A Point of no Return

Artistic Transgression in the More-Than-Human World

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Abstract

One of the characteristics of arts-based environmental education is that it encourages participants to be receptive to nature in new and uncommon ways. The participant is encouraged to immerse him or herself in nature, to seek a "deep identification." In my paper I explore if there could be cases where such immersion may reach – or even go beyond – a point of no return. A point, where the "intertwining" with nature causes the subject to sever the "life lines" to the world which would enable him or her to maintain the psychological, cultural and spiritual integrity of the ego. The dissolving of the ego's boundaries through artistic practice can be seen as having certain shamanistic qualities, specifically in cases when this transgression involves efforts to connect with other animal species. Such undertakings may constitute – at least in the perception of the shaman-artist – a form of "going native," becoming "one" with the non-human Others. As relevant cases I discuss the "trespassing" from the world of culture into the world of nature by Joseph Beuys in his famous studio encounter with a coyote and Timothy Treadwell entering the life-world of the grizzly bears in Alaska, for which he ultimately paid the price of death (the tragic story was documented in Werner Herzog's film "Grizzly Man"). I analyze these phenomena along the distinction between Apollonian versus Dionysian sensibility in cultural activity as articulated by Nietzsche. Finally I discuss some pedagogical implications for teachers and facilitators who encourage an attitude of radical amazement and vulnerability in arts-based environmental education.

Introduction

One of the criticisms of environmental education as it is often practiced today is that it seems insufficiently capable of reaching the hearts and minds of the learners (cf. Russell, 1999; Sobel, 1996, 2008). When one looks at ongoing programs and curricula, the impression one frequently gets is that (reductionist) science education still holds center stage; teachers, guides or facilitators appear to follow a pedagogical approach of "knowledge transfer" in which learning is basically regarded as a pouring of an established body of knowledge into a supposed empty vessel, the learner.[1]

As an alternative to this approach, it has been suggested that an innovation may come from an arts-inspired or arts-based "re-invention" of environmental education. Such an orientation may challenge the "top-down" view of the passing over of information from teacher (or guide) to student, and allows for a radical open-endedness in the educational process. A form of art-making which specifically aims to facilitate such (re)connection to the natural world has been conceptualized as "arts-based environmental education" (Mantere, 1998; Van Boeckel, 2006, 2009). One of its characteristics is that it encourages participants to develop a receptive attitude and to engage in new ways with the non-human environment. Learners are encouraged to approach the world afresh through art, e.g. by looking at a plant, animal or landscape as if we see them for the first time in our life. In this, the participant is encouraged to immerse herself in Nature, which could entail seeking the kind of deep identification that radical environmental philosophers have sponsored (e.g. Naess, 1989; Matthews, 1991; Abram, 1996).

One of the epistemological foundations that could inform such an alternative approach is the Deweyan view that in *any* learning activity, it is important to first establish a direct felt contact between the learner and the items of his or her learning, in short to facilitate "first hand" experiences.[2] It seems imperative that the learner is somehow able to hold at bay – at least temporarily – the commonly held expectations and anticipations of ways in which the world is to be understood. In an educational setting, it may mean that a facilitator develops and cultivates an ability to foster a mindful openness among the learners, which allows participants to feel safe and at ease when moving about in uncharted terrain. I would argue that this state is one of the fundamental characteristics of an artistic process and an artist's way of knowing. As Peter London puts it eloquently: "Everybody is frightened of the new; an

artist type of person is also frightened, but he or she decides to proceed, nonetheless" (P. London, personal communication, Sept. 20, 2006). It is this attitude of letting-go, of opening up, that teachers and facilitators in arts-based environmental education seek to nourish among practitioners. The participants, in their efforts to connect to Nature through art, are, as it were, encouraged by the teacher/facilitator to go over an imaginary threshold, in order to be able to perceive the world with fresh eyes. In some way, especially in occasions where this process is entered into with more depth, this may be like an act of *initiation*: a "dying" of the person before, and the "birth" of a new person who opens up, with all his senses, to the artistic process.[3]

