GENERATIONS IN HARMONY
‘the generations choir’
voices in interplay to raise awareness about ageism

by

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dedications

This work is dedicated to my close family. My grandfather, my parents, sisters, my husband and my children. I did this for us.
abstract

This essay is written in the context of a master exam project at Konstfack university of arts, crafts and design. I have explored what I, in the capacity of a designer, can do to raise awareness about ageism. The proposal, called “the generations choir”, is an interactive installation that will see the light of day during the spring exhibition at Konstfack in May 2018. It aims to give space to reflect upon our own actions and standpoint in relation to the topic of ageism. The structures of the choir system, often with age divided groups, stands as a metaphor for our age-segregated society. The human voice is the material I have used to work with in my quest to promote change, the idea of new ways of living: enabling interaction with different generations in a meaningful way.

Apart from the recording of singing voices of all ages, I have worked with sensors and programming to create a functioning interactive sound installation. I have focused on making an installation that invites visitors independent of age or disabilities (except the hearing impaired) to move freely and explore harmonies. My aim is to show that together with our differences, whether it’s a new voice, a broken voice or a frail voice, we can create something strong, lasting and beautiful. I want to remind us not to fall into the trap of age segregation and forget about all the good things that come with sharing references, experiences, stories and knowledge. Let us harmonies more! With whom do you sing?
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During a course at Konstfack in the spring of 2016, I conducted a project that I called Age-Less. The project emerged from the need to tackle the social and political problem of ageism. My conclusion after some research was that I needed to create activities, so called intergenerational activities. The point with these activities was to promote meetings and socialising between groups that doesn’t naturally occur otherwise; at least not in Sweden. I targeted seniors, teenagers, people on parental leave and students. Throughout the different activities I realised that I needed settings with easy access, low thresholds as well as being rewarding for all parts. In general I focused on activities where fun and play were in focus as well as activities promoting health and exercises on a level that does not exclude. I developed a set of cards with generic but personal questions to facilitate new encounters, as well as a certificate that stated that the participants had taken a stand in the fight against ageism. But I wasn’t entirely finished with the topic, I felt there were other paths to tread and this essay is telling the story of what followed.

For this thesis I have tried to use a language that is inviting for readers with different backgrounds, but you might still encounter words that are specific for the field of design or other neighbouring scientific fields. Below is a list of the ones that I believe needs clarification, a short explanation to the meaning of the word, where it comes from and if I use it in a certain way in order to avoid any misunderstandings.

- **aesthetics**, is used in this thesis, not as “what is regarded as beautiful” but rather the “state of being” or “mode of being” of the gestalt.
- **ageism**, stereotyping of and discrimination against individuals or groups on the basis of their age.
- **design activism**, as I have come to understand it and use it in this essay is a non-violent unsettling of unspoken truths, not violent acts/riot/revolution, that in a subtle way expose something, e.g. hierarchies and systems that control everyday behaviors and interactions.
- **dissensus**, here refers to Rancière’s writings and should be understood as something that demonstrates a certain impropriety, “disruption of consensus”, and reveals a gap between what people do and what they feel about it.
- **drone tone**, a note or chord that is continuously sounded throughout most or all of a polyphonic piece, examples: traditional chants and traditional bagpipe music.
- **gestalt**, from germanic languages, a form or figure, something as a whole.
- **ison**, so called drone tone or slow-moving lower vocal part.
- **othered**, a verb form of the word “other”. Coming from the social sciences and is used here and generally as; to other a certain culture or individual is to treat that culture as fundamentally different from another class of individuals, often by emphasising its apartness in traits that differ from one’s own.
- **pastoral**, as in music: at a moderate tempo with movement of a melody in thirds over a drone bass, a melodic reference to nature in form or mood.

I should also take the opportunity to frame the geographical setting. As I’ve chosen to address a social and political problem I felt the need to look specifically at what is going on within Sweden and what is possible to do, create and imagine from this point of view.
This all began with the death of my maternal grandmother, that passed within my daughter's first week on this earth. I was struck with the knowledge that it was now up to me to pass on her stories, the details of her everyday life that were symptomatic of the eras she lived. I also realised that I only had one person left from that generation within my family and that I didn't even see him that much because I had chosen to live my “far-to-busy-to-have-time-to-visit” life in another city.

This is a quest to look for new ways of living: enabling interaction with different generations in a meaningful way, not a criticism on global life, political ideology nor individuals personal life choices.

What I discovered quite quickly was the deep rooted ageism that has infiltrated layer after layer of our society. Below is a rendition of some of the examples of senior ageism that I found through research on the topic, but one must remember that ageism is not specifically targeting seniors.

The word Ageism stems from words like sexism and racism and was coined in 1969 by Robert Neil Butler. It is a word created to identify, problematise and talk about stereotyping and discrimination against individuals or groups on the basis of their age. Butler created it specifically to describe discrimination against seniors, but today it is used in a broader context since discrimination and stereotyping against e.g. adolescence also exists. This project does not focus on a specific kind of ageism, even though the starting point was to take a stand against senior ageism.

