

SmallTalk

Climate change chit chat



The sociologist Niklas Luhmann thinks of a society not as a compliment of individuals, but as a system of communications. Those communications can be generated by people, but just as well by organisations, institutions and even technological systems. As long as there is another communication that takes the previous communication as its point of departure. That way the communication gives a sense to the previous communication. 'Sense' needs to be interpreted in the broadest sense: also a 'non-understanding' is a kind of understanding, an interpretation in itself. As long as a communication generates another communication, it can be deemed successful.

It's this sociological pitch that inspired Stijn Demeulenaere for his installation 'SmallTalk'. SmallTalk is an installation about climate change. It was originally constructed for the audio workshop of Els Viaene and Aernoudt Jacobs early 2009. It was his final project for the Bachelor in the audiovisual arts, option radio at the Rits, in Brussels.

SmallTalk doesn't depart from the physical reality of climate change but looks back on the communication about this subject. The first hypothesis about the existence of something like a greenhouse effect were already formulated in 1896. Even then a Swedish scientist suspected that the growing emission of carbon dioxide could have consequences for the temperature on Earth. The last couple of decennia that insight has become widespread, and the last ten years climate change has become a very popular topic. Where 20 years ago the debate was pretty much limited to activists, scientists and some (green) politicians, today everybody has an opinion about the subject. CEO's, celebrities, architects, shopkeepers, regular people and even priests and popes. Almost all political parties (in Belgium and most of Western Europe at least) have incorporated the subject in their ideologies, solar panels are subsidised. There's a strong scientific consensus that the greenhouse effect is real, and more urgent by the minute. But there are still a couple of disbelievers who don't want to hear about it.

For a very long time, there came very little reaction about the subject from the financial field. And the little communication there was, was negative. Now we see the uprise of a 'green economy' and some even hope that the green economy is an answer to the global economic crisis. The greenhouse story is used fervently in advertising, used to sell green computers, green tv's and even green washing products. And most importantly now almost every person has its own opinion about climate change.

Thus, communication about climate change has become very successful. Ever more communications about climate change are used as a departure for another communication. Communications in this sense are not only words, also acts, subsidies, payments, buying, and commercials should be regarded as communications. We've come a long way from the limited group of activists and scientists. Now everybody has once voiced an opinion, made a decision or even bought something based on a communication about climate change.

That evolution hasn't happened by accident. The story of climate change has

worked itself up to a dominant theme, a hot topic. That's because of the the unquivering effort of activists and scientist, because of popular documentaries like 'an inconvenient truth' by Al Gore . Also because the effects of climate change have become incrisingbly real over time, increasingly visible, tangible even, especially in the third world. But the crucial factor in the rise to succes of the climate change story is the economical one. To counter climate change, we have to consume less energy and if we use less energy, we feel that in our bank account: we have to pay less. The positive image is a bonus we get with measures that provide us users with a financial incentive. Think of the growing popularity of low-energy light -bulbs (The EU will eventually forbid all incandescent light-bulbs), or green cars. The economical incentive that runs through the climate change communication (usually defined by the choice between paying less or more) is the strongest of all factors that run along with the communications. That's why that incentive is usually the guiding one. When the economic field adopts the story about climate change, the communications about the climate get a convining power they did not have before.

SmallTalk is exactly about the evolution af the communication about climate change. The installation evokes a jetset pary. On a cocktail table, there are 8 glasses. They have been transformed into speakers. 4 of them got a little speaker build into them, the other 4 are stuck on a piezo speaker and thus become a resonating space. In each glass hangs a small microphone. Through the glasses we can hear samples of politicians, activists, scientists, commercials and celebrities about climate change. Every microphone captures the sample which is played through the glass, and that recording is immediatly played back through the glass again. When you do this 20 times or more after each other, slowly the voice frequencies start to evaporate, and you're left with the eigenfrequency of the glass, the frequency that is naturally amplified by the resonant characteristics of the glass. The process is borrowed from Alvin Lucier's "I'm sitting in a room". Samples come and go. The microphones aren't perfect, so you get some overspill to the other glasses. That way you get a resonating field of communications over the 8 glasses. According to Niklas Luhmann society is nothing else than a communication field, a blanket of communications that continually refer to one another. It's exactly such a field that rises up from the glasses. SmallTalk poses us the question how much of that communciation has lead to action. Or was it nothing more than words, possibly over a glass of wine. The question becomes personal, because many of the quotes could come from us, or they come from commercials about products we might have. Commercials that convinced us to buy something ourselves. It shows that we all, people, institutions and organisations have adopted the climate change story.