Here I want to investigate the phenomenon of "transgression" from the world of culture into the world of Nature in its most extreme forms (bearing in mind that these two realms cannot be juxtaposed as wholly distinct spheres). Are there certain limits that must be set by the facilitator of such a process? Can the act of "opening up" go "too far"? By too far I mean the possibility that the participant/art-maker nears – or may even go beyond – a "point of no return." This point can be regarded as a liminal space beyond which it may seem difficult if not impossible for the person concerned to establish a healthy integration of the new and challenging experiences into her psyche. In that zone, the intensification of the "intertwining" between the sensate and the sensible, between body and world (Merleau-Ponty, 1968), brought about by the art-based immersions in the more-than-human world, may cause the subject to neglect, or actively cut off, the "life lines" which would enable him or her to maintain the psychological, cultural and spiritual coherence of the ego.

The dissolving of the ego's boundaries through artistic practice can be seen as having certain shamanistic qualities, specifically in cases when this transgression involves efforts to connect with other animal species. Such undertakings may constitute – at least in the perception of the artist – a specific form of "going native," of becoming "one" with non-human Others.

Here, I will specifically look at and compare the cases of two extraordinary people who pushed the limits to the extreme. They both, in their own distinct ways, arguably "took leave of their senses," while reaching out to the more-than-human world. The first case is that of "art shaman" Joseph Beuys, and the second is the experience of "Grizzly Man" Timothy Treadwell. The assumption underlying this analysis is that such intense forms of "looking into the abyss" (Nietzsche) can tell

us something about milder forms of transgression (understood here as the action of overstepping some boundary or limit) and can inform educators in their efforts to mindfully develop approaches and methods for connecting to Nature through art.

Some remarks of caution are in place here. The case studies of Beuys and Treadwell focus on (a) solitary artistic (or transgressive) undertakings of (b) males in contact with (c) wild creatures (albeit, in Beuys's case, animals in an urban environment). This means that, on basis of these case histories, one cannot infer conclusions that would, on a one-to-one basis, pertain to situations in arts-based environmental educational practices with either children or adults as participants. The daring undertakings of a singular artist/naturalist (analogous to the archetype of "the Romantic hero") are essentially different from artistic activities that are performed in groups and facilitated by a teacher. Furthermore, the circumstance of immersion in wilderness, or engaging with wild animals, is not only different in degree but also in kind when compared to performing arts-based activities in more "domesticated" zones, like a city park or rural landscape. These considerations may seem to make the effort to draw lessons from these atypical cases as too farfetched or leaning towards the use of hyperbole. Mindful of these caveats, however, the purpose of this analysis is to deliberately focus on some of the more extreme, atypical forms of loosing the self in making contact with Nature, in the hope that it will provide some insights when pondering on the question if there is indeed a potential liminal "danger zone" when engaging in (or facilitating others to seek) much milder forms of immersion in Nature.

Divine madness

Creative people, says Rollo May (1994, p. 93), are distinguished by the fact that they can live with anxiety, *even though* a high price may be paid in terms of insecurity, sensitivity, and defenselessness for the gift of the "divine madness." Poets and artists tend to perceive phenomena, utterances, connections, that other people apparently often neglect or fail to register, and this awareness may well stem from a heightened sensitivity and receptivity, a radical openness or vulnerability to the world. Again, in the words of artist and art educator London:

> Everyone has intuitions, everyone experiences ineffable inclinations. The difference between an artist type and non-

> artist type is when an artist type of person has an intuition, an inclination of some kind, the artist-type takes it seriously. The non-artist type sloughs it off, as a passing irritation in the eye, a little ringing in the ear. The artist type of person pauses long enough to hold on to such a momentary phenomenon, reflect on it and mine it for its possible worth. [...] An artist type of person is an ordinary type of person who takes primary experience seriously and then wrestles it in into its implications and gives significant and signifying form to it so that it is readable and its is credible. (London, 2009)

Such an intuition or inclination may trigger what has been termed a "flow experience" (Csikszentmihaly, 1990), during which all attention is focused on this one stimulus, which in profound cases may lead to a loss of the sense of ego and the sense of space and time. Like mystics, shamans, alchemists, poets and other charismatic types, an artist seems to have a visionary capacity at her disposition, providing her moments of profound understanding of that which is hidden. This mediating role, according to the Russian philosopher Ouspensky, is part of the artistic creative process. The artist has to be a clairvoyant, a magician. He must have the power to show others what they don't see themselves, but what he does see (Ouspensky, quoted by Kuper, 1997, p. 191). Now let us take a closer look at what some of these magicians tried to show us.

