

# THE WILDERNESS AT HOME

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## Abstract

In this paper I suggest that we need a complex, fractal-like intermingling of the wilderness and city in both real and virtual space in order to create a sustainable future for human beings on the earth. I discuss Mrs. Squandertime, a persistent simulation/stimulation of the slow alpha state that is conjured by watching nature without purpose, as an example of such an intermingling.

## Introduction

Stewart Brand suggests that for humans to survive climate change we need to pull back into cities, feed ourselves with as little impact as possible, and leave as much of the earth alone as we can (Brand 2009). At the same time groups as diverse as eco-spiritualists and earnest social scientists suggest that the mental and physical health of much of the world's increasingly urban population is damaged by lack of contact with nature (Bird 2007; Davis 2008; Maller et al. 2006; Tzoulasa et al. 2007). A solution to this dilemma is for artists, scientists, and technologists to demand and produce the greening of the interstitial spaces of our cities, and in a complementary surge, to simulate nature so that it can colonize our virtual spaces and our indoor spaces. One obvious success in this area is the proliferation of urban farming and gardening. While I believe we need more rooftop, builder's bag, window-box, and community gardens, the strength, and ceaseless renewal of the urge to plant can be seen throughout the existence of cities. It appears as persistent as the weeds that grow in the cracks of any concrete. However in this paper, I would like to concentrate on a more fragile, perplexing, contradictory need -the need for disorder, nature as wildness, and wilderness -which is a harder thing to sustain in the city. While parks old and new may set aside small areas for "natural regeneration," people and perhaps especially children have very little access to wilder natural areas. In the same context of wilderness I would like to ask both why and what could we, should we, simulate? Section One discusses a few projects that speak to natural disorder in an urban context. Section two discusses some art projects that have simulated wilderness. There is only space here to highlight a few of projects, so I am choosing those that have most impacted me, and have therefore influenced the creation of Mrs. Squandertime, a collaboration between Dave Pape and myself, which I describe in section three. In conclusion I address some questions, problems, and obstacles that this program of "The Wilderness at Home" needs to face.

## 1. Urban Wilderness as Home

In 1975 the Port of London Authority (PLA) lent gardener and urban reclamer Hilary Peters some waste land, Surrey Docks on the south side of the river Thames, and she started an urban farm. When I visited it in the late 70s, much of the land was broken concrete, with iron bollards and metal edgings around the dry docks areas. There was a lot of scrap. There was a huge pile of grey earth for the goats to climb on. Old dockland offices were living quarters for two workers, I think their names were Bumble and Hopper. There were garden beds. There were weeds. Kids wandered in from the nearby housing projects. Hilary Peters' experience at the farm supports

the idea that urban dwellers need nature.

The dreadful alienation of people in the abandoned docks wasn't just the result of unemployment. They were alienated from themselves, each other, and their surroundings. ... When I started to dig the silt and graze my goats and poultry in Surrey Docks, I was surprised by the urgency with which everyone wanted to join in. ... The farm grew, mainly not due to my efforts at all, but to all the people who recognized that the farm met some buried need in them. (Peters)

In 1980s, as water-front dock-lands became coveted real-estate in London, Surrey Docks Farm was threatened with extinction. It was moved to a less prime location in 1986, but still thrives (Surreydocksfarm.org). The original Surrey Docks Farm was surrounded by, and part of, an urban wilderness: a self-greening industrial ruin, where unofficial activities like catching bugs, making forts, watching birds, scavenging the water line, and loitering, could take place. The current Surrey Docks farm is a great resource, a place for kids to see and work with plants and animals, but in contrast it seems tamed and cleaned up, made to fit in with the new condos, the new neighbors.