Butler saw that ageism consisted of three different components:

1. prejudicial attitudes towards older people or age/aging process,
2. discriminatory practices against older people and
3. institutional practices and policies that perpetuate stereotypes about elderly people.

One can through this definition clearly see that ageism is structural. I've found examples on all levels of society. The most serious form being policies made with no consideration to different age groups and how they are affected or othered.

According to the World Value Survey (WVS) of 2014, 67% of the Swedes agree/strongly agree to the statement “that seniors above the age of 70 are not respected much these days”. In the same survey one can see that the most important thing to teach your kid is the respect of other human beings, somewhat contradictory! What is astounding is that at total of 15% think that elderly get more than their fair share and 10% think elderly are a burden to society. Bi Puranen (Dagens Nyheter 2015), Secretary General of the WVS, comments these numbers in an article in Dagens Nyheter with the fact that Iraq has numbers completely opposite to those of Sweden and that it might be related to the fact that they lack a pension system which makes the families care for their elderly and that respect is maintained in that situation.

In Sweden many seniors suffer from loneliness and issues connected to loneliness, such as depression (Socialstyrelsen, 2016). It is believed that these issues lead to premature deaths (Cuijpers, Vogelzangs, Twisk, et al, 2014). According to surveys issued by the Swedish social council (Socialstyrelsen, 2016) one can see a relation between seniors who consider themselves to have been treated badly by caregivers and seniors who feel lonely and suffer from depression. Is it wrong to say that the lack of respect towards caretakers lead to premature deaths? Recently the news that among the 90,000 deaths/year, that are statistically expected within the system of care, 1 of 4 dies alone (Sveriges Radio, 2017) was briefly debated. 25% die alone, let’s debate that more! The data tells a dark story when it comes to deaths at hospitals, but that is also natural as most of those death happens in the emergency rooms and thus also are “sudden/hard to assist”. But the remaining fact is that the Swedish government through a Commission whose task was to analyse and propose development of the palliative care states that no one should have to die alone, if not specifically wished so. That commission was issued in 1997, they had 3 years to investigate before the government took action. 1 of 4 isn’t really a successful number and is believed to be related to the question not being enough prioritised in the different municipalities budgets (Senioren, 2017), money has been taken from the budgets for elderly care and moved to the budgets for children and disabled (SVD, 2011), a clear case of senior ageism.

Globalisation is also one of the parameters that make this problem so hard to solve. In the times when we were more static, less prone to move away for studies, careers, love or plain adventure lust, the probability of living close to your family members was significantly higher. This also meant that the probability of you having time, both spontaneous and planned, to interact with older or younger family members was higher than it is today. But I do not promote to reduce, prevent or prohibit globalisation, but rather for us to find alternative ways of spending time with other generations in this new structure. That is why, in my capacity as a designer, I want to explore my possibility to raise awareness and promote the idea of alternative futures without generational borders.
When I first set out deep diving into these questions I had a very specific perspective, namely that of loneliness amongst elderly. Loneliness amongst the elderly is a health hazard and can be seen as a consequence of the socialistic family politics during the 70s, the ultimate solution to every one's right to provide for oneself and to be completely independent of one another. This policy made it possible for women to work, while elderly found themselves comfortably living in homes adapted to their needs and kids got dropped of at heavily subsidised daycare from the age of 1. Since, this well greased machine has gotten some cracks. The seniors today have a life expectancy far exceeding the generations that have passed before them, and due to the baby booms of the 40s and 50s the seniors above 85 today are many (SOU 2001:6), a Swedish politician once referred to this situation as “a meat mountain” a term stemming from the European agriculture industry that literally means “overproduction of meat that there is no market for”. In itself a viewpoint that could be seen as ageism. In the same time the Swedish municipalities have reduced the number of elderly homes and depend on the seniors to “want to stay at home as long as possible” and the families surrounding them to help out in every way they can (SVD, 2011). Daughters, and in some cases, sons (SVD,2011) all over the country struggle with feelings of shame and guilt over not having the time to facilitate the needs of their parents. Elderly everywhere struggle with problems tied to loneliness (Socialstyrelsen, 2016) and a society that just does not see the worth of having them around. I see my project as something general and specifically important for the public to grasp. We’re so good at talking about racism, we do it all the time, so why can’t we be as good at talking about ageism? It’s a mute matter. Through my explorations I have come to one conclusion as to why that might be: nobody feel responsible enough to touch it. Upon interviewing seniors I’ve gotten the answer “it’s the rest of society that need to be the ones who changes” as if you step over a threshold the day you become a retiree that puts you aside “from the rest of society”. While people from my generation think it’s so far away (many years) from their reality that it doesn’t become an urgent matter. I once heard a 14 year old say that “old people are disgusting”, cheered on by an 11 year old, which might be to provoke but might as well come from ignorance. We have built these great barriers for ourselves that we unknowingly lost all the good stuff about frequent interactions, like sharing knowledge, respect and understanding for one another.