Joseph Beuys

Joseph Beuys's first solo exhibition, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, took place in 1965 and became one of the artist's most famous performances. The artist could be viewed through the glass of an art gallery's window. His head covered with honey and gold leaf, he walked through the art gallery for about two hours. In his hands he carried a dead hare which he provided with explanations of the drawings that lined the walls. Beuys believed he understood well why this action captured people's imaginations:

> The idea of explaining to an animal conveys a sense of the secrecy of the world and of existence that appeals to the imagination. Then, as I said, even a dead animal preserves more powers of intuition than some human beings with their stubborn

> rationality. [...] The problem lies in the word 'understanding' and its many levels which cannot be restricted to rational analysis. Imagination, inspiration, and longing all lead people to sense that these other levels also play a part in understanding. This must be the root of reactions to this action. [...] (Beuys, quoted in Tisdall, 1979, pp. 16-17)

Throughout his artistic career Beuys produced many such spectacular, ritualistic performances. His most famous action took place in New York, in May 1974, when he spent three days in a room with a wild coyote. Upon arrival at the airport he was wrapped in a felt blanket and taken by ambulance to the site of the performance, a gallery on East Broadway. There Beuys alternated between standing upright, covered by the felt and leaning on a shepherd's staff, and laying on the straw. He regularly performed the same series of actions with his eyes continuously fixed on the coyote. The wild animal vigilantly circled the artist, and at one point even shredded the blanket to pieces. Beuys improvised, responding to whatever new situation. The coyote's behaviour shifted throughout the three days, from detached to cautious, to even aggressive at some points. At certain intervals Beuys performed symbolic gestures like striking a triangle or throwing his leather gloves to the coyote. He later explained: "I wanted to isolate myself, insulate myself, see nothing of America other than the coyote." Beuys saw the debasement of the coyote as a symbol of the damage done by white men to the American continent and its native cultures. His action was an attempt to heal some of those wounds: "You could say that a reckoning has to be made with the coyote, and only then can this trauma be lifted." At the end of the action, Beuys hugged the coyote that had grown quite tolerant of him, and was taken back to the airport.

Beuys believed that performance art could evoke a spiritual response in the audience, and through that provide a healing process. He sometimes compared his role to that of a shaman. His actions incorporated powerful symbols of birth, death and transformation. Beuys wanted to communicate with the coyote as a spiritual entity, and "learn how to survive" and to re-open the dialogue with the energetics and spirituality of the pre-European America. He had a special esteem for the wolf-like creature: "The spirit of the coyote is so mighty that the human being cannot understand what it is, or what it can do for mankind in the future" (Beuys, quoted in Tisdall, 1980, p. 26).

In Beuys's work, the bridge between the earthly and spiritual realms is often represented by animals, which he thought of as "figures that pass freely from one level of existence to another." In many cultures animals are guardian spirits for shamans, companions on their celestial journeys. Beuys's performances with animals suggest the shaman's special affinity with non-human Others: he can understand their language and share their particular abilities, and even transform himself into one of them. For Beuys, the animals have sacrificed themselves to make humanity possible. Therefore, "Man must once more be in contact with those below, animals, plants, and nature, and those above, angels and spirits" (Beuys, quoted by Clark, 2008).

Though it can be said that Beuys, in his actions, came close to testing the border between the human and non-human, it seems that after each experience he was able to retract safely from the liminal space. In his case, the excursions into "divine madness" did not result in insurmountable pathology or unbearable (let alone fatal) bodily harm.

