

Space as Atmosphere

Floating in a Molecular Bath

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When I enter the room, I already feel something in the air. I cannot say what. Something invisible. It seems like everything is vibrating a little bit stronger than usual. The space is charged. It's light and dense at the same time. The subtle vibrancy incites me to follow my needs and wants faithfully, to drop social codes, simply be, sense. I realize I am tired. I sit down, then lie down. The session has already started.

A vast and detailed soundscape with sounds of splashing water, human voices, electronic clicking and melodic humming washes over me.

Delicious, full yet delicate smells permeate me. They linger in my nostrils and color all other sensations until the next scent appears.

I hear and feel bodies softly moving around me. Sometimes they brush over me.

I sink.

The warmth of a hand rests on me for some time, a piece of fabric is gradually placed over parts of my body. An orange ends up on my chest, a cold stone on the palm of my hand. I feel their weight and temperature.

I drift off, come back, drift off again. Thoughts, memories, images come up. Sensations echo far beyond the area that was touched. They seem to move past the boundaries of my own tissue.

Was there a stone in my hand? Something heavy on my chest? Am I still covered by that piece of fabric? After a while of being still, I can't seem to feel the weight of things anymore—as if they have become part of my kinesthetic sense of being here.

A window opens, air and daylight come in. Someone brings me a drink in a small cup. The session is almost over. I can feel my clothes on my skin. Fifty minutes felt like fifteen.

The Senders is an immersive, performative installation by Stav Yeini, which I first attended in March 2019 and in which I later also participated as ‘sender’ myself, helping to facilitate the experience for others. Yeini graduated from P.A.R.T.S. (Brussels) as a dancer and choreographer in 2010, and has gradually developed a practice of creating multisensorial spaces. In *The Senders*, as in most of her latest work, she doesn’t choreograph the movements of human bodies but rather provides a sensorial experience to visitors by choreographing space—space as a living entity that continuously transforms, an invisible form that the performers, or ‘senders,’ jointly hold and regulate.

Yeini initiated this project with the intention of positioning herself somewhere in the periphery of the artwork rather than at the center of a stage. The main performing entities in this piece are not the bodies of performers but rather all the elements that constitute the space itself. She sees herself as a ‘curator’ or ‘artist-modulator’ who levels out the input of all the micro-authors with whom she collaborates: dancers, an alchemist, a musician, an artist-programmer, but also the plant whose electronic variations are captured by electrodes,¹ transposed into sound and integrated into the soundscape. The human individuals (performers and choreographer) consciously take a step aside to allow a whole range of other things to be more centrally present.

Atmosphere

The core matter of *The Senders* is the living quality of the space. It is invisible and almost ungraspable. I call it an ‘atmosphere’ in an attempt to half-grasp something that escapes full understanding and that is difficult to approach with language.

Atmospheres are at the same time intangible and very concrete. German philosopher Gernot Böhme² makes the word ‘atmosphere’ an actually workable concept by embracing this ambivalence. According to him, atmospheres exist somewhere between objective and subjective reality, and can be approached from both sides. They are generated by the organization of material objects on the one hand, and, on the

other, they affect subjects with the mood that emerges from this organization.

Because they exceed the sum of objective matter that composes them, atmospheres are numinous, not fully graspable nor expressible. They are totalities that infuse everything, immerse everything in a certain light, absorb and unify a diversity of impressions into a certain mood. Yet despite their vague, ungraspable nature, atmospheres are also very concrete and specific. They always have a singular ‘color’ or ‘taste’: a specific degree and combination of being, for example, cold, warm, serious, playful, holiday-ish, gloomy, dreamy, tropical, school-ish, mysterious, cozy, and so on.

When entering the space of *The Senders*, a floor covered with mattresses and off-white canvasses immediately makes me feel safe, comfortable and able to relax; fruit, flowers, basil, and mint make me taste, smell, and imagine delicious flavors; silky fabrics bring a sense of luxury. The space bathes in colored light, complex smells composed with essential oils and expansive, soothing sound. I notice plants, some of them connected by cables to the sound system, the attention and movement quality of bodies that circulate around me, the tone of a voice, the style of a cup, the gaze of another visitor, the breathing of someone close to me, the stillness of most bodies around me. All these elements color the atmosphere that is generated. No set of adjectives could adequately define it, yet I will refer to it below as ‘slow,’ ‘calm,’ ‘vibrant,’ and ‘sensitizing’ in an attempt to describe it nevertheless.

