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Call Me! Calling the Glacier

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the project **Call me!**, a series of interactive projects in acoustical emotional field research by sound artist Kalle Laar on the global impacts of climate change.

1. INTRODUCTION

Call me! is the title of a series of art projects using the mobile phone to give people the opportunity of a personal experience with various aspects of climate change. The first part of it, **Calling the Glacier**, which connects you in real time to a glacier, was introduced at the Venice Art Biennial 2007, a second stage of **Calling the Glacier** was installed for the ars electronica Linz 2007. Ever since **Calling the Glacier** has been presented on various art shows and other occasions like conferences and panels.

Another part of **Call me!** named **Hotline** was introduced at the Klimaherbst Munich 2009, a series of events, panels and conferences on global warming and energy.

Call me! has been developed in close collaboration with *artcircolo* headed by curator Dr. Serafine Lindemann and is part of the long-term project *Overtures* - a transdisciplinary arts project on resources by *artcircolo*. **Calling the Glacier** has been developed with the help of Vodafone Group Research & Development Germany and the Commission for Glaciology of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities Munich.

2. SOUND AND THE MOBILE PHONE

Images, static or in motion, are always spatially displaced representations of our reality. Before they can touch us emotionally this intrinsic distance has to be overcome. But sound knows no such barriers. Sounds reach the mind and the subconscious directly. Although this difference seems almost negligible, it is nonetheless essential.

The project series **Call me!** researches sounding signals of natural phenomena caused by climate change. But it also asks the question: "Are you afraid of the post-fossil age?" putting you through to a dialogue with people around the world. Telecommunications technology provides the acoustic connection to melting glaciers (**Calling the Glacier**), or to international energy providers and politically involved institutions (**Hotline**). Or it might let you listen to the sound of insects invading new territories that due to global warming now meet their temperature needs and who are carrying diseases unknown to these countries before (**Defroster**).

For any participator, active calling provides the possibility of individually experiencing locations normally unreachable and

mostly neglected by headline news. Pure information transfer is not the main issue with these projects, it is the individual emotional contact created by listening live to the sounds, unobstruded by any visuals, that is much more important. Activating this perspective in connection with social, political and scientific aspects is the aim of **Call me!**



Figure 1. Calling the Glacier, Vernagt Ferner
'Business Card'

3. PRESENTATION

The actual artwork is the business card that provides the phone number to connect the participant. The design is inspired by actual business cards distributed by Japanese prostitutes in 1990s Tokyo. A little bit sleazy and cheap, it is clear that no official institution would use this kind of typography or colour range. On the one hand these cards indicate that the phone numbers want to be called while on the other hand adding a little bit of humour to the project.

4. THE CALL ME! PROJECTS

4.1 Calling the Glacier

4.1.1 Vernagt Ferner Glacier

Calling the Glacier is a direct telephone connection to a glacier. A microphone installed on site transmits sounds from nature, directly and without editing, to the caller. You hear flowing water of varying intensity, sporadic cracking and other sounds, which a 'living glacier' utters with the change of seasons.

In the meantime the reality of climate change has reached a large part of the general public. The glaciers of this planet are a striking

symbol of this change. They resemble giant living creatures, which are slowly and in many cases frighteningly quickly shrinking, literally leaking off and disappearing. **Calling the Glacier** invites the caller to get in touch. Of course, the glacier itself is not in a position to answer, but when a caller makes the decision to dial this number, he will find himself there, in real time, any time, from anywhere. The focus is not on sensational reporting from strange, far-away worlds, but on a personal experience of a process that concerns us all.



Figure 2. Vernagt Ferner Gauging Station, Winter 2007

The microphone picking up the signal is placed next to the gauging station built by the Commission for Glaciology more than 30 years ago. What makes the Vernagt Glacier so special is the fact that it discharges into one water flow only, a little creek in the winter and a roaring stream in the summer. This is very unusual as the melting water of most of the glaciers runs off in various outlets. Therefore the Vernagt has become one of only five glaciers worldwide where the mass balance, the balance between winter growth and summer loss of ice, is measured by all scientific means applicable, while on the other glaciers only one or two measurement methods can be used.

The microphone is connected to a mobile phone system that, if called, transmits the signal to the nearest antenna. As there is no antenna within sight the signal relies on reflections from the surface and travels from southern Austria to nearby Italy where it is picked-up and sent to Germany. Here the signal is split to make sure that the line is not engaged. Up to five people can use the line simultaneously.

Since the gauging station relies on solar power, one additional solar panel has been installed feeding the low energy needed for the phone connection.

The system has been working since June 2007 and will continue for at least one more year from the time of this writing.

4.1.2 Pasterze Glacier

At the invitation of the ars electronica Linz 2007 with the help of the Central Institute for Meteorology and Geodynamics Vienna (ZAMG) **Calling the Glacier** was temporarily installed on the Pasterze Glacier in Austria.