According to David Levi Strauss (1999), Beuys was less a shaman than an ordinary man (though deeply inspired by Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy). His inquiries were seldom taken to such extremes as the shaman's are. They rather moved in the direction of more common and communal work: producing warmth, planting trees, talking with animals, sweeping up, farming, and teaching. Because of this, Strauss argues, it took a good deal of courage for Beuys to put himself in vulnerable contact with the more dynamic and chaotic force of Coyote (Strauss, 1999). At any rate, Beuys was not suggesting an atavistic return to a pre-technological past. In his own words:

> When I do something shamanistic, I make use of the shamanistic element – admittedly an element of the past – in order to express something about a future possibility. [...] It's this aliveness that I'm after, also in the sense of will power based on the necessity of bringing back something into our time-conscious culture that's been lost, namely a willingness to take these lost forces seriously, forces that are there in shamanism, and to put them back in the context of our thinking in a completely new way. That's why these things are realities not only in an aesthetic context, they're also real intentions. [...] (Beuys, quoted in Bastian and Simmen, 1980, p. 92)

Summarizing, one can question whether Beuys's actions in essence

constituted a deep probing of the boundary with the non-human Others. I suggest they should rather be taken as artistic performances, happenings, aimed a conveying a strongly held conviction to an audience.

Timothy Treadwell

Whereas Beuys seems to have limited his performed cross-species encounters with either caged (coyote) or dead (hare) wild animals, some other creative outsiders have sought to take it one step further by engaging with non-human Others in their wild habitat. As a case in point I want to discuss in the following the "transgression" into Nature by Timothy Treadwell. He made his way into both the biotope and life-world of the grizzly bears in Alaska, and ultimately paid for this with the price of death. The tragic story was brought to movie theatres worldwide by Werner Herzog in *Grizzly Man.* The film is partly a compilation of hundreds of hours of video footage that Treadwell left behind. Treadwell was a self-appointed custodian of the bears, an "eco-warrior" engaged in defending endangered wildlife. He enacted his filmed performances in front of dangerous brown bears, while having a future audience in mind that would eventually be seeing his stock footage. The film rushes are neither objective, "fly-on-the-wall" documentary renderings of wildlife nor exclusively staged fabrications for propagandistic use. Our access to them is limited to the selections that Herzog has made and compiled in his film. Nevertheless, on basis of those I suggest that Treadwell performed his own specific Beuysian "actions." Like Beuys, he was never quite sure how a wild animal might respond to his crossing of the human-animal border. As audience (and at a safe distance!) we are able to watch the filmed representations of their performances that have been saved for posterity.

All in all, Treadwell spent thirteen summers in Alaska's Katmai National Park and Reserve, a place that ranks among the wildest areas of our planet. When he wasn't up there in the wilds, Treadwell would visit schools and educate the public. In his final summer in Katmai, he and his girlfriend Amie Huguenard got attacked and devoured by a bear.

In *Grizzly Man*, Park biologist Larry Van Daele describes the luring that attracted Treadwell to cross an imaginary line:

> One of the things I've heard about Mr. Treadwell – and you can see in a lot of his films – is that he tended to want to become a

> bear. Some people that I've spoken with would encounter him in the field, and he would act like a bear, he would "woof" at them. He would act in the same way a bear would when they were surprised. Why he did this is only known to him. No one really knows for sure. But when you spend a lot of time with bears, especially when you're in the field with them day after day, there's a siren song, there's a calling that makes you want to come in and spend more time in their world. Because it is a simpler world. (Van Daele, quoted in *Grizzly Man,* 2005)