Between visible and invisible, material and immaterial, graspable and numinous, the atmosphere seems to permeate not only all matter but also my body-mind, my thoughts, my sensation, my emotions. Actually, the distinction between body, mind, and emotion are irrelevant in this situation: I am affected wholly and fully, including every part and layer of myself. This makes me think of what Gilles Deleuze calls a ‘molecular plane,’ which in an interview with Claire Parnet he describes as consisting purely of ‘relations of movement and rest, of speed and slowness, between unformed, or relatively unformed, elements, molecules, or particles borne away by fluxes.’³ From this primordial plane of flows emerges a ‘molar’ plane, corresponding to the organized realm of what

³ Deleuze and Guattari mention the molar and molecular planes in *A Thousand Plateaus*, yet I find that in *Dialogues*, Deleuze develops the distinction between these two planes more clearly: ‘[the molar plane] is not given for itself, but must always be concluded, inferred, induced on the basis of what it organizes. ... It is therefore a plane of transcendence, a kind of design, in the mind of a man or in the mind of a god, even when it is accorded a maximum of immanence by plunging it into the depths of Nature, or of the Unconscious. One such plane is that of Law, in so far as it organizes and develops forms, genres, themes, motifs, and assigns and causes the evolution of subjects, persons, characteristic features and feelings. ... [The molecular plane] knows nothing of subjects but rather what are called ‘heccities.’ In fact no individuation takes place in the manner of a subject or even a thing.’ Deleuze, *Dialogues*, 91–92.

¹ Yeini uses PlantWave, a device that detects electrical variations in a plant via electrodes placed on the leaves, and converts the waves of these variations into sound waves. www.plantwave.com.

² Böhme, ‘The Art of the Stage Set as a Paradigm for an Aesthetics of Atmospheres.’

we know—persons, objects, forms, anything we can name, recognize, identify—like the thoughts that arise when I first encounter a space or the orange I see on the floor. I like to imagine atmospheres as being in dialogue with, or partly existing on this molecular plane of fluctuating particles; like an intangible texture that precedes human-modeled individualities and therefore indiscriminately traverses, affects, permeates everything that shares its spatial confines. A texture that also exists in relation to other paces and timespans.

Deep Perception

Sensorial perception is the area through which atmospheres reach us. They manifest in direct impressions of smell, sound, touch, temperature, internal sensation, kinesthetic movement, emotion and the feeling of it, thought or imagery and the bodily sensations they trigger.

The atmosphere of *The Senders* reaches us through our senses and enhances our sensorial receptivity. Bringing calmness by means of comforting sound and a soft-colored, cozy spatial organization, it opens room for relaxation—and rest. The tension that accompanies most of our rushed, everyday lives is kindly requested to suspend itself. A space for less action and more sensorial receptivity emerges. Less reaching out to the world, less production, less doing—more listening. The instrumental rationality with which we fulfill an almost compulsive tendency to act on, control, produce, comprehend, grasp, and appropriate whatever surrounds us is put on hold. The domination we thereby tend to exert in varying scales subsides. By temporarily and even only partially abandoning this tendency that is a natural response to a competitive environment and hasty lifestyle, we allow experiences of amplified perception to emerge, experiences of a kind that is rare in hyperactive and overstimulated contexts.⁴

I like to call this amplified sensorial perception ‘deep perception’ in reference to the practice of Deep Listening⁵ that Pauline Oliveros developed from the end of the eighties to her passing away a few years ago. Oliveros was a pioneer of electronic music and explored sound as well as meditation.

She uses the word ‘deep’ to indicate what goes beyond the boundaries of ordinary, common understanding, ‘defies stereotypical knowing,’ or ‘has too many unknown parts to be grasped easily.’⁶ Whereas especially urban life incites us to listen selectively, only granting attention to what we deem of value or are concerned about, like music, spoken words or the sound of approaching danger (a car, the beep of closing doors in public transport), Deep Listening is a form of meditation that simultaneously gives attention to the whole range of a sonic environment at a certain time, in a certain place. Oliveros has been teaching this practice as a tool for artists to compose and improvise; for designers, engineers and city planners to more mindfully shape the sound of technology and living environments; and not least as a means to improve anyone’s well-being and health.

