



Reasonance. Sensing a Shitstorm

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Reasonance

Sensing a Shitstorm

Abstract. In this paper we explore how the affective and bodily experience of being the centre of a written shitstorm, can be translated to others through sensification. Through the 3D system Sound-O-Matic³, our installation aims to explore how an auralization of a shitstorm can allow the listeners to be affected by an atmosphere that was earlier only felt by the exposed individual. The paper describes the design process guided by the concept of resonance through an infrästhetic approach, as a way to explore, how we should not only resonate with the experience, but also critically reflect on the entanglements of resonance and reason. We identify four main refrains in the shitstorm that can be translated into the present through the installation, extending the shitstorm into a new sensory space that we can hear, feel and discuss.

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Keywords. Sound installation, shitstorm, resonance, infrästhetic, affective atmosphere

Background and Context

In 1995, the artist Elle-Mie Ejdrup Hansen created “Peace Sculpture: Line - Light.” The work consisted of a 532 kilometres line of laser light, starting at the north tip of Denmark, to the German border in the south. It took place on the date of the Danish liberation from WW2. The event gained massive attention in the media in the months up until the artwork was shown, resulting in a large number of articles, creating what we today call a ‘shitstorm’.

To mark the 25 years since the artwork took place, an exhibition will take place in September 2020 at Viborg Kunsthall. In this context we have been invited to make a sound installation composed of quotes from the large archive of written articles. This paper unfolds the design process, with a focus on how the empirical data together with the concept of resonance have been used to guide the design process.

Empirical Data

The notion of shitstorm has gained public attention as part of the social media sphere. We use the term as described as “[...] the sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative WOM⁴ and complaint behavior against a person, company, or group in social media networks.” (Pfeffer et al., 2014, 118). Ejdrup Hansens artwork was exhibited in May 1995, before the concept of shitstorm saw daylight, but

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3. Developed by CAVI (Center for Advanced Visuals and Interaction);

<https://cavi.au.dk/technologies/sound-o-matic/>

4. WOM : Word-of-Mouth

as we now 25 years later re-exhibit the material, it calls for reflection on both how it existed then, and how it echoes in the present.

The empirical data used in the installation consists of quotes from Danish newspapers, gathered through a collection of approximately 2,800 articles about the artwork (Danish pop.: 5.8 mil.) written between August 1994 and May 1995.

Camilla Reestorff describes how shitstorms take on strength through strong emerging *refrains*. Through repetitions, the refrains create a specific form of intense atmosphere and become *sticky* (Reestorff, 2019). Referring to Sarah Ahmed (Ahmed, 2004), Reestorff argues that the refrains capture and transport affect as well as mobilize and intensify anger in defence of an undefinable “we” (Reestorff, 2019, 8). The refrains provide the affective cues and orientations that allows the crowd to be rendered into a public, inviting others to tune into the issue, but also affectively attune with the refrains that were sticking to it. Through this process the battleground is drawn, on which affect is governed and thus determined who are deemed legitimate players and which voices are heard in the debate. Through the refrains, it is negotiated which affects can be oriented towards which bodies (*ibid.*, 17).

Reading through the 2,800 articles, we chose 190 quotes (36 females, 123 males, 31 unidentified) from 35 different newspapers and magazines, centred around the following four main refrains:

Nazi associations: the artwork evoke reminiscence of WW2 (e.g. through the inclusion of bunkers and laser light).

Anti-feminism: the artist is a young and inexperienced female incapable of creating ‘good’ art.

“Is this art?”: the art is not lasting and is only made of light, which is not a real art-material.

Generation gap: the young generation (including the artist) does not understand how it felt to be at war.

Furthermore, the quotes were chosen based on their ability to affect the authors of this article; their sheer ability to shock, disgust or by having a tragicomical character.

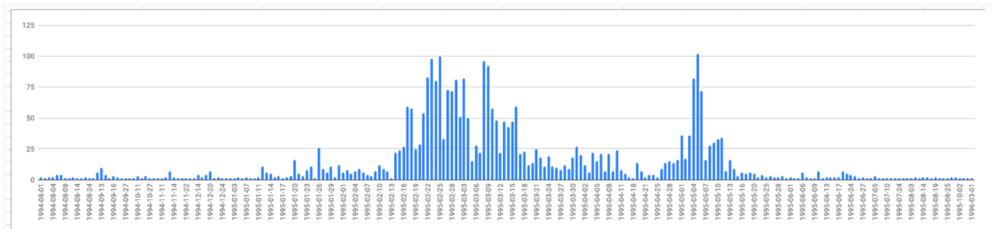


Table 1. Articles per day (1994-1996), Jakob Brask, 2020-06-18

Beside the collection of quotes, we also use the statistical data showing the chronological rhythm and the peak of the shitstorm (articles per day) to guide the development of the sound composition.

