

Shock in the Ear: sound and new media art

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Abstract

New media art generally fails to engage with the imaginative and artistic possibilities and particularities of sound. Shock in the Ear is a sound-centred experimental art CDROM which explores shock -- from culture shock to electric shock and reverberating beyond into shock aesthetics.

Keywords: Shock, CDROM, Sound, Eurographics, experimental

1. Introduction

Shock in the Ear invites the user to interact in a new way and to engage sensually with shock as an experience of deep and abrupt physical and psychic change. It is an intense and poetic work, challenging the usual hierarchy of vision over sound and solely vision-centred interface and interactivity. It thus formally expresses the 'shocking' concept that sound is a medium appropriate to interactivity, as a new and engaging artistic form, because sound goes beyond the interface, into time, into the body, and into the imagination and emotions.

The event of shock shifts the body with new sensations and heightened awareness. To map this bodily time/space is an aesthetic, synaesthetic journey. For, as Susan Buck-Morss argues about aesthetics, the "original field of aesthetics is not art but reality-- corporeal, material nature".

Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body.' It is a form of cognition, achieved through taste, touch, hearing seeing smell - the whole corporeal sensorium. (Buck-Morss, 1993,125)

Aesthetics shape subjectivity; they are felt as much as thought -- they are the source of gut reactions. (Eagleton, 1990, ch.1) One of the central concerns for sound artists in the context of new media is to upset these aesthetic gut reactions, to rekindle the senses, especially hearing. This does not mean to replace sight as dominant in new media art, but rather to let the different media and senses rub

against each other, to dislodge each from their conventional places. As the different senses -- hearing, touching, seeing -- disrupt each other, they can shift perception, instead of re/congealing into a totalised, hierarchized whole. This seems to me essential in any experimental art work aiming to do more than simply reproduce existing forms and aesthetics. Gregory Ulmer has spoken of the need to think the computer interface "with the heat as well as the light". I would add thunder and whispering, as well as large sweeping gestures and small gentle movements, to that heat and light to give new media art a further edge and difference. This makes possible Ulmer's 'design for a different logic' -- where you "follow the familiar into the unfamiliar until you no longer know which is which". (Ulmer, 1995)

While freeing sound from endless loops was essential to my project with Shock in the Ear, so too was a refiguring of new media art visual aesthetics and kinaesthetics -- to free it from rapidly clicking digits and cyberspace dominance. There the digital screen usually operates as a sort of transparency, so that it can be moved past effortlessly, immediately, imperceptibly on the way to the depths of cyberspace. That creates a phantasmagorical effect, of offering an escape from reality, the body, and the senses. And speed cuts across/cuts out time and space as memory, replacing it with instantaneity in cyberspace. Speed also dictates the gestural relationship between touch, sound and visuals. The effect of this aesthetics and kinaesthetics is all too often that new media art is driven -- driven not to linger and decay sensually in time and space.

Thus, with the valorisation of speed as a pleasure (addiction) and technique in new media art, there has been little concern with sound and touch. So

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sound, rather than opening onto alterity, proximity, intimacy, and affect, follows in the line of sight -- reduced to abstract, objective, exchangeable senses. Sound suffers the uneasy fate of touch here:

It could be argued that digital technology institutes touching as an objective sense, uncontaminated by the ticklish materiality of a body in its vulnerability to change through touch. (Vasseleu, 1996, 11)

In these cyberspatial aesthetics and kinaesthetics, the body is constrained by limited motions and sensations, disciplined --trained to concentrate all movement in one finger, all sensation in the mind's eyes.

Shock in the Ear displaces the usual formal composition of CDROM art which relies on: illusions of depth; smooth polished surfaces with photographic 'realist' definition; and a particular sense of time (related in part to locking the sound to the image). This displacement is intended to produce an aesthetic shift/shock which resonates with the decentring effects of shock experiences. An altered awareness and experience of time is also central to the shock experience, and I was particularly concerned to explore the possibilities of the experience of aural time in the CDROM.

A Shock in the Ear involves stories, performances, music, paintings for the screen, and sounds. The stories are about shock experiences. The performed pieces include different performances of these stories as well as poetic texts. Performance (recorded) plays a crucial role. Performance, the resonating voice/sound of the performer, as a consciously embodied use of voice, has the possibility of addressing the concerns that computer interactivity is disembodied. The music, by Richard Vella, provides texture and pleasure missing in so many CDROMs; and it disrupts the usual interactive kinaesthetics of rapid clicking through its compelling sensual and immersive qualities.

The visuals provide their own interpretations of shock. Maria Miranda's screens work at a sensual, poetic level to disorient and engage the user, already habituated to a certain computer look. They invite slow and intense exploration rather than escape into a smooth, slick, bodiless cyberspace. Thus they help to dislodge the user from habituated rapid clicking, to engage them with time and sound.

There are also broader aesthetic concerns behind the work. These are to do with 'shock aesthetics' - is shock as an aesthetic (so crucial in modernism and avant garde art) still meaningful in the post modern era? If so, how do you make those sorts of sensory,

perceptual shifts and repositionings through art? I believe that shock in the sense of unexpected collisions is still effective and affective; and this is what animates the visuals and sound in this work. In the late or post modern era, while we may be numb to shock/horror as a disrupter of our sensibilities, hybridity can still catch us unawares, catch our unawareness, and re-engage us.