In terms of wilderness in the city, gentrification seems to be a huge threat, but is it one that can be avoided? Duisburg Nord Landscape Park (Hui 2001; Landschaftspark), in Emscher, Germany, created by Architects Latz + Partner's between 1991 and 2000, seems to attempt a different balance of the raw and the cooked. This project transformed a disused ironworks into a 180 hectares park. Instead of razing the blast furnaces, ore bunkers, gas-o-meter, and casting houses, the architects incorporated the buildings and the site's history into the new park, marrying architectural heritage with eco-green concerns, and in the process preserving some of the wildness that pervades disused urban industrial sites. They allowed nature to re-colonize the buildings, turned the blast furnace into a viewing platform, put climbing walls on the ore bunker, a high-ropes course in a casting house, have artists installations on site, all this and a farm school. That Duisburg Nord Landscape Park exists, suggests that cities can make more radical choices about urban green space. I have not visited Emscher myself, but friends tell me that climbing rusting ladders up the blast furnace is a fairly wild experience.

The USA has plenty of raw spaces ripe for experiments in Urban Wilderness. I currently live in Buffalo, New York,

a city rich in industrial history, with miles of abandoned and rusting sites. Recently a new group has taken over some of the Grain Silos, Silo City (Silo City), and are encouraging and allowing artists to work in and around them. In May 2012, five artists created installation and projection works in and around Silo City for Fluid Culture Culleton and Read, a lecture, arts, and media series on themes of local and global culture and ecology organized by the University at Buffalo Humanities Institute. In late April 2012, I went to Silo City at dusk. Like the London docklands of the 70s, the surrounding area was bleak and desolate. There was a closed gate and a sign warning trespassers to stay away. A crumbling street of blank industrial buildings led to the grain elevators on the side of the Buffalo river. A herd of deer were grazing close by, geese flew overhead and landed in the water. I was meeting artist Laura Curry to watch her record material inside the silo for a performance piece. She had set up a video camera at one end of a long dark corridor, leading under the grain chutes, and placed sound recording equipment half way along the corridor. The space echoed and was increasingly dark. Curry created a white corn starch trail disappearing into the darkness. Then I could hear her approaching, moving, scuffing the corn starch, dislodging gravel. I heard more geese flying and honking behind me. Curry moved along the trail, it was too dark to see her, until she was very close to the camera, arms raised. It was very much an experience of wilderness.

My other visits to wild urban spaces include renting a canoe on the Chicago river and canoeing downtown; taking my own canoe down the Buffalo river past the rusting Grain Elevators; watching miles and miles of New Jersey wetlands on rides from Manhattan to Newark, and wondering if anyone goes into them, are they safe are they polluted?; traveling by train out of New York and seeing boys diving into the Hudson off some half-sunken and rusting hulk, and wishing I could too. Many cities, most cities, go through declines and falls that produce these rich wild spaces, can we enter them without spoiling them? Can we maintain this wilderness? Can these spaces have anything of the same effect as natural wilderness?

## 2. Virtual Wilderness

Conservatives argue that wilderness, in the most negative senses of the word, already permeates existence online: it is a spiritual wasteland, a pornographic no-man's-land, where children and young people are bullied and made savage. But artists and technicians have always imported the aspects of wilderness that refresh the soul into digital media. In terms of virtual space and indoor space, I would like to consider two questions, in this section, why should we simulate nature? and in the conclusion, what should we simulate? To help answer these questions I would like first to consider three powerful simulation projects.

In 1992, Brenda Laurel's group created PLACEHOLDER (Laurel et al. 1998), a virtual reality experience for two people. The virtual environment simulated the real environment close to Banff in the Canadian Rockies. There was a sulfur hot spring in a cave, a waterfall, and a landscape of hoodoos (tall, thin rock spires). Each participant wore a head-mounted VR helmet and could communicate with the other participant with a "Goddess" (a voice played by a live performer), who also acted as a guide. The participants could explore the space and "become" smart "critters", Spider, Snake, Fish, and Crow. The landscape contained the recorded traces of stories based on Native American culture,

and the participant could add her own stories to the world. At the heart of PLACEHOLDER was a consideration of the way that human beings put their own markings on landscape. We like to mark our territory, just like many other animals. In a way, narrative and story-telling are our marks. A huge part of the experience, and an idea that permeates many human narrative traditions, was experiencing life through the body and perceptions of another animal. Although the team did not implement all their ideas in this area, the participants could, for example, "become" Crow, opening their arms/wings and soaring around the waterfall.