The Experience of a Shitstorm

Through Facebook we called for individuals who had been exposed to a shitstorm, to anonymously answer a questionnaire and symptom-chart entitled *The Feeling of Being*

in a Shitstorm. The survey was conducted in May 2020, and we received 13 answers (see Table 2).

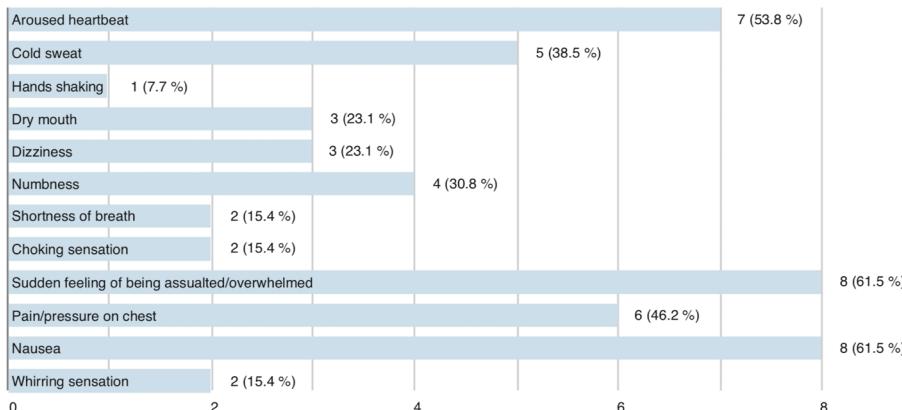


Table 2. Symptom-chart of '*The Feeling of Being in a Shitstorm*', Højlund & Udsen, 2020-06-18

Apart from the pre-chosen symptoms, three participants added extra symptoms: sleeplessness, alert mode, rage, quivering in the whole body and stomach pain⁵. Even though the affects and bodily feelings of being in the middle of a shitstorm are experienced differentially, it is clear that arousal of bodily rhythms (heartbeat, pulse, breathing), feeling of dizziness and nausea and the intense feeling of a sudden assault is repeated in both symptoms and comments:

“High pulse pumping like a techno-drum, heartbeats, flicker of the eyes, tinnitus sound”

“I have two breaths, one where it is ‘me’ that breathes and one where it is the body [...] The body’s breath uses the muscles for a state of emergency, which is barely every one of them, from the toes to the eyes. The body is capable of moving my chest as an accordion in and out, and I can hold ‘my own’ breath and still breathe through the body. It is infinitely hard!.”

Furthermore, several participants highlighted the feeling that the atmosphere around them changes as well, e.g.:

“It was as if, the room I was in, became much smaller, the ground disappeared under my feet, and my body turned itself inside out.”

Taken together, the participants describe the feeling as an intensely anxiety provoking experience, where the control of both body and surroundings are distorted. The bodily and affective experience of being in a shitstorm is a particularly powerful and intense atmosphere, that can be understood as “something which can come over us, into which we are drawn, which takes possession of us like an alien power” (Böhme, 2008, 3) as they “bathe everything in a certain light, unify a diversity of impressions,” and moreover, are “a quality of environmental immersion that registers in and through sensing bodies whilst also remaining diffuse, in the air, ethereal” (McCormack, 2008, 413).

5. All quotes are translated by the authors from Danish.

Designing for Reasonance

Ejdrup Hansen's new exhibition is not only a retrospective work, but also a contemporary artwork that points to how our memories help in shaping how our lives and future unfold. Thus, we consider it to be the role of us as designers to translate not only the affective qualities as these risks to create an unbalance where cognition, interpretation and motivation becomes minor processes (Endensor, Sumartojo, 2015, 252). Thus, the goal of the installation is not only to create resonance in the audience with the affective quality of being attacked by a shitstorm, but also to invite for reflections on the historical and cultural conditions of a shitstorm.