I have worked with aesthetics expressions and the gestalt to find ways of representing structures, looking for inspiration from textures and patterns found in nature, symbolism and different ways to visualize data.
The human voice is created when air from our lungs flows through our vocal cords, two horizontal membranes, called “vocal folds”, that stretch from back to front of the larynx. Most of us are born with the ability to create sound and the first 10-13 years not very much happens to the voice except that we learn to control what kind of sound we make. Over time the vocal folds matures, evolves and the voice finally breaks with the help of a hormonal mixture we’re all familiar with. Thank you puberty. This happens to both sexes even though hormonal impact leading to a drop of about one octave in the pitch of the voice only happens for men. What many don’t know is that hormones keep affecting the vocal folds through out life (Kadakia, Carlson & Sataloff 2013), specially for women as the female voice undergoes cyclic changes with the menstrual cycle due to tissue in the larynx having oestrogen receptors, meaning voice changes over the course of each month. Some four decades later both sexes suffer new hormonal fluctuations that changes the characteristics of the voice, the pitch starts to either drop, if you’re a woman, or go up if you’re a man. You can always affect the voice through synthetic hormones if you’re changing gender for example. It is also common that body builders that ad hormones to their regular diet grow a deeper voice. The vocal cords also get affected naturally after a bacteria or virus attack, as the recovery risk changing the vocal folds just as a scars changes the appearance of your skin. But as age grows on you and your vocal folds have been through a lifetime of screaming, viruses and hormonal lows and highs the changes are irreversible, there is really not much we can do to “sound” young again, except maybe a transplant? Senior voices also get affected and become increasingly “thinner” with time due to the membranes becoming less and less flexible, it also reduces the range of the pitch. Some ten years ago I went to a Bob Dylan concert and was much disappointed that, although he is a great performer, all his songs were sung in a range of three notes. Julie Andrews on the other hand has stopped performing all together due to her voice no longer being what it used to be, one must know one’s limits!

The fact that the voice evolves and changes over time, thus indicates age, fits my project very well. The human voice could be seen as a rather unorthodox material, and potentially I could have chosen to associate my explorations with any other, but because of the excellent age indicating qualities I describe above and because it is much less revoking than other materials with similar age indicating characteristics (such as the human skin) as well as it being a literal metaphor for giving something a voice it felt like the perfect, and to be frank very easy, choice.
Not long after the project started I decided, on a hunch, to record voices. Not knowing exactly why, I started off by recording people talking, then singing, together and in group, before I realized I needed a plan. After some time my plan to engage people of different ages in an intergenerational choir went backwards due to scheduling problems, I looked to my alternative paths and rejoiced over the possibility to bring my recordings into the focal light of the project. I tried to make sense of what I already had as material and what I could do with it. Based on the research I had done on the evolution of the voice made me want to display and focus my recordings to do just that. Some of the decision I had to take in this process was “Who”, who’s voice and what (stakeholder etc) is this person in the project, what are they to me? How do I manage the Age aspect? And finally which tone’s do I record? Read more under “Harmony” to understand how I reasoned.

To be able to record voices of many different ages at knowing that I did not know enough people personally I decided to put up a homepage where I could briefly inform about ageism and the project and how to get in touch with me. It had marginal effects on the number of people who got in contact but there were some brave souls and they made me so incredibly happy that I decided to call them “voice heroes”. After deciding more about what I needed recorded I started of again by contacting choirs to get in contact with as many singers as possible.

Some of the voices I managed to collect in the end are people I know personaly, some who got in contact through the web and most of them I found by hanging out at the local church, Uppenbarelsekyrkan in Aspudden. Out of 23 voices in total, the youngest was 7 and the oldest 82. My ambition to record 100 different ages still remain, luckily I can add voices to the final result as I go along.

As a part of my process I have searched both high and low in music for harmonies I find specifically fitting to a certain pastoral tempo or phlegmatic rhythm. To the concept of slow design. And why you may ask? Well, slow design is a branch of design that promotes interactions and less mass manufactured things, a philosophy that puts the individual, socio-cultural and environmental well-being in the focal point of the design process. It is aimed to catalyse behavioural change and socio-cultural transformation, benefits and well-being. But as it sounds it’s slow, it’s holistic, inclusive and reflective;

“designing for space to think, react, dream and muse”.

For these values I have chosen to look for musical harmonies to represent them. I have kept my ears open and each time a song came on that I felt fitting I’ve taken out the spreadsheet trying to decipher what notes to bring into the mix, trying to understand the amount of notes, the range, the gradation, dissonance and consonance. The type of musical impressions that finally stayed with me are strongly connected to the basic musical term “triad”. There are different kind of triads, the major, minor (very common: the happy and the sad), the diminished (sounds a bit spooky) and the augmented (sounds slightly dreamy). Polyphonic singing traditions such as the Gregorian chants which are sung in three parts with strong dissonances, parallel fifths, and a tuning system based on perfect fifths and Arvo Part, master of the minimalistic and the simplistic, has also served as inspiration as well a the very characteristic Valaam monastery chant tradition that comprises of a melody and an “ison” accompanied with simple ornamentations. I’m not a musician, but I have a background where music and singing occurred every day, so I still possess some knowledge of music theory, but on occasion I’ve consulted with people far more skilled in these matters than myself.