I see deep perception as a multisensorial way to practice Deep Listening. Instead of concentrating on sound, multisensorial impressions of touch, smell, taste, and kinesthetic sensation are also ‘listened to’ with the whole body-mind. Deep perception is the kind of experience that Yeini facilitates with *The Senders*. Receivers—the ‘audience,’ that I previously also have called ‘visitors’ because their implication exceeds by far the auditory sense—are offered a space and a time to practice multisensorial perception, while a number of ‘performers’—Yeini calls them ‘senders’—mindfully manipulate sound, smell, light, pieces of fruit, shells, flowers, and other things to work on their senses. The calm, safe, subtle and vibrant mood helps in entering a relaxed and sensitized state where we can perceive things in a different way—or maybe perceive different kinds of things. Suddenly, the right time and body-mind state make it possible to see and feel minor things, inconspicuous things, things that evade usual modes of perception, escape our full grasp—and to be affected by them more deeply.

Deep perception requires another relation to time because it includes the vastness and complexity of an environment as much as possible, and enters in relation with things that resist identification by our common thought-models—things that, as Oliveros puts it, ‘may take either a long time, or never to understand or get to know.’⁷ Whereas the identification of something that we already know potentially happens in a split

narrow in your awareness of sounds, you are likely to be disconnected from your environment. ... Compassion (spiritual development) and understanding comes from listening impartially to the whole space/time continuum of sound, not just what one is presently concerned about. In this way, discovery and exploration can take place. New fields of thought can be opened and the individual may be expanded and find opportunity to connect in new ways to communities of interest. Practice enhances openness.’ Oliveros, *Deep Listening*, xxv.

6 Ibid, xiii.

7 Ibid.

4 Han, *The Burnout Society*; Han, *The Scent of Time*; Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration*; Crary, 24/7.

5 ‘Sounds carry intelligence. Ideas, feelings and memories are triggered by sounds. If you are too

second, becoming acquainted with a molecular plane of things that are not yet individuated asks us to attune to other paces. We need to slow down; allow experiences of perception to take the time they take. To not rush over them and barely notice, but to taste them fully and allow the experience to unfold at its own pace. In *The Senders*, clock time tends to dissolve. Like in a dream or hypnosis, an hour can feel like mere minutes. As if we dove into undercurrents of time. Even sense of space can transform, as sensations of sound, touch and smell become spatialized. When ‘waking up’ from a session as a receiver, I feel like we have traveled far, and yet that I have never been more in tune with the subtle presences that surround me here and now.

Care, Boredom, and Resonance

Sessions of *The Senders* are experienced by nearly all receivers as deeply restorative. Like in Deep Listening, a caring and healing component lies at the center of this artistic practice.⁸ I believe this healing and care reach beyond our human, individual selves to include broader animate and inanimate, as well as organic and inorganic systems in which our lives are embedded. From a state that is inclined to reach out and dominate surroundings with mind and actions—a state that has destructive effects on our individual as well as collective environmental, psychic, and social well-being—we shift to a receptive state that potentially opens us to dialogue, reciprocity, and mutual affection.

This shift can be unsettling. It can happen that one doesn’t know what to do with the suspension of an active, everyday working-state that deep perception requires; that one doesn’t ‘see the point,’ experiences the situation as meaningless, empty, or unfulfilling. In a culture that rewards fast ways of life, when things become still, silent or slow, boredom makes itself felt all the more violently. As if the constant flow of activity and stimulation were there to distract us from a generally alienated state by creating a false impression of fulfilment; obsessively avoiding the feeling of meaninglessness that appears when this flow is interrupted.⁹ Both high-speed living and

boredom make it very difficult to establish meaningful relationships with other beings or to stand in a conscious relation to time and space. In this circuit of boredom and activity that bites its own tail,¹⁰ slow art situations like *The Senders* might trigger boredom, impatience, or irritation. Yet, they also carry a potential to break the spell¹¹ of boredom at its root and open us to other modes of being-with, because they invite us to step out of the hyperactive game.