2. The Experience

The aim is for the user to experience shock, as the strange time/space after the event -- a dislocated space and expanded time during which or after which new sensations and perceptions can flood in. They experience this both in an indirect way through hearing stories from those who have been through it and directly through being themselves dislocated in interactive cyberspace. Their accustomed location in computer space is one where they are emotionally/psychically immersed but physically and sensually distant as they carry out a quest or play a game, in a variation on the theme of familiar looking and sounding cyberspace. In this work they find themselves somewhere else -- and, parallel to shock, they go through the numbness and come back to fuller sensations and perceptions.

There is also an uncanny experience of no home/page and no screen menus. Neither is there the usual hierarchy or depth relationship between the sites -- in this work they are simply different and randomly accessed. In part this is to allow a rich and sensual screen uninterrupted with informational icons. This is also appropriate for the random possibilities of CDROMs which I wanted to maximise, especially as they suit the fragmented, uncontrolled character of shock and its memories.

3. The Style and the Structure

Shock in the Ear involves five "sense sites", each of which is based on a different moment in the shock experience, conceptually and formally. Each has a distinct look, feel, sound, form of interactivity. 'Control' is disrupted through random programming: you can move from site to site, but you cannot control which site you will go to. Similarly, within each site, movement is random between stories.

The visual style is specific for each of the 5 sites in the work and appropriate to their particular sound and type of interactivity. For instance, where the sound is most lyrical and the interactivity is about increasing intensities, the visuals are most dense and painterly.

The sound design uses the same material in a variety of ways, through different performances, editing, and mixing (some of which happens "live", via the interactivity). As you come across the same material in your random movement through the piece, its different meanings can become evident. This expresses something about shock and its reverberances. It also creates an unusual and poetic notion of "depth" rather than that of going into cyberspace.

3.1 Memory site

This site conveys the memory of the shock experience through hearing the six 'original' stories. Like memory, the visual style is fragmented and partial in some places and overlaid in others. The movement between some of the screens is via a blend -- evoking the way memories blend and overlap in the after-state of shock. Music both creates a tension and engages the user: its mix with the stories is random, creating a disturbing and fragmented dimension. There are 6 different groups of music which have different colours and therefore produce different counterpoints to the stories.

3.2 Attack site

A sharp, intense moment of attack (in the musical sense). Visually, with its reds, its overlaid images, its choices of elements, this site evokes the intensity, the present, disturbing moment of the shock event. The performance is breathless, urgent, abrupt. The sound here can be found in four hotspots: fragments of a performance of the stories, sounds, words, music. Each visual hot spot has a bundle (4-7) of elements which are played randomly. This means that the "live mix" achieved by moving around the screen differs virtually every time. The sounds include sucking, cutting (into the flesh and bone), and scrunching sounds.

3.3 Decay site

A wet, flowing moment of decay (in the musical sense). This site evokes the close/distant, modulations of the aftermath of shock. The visual style is cool -- blues and greens -- with discrete images; it evokes the numbness of shock. The sound uses watery sounds such as ice floes breaking apart, thunder, frogs, a vortex of water. The performance of the story fragments is modulated including whispering alternating with a more distant voice. Movement here operates in the same way as in the Attack site since the moment of intensity (attack) and its aftermath (decay) are related moments of shock.

3.4 The Call site

This is the moment of disruption of shock, the uncontrollable and insistent moment. It is also a reminder of Keith's story of being shocked in the ear, through the telephone during World War Two. At random times, the phone rings. The user must pick up and then respond via 'software' code. The phone 'hardware' then appears and the user is spoken to. Visually, this site has a very different feeling -- conveying the interruption of the Call. The sound character of this site, like the visual, is spare, voice only (treated to sound like it comes through a telephone). This is also a moment of culture shock, as one of the voices does not speak English and is increasingly annoyed and louder.

3.5 Resonance site

This is the moment of resonance -- a moment of being outside the stories and responding poetically and reflectively. In this site the images are painterly and textured: they comment on, are inspired by, and extend the texts which are heard here. The texture invites a kinaesthetic response, inviting the user to explore their texture for (hotspots of) sound. Besides the poetic texts (which I wrote), there are also sound fragments -- of sentences, phrases, words. Some of these are in various languages (and are performed to produce a sense of culture shock). One of the dynamics at this site is that the voices and the screen 'speak' to each other, so that words or questions on the screen are answered by the voice. Movement of the mouse around the screen alters panning and enables a different sort of immersed interaction than that of rapid clicking. That is, this site works through a slowing down of time and interactivity -- the more the user is immersed in exploring the texture of the paintings, the more they are rewarded with sound.

4. In summary

Shock in the Ear is a sensual and disruptive aural-visual experience for the user. Its high quality and complex images and stereo sound work in non-conventional ways. Music counterpoints as well as providing emotive/sensual effect and a sense of dis/location in time and space. Sounds evoke space and sensual responses rather than operating as literal fx. Performance works as texture and rhythm as much as through content. Visuals are textured, poetic, evocative to invite a richly sensual involvement and intense interactivity. These elements articulate together to produce a work uniquely performing, playing with, and shocking the interface of CDROM art.

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