In the final proposal (installation during spring exhibition) I consider the possibility to harmonise very important as it is a representation of what we could accomplish together, just as Daily tous les jours music and light installation “21 Balançoires” (21 Swings) during Montreal festival season beautifully demonstrates. One note is good, but if we combine it with another one it could turn out great. My decision to choose which notes will be available, “playable”, was conscious and planned, I want it to be easy to create beautiful combinations rather that noise. It’s all a metaphor for what we can accomplish if we work together. Interaction across the generational barriers, tearing them down instead of reinforcing them. Everytime a harmony is created in my installation an intergenerational meeting occurs and even though it’s a fictional one it represents what could happen and how harmonious it could be.
In my previous project, Age-Less, I concluded that it was hard to create new patterns, habits and platforms based on my own attempts to create such platforms and discussions with the stakeholders. I was happy with my choice to work with the human voice because it enabled me to tap into an already existing system namely that of the “Swedish coral miracle” and it effectively avoided the above mentioned obstacle. I started the project thinking that it too had to focus on activities, real people meeting and interacting, but could not find a system, choir/group of choirs, flexible enough to work with the specific time frame of the thesis project. As the real people fell out of the process I have put emphasis on creating the interactions during the spring exhibition at Konstfack instead. Interplay, according to the Merriam Webster dictionary, suggest two or more opposing forces/groups existing and happening together which is of course the very thing I would like the future to hold and what my proposal should inspire people to seek out. Interplay and interactions are created when each visitor steps inside the installation, it only takes one really, as the voices also represent human presence even though anonymous and faceless.

Rumours supported by the Swedish art council (Statens Kulturråd) suggests that there are somewhere about half a million choir singers in Sweden (which can’t be controlled as there are no official records). Choirs are very accessible, church choirs in particular but profane choirs are just as popular as well as a trending “dare-to-sing” culture and sing-along events that are frequently recurring and even broadcasted on national television. To talk about “the Swedish choral miracle” (det svenska körrundet) is common. The “miracle” started back in the 30’s and is believed to be a result of the high amount of choir directing and composing education spots. This, in turn, has led to many choirs performing on higher levels. The high performing choirs are surrounded by whole systems where composers compose for a certain choir in a certain setting or for a specific event, thus expanding the choral culture continuously and keeping it up to date. Among choral scholars one talks about mass phenomenons and social movements (Fagius, 2009).

My conclusion to this was that choral singing and singing in general has a high acceptance among the Swedish people and that the Swedish choral miracle would be an easy entryway for me in this projects as well as an already existing system to tap into.

One would think that choirs are the perfect condition for us to create spontaneous intergenerational meetings as they are so common in Sweden, but there is a big but. Choirs are usually segregated into age-related group settings. Boys choirs, girls choirs, youth mix choirs (broken voices), young adult professional choirs, adult professional choirs and senior choirs etc. There are some mixing over the borders here, but not in a frequent, structural way, more as a special event thing. This is for purely aesthetic (read “what we perceive as beautiful”) reasons, because as I explained above the qualities and characteristics of the voices are different. We strive for homogenous soundscapes and back of when it’s “sprawling”.

As this was my initial lead into this master project, I decided that the human voice should be my material and context. The voice is also the perfect metaphor for a manifestation and it makes sense to me to “give a voice” to the movement of ageism that has gone on for so long but still haven’t really made it to the surface of media and political buzz.
Movement (proposal / process)

Movement became a crucial part of the process as I reflected on my own relation to music and playing instruments, movement has been a part of the exercise and experience.

Many of the projects I have found as inspiring during my process have movement as a major part of the gestalt. Daily tous les jours “21 balancoires” is one example where swings activate the colourful light and sound installation, or Yuri Suzuki’s “Pendulum”, pendulums swinging back and forth when human presence is detected, accompanied by a monotonous singing as well as Suzuki’s “It looks like sound”, small “train like” robots that play different notes depending on which colors they detect along their tracks.

I had to make up my mind on what kind of movement I was looking for: movement in the installation itself, letting bystanders see the moving objects letting the installation become truly interactable by depending on the visitors movement and actions to activate it, just as the “Piano stairs” installation at Odenplan metro station by the Volkswagen initiative thefuntheory.com.

If I go back reminiscing on my time performing music I can’t ever remember not moving to it. Of course this depends on the instrument you are playing. Myself playing the violin makes it rather easy to move while playing, weather you are sitting down or standing. It almost hinders me to sit/stand still. But most importantly is the moments I remember as powerful experiences, I actually don’t remember what piece I was playing but more an embodied, haptic, memory of what it was like connected to emotions like happiness, powerfulness, sadness, etc. Now, there is tons and tons of research done on the topic of musical performance/experience and the movement of the body that I haven’t felt the need to look into, instead I trust my own instinct and memories as I have lots of experience, I can almost refer to it as the backbone of this project.

