

Notes on Commentary in the work of Gernot Wieland

To offer a subjective account as to what moves me so much about Gernot Wieland's artistic practice, I found myself setting out with an elaborate butterfly net to capture him.¹ Wieland is an artist-exegete, a commentator on secular society who speaks throughout his artworks, in twists and turns, of life as an experience of marginality, or of marginalia as a form of life. His lectures, films, drawings, photographs and installations can be considered as a form of writing that wanders along and engages the border between language and image to somehow trace the sense of self as always having just left the picture.² It is a form of commentary in the margins of apparatuses of power that are found in family histories, social contracts, rituals or rites of passage, popular notions of politesse and self-reflection, psychoanalytic theories, philosophical concepts that figure the human as an exclusion of an inherent animality, and the hierarchies of public institutions as inherited systems of control. By narrating a life experienced from the margins as an engagement with these apparatuses, Wieland is humorously able to draw viewers into penetrating questions as to the cost of so-called humanity on our relationships with one another and the other creatures on the planet. Upon the generous invitation to develop this text, I wrote to Gernot: "[my] initial impulses are to underscore a relation between Poetics and Praxis, that literature and story-telling embody, and that theory in your work plays second violin to poetics. Memory plays a central role in the personal navigation of the social and political, through gestures and symbols that exist and operate (or maybe sort of wander? A Wanderlust?) across differences between people. But it's a fuzzy form of signifying that can be left incomplete. Making meaning is an interpersonal and poetic process that unfolds over time, it's social, it's a form of exchange, let's say. Not sure, maybe I would go elsewhere instead...."

Dreamscapes, storytelling, the need to grasp reality and neuroses of recollection are figured in his films as paradigms and examples to address the problematic nature of exceptions and norms that are essential to systems of power. In *Thievery and Songs* (2016), Wieland narrates, in his own voice, a dream he has of the Bremer Stadtmusikanten (Bremen Town Musicians), a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm in which a donkey, a dog, a cat and a rooster are able to scare away a group of robbers from the robbers' house by standing one on top of the other and screaming at the top of their voices.³ The film depicts human actors wearing humorous animal costumes with huge papier-mâché masks over their heads, effectively blinding the performers as they wander the streets of Bremen. The movement fails because the animals cannot decide who should sit atop whom, the donkey complains of backache, and they find themselves visiting a therapist, individually and as a group. All the characteristic traits that children's stories project over centuries onto these animals become the source of each of their forms of depression. At the end of the dream, they go their separate ways, and Wieland describes an ambiguous landscape in which he has no idea where to go from there. Then he wakes up. The varied simplicity of his artistic means to illuminate the stories he tells – 8mm film, drawings, plasticine figurines, watercolours and potato prints, his notable Austrian accent for voiceover

¹ I will use 'Gernot' to speak of the person and Wieland to speak of the artist's practice.

² I will try to limit reading his metaphors and examples. I will comment on Wieland's *exemplary* use of commentaries in terms of speaking in the first person, speaking to the second person, and speaking of the third person (which, by convention, this text itself does in regards to the artist).

³ The Bremen Town Musicians are proudly monumentalized in a beautiful bronze sculpture by Gerhard Marcks (1953) in front of the Bremen City Hall in the centre of Bremen. The story represents the power of the *people* when they self-organize. It has little or nothing to do with animals.

narration – are pragmatic, which allows an immediacy of communication and resists the fear of forgetting everything or of being forgotten (a fate, one senses in his works, that is worse than death).

The exclusion and suppression of an animality and its implicit continuity to an emotional world is an underlying paradigm of domination throughout Wieland's work. The inability of an inner animality to roam freely, to wander, is also significant. The aforementioned constellation of apparatuses, that recur in his stories, maintain this exclusion and capture of an animal otherness within the heart of human beings. For example, in the film, *Ink in Milk*, Wieland narrates the experience of being forced by a strict school teacher to drink from a glass of ink in 'school milk' that he and a group of fellow students had playfully concocted to watch the effect of the black and white liquids interacting with one another 'like dance moves.'⁴ The students immediately vomit up the milk and Gernot is surprised 'how the ink still tried to perform dance movements, like a dying animal.' He exclaims to the teacher, 'with a smile,' that the effect looks like 'Dancing movements. Animals dancing.'⁵ The teacher goes into a blind rage and passes out beating him. The repression gives rise to a deep sadness that one can hear in Wieland's voiceover narration, but it also opens a potentiality for empathy and a motivation to reconsider the ideologies that uphold this division and control.