In 1995 Char Davies' group created Osmose, another virtual reality work, and perhaps the paradigm for nature simulation (Davies). Osmose was an experience for one person wearing a VR helmet and a sensor vest which detected chest movement. The participant navigated the virtual space, much as a scuba-diver, leaning her body to choose direction, controlling her breathing to move up and down. Osmose consisted of a dozen spaces, each with a metaphorical relationship to nature. The most literal evoked trees, forests, ponds, flows of water, sap, blood-cells, microbes; the most symbolic contained text and code. In a technical tour de force (given the date) the computer graphics simulated the soft, dynamic, interpenetration of light and color of natural scenes, instead of the typical, contemporary, hard edged computer graphics. Participants emerged entranced: they spoke in very spiritual terms of the space bringing them closer to themselves, to nature, to something essential.

Andrea Polli's collaborative group produced Atmospherics/Weather Works (Polli), a simulation that focuses on sound, specifically the sonification of storms. In 2003, an installation at Engine 27 in NYC, simulated two storms that passed through the NYC area, the President's Day snowstorm cyclone (1979), and Hurricane Bob (1991). These two storms had been extensively modeled by meteorologists. The size and shape of the storm was captured by data representing the wind speed at different points in an area stretching from Northern Florida to Northern New York state, and at five elevations from sea-level to the top of the atmosphere. The team mapped this wind speed data and sampled every three minutes, to digital sounds that referenced wind whistling; mapped the whole storm area to the size and shape of the Engine 27 space; and played the storm on loudspeakers positioned throughout the space. As audience members walked through the darkened space, they were literally moving through the storm and experiencing the chaos and patterns that emerged in space and time. Again participants referred to the experiences as visceral, soothing, spiritual, essential.

The value of simulations, whether audio or visual, has always been linked to providing an experience for human beings of things that they cannot experience directly, and/or with their own perceptual equipment. The paradigmatic examples are the experiences of the turbulent forces in a furnace, the workings of a cell. Polli's simulation speaks to this aspect of simulating wildness -we literally get an experience, a geographically-scaled event on a human scale, that we cannot have in any other way, but that is analogically, very closely tied to our experience of wind and storm. Char Davies' work has been criticized for throwing so much technology at reproducing nature (Grau 2003), why not just go outside? But for populations that for reasons of physical, economic or geographical capacity cannot easily

scuba-dive or tramp in the woods, the rebuttal is simple. And if we are moving into a time when we should all be leaving nature alone, what will restrain the eco-tourists amongst us? Perhaps donning smart “critters” of various sorts, and interfacing a virtual wilderness with an alternative set of perceptions and drives?

### 3. Mrs. Squandertime: Wilderness at Home

These real and virtual projects, speak not only to wilderness, but to the relationship of people to wilderness. PLACEHOLDER, Osmose, and Atmospherics/Weather Works all immerse the human body into the simulation. PLACEHOLDER deals with aspects of human imagination and story-telling grounded in nature. Osmose and Atmospherics/Weather Works stimulate the sense of wonder and awe that wild nature-scapes evoke. I believe that wild urban spaces – the original Surrey Docks Farm, the Duisburg Nord Landscape Park, and Silo City – have a similar allure. There is an awful pleasure in watching hulking, man-made, structures decay: feeling both humanity’s thumb-print, on the world, and its vulnerability. There’s a pleasure in seeing what wild-life still goes on, in, around, and under the city. All these pieces and places push the participant towards a sense of time and rhythm that is not dictated by civilization’s metrics. It is this aspect of wilderness as out-of-clock-time, regenerative, and contemplation-inducing, that we address in Mrs. Squandertime.

