city centre varies from 4700 to 5750 euro/sm (average 4900), compared to the 2800-4650 (average 3600, where the highest values are referred to the peripheral area of the Centro Storico) of the rest of Florence (Bortolotti 2019, 4).
- 7 A political project connected to the Italian left, particularly with *Firenze Progetto Comune*, and the mayoral candidate Antonella Bundu. For more information, see <https://www.antonellabundu.it/>.
- 8 The British Institute, the Kunsthistorisches Institut Florenz (Max-Plank-Institut), Villa Romana and the Institut Français are the most famous.
- 9 Active between 1898 and 1998. Following the Italian Mental Health Act (Legge Basaglia) of 1978, Psychiatric Hospitals have since been dismantled.
- 10 Giuliano Scabia, inventor of the sculpture *Marco Cavallo* and pioneer of the so-called 'pathological theatre' in Italy, together with the psychiatrist Franco Basaglia, was directly involved with Chille de la Balanza and took part in numerous events in San Salvi, such as the Festival Spacciamo Culture and the presentation of the book *Pazzi di libertà. Il Teatro dei Chille a 40 anni dalla legge Basaglia* in 2018.
- 11 For more information, see chille.it/chille-50/. Eliana Martinelli recently published *Stages of memory. Strategie per la rigenerazione dell'ex manicomio di San Salvi a Firenze*, a study on San Salvi and Chille de la Balanza as a social and architectural experiment.
- 12 For more information, see lacompagniadelleseggiole.it/la-compagnia-delle-seggiole/
- 13 For more information, see virgiliroseni.it/scuola-sul-gesto-generale/
- 14 Districts 1, 3 and 4 of the City of Florence, which include Oltrarno and Isolotto, in the North-West of Florence.
- 15 Districts 1, 2 and 5, which include Centro Storico (the historic city centre), Campo di Marte and Coverciano, in the South-East of Florence.
- 16 Since 2015 it also hosts the Summer Schools of Advanced Training in 'Theatre-School' held by Anatoly Vasiliev.
- 17 Kids, teenagers, young, young advanced (60% of the pupils), adults, adults advanced, special trainings.
- 18 At the beginning of the 20th century the area of Oltrarno, overpopulated, with 23 factories, was the first working-class area of town. Particularly relevant was the "second fusion iron foundry", known as the Pignone Foundry, built in 1842.
- 19 Many small shops, grocery stores and newsagents have been closing, especially since the turn of the century, and most of the commercial activities are now restaurants, pubs and Airbnbs. See: Conte,

- Rossella. "San Frediano, un altro negozio storico tira giù il bandone", in *La Nazione*, 5.10.2019; Gori, Giulio. "Il grande silenzio di borgo San Frediano. Nell'ex via più «cool» crescono solo ristoranti e affitti per stranieri", in *Corriere Fiorentino*, 23.02.2017.
- 20 Interview with Alessandra Comanducci of 13th November 2023, at the end of the latest edition of the Festival *Il Respiro del Pubblico*, curated by Cantiere Obraz.
- 21 The Giardino dei Nidiaci now partially borders with luxury rental apartments.
- 22 Cantiere Obraz cooperates with the following schools around Oltrarno: Middle School ARTIGIANELLI (since 2015, 20 pupils/year, 36 pupils in 2023); Elementary School ISTITUTO COMPRENSIVO OLTRARNO (2021, 96 pupils); Elementary School CAIROLI (since 2023, 100 pupils. Confirmed for 2024). Data collected by Cantiere Obraz.
- 23 Alessandra Comanducci's ethic and aesthetic values and point of view follow the tradition of the Brechtian *Episches Theater* and find support and confirmation in recent writings and works, for example those by the artist and director of NT-Gent, Milo Rau, such as *The General Assembly* (2017), *Why Theater?* (2021) or *Die Rückerhoberung der Zukunft* (2023). Here, the choral assembly power of performance is analyzed and promoted through the content of theatre pieces, through the actorial technique, and through the identity of the performers themselves, who often are chosen by the director because of their personal experiences.
- 24 Piazza Tasso, seat of the public library Biblioteca Pietro Thouar and of the public homeless shelter, is renowned in the neighbourhood both for its playground and for being the heroin market of Oltrarno.
- 25 *Azione artistica per spettatore solo*: 50 participants in 2020, 230 participants in 2021.
- 26 *Storia del teatro dal punto di vista dello spettatore*, 8 meetings for 10 participants each.
- 27 8 performances for 280 spectators.
- 28 A Facebook page was created for *La fantasia a in città*, which remained as a reference for Cantiere Obraz's children-tailored performances in Oltrarno until 2022. facebook.com/lafantasiavaincitta/about
- 29 For more information, see gufetto.press/articoli/gufetto-scuola/il-respiro-del-pubblico-21-cantiere-obraz-le-recensioni-della-scuola-di-critica-teatrale/; <https://gufetto.press/articoli/gufetto-scuola/il-respiro-del-pubblico-22-cantiere-obraz-le-recensioni-della-scuola-di-critica-teatrale/>; gufetto.press/articoli/gufetto-scuola/il-respiro-del-pubblico-23-cantiere-obraz-le-recensioni-della-scuola-di-critica-teatrale/
- 30 The data have been collected by Camilla Pieri of Cantiere Obraz.
- 31 The first edition of *Fiorentini Fantastici* welcomed circa 150 spectators.
- 32 For more information, see cantiereobraz.it/naturesimo/
- 33 For more information, see science.org/doi/10.1126/science.add4088
- 34 5 performances for 130 spectators.
- 35 'Genius Loci' means the intrinsic identity of a place.
- 36 Completed in 1882 and recently restored twice: in 1950, after World War II, and in 1966 after the last flood, which submerged the Florentine city-centre in November 1966.
- 37 The centre of Florence still does not have a proper Mosque. The building rented in Piazza dei Ciompi by the Muslim community in 2008 will soon be dismantled and a temporary religious centre, again in Piazza dei Ciompi, should be available for the Muslim community after the summer of 2024.
- 38 In 2022 the 6-months' workshop took place at Manifattura Tabacchi.
- 39 Usually meeting every week from January to June of each year.
- 40 Concerning the ritual function of theatre, it is worth mentioning Richard Schechner's studies (see bibliography), which offer a historical and actual scientific perspective.
- 41 Inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 CE) and Euripides' *Bacchae* (405 BC), of which Pentheus is the main protagonist.

- 42 The quotes refer to the interview between the author and Francesco Gori on 23rd November 2023.
- 43 The cells are not usually accessible.
- 44 Every performance is introduced by a brief presentation by Francesco Gori, who explains the mythological and/or theoretical background of the work.
- 45 4 performances at Murate Art District (MAD) and 1 at the *MythosLogos 2019* Festival of Lerici.
- 46 *Mysteries* is now in its third edition, *Mysteries 3.0* (2023).
- 47 One-to-one performance.
- 48 The data have been collected by Genius Loci Performance.
- 49 Concerning this aspect, it is extremely interesting to underline that most of the performers had had the experience of living in another city: almost 50% are not Florentine, while almost a 50% studied abroad and came back to Florence.