During my recent studies in contemporary dance and dramaturgy, I investigated ‘slow dance’¹² in the context of a hasteful society. By slow dance, I understand choreographic work that asks for the suspension of usual paces, invites us to let go of the tension that makes us less receptive to our surroundings, and thereby facilitates other ways of relating to our sensible environment. Along the way, I found that slow atmospheres¹³ could lead to a specific kind of aesthetic experience that I call ‘aesthetic boredom.’

The ideas of slow dance and aesthetic boredom both resonate with a recent tendency in contemporary choreography and performance to create semantically vague spaces where any form of narration or representation, however abstract, is not the main interest or even is absent.¹⁴ These spaces suspend usual ways of relating to our environment—including performance settings. Contrary to most everyday situations, they don’t require focused attention: there needs to be no fear of losing the ‘thread’ of the performance, since there is none. Instead, they encourage a kind of attention that can only take place when there is time; when there is no hurry; a meandering spectatorial attitude that doesn’t go straight to any goal, doesn’t try to understand, but extends in time and space, takes detours, hesitates, lingers, pauses. We hang out with what is present like a good friend would: without trying to ‘get’ anything out of the situation, without imposing any plan on what is there.

Aesthetic boredom could be an aesthetic experience where kinesthetic, cognitive, and affective relaxation makes it possible to dive particularly deep into perception, and where attention is free to contemplatively linger, meander, and simply be touched by the way things are. At the very opposite of boredom that makes us feel separate from our

a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality, Hartmut Rosa describes very systematically how in our late modern society, acceleration causes alienation. Contrary to essentialist uses of alienation that describe an alienation from some ‘true’ human essence, ‘authentic’ nature or unalienable inner being, Rosa proposes a relational alienation. Contemporary subjects are alienated in the sense that they lack a meaningful relation or connection to time, space, others, the world of things and even themselves, which, in Rosa’s terms, prevents them from living a ‘good life.’

¹⁰ For Byung-Chul Han, today’s frenetic resolution to act is more responsible for the emptiness and meaninglessness that causes boredom, than it is a way to counter it. For him, if meaning is relationship and boredom is an experience of meaninglessness in a culture where excessive activity prevents true relationships to take place, then ‘boredom can be seen as the flip side of excessive activity.’ Han, *The Scent of Time*, 78–84.

¹¹ ‘A compulsive activism keeps boredom alive. The spell of profound boredom will only be genuinely broken if the *vita activa* incorporates the *vita contemplativa* into its critical pole and once again serves the latter.’ Han, *The Scent of Time*, 84.

¹² ‘Slow dance’ is a term Hana Lee Erdman and Louise Dahl coined as a gathering term for choreographic practices that resonate with a wider slow

⁸ The title ‘The Senders’ refers to the idea of sending healing energy. That’s why ‘performers’ in this piece are called ‘senders.’ Besides her choreographic practice, Stav is an energy healer and teacher. Her choreographic work has been gradually more informed by this practice.

⁹ In *Alienation and Acceleration: Towards*

art movement: a movement that calls attention to the experience of time unfolding, where watching becomes both conscious and embodied. Like slow food, slow cinema, slow sex, slow art and many other slow movements and genres, slow dance emerges in reaction to a contemporary context where most areas of life go (too) fast. Erdman and Dahl also gave their first collaborative choreographic piece the name *Slow Dance*. It premiered in September 2019 at MDT Stockholm.

13 Slowness can be conveyed by obvious compositional choices such as slow paces, slow build-ups, stillness, or repetition. Yet because there are also pieces, such as *The Senders*, where slowness doesn't translate into any pinpointable characteristic, I rely on the idea of atmosphere to approach slowness beyond singular compositional elements.

14 Ana Vujanovic's concept of 'landscape dramaturgies' has been a source of inspiration to what I write here. Vujanovic, 'Landscape Dramaturgy' and 'Meandering Together.'