The direct inspiration for this work was an anecdote. Stijn does not know if it's historically true or if it's an urban legend, but that is of little importance. A journalist interviews Eva Longoria, the dreamwoman from 'Desperate Housewives'. After the interview the journalist compliments Longoria with the beautiful BMW on her porch. The actrice reacts annoyed: *"That thing? Oh no, that's not mine, that's the maid's. I drive the little Yaris that standing next to it. A*

green car. I'm all for the environment you know."

In other words, nowadays it's hipper and more stylish to drive a green Toyota Yaris than a BMW, which used to be an icon of the style industry.

And when you do some youtubing, you'll notice that a lot of stars, politicians and common people bring lipservice to the environment. They all want to they're part to combat climat change. And what the elite takes up as it's ideal, seeps through to the middle and even the lower classes. Bio-food, green energy, passive houses, green cars: it looks all just somewhat more enticings, more thrilling than 10 years ago. That too is a shift in power.

And so the ideo grew to create a cocktailpary, to rebuild glasses into speakers and let them have that communication. A jetset-party where commonplaces, sincere motivation, difficult numbers and cheap comments could mingle. Without reference to the people who voiced the direct comments. A mingling of sentences, an evocation of conversations who at least half happen because this is the new ideology /trend / fashion / code of today.

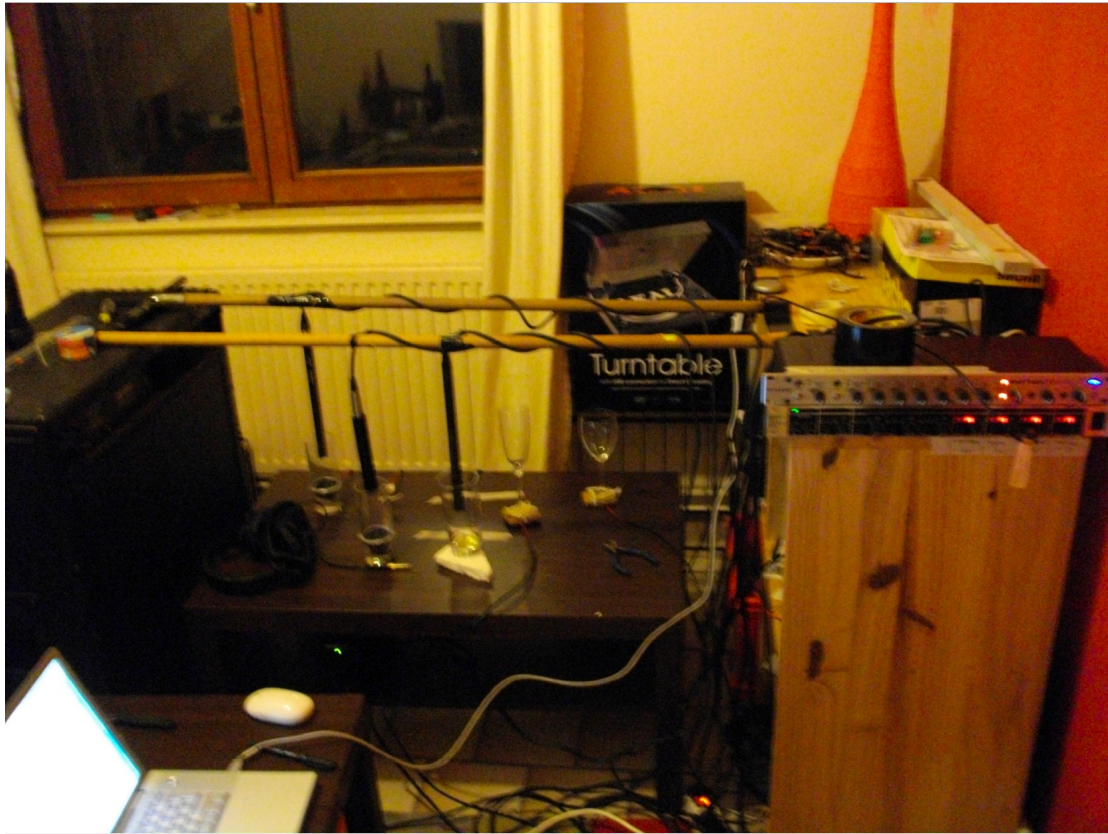
The installation begins soft, with some barely audible stories of politicians and activists. You start to listen carefully. A bit later you hear quotes that are easier understood. You recognise the voice of Arnold Schwarzenegger – the republican governor of California who, other than many of his fellow partymembers, made green energy a cornerstone of his policy. You also hear the voices of George Bush, Al Gore, young professionals, commercials for the new macbook, etc. With every repetition the voices loose power, loose understandability. But while they loose power, they become scharper, more incensive, more intrusive by the minute. The question where we find ourselves in this communication fields therefore becomes more urgent, more pressing.