Timothy Treadwell (his real name is Timothy Dexter) was born in a mainstream, middle-class family on Long Island, New York. As a young man, Treadwell lead a turbulent, mostly urban life. At one point he even overdosed on a heroin speedball and only just in time the paramedics succeeded in plucking him back from the edge of death. Treadwell first traveled to Alaska in 1989 at age 32. From early on, his interactions with wild mammals seem to have a shamanic dimension. Looking back on meeting his first grizzly, he writes, "For me, the encounter was like looking into a mirror. I gazed into the face of a kindred soul. A being that was potentially lethal, but in reality was just as frightened as I was" (Treadwell, 1996, p. 10). A few weeks later, in a remote region of western Alaska, he again comes close to bears. He trips and falls. Nick Jans provides the following account: "[H]e sings to the bears for the first time – an unconscious, on-the-spot ditty – which seems to have a magical, calming effect, not only on himself, but on them. He's stumbled onto a peaceable kingdom where the bears seem neither ferocious nor afraid of man – a childhood dream made real" (2006, p. 17). In fact, Timothy Treadwell experiences nothing less than a born-again moment that shapes his life: "I begged forgiveness from a higher power, then made my pledge: 'I will stop drinking for you and all bears, I will stop and devote my life to you.' [...] my battle for preservation had begun" (Treadwell, 1996, p. 33). From that moment onwards, says Jans, an interwoven "pattern of myth and reality" starts to form. In Treadwell's efforts "to become friends with the bears" and in his self-appointed role as their guardian, he starts to imitate his ursine companions. According to filmmaker Joel Bennett, who collaborated closely with Treadwell at several occasions, he had an intuitive grasp of bear body language which Bennett attributed to his rough-and-tumble experiences on the streets of California (Jans, 2006, p. 29). As Van Daele noted above, he adopted the bears' body language and vocalizations. From his autobiography *Among Grizzlies*, one

can get a sense of how Treadwell slowly seemed to be more and more comfortable with his "shape-shifting" into a bear: "making huffs, grunts, woofs, growls, and snapping noises, crawling on all fours, avoiding eye contact, rearing up, and stomping, dressing in black and rolling in the bears' beds to look and smell more bear like" (Brinks, 2008, p. 312). A research colleague of her even goes so far as to speak of Treadwell acquiring "ursine literacy" (*ibid.*, p. 321).

Treadwell's entire life, from childhood to death, seemed to suggest a deep yearning for the extraordinary (Jans, 2006, pp. 12-13). Another way of looking at this yearning is that he seemed to have projected his unease with the human civilized world upon an idealized Garden of Eden, with bears and humans living peacefully together (Drenthen, 2009, pp. 12-13). Scholar Ellen Brinks (2008, p. 305) regards Treadwell as somebody who is essentially acting out a familiar fantasy ascribed to children – living in communion with wild animals, the bears and the foxes and even knowing them by name. From that perspective, Brinks has quite a different look on Treadwell's efforts to be recognized ("through a mimetic transformation of his own body") as a bear among bears (Brinks, 2008, p. 306). She takes it to be a rejection of species difference in favor of some more radically hybrid experience, and adds that Eurowestern culture only tolerates such endeavors as a form of play during childhood, but never when sought by adults. Treadwell's feral tale tells us the story "about the refusal to abdicate desires for cross-species relating, or to abandon a mode of object relating that yields unpredictable, embodied forms of knowledge – despite the consequences of being stigmatized, or dismissed, as childish for doing so" (Brinks, 2008, p. 307). Even more so, Treadwell's affinity for mimicry of the bears is understood by Brinks as a "child's way of knowing the world."

According to Brinks, Treadwell's corporeal way of knowing relies in the first place on voice and proprioception. She defines the latter as an inner sense of "how your body is located in space." Furthermore, it is a kind of "thinking through the body," a way the body "can talk to itself" (Brinks, 2008, p. 313).

One way in which embodied thinking manifests itself powerfully is through experiencing the emotion of intense fear. In the context of our theme of deep connecting to Nature through art, the following observation of Brinks is particularly interesting. According to her, it is often by being in fearful situations that Treadwell's animal "metamorphoses" are provoked. Excitement that comes from fear leads to physiological changes (change of heartbeat etc.), and this can have the

effect of dismantling the self. Brinks adds, "One could argue that this by definition would produce interesting and new forms of knowledge. [...] Based on mimesis, this kind of sensuous, corporeal understanding is by nature performative, and it gives us a new way of conceptualizing self/other relating" (2008, p. 313).