This ability to capture traces of a disappearance, and even reappearance, of this animalistic dimension of the self pushed to the margins and to assemble the effects of the repression in a narrative, moves a personal search for belonging *off to the side of* gaining universal knowledge. Instead, desire finds a temporary home in particular, human experiences that are in favour of navigating the gaps across differences that one encounters while moving from one particular situation to another. This experience of gaps produces momentary recognition and mis-recognition, upheavals of memory that are at times involuntary and disturbing, in which case the ego reaches for memories that are voluntary, in order to maintain its consistency. The gaps are mobile, immaterial; they are little lapses in agency that create tensions, excitements, doubts and moments of joy at the elaborate and at times absurd interpersonal relations found in the struggles of everyday life.

Wieland leads by example by taking every opportunity to face an *other, or otherness* (and by this I mean the 11 year old friend in lipstick and eye shadow or the captivating experience of vomiting up ink in milk, respectively), within the context in everyday existence as an artistic exploration. Art becomes the vehicle of a meaningful struggle to try to live authentically, even in the extreme form of facing an Other Self, that is, another autonomous, sentient being. To live within the sphere of human gestures is to be ok with vulnerability in the face of an other, or otherness, in this sense. The greatest other is finding yourself speaking face to face with a *you*, to smile at the site of the dancing movements in the vomit and express something at the edge of language, '*...like a dying animal.*'⁶ A *you*, in the second person, is whomever or whatever one faces as *another I*. All other *others* are lexical beings, they exist in the third person and can be pointed at even when they are absent. We can point to the rooster, the cat, the dog and donkey, but the dimension of what these creatures represent inside ourselves is much more intimate and potentially uncomfortable. If one were to point at a part of their own body, one

⁴ From the voice-over narration in *Ink in Milk*, 2017

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.* This is what is so heartbreaking about the teacher's rage – the moment is so intimate and speaks to the capability for human gestures that Wieland captures so poignantly.

can other, or alienate, a part of themselves. Some people cannot stand the sound of their own heartbeat when they lay their head on the pillow at night. Wieland's use of fact and fiction manifests an intimacy that is generous and moving because the struggle in each story has something to do with this desire to learn something of oneself in the face of an other as a *you*, as an *Other Self* who shares the use of the pronoun, *I*.⁷

Ink and Milk is a meditation or thought experiment on the speaking subject who takes up the "I" in language in its own image, in order to work with the dimension of language that speaks before and after the life of the subject. Wieland challenges the ethical underpinnings of man as a political animal, by revealing systems of enculturation, which primary school represents, as political spaces that attempt to stamp out difference in the name of maintaining order and balance. The description of disciplinary systems and games narrated by Wieland interweave his position as an "I" *alongside* practices that use the 'proximity of physical bodies in space'⁸ as 'the beginning of politics.'⁹

A prime example is Gernot's friend whose peculiarities are an effective source of personal pleasure, and for this very reason are unwelcome, resulting later in a diagnosis of schizophrenia that marginalizes him to an asylum. Wieland recounts his punishment for making plans with the friend to escape Austria on a boat they will build to set sail for South America to live with indigenous people. Gernot must sit at the back of the class facing the back of a wardrobe. It is figured as the moment of coming into a political consciousness while sitting apart from the others. He turns the punishment of being the one expelled into an experience of the exceptional person as either a hero or villain; in so doing, he others *himself* in an exemplary fashion. Narrating the experience as an "I," *exhibited as separate* in the space behind the wardrobe, yet alongside the others, is the thought experiment of life in the margins and/or to experience marginalia as a form of life. The film is projected on the back of a wardrobe, ostensibly to awaken the viewer's own political sense of being a body in space that sits apart from the others.

⁷ I want to draw attention to the difference between the celebration of an exceptional phenomenon vs an exemplary one. I will paraphrase several works by Giorgio Agamben, in particular, *The Coming Community*, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, and *Homo Sacer*, University of Stanford Press, 1998: the exceptional person (for example!) breaks the rule, they are outside of the law, category or class attributed to them, and while they testify to human potentiality, they do so in the register of property, of possessing a quality outside of a norm, and thereby *call for a new class of their own* (eg. the image of the school teacher in *Ink in Milk*, who passes out beating the children who defy the norm that therefore calls for an *exceptional punishment*). An exemplary person exhibits their belonging purely *alongside* the law, category or class – they are within the category (which is why they are useful as an example) but they are irreducible to it, or else their mode of belonging could not serve other cases: *paradigm*, from the Greek *para-deigma*, *to show beside*, or the German, *Beispiel*, *to play alongside*. The qualities of an exemplary person are not owned, they are *called upon or appropriated from a particular manner of belonging itself*. The difference can be summed up between saying, "I am human" (exceptional) and "I call myself human" (exemplary). Wieland obviously uses the example to play alongside the exceptions and norms of power, from *within their margins*, to find a new – fictional – use for facts, laws, categories and classes. The position of his narration is exemplary because he exhibits himself within the categories he analyses; one is able to witness how he negotiates the effects of so-called humanity upon him.