Figure 3. Artist Kalle Laar at the Gauging Station Vernagt Ferner, Summer 2007

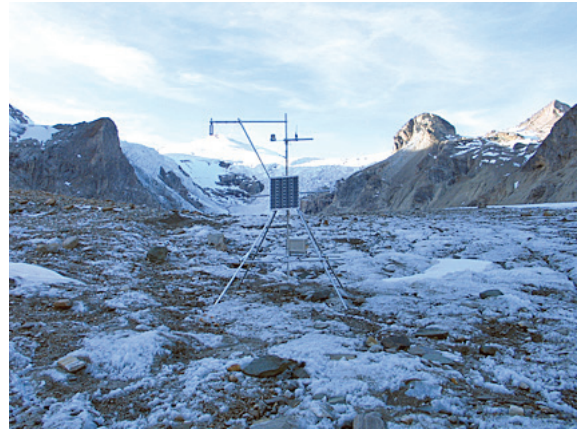


Figure 4. Pasterze Glacier Call me!-Station, Autumn 2007

First the microphone has been placed directly on the surface, above a temporary glacier stream. During the last expedition a few weeks later in October 2007 the surface had already changed considerably, and it has been decided then to sink the microphone into a glacier mill about 6 -7 meters deep. Therefore, you could call the heart of the glacier directly. Like with the Vernagtferner, power was supplied by solar panels, feeding an accumulator mounted on a aluminium scaffold, holding also some measurement instruments of the ZAMG.

By the beginning of May 2008, the glacier was covered by about three meters of snow, temporarily silencing the station. This was expected to happen, and once the solar panels see the sun, the station restarts automatically. Extreme weather conditions, like a strong influence from the Sahara region later in May, caused the snow to melt faster than ever. Usually the water inside the snow rises to only a few centimetres on top of the ice, now it rose more than a meter, a phenomenon never observed before in this region. All the electronics were flooded and destroyed. Therefore the actual destruction of the system provided a new scientific insight.



Figure 5. Pasterze Glacier Microphone, Autumn2007

The Pasterze system is no longer operating.

Calling the Glacier will be extended to Spain, an expedition has already explored possibilities on the Aneto Glacier in the Pyrenees. Further research is devoted to the Greenland area.

4.2 HOTLINE

While **Calling the Glacier** connects you to a phenomenon in nature, the **Hotline**-series uses the phone in a more traditional way. It provides the phone numbers of institutions that are in different ways connected to future impacts of the climate change. These include atomic power plants, coal and tidal power plants, institutions like the OPEC and environmental ministries of different countries, as well as an institution like the FRONTEC, the European Union border security unit. While some of the numbers published on these fake business cards are hard to find, none of them are really secret. Some will connect to an information centre, others directly to persons involved with the public image of the institution, some of the people being professionals in public relations, others not. The person answering the phone at the Public Contact of the Navajo Coal Power Station, Lower Antelope Canyon, Arizona, USA will react differently than the head of the OPEC information centre.



Figures 6./7. Call me! 'Business Card' of the Navajo Coal Power Station, Lower Antelope Canyon, Arizona, USA

This project asks the question “Are you afraid of the post-fossil age?” and encourages the participant to share her or his concerns with a person that will be affected in the future in the same way as the caller, but is working in an institution or plant that has a direct link to the impact of future changes. **Hotline** is not about the call itself, it is about its potential. Whenever someone picks up one of the business cards with a phone number that neither the participant would have thought of calling before, nor that the target would usually provide freely, the possibility of calling is released into the mind of the participant. As long as the card is in the pocket it will remind the person carrying it that she or he could call, could actually do something on a personal level, as little as this might be. It is all about the possibility.



Figure 8. Call me! 'Business Card' of the Frontex, European Union Border Security Agency

4.3 DEFROSTER

Where **Calling the Glacier** provides a live-connection to nature, **Defroster** combines the live element with recorded material. To maintain a project like **Calling the Glacier**, substantial support is needed and it is clear that it cannot always be repeated in the same way. Defroster derives its name from the melting of the permafrost regions in Siberia, where a **Call me!** version is projected but not yet realised. Because the sound of the release of the methane from the Siberian soil could be picked up by a microphone only with great difficulty, the idea is to document the change in wildlife caused by the raising temperatures. Insect swarms, in their enormous quantities unknown to this part of the world until a few years ago, dominate the soundscape of new swampy areas, at least during the warmer seasons. A microphone there could pick up this sound while the change in the local atmosphere can be measured and related in different ways. By pressing an additional button on the phone you will get the information upon request.



Figure 9. Call me! 'Business Card' of a Mosquito of the Culicidae Family Carrying the West Nile Virus

Insects can be seen as sensitive indicators of global warming, but not only the animals themselves are finding new territories. Viruses causing diseases to regions where they traditionally have never been seen before, using insects as a means of transportation. So while the Siberian soil will have to wait for a live-phone connection, you can call a mosquito, actually the recorded sound of it. The mosquito of the culicidae family is a regular in western Europe, but the West Nile Virus it is sometimes carrying is not. This Virus has been detected in southern Austria and will be entering Germany in near future. So while you cannot call the virus directly, the "business card" with the phone number of the sound of the insect might provoke different feelings when this familiar animal will be encountered in the future.

