

Playing Wild!

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Das Komische wohnt, wie das Erhabene, nicht im Objekt, sondern im Subjekt.

(Like the sublime, the comical does not reside in the object, but in the subject.)
(Jean Paul, *Vorschule der Aesthetik*, §28 ('Pre-school of Aesthetics'), 1804)

Preface

What we understand about wildness today is highly mediated, so that whenever we start talking or communicating about wildness in words or images, we are always already in the realm of culture and its codes. We cannot escape the aporia that there is no way to address wildness directly. We can only speak around it.

This essay attempts to discuss the intersection of art, technology and wildness, and asks what the scope of 'going wild' – the manifestation of untamed energies, be they natural, pathological or sexual – can mean in a contemporary situation.

The text is based on a talk that was first given at DigiFest: Go Wild! in Toronto in May 2005. For its publication in the Sarai Reader on 'Turbulence', I have decided not to weave a thread of references to the notion of 'turbulence'. Instead I hope that in the new context, this discussion of 'wildness' will create its own, uncontrolled resonances and turbulences.

1. being wild

In a very general, etymological sense, the root of the Germanic word 'wild' is related to the word 'Wald'; in English the word 'wold' is used for 'forest' or 'wood'. 'Wild' in this sense are those plants and animals that grow and live in the forest, they are those plants and animals which are not domesticated or cultivated. Wildness is that which is outside the realm of human culture, just as the terrain of the 'wilderness' lies beyond the clearing, i.e., beyond the part of the forest or land which has been cleared and cultivated.

The fear and excitement elicited by this wildness comes from the deep-rooted sense of danger that we associate with it. Our cultured home, camp and castle is surrounded by a twilight zone, populated with animals and hybrid beings that are as threatening as they are obscure. The werewolf, that hybrid between man and wolf, roams the dark border zone between village and wilderness. Wolf children who grew up in the company of animals point to the proximity of humans and animals because these children are not mimicking animal behaviour, but living as animals. In contrast, witches and shamans cross the boundary between human and spirit realms at will, a fact that keeps them in a powerful, often precarious dialogue with the dangerous and wild.

The mythologies of many cultures show a high level of fluidity between humans and beasts. Think for instance of the many mythical journeys into spiritual realms as recounted by the Amazonian Indians; or think of Ovid's account of the 'Metamorphoses' that humans and gods undergo, turning into plants, animals, or dead matter. Or remember the movie *Alien 4*, in which the evil Alien monster child grows in Ripley's pregnant body. A dangerous, destructive internalisation of the wilderness.

Some of us may be thinking about wild sex, others may be wondering about the wild and wired world of the Internet, of online games and multi-user dungeons populated by shooter-

egos, shape shifters and code crackers. Or the thriving ecology of roaming computer viruses. A future army of nano-robots going haywire in our homes. And some urbanists talk of 'wildness' in relation to the excessive and uncontrolled growth and transformation of cities all over the world.

All these associations are difficult to pin down, but they drift around and mingle in our minds. What connects these phenomena is that they are generally not ascribed to some spiritual or demonic sphere beyond reality: what is wild is natural, and it belongs to this world.

The wild is always a potential threat to our livelihood, or to the stability of our lives. 'Being wild' also means that something escapes any rules and codes. This makes 'wildness' such a paradoxical thing to talk about: it is that which is uncoded, and which thus also escapes description. It is in excess of what we can understand and rationally describe. 'Being wild' is an excessive singularity, something that cannot be compared or represented. It is an excessive presence of an Other.

2. going wild

To 'go wild' implies that something was earlier cultivated, coded, tamed; and that this cultured entity now returns to a supposed state of 'wildness'. It would be interesting to trace the origin of the notion of 'wildness', which emerges as the Other of human culture. In that context, we could explore the history of the cultivation of land and the domestication of animals. What are the rules and structures that humans have imposed on nature in the course of cultivation and domestication? What does it mean to 'tame' another being? Does it mean forcing my own wildness, my own will, onto you? When I get 'tamed', does it mean that I get forced into (something or) somebody else's wilderness?

For now, I will leave this thread aside and look at the reverse movement of 'going wild'. This assertive statement expresses a desire to transform what is cultured into uncoded nature; a desire to become wild. This may be reminiscent of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's extensive discussions of becoming-other, becoming-animal, becoming-woman and so forth, in their book *Mille Plateaux* (1980). In their theory, this movement of becoming-other is connected to transgressing the logic of identity and self, and to the desire to morph into something that is unbounded, transgressive, and multiple, a 'body without organs'.

Think, for instance, of Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick* (1851), in which Captain Ahab in the end seems less obsessed with killing the white whale than with becoming the whale. Not becoming 'like' it, not emulating it, but actually becoming the whale, either by replacing it, or by becoming part of it.