Mrs. Squandertime is a large, high-definition, projection-based, autonomic installation. The project consists of the persistent (24/7) simulation of an ocean view, a living room and a virtual character, all driven by real-time data. The character herself is rendered photographically in a series of slowly dissolving stills which correspond to her current behavior. Her daily routine includes many hours sitting and watching the view. She wanders into her living room with or without a cup of tea, sits, and contemplates boats on the river, the sea, clouds, gulls flying, the tide going in and out, people on the sea wall. The graphic elements that compose the view are hundreds of images taken from historical printed sources. The roughness of the waves; size shape and movement of clouds; numbers, locations and behavior of boats, wildlife and people; are all determined algorithmically. The program that assembles and animates these images is driven by weather, time, and tide data constantly updated from a real physical location.

The piece as a whole rejects a romantic notion of wilderness as a pristine space outside human being’s civilizing hegemony. Pre-historic humans drained the swamps in England, turned Australia into a desert (Diamond 1999), radically altered all land, and what they missed 20th and 21st century humans have trammled. Instead Mrs. Squandertime speaks to the long history of humans both needing wilderness and needing to survive (with) it. The project connotes a Victorian aesthetic of sublime wilderness: in this case a seascape ruled by tide and weather. In this project the same network-driven, sampled, and patchworked content techniques that usually connote the frenzied, the fast-paced, the urban, are used to produce a work inspired by the slow movement. Mrs. Squandertime is an invitation to sit awhile, stay quiet, and contemplate the view. Mrs. Squandertime invokes the mediated possibility of reassembling and retaining an ideal sense of wilderness even when we are nowhere near wilderness. Mrs. Squandertime serves as a very quiet shout against the obsessive, consumerist, self-important, always-connected, busyness of 21st century life. Instead, like Mrs. Squandertime, stay home, watch sea and clouds. This is wilderness at home. Mrs. Squandertime as a role model.

### Conclusion

Assuming for a utopian moment, that we collectively agree to leave much of the earth alone, could urban and/or simulated wilderness substitute for real wilderness for humans’ psychological and physical well-being? In their paper “Promoting ecosystem and human health in urban areas using Green Infrastructure: A literature review,” Tzoulasa et al. conclude that before policy about green-space can be formulated, empirical research is needed to determine exactly what makes it beneficial Tzoulasa et al. (2007). Although I support empirical research, this program reminds me of the 1950s zeal to scientifically determine the goodness of food, to extract the vitamins and serve them up in pills. I believe that what funding and energy we have, should be put into making many bold and noisy experiments in the artistic sense. For real space: wild camps for girls in the New Jersey marshes, artists colonies in old silos, survival adventures in city sewers. For virtual space: as many different types of simulation that artists, scientists, and technologists can imagine in subways, schools, old-people’s homes. Judgment of these projects could be multiform -aesthetic, popular, social, qualitative, and by all means quantitative. Compelling projects that meet human beings needs for wildness and wilderness, might then become part of the persuasive force to stop housing developments built around golf-courses in deserts and the kind of eco-tourism that leads to 40 land-rovers surrounding a tiger.

Perhaps a harder question is, how much wilderness will any community allow, given an opposing determination to be safe? Fear of predators lurking in the wild, provokes censorship in virtual space, and turns wild urban space into no-go areas for most people, most of the time. William Bird writes, “In the US the radius in which 9 yr old children were allowed to play in 1990 had shrunk by nearly 90% compared to 1970.” Bird (2007). I see no easy answers here. But I want to oppose that paralyzing fear with powerful imaginings of restorative virtual and urban wilderness. In a study of the behavior of urban children in Portland, Kentucky, between 1900 and 1950, Louise Chawla describes urban boys playing in box cars and quarries, and riding river currents. Even groups of girls traveled the urban byways freely and swam at local beaches and lock through the 1930s Chawla (1995). What steps can we take to bring some of that freedom and independence back into our lives and the lives of our children?

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