5. RESPONSE

With this project, one does not have the usual responses you might find in an exhibition situation. There is always an immediate general interest but because the physical evidence of the work, the card, is taken by the participant any reaction will be a private one. It is not expected that people start calling while at an exhibition. Within the first year, about 20,000 people called the glaciers. The feedback from many people proved that there was a strong emotional impact that could not be controlled, the direct audio connection seemed to be very different and maybe even more powerful than a visual representation of the same phenomenon. Some people even started to call regularly. For some reason and quite unexpectedly it has been hardly ever questioned that **Calling the Glacier** is an actual live connection, the element of trust being a strong factor in this work.

The fact that the emotional impact often preceded the actual call was not expected when the project was conceived. It is the possibility of the call that already stirs the emotions, a reaction that the **Hotline**-series is trying to exploit more directly.

6. COLLABORATIONS

A project like **Calling the Glacier** needs collaborators on many levels. First of all, being part of *Overtures 3 - A North-to-South Expedition about the resource water*, was essential to understand some of the basic impacts of global warming.

In the year 2000, the project series **Overtures** began transdisciplinary, future-oriented research concerned with resources. After two international exhibitions and the north-south

expedition dealing with the change in value of water, **Overtures 4** is laid out as a discussion and research series for the development of innovative methods of communication. The agenda focuses on discussion panels, workshops, time-travels and lectures, performances, interactions between art and society. Artists, technologists, scientists and media representatives visualize recent insights in order to work out future scenarios to prepare a broader public for the social paradigm shift present already today. Not only the worldwide recession but also, most notably, the climate change is providing our planet with new challenges.

The future perspective — beginning today — needs to deal with embracing our growing knowledge. Which values need to be redefined, conserved or rediscovered? What needs to be changed regarding the limitations of our resources, the changing climate and the threats of globalization? How are innovations and new ideas implemented in today's economy? And what level of personal responsibility do we take for our local and international actions? **Call me!** continues to be a part of it.

The collaboration with Vodafone Group Research & Development helped to clarify not only many technical aspects involved in establishing a connection to a glacier, but it showed that a branch of a company could have high ethical standards challenging and supporting the project on many different levels.

The concrete process of learning from different disciplines supported by *Overtures* was reflected by the collaboration with the Commission for Glaciology of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences & Humanities. Here the project received its solid scientific background, while in exchange providing the scientists with channels of publicity they would not have had otherwise. For more than thirty years, these scientists were measuring the Vernagt Ferner, and for at least twenty years they have been trying to explain to the general public that a radical change is happening, but they were unable to reach a broader audience. Collaborating with an art project has opened new possibilities.

7. THEORY

On a theoretical level, **Call me!** can provide some insight in certain aspects of the use of new technologies.

Possibilities in new media and technology that are not directly related to their intended use are often not easily discovered and sometimes remain overlooked during their lifetime.

One example might be the history of a musical instrument, the synthesizer. The accelerated development of technology does not give the not-so-tech-savvy-brains among many musicians enough time to focus on the various possibilities of a particular instrument: its successor is always already waiting in the shop. Changing fashions have to be met. Quite a few experimental minded musicians keep coming back to some seemingly outdated instruments only now discovering new possibilities outside the set templates and advertised possibilities.

Similar aspects can be found in one of the main fetishes of our time, the mobile phone. Who will ever learn and use all the functions offered in one of these fancy little machines? The focus has shifted from communication to various other fields like status and entertainment. The original synthesizers were constructed to manipulate waveforms and the modern instruments give you thousands of pre-constructed sounds without encouraging you to

learn other possibilities, let alone to use the technology for something it was not invented for. Only the artist may see other, potentially creative possibilities here.

The mobile phone lets you communicate whenever and from where ever you wish, but its development didn't seem to have affected the general idea of communication or who to communicate with. Gadgets produce a kind of 'surface'-use, an overall heard background noise of idle chatter.

We reached a point where it could be interesting to stop for a moment and rethink: this little mobile instrument has been invented to communicate, so why not think about quality rather than quantity? Not on the technical side, but in terms of new partners to communicate with.

Call me! Therefore raises the question of how a personal communication could be established on social, political and environmental levels.

8. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Call me! is part of Overtures - a transdisciplinary arts project on resources by artcircolo.

www.overtures.de; www.artcircolo.de

In cooperation with Dr. Serafine Lindemann, artcircolo, Vodafone Group Research & Development and the Commission for Glaciology of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities Munich

9. REFERENCES

- [1] www.callingtheglacier.org; www.callme.vg
+49 89 3791 4058: Dial this number and listen in real time to the Vernagtferner Glacier in the Oetztal Valley, Austria