An equally dramatic account is Franz Kafka's story *Ein Bericht für eine Akademie* (Report for An Academy) (1919), in which an ape explains its gradual, and tragically incomplete, transformation from animal to human. In a more assertive vein, in 1913 Kafka wrote *Wunsch, Indianer zu werden* (Desire to Become An Indian), a story only one sentence long, in which he imagines the transformation from human into animal:

Wenn man doch ein Indianer wäre, gleich bereit, und auf dem rennenden Pferd, schief in der Luft, immer wieder kurz erzitterte über dem zitternden Boden, bis man die Sporen ließ, denn es gab keine Sporen, bis man die Zügel wegwarf, denn es gab keine Zügel, und kaum das Land vor sich als glatt gemähte Heide sah, schon ohne Pferdehals und ohne Pferdekopf.

(If only one were a native Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, and kept on quivering jerkily above the quivering ground, until shedding the spurs, for there were no spurs, threw away the reins, for there were no reins, and hardly saw the land in front as a smoothly shorn heath, already without a horse's neck and without a horse's head.)

What, however, does it mean to 'go wild!' in our contemporary world? Which wilderness are we talking about? In our distorted world, we think of animals as endangered species, precious carriers of bio-patents, protected and guarded on this global extinction zone into which we humans have turned the planet. So desperate are we to ensure the survival of 'wild animals' that we are prepared to grant them 'human rights'. Or we think of animals as mere material churned over by the food industry, un-dead fossil matter counted in calories and nutrients.

Going wild? Or 'going wild' as in sex? You don't need to read French philosopher Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976), or study the theories of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan to know that sexuality is a highly regulated and coded system. Sex tourism and the pornography industry turn 'wild sex' into a commodity that seems easier to buy than to have. Against wild nature we construct dams, fences and Tsunami warning systems. The only 'wild card' in the global ecology game these days seems to be the speed at which human destruction of our natural environment is eroding the viability of our life on Earth.

An art project that dramatises this boundary between control and danger is Dutch artist Erik Hobijn's *Delusions of Self-Immolation* (1993). Also termed the 'suicide machine', this installation allows the participant the extreme experience of almost burning to death, with a flamethrower being shot at the well-prepared and protected body. A second later, the platform on which the participant stands, turns around, and a second valve shoots a gush of water, extinguishing the fire and cooling the heat immediately. The experience itself is, reportedly, highly dramatic and takes you to an existential threshold. More important, though, than the actual flash, which only takes a second, is the lengthy preparation of the body with fire-resistant gel, a ritual that takes up to one hour. It is this preparatory ritual that holds the imaginary power of the art project – the fatal impossibility of simply 'going wild' and giving oneself over to the fire.

Even from a less drastic perspective, 'going wild' raises the crucial question of the boundaries of our cultural experience. Where do you find anything that is uncoded, un-barcode, unpatented, offline, out of range of your GPS tracker, code-resistant? Which of us can come up with a genuine conception of 'wildness', one that is not mediated by television, tourism, and consumer culture?

Remember, for instance, the much-noted performance of Yugoslav artist Marina Abramovic at the Venice Biennial 1995, the year of the end of the genocide in Bosnia; for a week she sat on a mountain of animal bones, ritualistically scrubbing them, performing the impossibility of cleansing the horror of war.

In our hunger for 'wild' stuff, we seem to be doing the exact opposite of 'going wild', posing as radical and transgressive when all we can handle is a controlled experience of the border from inside the encampment. Those who overstep the boundary, either by resisting consumption or living in uncontrollable excess are written off as a danger to public security. Discussing drugs and the social regulation of ecstasy, Dutch philosopher Henk Oosterling argues: "The Achilles heel of the info-capitalist society of consumption sits at the intersection of excessive consumption and the regimes of public order: as soon as the usage of means and substances no longer takes place along controllable public trajectories, and as the ecstatic

excessiveness of consumption cannot be socially reinvested, then addiction is not only counter-productive, but even subversive” (Radicale Middelmatigheid, 2000, p. 93).

By analogy, we can conclude that so long as the usage of 'means and substances' does take place along controllable public trajectories, and so long as the ecstatic excessiveness of consumption can be socially reinvested, then addiction is not only productive, but even affirmative for the public order.

The Dutch writers' collective ADILKNO, when discussing “The Alien and its Media”, have suggested that such cultivated wildness or evilness mainly serves the function of aestheticisation: “The sublimation of evil into the sublime intends to confine the alien’s dangerous unpredictability to the aesthetic experience of the uncodeable, to be consumed within an institutional framework” (Media Archive, 1998, Ch. 43).