Appendix 1 contains the text I used as a manuscript for a film course we had mid project. The text focuses on examples of movements I imagine one could perform to activate the installation that I am describing further down in the essay, imagining these movement helped in my development of the gestalt and possible interactions.

To conclude: My explorations connected to movement has primarily circled around motion within objects and motion provided by a human presence and action in the installation. The reason for which I chose to move forward with a static installation was that the moving of the body might enable a more powerful and long-lasting experience than a passive one.

Appendix 1 contains the text I used as a manuscript for a film course we had mid project. The text focuses on examples of movements I imagine one could perform to activate the installation that I am describing further down in the essay, imagining these movement helped in my development of the gestalt and possible interactions.

composing / conducting (proposal)

I’ve made a point thought the project that ageism goes both ways. It’s not the “rest of society” that is disregarding the remaining 65+. It’s just as common for a 30 year old something professional to look down on a 14 year old as stupid and uneducated instead of seeing potential*, and the ever ongoing “I don’t understand the youth of today” that we hear from the older generations shows how great the barriers are and how uneducated we are about each other. I believe that we are in charge of our own fates, but remaining idle in this question might turn us against each other. In my proposal I am giving visitors the opportunity to compose and conduct interactions between generations as a metaphor for real life. If this experience inspires to take things further I couldn’t be happier.

conducting gesture of a four-stroke
realisation / awareness / experience (proposal)

"...Hear the voices of The Generations choir
Wordless but present.

Ageism is all around us but seldom spoken of, a quiet issue, now given
a voice. This project aims to give space to reflect upon your own ac-
tions and standpoint."
- From appendix 1

When this project became an installation representing human voices of different ages instead of something that involves actual humans I have worked continuously with the notion that the installation needs to bring the question of ageism into the light as well as invite the visitor to reflect on the issue. My work and choices regarding the aesthetic has mainly revolved around these questions. What kind of space do I need, colours, textures, soundscapes. What do they hear? How does the voices create a lingering experience that will give the visitors the reflection I would like them to have?

The socio-medicine professor Töres Theorell, that researches cultural activities and health, wonders if it isn't so that we, humans, are genetically programmed to develop strong bonds when we create music/sound together. What a fantastic question! I might positively agree to that, not on a scientific level but rather from personal experience. I can't promise that the visitors will experience the same thing as actually singing in a choir; but maybe I can at least locka med tanken.

I have been saying several times that I did not want to be too political, that I wanted to be within my comfort zones and not step on anybody's toes, because politics is generally a space where I am utterly uncomfortable. As I have described in the beginning of my essay, the problem which I'm addressing could be seen as of socio-political character. At least here in Sweden, laws have had an impact on how we treat our elderly and what kind of human being is considered to be normative, namely the taxpaying, contributing to society one. Politics, for me, represents a space where you make statements, where you bend statistics to fit your argument and ideology and where the arts have little place. But after reading up on design fields such as design activism, social design, slow design etc, I've realised that almost everything is political, and that my project being about social change (interactions over generational borders) is within the political. “You only have two choices: your commitment or your fear” as Sammy Davies Jr once said, and the idea of aesthetics and politics is neither new or absurd. Jacques Rancière has put a lot of thought into it meaning that the arts have a power to disrupt “the logic of disensus” (Rancière 2004), which lead me to the definition of design activism as explained by Thomas Markussen: "Design activism generally is defined as representing design's central role in:

1. promoting social change,
2. raising awareness about values and beliefs (e.g, in relation to climate change, sustain-
ability, etc.), or
3. questioning the constraints that mass production and consumerism place on people's
everyday life.
Design activism, in this context, is not restricted to a single discipline of design but in-
cludes areas such as product design, interaction design, new media, urban design, archi-
tecture, and fashion and textiles, among others" (Markussen 2012).

This view on design is one where I recognise my own practices and what drives me to keep "designing". Nr 2 in this definition is what I try to achieve through this project while nr 1 should be considered as a plus in the long run.

It's hard to argue that activism and politics have nothing to do with one another and therefore I have come to accept that there is a slight amount of political as well as some activism that goes along with this project, whether I'm comfortable with it or not. Following what Markussen states regarding the designers possibility, through design activism, to promote social change, raising awareness about values and beliefs etc, it becomes obvious that the goal of my projects is to have such an impact.
“A speaking being is a political being.”
- Aristotle

“If we can design our way into difficulty, we can design our way out.”
- John Thackara

“Design is basic to all human activities. The placing and patterning of any act towards a desired goal constitutes a design process.”
- Victor Papanek
the generations choir ( proposal )

Below is a description of what I plan to do for the spring exhibition, what impact I am hoping for and reflections on the proposal.