Resonance is often described as a sort of affective attunement, a way of being 'in sync' with the world, people and things (Erlmann, 2010; Rosa, 2017). By contrast, reason is normally aimed at reflection and the cognitive domain. Nesting reason and resonance into one-another, Veit Erlmann describes his concept *reasonance* (2010) as a 'double duty' in which it is the natural mechanism that governs interactions of vibrant matter (Bennett, 2010): in this case, the collective attunement around the refrains, war and peace, art and shitstorm, past and present. On the other hand, resonance is what creates unity between body and mind that the reflective human must unthink before it can "uncover truth" (Erlmann, 2010, 7).

Will Schrimshaw argues that such critical and reasoning distance can be hindered through overwhelming affectivity and immersion, as it presents us with the ability to enter an artwork as a multisensory enveloping environment rather than a distant object (Schrimshaw, 2017, 184). He argues that we then lose our capacity for decisions. We therefore need a critical approach to the immersive that does not shy from allowing the force of conceptualization and representation into the circle of immersion, as a space for critical distance, thought and action (*ibid.*, 193).

Schrimshaw suggests an *infraesthetic* approach as an exit strategy from purely affective and aesthetic sufficiency through the use of sound as a means of generating movement and displacement within bodies and artworks (*ibid.*, 57). This approach can be unfolded e.g. through the following gestures:

- Shifting focus from audible quality towards intensive quantity of sound;
- Addressing physical realm of signals towards how the forces of omnidirectionality affect change on the body through the extremes of audition in the lower end and upper of human hearing;
- Presenting real events, beyond subjective experience, e.g. sound that cannot be heard by human, but can be seen in its force on other objects.

Through these gestures it becomes difficult to locate the interior and exterior of hearing and the artwork. This confusion of limits points the limits of hearing and thus invites for critical reflection and allows us to explore boundaries of experience.

Schrimshaw's ambition is that the *infraesthetic* approach can open towards an ecological ethics that decentres human subjectivity, by e.g. exploring the limits of sensory experience. A decentring required to navigate and orient ourselves in relation to challenges of our time (Schrimshaw, 2017, 192). Jane Bennett furthermore describes that the aim of ethics should be to distribute value generously to the bodies (Bennett, 2010, 13). The value in this case being more attentive to the affects of digital behaviour. By exposing the public to the affects of the written word, we want to emphasize that "all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations." (Bennett, 2010, 13). Hereby creating an *infraesthetic* approach

that takes us away from pure æsthetics, and instead orients the installation towards being an affective atmosphere where resonance can take place between bodies and artwork.

Shitstorm Installation

In the installation, the goal is for the guest to feel resonance, firstly on an embodied and affective level, where the guest becomes resonant with the soundscape; tuning into the installation's frequency e.g. by feeling their pulse grow faster as the rhythm of the soundscape becomes faster. Furthermore, we want to create a space where the embodied feeling of being part of the sensoric atmosphere creates room for reason-making: what is a shitstorm? how are we interacting with it? are we participating? etc.

The installation consists of 20 speakers placed throughout a room, approx. 6x6m². In the middle of the room a circle is marked on the floor, inviting the listeners to stand in the auralized shitstorm experience. In the circle the listener is met by a galvanic skin response sensor and pulse interface asking them to place their hand on the screen to start the experience. When the installation starts, whispering voices will be heard from the corner speakers evolving to the remaining speakers in a storm like motion. Through the performance (3 min) more voices will be entangled in the experience, creating a soundscape of ambient voices that demonstrates the spreading of WOM, and end with a withdrawal of voices that leaves the listener in a soundscape of *bodily sounds* such as breath, heartbeat and ringing noises.

To sense the uncontrollable character and how the atmospheres takes over the body and breathing, the installation express power through conditions and activates pre-disposed affects, emotion and habitual unreflexive responses. In the installation, the infræsthetic focuses on orienting the listener towards embodied rhythms of reason-making practices that can re-habituate the listener. In order to translate this need, we consider the design as an attuning relation between the visitors' bodily rhythms and the installation (Højlund & Kinch, 2014). Hereby the installation conditions a thick immersive and potent atmosphere through quantity of loud sound, spotlight, swirls of movement in sound, sudden shifts, etc. that highlights the uncontrollable character of shitstorm.

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