Is this the limit of the project ‘Go Wild’? Can it take us to places other than the fake West of Marlboro Country? A ‘Wild’ West that has turned into cruel folklore, justifying selective lawlessness as part of the American Way of Life?

When talking about wildness today, forget nature! ‘Going wild’ in the sense of going beyond culture is impossible. We know that we live by and in code, we are created by codes. Wildness today is human wildness, at times sublimated as the wildness of machines. The beast is inside of our culture, inside the code.

Yet, what benefit might an aestheticised, or committedly ‘aesthetic’, experience of the ‘uncoded’ hold? Is it even possible to think of something like ‘wild code’?

3. wild machines - animal spirits

It is useful, in this context, to introduce the notion of ‘animal spirits’ to our discussion. Artists have explored the field of the animalic and the freeing of its energies, for many years. Media art, often thought of as a cold, mechanical, technology-driven field of artistic exploration, has frequently transgressed the assumed rationality of the machine. The dangers and the ugliness of the ‘machine spirits’ have been explored as intensely as the pleasures and beauty they may elicit.

One example of a recent art work in which the boundaries of life and artifice are tested is Austrian artist Herwig Weiser’s installation *zgodlocator* (2000). In a plexi-covered well or basin we see an artificial miniature landscape made up of metallic fibres and granules, taken from recycled computers and other technical hardware. This ‘beyond’ of our techno-paraphernalia is animated by means of a grid of strong electro-magnets underneath the basin. As the magnets are activated, the metallic fibre stands up in surreal, quasi-natural configurations, vibrating and emitting sounds, as though they wanted to come alive. The magnets can be controlled individually, so that moving patterns can be drawn into the metallic landscape, animating it.

‘Animating’ here implies both the sense of creating an impression of self-generated movement, and of giving the material an artificial soul.

Animal spirits (*Lebensgeister*, in German) are the media that connect body and mind – at least that is how Enlightenment thinkers sought to overcome Descartes’ idea of their separation. In the cybernetic thinking of the American mathematician Norbert Wiener and others, the relationship of animals and machines was first thought of in the Cartesian sense of the animal as mechanism: the animal body as a mechanical, dynamic contraption with pumps,

joints, internal information systems. Later, this metaphor changed: from the animal treated as a machine, it became the machine treated as an animal. The root of the word 'animal' is the Greek *anima* (spirit and breath). Animal spirits are thought of as the ambiguous, yet powerful sources of energy that feed inanimate matter. And ever since the Jewish folklore story of the Golem, Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818), and Fritz Lang's science-fiction film *Metropolis* (1927), people have been scared and fascinated by the idea of machines coming alive, and 'going wild'.

These animated machines articulate the ambivalence with which humans see themselves as both the masters and the victims of technology. More than anything, the reason for this ambivalence is that our technological culture is a culture of excess, a culture that thrives on offering more than we can handle or stomach. Wildness in this culture is frequently associated with violence, and the respective forms of violence are not 'wild' in a natural sense, but are signs of the wilderness within our culture, whether in the media-dependent war scenarios, whether in the hooliganism of a fully commodified sports industry, or in the violence against migrants who are the media – i.e. key means of communication, production and transformation – of a global, hyper-mobile form of capitalism. We all remember the sadism within the images of the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq – how do we interpret the wildness of those scenes? Whose *Apocalypse Now*? Whose *Heart of Darkness*?

Artistic interventions in this domain are precarious, because – like German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's 'witch's apprentice' (*Der Zauberlehrling*, poem, 1798) they have to deal with the spirits that they call, and that easily go out of control. However, they can broaden our horizons by confronting a technological culture that embraces these excesses and contradictions blindly, and hides its heart of darkness behind the smokescreens of slick and functional surfaces.

4. coding wild

If we locate the wilderness in the very code of our culture, then we can think of any form of excessive coding, from programming computer viruses to hacking into supposedly unbreakable security systems, as forms of 'going wild'.

How, then, can we imagine such 'wild code'? As early as 1994, German media theoretician Siegfried Zielinski suggested, "For art, it would be worthwhile to attempt to invent algorithms of (self) squandering, of faltering, of ecstasy, and of (self) destruction as an experiment."

The Internet- and software-based work by the Dutch-Belgian group Jodi has managed to deconstruct the codes of browsers and computer games in ever new, challenging ways, by twisting the software and aesthetically exploiting inbuilt bugs and deficiencies. In a different mode, the Austrian artist team Margarete Jahrmann and Max Moswitzer are meshing and mixing different layers of code and coded interaction into complex, hybrid environments that extend our understanding of networks and online behaviour, by, for instance, translating online interactions from textual to abstract sound levels, or into other, automatic events, which in turn become represented as physical objects. And in his generative software and video work, *L'Invention des animaux* (*The Invention of Animals*, 2000), the Quebecois artist Jocelyn Robert programmed a short video sequence of an aeroplane in such a manner that it seems as though the plane is trying to develop bird-like behaviour, chirping electronically and shaking its pixelated wings – the wonderfully paradoxical image of a machine trying to become an animal, to go a little bit wild.