⁸ From *Ink and Milk*, 2017.

⁹ *ibid*. Wieland is specific within the film on his marginal position in the story: "You're always caught in cross-sections of different layers and structures, not only of narration but of existence."

The film presents two possibilities for escaping the dilemma of enculturation, one fantastical and tragic, the other poetic and tragicomic: the fatal trip of the friend who sets sail to South America and the path Wieland takes because 'his language would not allow [him] to'¹⁰ go on the boat, which is to embrace the act of narration and submit himself to being a subject in language, to become a linguistic being and evade causality altogether.¹¹

There are many moments in Wieland's films in which the use of the third person presents the characters hovering at the verge of disappearance – what I've referred to above as the lexical *other* – or forcefully coming forward in an unforgettable manner that speaks to an experience of otherness in general. I will illuminate this idea by plucking out a couple of concepts within a new work premiering at the Salzburger Kunstverein: *Circle, Square, Circle* (2020) is a 16mm film that Wieland collaborated with a bird trainer to produce. The trainer attempts to teach birds to fly in a circle, to be captured by the film camera, and the results are a series of commands and resistances that reveal an apparatus of otherness. What one sees in the film is a soft, grainy blue sky, punctuated by the appearance and disappearance of the birds, who are lost into the film grain each time the camera operator fails to focus the lens on the subject. The fleeting quality of trying to capture the bird images in frame intensifies the desire to confirm whether the birds indeed fly in a circle. The otherness of the birds here enters into an ontology of seeming by setting the birds into an indeterminate space between the domestic and wild. It is another instance of a gap Wieland uses to bring *not the qualities of the birds themselves to the fore*, but instead the desire to command them, to instrumentalise them toward human goals, to categorise them either as 'useful' because they can be trained, or beautiful if they can trace the pure geometry of a circle. Whereas the indexical image captured by the camera is a testament to the difficulty of training the birds to do something *on command* (and to thereby change the status of 'the real'), the title of the work itself invokes the intellectual purity of geometric forms that have been deemed superior by analytic philosophy to describe the laws of nature since the so-called Enlightenment. All this is to say, the being or creature that won't obey a command, program, or desire could be a working definition of an *other*, or otherness, *this other who approaches a you, in the form of an Other I*.¹²

This leads me to his particular use of voice as a narrator: *you* are the real other, the means of addressing the viewer in an artwork or a text is a silent and absent *you*. The process of addressing a *you* through emotions that arise at the thresholds of what is sayable and unsayable (the title, *Ink in Milk*, is a good example) about a lost dimension of our *species*, is an adventure of sorts toward an intimate *other*. Like in all narration, and indeed illuminated by Gernot's particular voice, with its soft and careful delivery of a basic English grammar that allows him to step outside the disciplinary regime of Austrian German,¹³ the script addresses an imagined *whomever*, or even *whatever you*. The question would be, can one other oneself as a *you*, even if one is only able to catch a glimpse of the back of the head as it leaves the particular encounter?

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ I am ready to claim that Wieland's strategy is working because Germany is no longer winning the World Cup.

¹² The rebellious part of me doesn't want the birds to fly in a circle. How do you respond to a command, to being commanded to perform in a certain manner? I *might* find it more acceptable to be commanded by a lover, or at least someone who can truly look me in the eye when they do so.

¹³ Thanks to Seamus Kealy for the inspired suggestion.

The gesture of writing the voice of a narrator in Wieland's work makes use of emotion as a threshold where the subject dives into or leaps out of language in a continual dance and suspension between the two positions. This kind of marginality offers a promise of being developed; it is enough to undergo it when I enter into Wieland's work.¹⁴ The various, and curious facts that are put in the service of trying to grasp the fleeting presence of the other as a *you* of Wieland's artworks (and here is a good use of fiction, a *you* in the form of animals, relatives, psychoanalysts, strangers, shopkeepers to name a few) allow one to study a cartography of the personal territories that we entrap ourselves within in secular, social life.