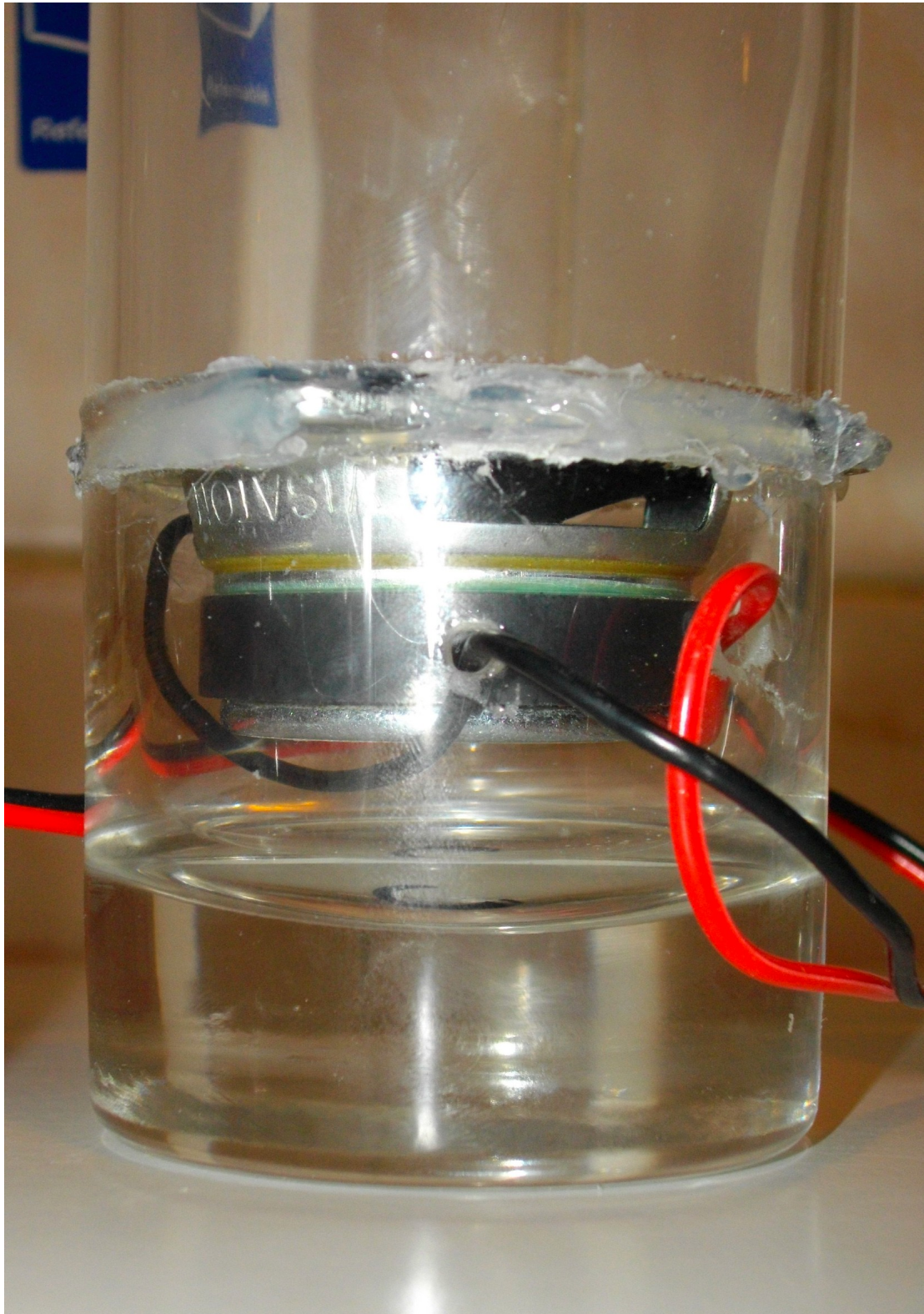
The installation exists in two forms. One the one hand you have the live performance. An audioperformance in which Stijn manipulates the quotes he runs through his glasses live, and builds up a subtle carpet of sound that evolves into a harsh climax. During this live performance, the audience are offered a complimentary glass of whine to include them in the cocktail party. They are not merely audience, they are participators of the jetsetparty.

On the other hand you have the normal installation. Here there are no more microphones to be seen, but you can still hear an ever changing. The installation builds up to a climax, lets things cool off a bit before it works up to a new climax again.

Pictures

Test installation





Installation shown on april 2nd at Burning Ears Festival at Rits, Brussels