My proposal does not include a classical design “object” or “artefact” neither am I developing a service. One of the reasons for this is that I have hard time imagining what, if any, kind of impact this object could have in a private setting or as any kind of commercial product. The framing led me towards the conclusion that I should focus on the interactions and less on the object.

“...design activism is “design thinking, imagination and practice applied knowingly or unknowingly to create a counter-narrative aimed at generating and balancing positive, social institutional, environmental and/or economic change”...”

(Fuad-Luke 2009)

Moving the object aside gives me more space to focus on the interactions and what medium I can/should use to create them. The interactions are meant to create a reflection through a “counter-narrative” that voice other possibilities and promote social change, and I have decided to engage the body in doing so. Therefore I imagine my proposal to be an interactive installation that engages the visitor to interact with a choir of human voices, together creating harmonies independent of age.

I have worked with sensors that measure, in this particular case, human presence. Once a visitor steps inside the zones, where the sensors “sense”, the voices will be activated. After that it is up to the visitor to explore the interactions. There will be information, probably in text, that briefly informs about the issue and the project.
the generations choir ( reflection )

If I could dream, a visit to my installation “the generation choir” at the spring exhibition would bring revelations of truths about themselves (visitors) that are hard to accept and that they would leave with a feeling that they might want to do things differently onwards regarding intergenerational interactions. A shifting of the mind: “the shared idea in the minds of society, the great big unstated assumptions - unstated because unnecessary to state; everyone already knows them - constitutes that society’s paradigm, or deepest set of beliefs about how the world works” as my house guru Donella Meadows puts it.

Many have a hard time seeing where they take place within this problem and find it easier to blame the “system”, meaning government and municipalities. And of course legislation and municipalities could do a great deal to change the negative patterns we are in but regular members of society, you and me, are active parts of this system and therefore might just as well be the change, just as the initiators of the beautiful project “Äldrekontakt” proves.

In her paper titled “LEVERAGE POINTS, Places to intervene in a system” Donella Meadows lists what she calls 12 different leverage points in increasing order of effectiveness. The leverage points are suitable places to make small or big (tweak, add, take away etc) changes in order to make a malfunctioning system work better. Number twelve is the first she goes through and is the least powerful. The further down you read the leverage points get more and more powerful, but not easier to implement. On the contrary, number one is the most powerful and probably the hardest to achieve. Number one is called “The power to transcend paradigms”.

“It is in this space of mastery over paradigms that people throw off addictions, live in constant joy, bring down empires, found religions, get locked up or “disappeared” or shot, and have impacts that last for millennia.”

-Donella Meadows
If I reach for the stars, according to Meadows that would be to give visitors the power to transcend the paradigm of generational barriers, I’ll probably end up somewhere beneath them, but to aim for something less would not make any sense to me. I’m replacing stars with seeds: If I could plant a tiny seed in the minds of the people that get in touch with my project I would say that I’m satisfied. A seed of awareness about the topic that is generally unspoken, unseen, disregarded or othered, that hopefully grows into a reflection, and that reflection could end up becoming a demand for change or even better, an action. We have to start with ourselves.

Because of the problem that people have hard time seeing how they are responsible and part of the system I want to change, a visit to the installation might just as well be offensive instead of inspiring. In my mind this is likely to happen to people who are prone to generally “blame the system” and taking no responsibility of their own part in it rather than to people who have more of an open minded character, but this is based on pure assumptions. If assuming that a part of the visitors get offended by my claims that regulars, like you and me, are just as responsible for the ageism in society as anybody else I have to think about what that impact means. Could offended actually be good too? Offended must mean that there is a seed as well, and hopefully the “offended-ness” leads to discussions, debate, critique, etc. Discussions based on critique are just as important, we can’t everybody be of the same opinion. I consider discussions to be a good negative impact simply because it gives space to the topic of ageism that is usually othered.

Except from imagining positive and “negative” impacts that seem obvious in the setting of the semi open public space that is Konstfack’s spring exhibition I would like to reflect on the possible impacts of putting the project in different environments. This installation could end up in different places outside of Konstfack to target unsuspecting bystanders in the system. Let’s say the installation ends up in a school, could it inspire teenagers to interact with their grandparents in another way? Or could it give teachers tools to bring the topic of ageism into education such as social studies or even debate clubs? Start to imagine the installation in open public setting, could it promote interactions that would not usually occur? Would those interactions lead to the same kind of reflection I’m looking to create during the spring exhibition? Could it have a place in a municipal building, close to the corridors of power? Maybe as a permanent installation, so that everyone walking the length of that corridor would become reminded of the issue everytime they passed. But it is not so that the open-mindedness of an art exhibition visitor put’s less stress on the effectiveness of the proposal? Therefore taking the installation away from that setting would put my project right within the design activism spot, according to Rancière it would “reorient perceptual space, thereby disrupting socio-cultural entrenched forms of belonging in and inhabiting the everyday world.”