Criticizing the way Treadwell's "childish" behavior is trivialized by others (e.g. by Herzog), Brinks heretically regards his experience as a reminder that we *can* indeed approach animals by way of a visceral and empathic understanding. She seems to sympathize to some extent with his flirting with cross-species metamorphosis when she writes that "[i]n Treadwell's own imaginary, the feral tale is the repository for mimesis' potential to validate forms of sense experience and knowledge that are integral to, *but not limited to* childhood " (Brinks, 2008, p. 318, my italics). However, Brinks is also careful to point out that Treadwell's relating to bears does not dissolve in non-differentiation or an oceanic submerging (Ibid, p. 315), as he always seems able to retain a heightened awareness when he is near to bears. Thus, Brinks herself gives reason to ask whether speaking of "metamorphosis" is not too far-fetched. In that regard, it is revealing how Treadwell describes the effects of his mimetic endeavors himself in the final letter he wrote to a friend, a few days before he got killed: "Hello! I am writing you a last letter for the journey. My last food delivery is scheduled for late today. My transformation complete – a fully accepted wild animal – brother to these bears. I run free among them – with absolute love and respect for all the animals." (Treadwell, cited in Peacock, 2004).

Conesa-Sevilla views the story of Timothy Treadwell as a case in which "wild bears become the fascinating singularity around which an urban psyche tests the possibility of continued self differentiation and integration imbedded in a wild, non-human, social, and ursine environment" (2008, p. 138). But in contrast to Brinks, Conesa-Sevilla discredits Treadwell's way of knowing as one of making "false interpretations," e.g. mistaking bear tolerance as acceptance. Pondering on where his "foolish daring" comes from, Conesa-Sevilla wonders if his thrill-seeking behavior shouldn't be attributed to his former addiction to drugs and edge sports. To support this claim, he quotes Nick Jans as follows:

> [The bears'] tunnel-like trails wind through the otherwise impenetrable alders and head-high grass, forming an unmapped maze. [...] For a human, exploring these trails seems a poor idea

> of the first magnitude; *suicidal* is a word that comes to mind. Considering that *the* leading factors in brown-grizzly attacks are lone humans surprising bears in thick brush, and that such conditions define the Maze, we might cross off *suicidal* and substitute *insane.* (Jans, 2006, p. 60)

In his efforts to understand Treadwell's behavior from an ecopsychological perspective, Conesa-Sevilla comes to the intriguing assertion that if Timothy would have been born in another society, he might have been recognized as having shamanic potential (2008, p. 142). Rather than as an "adult living out a childhood fantasy" (Brinks), Conesa-Sevilla understands Timothy as a "misguided adolescent trapped in the body of a man." This perspective leads him to a quite different assessment. In a different time and place, says Conesa-Sevilla, Timothy would have had the privilege of undergoing an adolescent *rite of passage.* Instead, he was given a chance very few of us take: "to face all our demons inside a maze [the Grizzly Maze, JvB] while confronting father bear, the creator" (Ibid., p. 144). Thus understood, Treadwell's efforts can be seen as the seeking of a vision, as temporarily isolating oneself from humanity and its distractions as an all-important ecopsychological trial or respite (Ibid., p. 143). Drawing on psychologist Erik Erikson, who asserted that youth must often test extremes before settling on a considered course in life, Conesa-Sevilla suggests that if the "considered course" for Timothy would be a mature intimation with wilderness and "bearness," then his case can be regarded as a "failed mature ecopsychology." Obsessed as he was with a singular and exaggerated emblem, Conesa-Sevilla surmises, he was only partially able to join the ecological grandeur of wild Alaska (2008, p. 146). But, be that as it may, where could genuine ecopsychological balance and maturity be found in relation to the bears, if such is indeed possible? Here, Conesa-Sevilla dwells on the remarkable work of environmentalist-philosopher Paul Shepard:

> The world of real bears is not always safe or amusing, nor is it exploitative and despotic. It requires many generations of human attention, the pooled accumulation of knowledge, to grasp the full outline of the bear's life, the efforts of the poets, mythologists, metaphysicians, and artists. It is not only its likeness to us but its difference from us, working in tandem, that shape the watershed of mature reflection. (Shepard, 1996, p. 172)

Ultimately, it may be hard to assess accurately the extent to which Timothy was acquainted with the pragmatics and mythology of "bear" as put forth by Shepard. Indeed, the thin line dividing on the one hand the effort of trying to adhere to and respect this mythology and on the other hand the act of bringing child fantasies to very real natural interactions may disappear when a firmly established ecopsychology is not present (Conesa-Sevilla, 2008, p. 147).