15 'If acceleration is the problem, then resonance may well be the solution,' writes Hartmut Rosa (*Resonance*, 1). After systematically describing how acceleration in different aspects of our lives makes us feel alienated from everything that surrounds us, including ourselves ('Alienation and Acceleration,' 83–97), Rosa proposes resonance

surroundings, aesthetic boredom is an experience of relation and embeddedness.

Art situations, like *The Senders*, that encourage a movement toward deep perception and aesthetic boredom by suspending fast paces of life, remind me of Hartmut Rosa's 'resonant spaces,' spaces where resonance¹⁵ can take place.¹⁶ In resonance, we allow things to remain in their own space of radiance. Instead of reaching out to them, to identify them, assimilate them, consume them, or produce more knowledge, we open up the possibility for a reciprocal relationship: we allow things to affect us.

Bathing in Resonance

The Senders is a space where visitors can *collectively* sink into deep perception, sustain a contemplative, lingering attention and potentially experience aesthetic boredom. Together we attune and let ourselves be affected, immersed, and even absorbed by an atmosphere that, as I like to see it, partly belongs to a molecular realm. This realm exists on an ontological level that precedes psychology, memory-models and instrumentality. In fact, it precedes any kind of individuation altogether and therefore necessarily also evades semantic determination.

Although, as a receiver of *The Senders*, I surrendered easily to a pleasing and gentle process of lingering attention and deep perception, I know that the indeterminacy of this space also demands responsibility. Not only because the suspension of usual modes of engaging, even with art, can cause boredom when one doesn't find a way 'in,' but also because the time and space that is opened up can be used to practice contemplation just as well as absentmindedness. How can we collectively inhabit this vague realm, full of under-identified and thus unknown things? How do we navigate when temporary stillness allows the world to speak more deeply? How do you swim in a molecular bath?

More than really swimming, or skillfully carving my path through it, the feeling I have as a receiver of *The Senders* is one of floating. Floating on vast waters of not-knowing, traversed by rich and complex floods of sensation.

In this bath, distinctions between individual and collective, human and other-than-human, organic and other-than-organic don't exist. They disappear together with divisions between subjects, objects, and semantic units. The stone gently placed on my hand dissolves into changing sensations of weight, temperature, and touch until it almost becomes part of my body.

As we relax and open our senses, vibrancy and radiance emanate from all elements in the space-atmosphere. They reach out to us and affect us, 'touch' us if we allow it. Calmness and sensitivity provoke a change whereby our tendency to instrumentally relate to a molar plane of objects—one modelled by language and structures of thought—shifts to a resonant way of being-with a molecular bath of fluxes that escapes full identification, grasp, or comprehension—and includes ourselves.

We cannot experience the bath without being absorbed by it, imbued by it, without becoming part of it. We cannot stand outside of it and reify it or instrumentalize it. As we sink even only partially into an ontological realm that precedes individuation, we can taste the beauty of more horizontal ways of engaging: socially, affectively, politically, and ecologically. Imagining ourselves as a set of particles that are neither separate nor superior to all other particles around.

A window opens, light and fresh air enter. I wake up without fully losing the feeling. A conversation, a bike ride. I spend the rest of my day floating through colors, smells, and sensations, losing track of my own borders.

as a primary relation to the world that we need to find back in order to live a 'good life.'

Resonance is a mode of relation that is experienced when (a segment of) the world 'speaks back' to us instead of remaining 'mute'; when we are at the same time actively relating and passively being affected; when we enter into a reciprocal relationship with the world, mutually calling upon each other, responding to each other, and potentially transforming each other.

Resonant spaces are situations where experiences of resonance can reoccur, so that 'axes of resonance' can appear.

16 Rosa, *Resonance*.

The Senders
Concept, choreography and sound design: Stav Yeini. Interactive installation: Nimrod Astarhan. Sound advice: Christina Vantzou. Video: Siet Phorae, Eva L'Hoest. Scent alchemy: Ayin De Sela. Fermentation, cooking: Andrew Hardwidge. Performance: Ezra Fieremans, Mikko Hyvönen, Alice Van der Wielen-Honinckx, Stav Yeini. Supported by: Buda Arts Centre, STUK- Huis voor Dans, Beeld & Geluid, workspacebrussels.

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