My aim with the choices of harmonies and the way I have programmed the sound that the visitors will experience thanks to their movements inside the space of my installation is to disrupt their everyday pace. A little pause in their lives, where they are given to opportunity to ask themselves where they stand in relation the the topic and if they believe themselves to have any part in the system. Do they believe it is unpleasant noises or rather harmonious and already are a part of this virtual choir, or at least willing to be part of the choir. Now that is a seed I’d like to plant!
references


Rancière Jacques (2004). The Politics of Aesthetics - the distribution of the sensible, Continuum p.31


Sveriges Radio, Kaliber i P1, Ensam inför döden, 2017-10-09 p.11


appendix 1

Below is the text I uploaded for the spring exhibition webpage as well as used as a manuscript for the movie/animation course. It helped me imagine interactions taking place within the installation and helped me with decisions concerning the general gestalt of the exhibition, placement of sensors to how to utilise the sensors, how to write the code to make it send the right information to the speakers.

Enter the Generations choir. Join in.
Each generation has its own voice. Equal without judgment, together against ageism.
It is interplay, consonance or dissonance. You decide.
This is a place where you compose harmonies and interactions, or co-compose if you are more than one.

It’s an experience for the body and the mind. Make a sweeping movement with your arm, or stab the air. Use your whole body. Stand still in one spot and reach out, up or down. Sit down, reflect with body and soul. Lay on the floor, cover as much space as possible. Run around. Dance, create your own rhythm, slowly sway. Hold hands, reach further.

Hear the voices of The Generations choir
Wordless but present.

Ageism is all around us but seldom spoken of, a quiet issue, now given a voice. This project aims to give space to reflect upon your own actions and standpoint.

appendix 2

Below is the text I uploaded for the wall labels that are going to be used during the spring exhibition. At first my plan was to use the same text as the web version and make it shorter, but couldn’t find a way that satisfied me and that was informative enough. Instead I wrote a new one and chose to not trying to tell people how to act in the installation, hopefully they’ll come up with that on their own.

Choirs are an excellent metaphor for the societal structures of today. They are age segregated, just as society. “To give something a voice”, in this case the usually quiet fight against ageism, is a metaphor too. Simultaneously, the voice’s excellent age indicating characteristics made it my material of choice. Recorded voices of different ages becomes, in this interactive sound installation, a virtual choir that permits visitors to experience generations harmonising, a reminder of all the good that comes from sharing experiences, stories and knowledge.
This is a short reflection on what happen during the final stages of the project, the building and installation of the exhibition.

As a first reflection I have to say that I ran into an unnecessary amount of stress due to technical problems during the last week before the spring exhibition. Going from the smaller “pizza size” model to the big scale installation demanded more adjustments than I imagined. I had foreseen some issues and was surprised with others, like the sensors interfering with each other even though there was more distance between them in the final installation than the model. This is a boring detail, because it worked in the end. But had I tried out the bigger scale earlier I would probably have recorded the voices differently and the final result would be massively different. As I said, it worked in the end so it’s not a regret but just another possibility that did not get the chance to be explored. All in all, I am happy with the result, but I will continue explore this other possibility!

I am overwhelmed and happy over the warmth that has been shown to me since the installation came up. Primarily I have been looking for reactions to the sound of the generations choir, created when entering the installation, and the little disruption that allows for the message I’m trying to convey to sink in, not on the gestalt of the exhibition itself. Many of the times somebody walked by and said the exhibition itself is “looking really nice” I’ve been surprisingly even happier, as a designer I take pride in having managed to gestalt something visually pleasing that people react to.

Under Appendix 4 I describe a few of the encounters that have occurred during the ten days of the spring exhibition, which of course is the most important feedback I’ve gotten. I haven’t had one meeting or discussion with visitors who have been negative. But then, just passing by and not reading the signs or ask me questions is enough to tell me they’re neither interested or inclined to become interested. The question I have been asking myself during the past year is precisely “how to reach everybody”. I am happy to say that some of the encounters were more surprising than others (encounters with people who I count to be extra hard to reach, according to my prejudice). But let’s just say, I was never very surprised when senior women spoke to me about the project, but pretty surprised when anyone else did. At this point I have a hard time to analyse why I managed to reach some of these” hard cases” and other just passed by. Maybe I’ll figure it out later.

One reflection that came early on after the installation of the exhibition was that I should have worked on the sound itself more, and that I’m not in any aspect a sound designer. Maybe should I have brought in one. But luckily the sound was controllable through the code we had written and I was able to make little tweaks here and there throughout the ten days of the exhibition that made me come closer and closer to the “sound” I set out to create.

As galleries have approached me asking if the piece could be moved and exhibited elsewhere, I have also had the idea to work even further on the sound experience and explained that the format of the installation could change to “infinity” and be adapted the place it moves to and still tell the same story. Apart from galleries many have approached me with how amusing the installation was and claimed it would fit perfectly in airports, hospitals, shopping malls, corridors etc.

I’ve gotten comments about the circles on the floor as some have been confused thinking the floor was pressure sensitive. But even this “mishap” has been a good conversation starter and to be honest I don’t mind people wondering how the installation works, as it’s obviously a bit more demanding than a ceramic vase or canvas with paint.