Marnie Gaede, an ecologist and friend of Treadwell, says in *Grizzly Man*, "he wanted to become like a bear [...] perhaps he wanted to mutate into a wild animal [...] connecting so deeply you're no longer human." And the film director and narrator, Werner Herzog, also speaks of Treadwell's negligence of an unseen line. Discussing what he felt when going through Treadwell's left-over video footage, Herzog says, "I discovered a film of human ecstasies and darkest inner turmoil. As if there was a desire in him to leave the confinements of his humanness and bond with the bears, Treadwell reached out, seeking a primordial encounter. But in doing so, he crossed an invisible borderline."[4]

In *Grizzly Man*, Sven Haakanson, the indigenous curator of Kodiak's Alutiiq Museum, specifically talks about the crossing of a boundary by Treadwell: "He tried to be a bear, to act like a bear and for us on the island you don't do that. [...] If I look at him from my culture, Timothy Treadwell crossed a boundary that we have lived with for 7.000 years; it's an unspoken, an unknown boundary but when we know we've crossed it, we pay the price."[5] Drenthen takes Haakanson's condemnation of Treadwell's border-crossing as a statement that the distance between humans and grizzlies is real and the gap cannot be crossed. For the bear represents something sacred and therefore should not be touched. In our interactions with the wild, some things are taboo.

> In the native view, a taboo regulates the relation with bears and orders not to cross the borderline between their world and ours. Bears and humans should keep distance from one another, because the gap between both worlds is not merely factual but also a symbolic. On the other side of the gap exists an alien, sacred world of its own, inaccessible to humans, but with its own reason. (Drenthen, 2009, p. 17)

In Drenthen's understanding, Alutiiq culture does not need a meaning of wildness as a sphere *beyond* culture, because, in his view, its cultural concept of the sacred already provides a means of articulating the

dimension that transcends the confinements of the human world. To him, a characteristic of non-indigenous postmodern longing for the wild is that such taboos are not acknowledged; moreover: taboos are considered as arbitrary social regulations, constructions. Post-modern subjects long for encounters with wildness beyond or without cultural mediation. The trouble with wildness, however, is that its moral meaning can only be articulated through such appropriations: without interpretation through culture, says Drenthen, wildness as such will never be a meaningful home" (*Ibid*., p. 19): today's wilderness lover's simply cannot commit themselves to a "culture of nature." To that I would add that people in post-traditional societies also lack the cultural frame of reference, the language and other context markers,[6] which would enable them to make sense of experiences in the wild. Or, as Conesa-Sevilla put it, there is indeed an almost incommensurable gap between the modern (urban) and the hunter-gatherer mind, and even the most ecopsychologically well-intended intimations of Nature oftentimes fail to close that divide (2008, p. 138).

At this point we can look at some of the parallels and points of differences between the accounts of the "actions" of Beuys and Treadwell. A striking similarity is their shared fascination with Nature, especially animals, which manifested itself already at young age. Both developed their own particular forms of *sha-mania*,[7] exploring the frontier dividing human and more-than-human. Beuys did so as a (performance) artist. Though radically engaging with for example the coyote, his avant-gardist, modernist excursions into the *Umwelt* of the Other left him always an outlet to achieve a form of closure and to establish a safe return to regular, day-to-day life. Moreover, according to Steve Baker in the book *Representing Animals* (2002), it has become increasingly apparent over the years that this instance of artist and animal coming closer together as living beings, caught up in each other's affairs, was in fact contrived. Whereas Beuys thought of the performance as "an ecology," critic Andrea Phillips suggests that the artist's position in relation to the animal "is more cruelly focused than that, lying somewhere between ringmaster and slave to the wild coyote with whom he performs" (Phillips, quoted in Baker, 2002, p. 69).

Timothy Treadwell, on the other hand, never even proclaimed to be an artist (though, again, it can be argued that his almost obsessive videotaping of staged performances of talking about and interacting with bears and foxes has artistic undertones). His "shamanistic journeys" into the life-world of the bears alternated with periods of more routine-

like, conventional life in California. Neither in his case was there – or so it seems to me – an intention of *de facto* "crossing over," leaving the mundane world of humans behind. (Here I don't side with the views of some commentators that suggest that the fact that he got devoured by a bear actually was the radical fulfilment of his desire to be one with the bears.) For thirteen summers in a row he was wholly capable to "shape shift" from a self-proclaimed fully accepted wild animal to a mundane life among other members of *homo sapiens* in the "lower 48."