The underlying concepts of such artistic strategies were introduced eighty years ago by the Russian literary scholar Viktor Shklovsky and German writer Bertolt Brecht through the Russian term *ostranenie*, the German 'Verfremdung', i.e. 'making strange', 'defamiliarising'. More recently, anthropologist Michael Taussig has argued for what he calls 'mimetic excess', i.e., a form of mimicry fully aware of the codes of what is being represented. If we understand 'going wild' as a form of 'mimetic excess', as a form of appropriating the codes and rules of culture and turning them upon their head, through dramatising or exaggerating them, then we might not be the sheepish victims of a techno-culture that pushes us into its wilderness, but we might in fact become wild subjects of those very codes which define us.

I would claim, by way of conclusion, that 'wilderness' remains a question of territories, even in an age of virtual and highly mediated spaces. Talking about the possibility of escaping social codes, Foucault has used the term "heterotopos" to describe sites such as islands or ships: places where the social rules associated with states and territories are not in force, and where different behaviour and different relationships can emerge. The Australian philosopher Brian Massumi has argued that in order to find such sites of escape, or autonomous zones, it is not necessary to go out into 'wild nature', but that it is possible to find these places in the interstices of urban culture itself: "... they are where bodies in the world but between identities go: liminal sites of syncretic unorthodoxy" (*A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 1992, p. 105).

These 'wild zones' have their less appealing equivalent in the in-between zones that nation states create in order to isolate undesired people. While places like prisons still fall under the given legislation, there are new areas in which people can be kept without being able to make claims to their human rights, the protective shield that enlightened modernity gave to its citizens. When you now enter an international airport, you pass through an exterritorial zone in which you are formally not recognised as 'having arrived', so that you might claim your right to asylum. A similar scenario has been explored recently in Steven Spielberg's movie *Terminal* (2004), in which a traveller called Navorsky is stuck in the limbo of the transit lounge.

This type of wilderness is also explored in a recent work by the Austrian-German artist group Knowbotic Research. In their project *naked bandit/here, not here* (2004) they analyse and transcode the legal scenario in which sovereignty is defined not by reference to a territory and related legal codes, but by the sheer ability to control behaviour. Similarly, enemy combatants in Guantanamo Bay are under the sovereignty of the US army without being allowed to make claims to the rights that they might have if they were on formally American territory. Such an exterritorial, juridical 'wilderness' can be declared by law, creating zones or encampments where the rules of civilised behaviour are off-limits.

In Knowbotic Research's installation, a silver-coloured blimp equipped with a simple vision system can autonomously fly around, recognising and attacking black balloons hovering in the space. The strongly coded behaviour is defined by a clear power relation that, however, can be interrupted by the audience by means of a symbolic intervention at the level of the code that controls the interaction. In one version of the installation, the script of the computer code has been painted on the wall in an expressive style that contrasts with the cold logic of the programme, yet articulates the 'wild' openness of the represented relationship.

'Wildness' has become a metaphor for the escape – for better or for worse – from an overly regulated and structured world in which technologies of control are increasingly mediating human communication, behaviour, and the way we can socialise in public, often in the name of 'security'. The American information theorist Wendy Chun has recently made a strong

claim that instead of demanding ever more security and control, we should insist on our freedom as individuals and as a society, and for that, it may be necessary to construct technologies and develop systems that are vulnerable, systems with which we can live because they are vulnerable.

It can be done. In the code.

Further Reading

Martin Burckhardt: Vom Geist der Maschine. Eine Geschichte kultureller Umbrüche. ('On the Spirit of the Machine. A History of Cultural Ruptures') Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 1999

Michel Foucault: Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias. ('Des Espace Autres', 1967). In:

Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité, October, 1984

Heinrich von Kleist: Über das Marionettentheater. ('On the Puppet Theater', 1810)

Henk Oosterling: Radicale Middelmatigheid. ('Radical Mediocrity') Amsterdam: Boom, 2000

Michael Taussig: Mimesis and Alterity. A Particular History of the Senses. New York/London: Routledge, 1993

Siegfried Zielinski: 7 Items on the Net. (1994) (www.ctheory.net)

(Berlin/Toronto, May 2005)

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SARAI READER 06 : Turbulence

Produced and Designed at the Sarai Media Lab, Delhi

ISBN 81-901429-7-6

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