All in all, I am much happier with my project, process and proposition this time around compared to many other previous projects, but on the other hand I felt prepared going into it and already knew where I would encounter hardship. Off course I could have chosen and even safer route (such as avoiding hi-tech solutions) but luckily I have had exactly the right kind of people around me that have helped out in every way they can. And I have learned how to ask for help, or just to ask for help, and trust others with their competences, something I’ll bring with me from now on.
The set that was given to all of my voice heroes:

a) business card

b) a printed note with a short text about the project (same as wall lable text) and handwritten invitaion to the springexhibition with dates and open hours

c) the pamphlet that I also was giving out during the springexhibition with information on ageism, the voice and chorals

d) a certificate, prof of participation
appendix 4 - ( encounters )

I have been sitting close to my exhibition a lot of the time due to it being a technical piece with a presumably steal worthy loudspeaker, as well having a code that could potentially crash at any moment. Apart from these maybe boring reasons I knew that my project was a lot about the interactions and discussions, which also made me want to stay close by in case somebody wanted to chat.

Here is a short list of the encounters that have been specially memorable for me. As suspected many of the discussions have been initiated by senior women, which is why some discussions with men, specially younger men, stand out without being memorable for any other reason, examples in nr3, nr12, nr14 and nr15.

Listed without order

#1 ex professor at Konstfack,
sharing her ideas on ageism, not “looking” her age or “behaving” her age and how her grand-kids thinks her quirky and embarrassing due to this.

#2 parents with their 5 and 7 y/o,
who looked at each other after having discussed age-segregation with me, looked at their kids and walked away with a concerned look on their face.

#3 two middle age dudes in suits,
actually talked to me about the project with interest…

#4 the older lady and the younger lady,
that did not know each other but collaborated under my sensors to explore them fully, laugh and then high five-ed before going separate ways

#5 the retired singer and her husband,
both shared their thoughts on ageism and age-segregation with emphasis on here experiences from singing in a professional choir and having to “retire” at 50, though her male colleagues could stay on a good 10-15 years because the lack of male choir singers. She “made a scene” by standing under my sensors and singing along at the top of her beautiful and fully functioning voice, harmonising and giving us all a very good time.

#6 the choir singers from uppenbarelsekyrkan
who came, and “finally” understood what they had been part of, walking around under the sensors lengthily to try to locate their own voices and thanking me for the experiences.

#7 the american lady
who was doing a collage of “Swedish voices” and asked if she was allowed to record my voice while I explained the project, then sharing her ideas on ageism from an american perspective and her own experiences.

#8 the ex professors and tutors at Konstfack
Who talked widely about their view on ageism, when they first detected it, when previous students of them had either discovered prejudice against different age groups or acted discriminatory against different age groups

#9 the many, many, many kids,
jumping around, and then fetching their parents/grandparents
#10 these kids

who asked his mom what it was, “I don’t know, let me read” and then answered “it is recorded voices”, “but why”, “I don’t know, dear”…(this is where I stepped in and saved the day).

#11 the boy,

to one of the voice heroes, who came to better understand what his daughter had been part of and reflected how little he knew of ageism but how much it annoyed him, giving examples of his workplace and family situation. Thoughts he had never put into words before.

#12 the dad

to one of the voice heroes, who had a lengthy talk about elitism in the choir system, and how he had never reflected on how age-segregated the society is and if it’s either negative or positive.

#13 the kids from Design Lab S

who first just thought it was a fun thing, but got super engaged and inquisitive when I spoke to them about the project.

#14 the former Konstfack board member

who had a lengthy talk about elitism in the choir system, and how he had never reflected on how age-segregated the society is and if it’s either negative or positive.

#15 former konstfack student,

discussing when feminism clashes with ageism and vice versa.

#16 the soon to be slöjd teacher,

who has been singing in choirs her whole life but resent the age-segregation and plan to invite several generations to do craft together in intergenerational slöjd workshops!

#17 the man in the wheelchair,

who has happy he could enjoy the full experience of the installation, both by being able to read the info and wheel himself around the “dance floor” as he called it.

#18 all the others

who gave me a thumbs up. Or said “great project”. Or shouted “I love this”. Or just jumped around before being really serious and reading the info on the wall and nodding in understanding.

*Being present during the spring exhibition has been extremely rewarding. My project was mainly about getting people to voice their opinion or to inform, and boy did we talk!*
I want to thank everyone who has helped me during this project, specially Max Kleijberg for guiding me at the very beginning, Anders Brandén who took his time to answer sound technical questions, Carl Gabell who helped me understand what was needed in hardware and software to make this installation happen, to my husband who helped me writing the code, listened to my decision making and general support as well as for his excellent report checking skills, and finally, to Rebecka Dellskog, who helped me figure out harmonies!

I am especially grateful to all of my Voice heroes. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

And all the teachers, tutors and classmates at Konstfack, the ambiance has been great!

Without your help my project would have been less and far more difficult.