The Dionysian and the Apollonian

Having reached this point I want to analyze the phenomenon of seeking and crossing the threshold that separates human from the non-human along the distinction between Apollonian versus Dionysian sensibilities in cultural activity, as first articulated by Friedrich Nietzsche in his *Birth of Tragedy*. I take such immersions into the wild as expressions of an unrestrained Dionysian "unselfing." Dionysos, and the Dionysian principle, seek unison with the eternal stream of life, in a lustful and yet terrifying return to Nature. It constitutes a force that both creates and destroys. Only art – and then especially music – can bring about this reconciliation with the stream of life, and not any rational (Apollonian) understanding or theory.

Returning to the original question with which I set out at the beginning of in this paper: is there a point of no return when seeking deep immersion in Nature through art, and if so, where is it located and what can one do to avert or mitigate possible risks? Eco-psychologist Theodore Roszak (1981) made an interesting observation in this regard. "It may be the bad habit of creative talents," he stated, "to invest themselves in pathological extremes that yield remarkable insights but no durable way of life for those who cannot translate their psychic wounds into significant art or thought." This act of "translation" may involve embedding and contextualizing the Dionysian experiences in the more mundane world of Apollo – in static patterns of structure, regularity, and reason.

The question can be taken up on the level of the individual practicing artist and on the level of the teacher/art facilitator working with a group of students who are encouraged to allow themselves to open up to a more radical appreciation of Nature, both in an affective (feeling) and sensuous (perceiving) way.

The question seems relevant, because art making, as said before, often entails interrogating and investigating the boundaries of the commonly known world. On a fundamental level, it involves going into new territory. But there is a big difference between the "uncharted terrain" that may manifest itself in the confinements of an art class or artist's studio and the unknown world that could reveal itself in wild Nature. In the former case, one may speak of entering an inner world or wilderness; a meeting of what Jung called "the shadow": those parts of consciousness that normally don't meet our awareness. In "the big outside" however, the "coming forth" of Others may set the parameters for the encounter with the unknown. It may also be that the new terrain causes a sense of unfamiliarity which triggers encounters with aspects of the shadow that would not present themselves within the confinements of walled space.

A key prerequisite seems to be that the Dionysian experience is somehow embedded in a cultural context which can provide guidance, and also helps articulate and give meaning to the experiences one undergoes. In a sense, this is paradoxical, as Dionysian in effect means loosing control, letting go.

Let's return for a moment to the observation of Sven Haakanson, the indigenous curator of Kodiak's Alutiiq Museum. His point was that indigenous people respect the bear in its otherness; they acknowledge the boundary. The people who do communicate with "bear" are the medicine people or shamans. But here the interaction is highly regulated and codified; the shaman, in his journey to the upper or under world acts along a protocol which provides for – in most cases it seems – a safe return to the everyday (Apollonian) world.

In his article "Beyond control and rationality," David Wong (2007) makes the point that powerful educative experiences can neither be fully explained nor evoked if learners exercise only logical reasoning and self-control. For transformative and compelling experiences require also the non-rational, receptive process of "undergoing." According to Wong, relatively little attention has been given to the role of automatic, non-conscious processes in situations where significant learning is occurring (p. 198). Leaning on Dewey, Wong asserts that the degree to which any activity is aesthetic and educative is related to the degree to which active doing and receptive undergoing are joined in perception (p. 203). The receptive undergoing involves, according to Dewey, an element of suffering in the sense that one is "acted upon by the world, often against our own will" (Wong, 2007, p. 204). It is a necessary condition, in Dewey's

reasoning, for only thus do we take in what preceded (Dewey, 1934, p.42). Compelling experiences are constituted by more than just our intentional actions. Only by fully undergoing the experience, surrendering to this suffering, do we truly learn:

> Perception is an act of the going-out of energy in order to receive, not a withholding of energy. To steep ourselves in a subject-matter we have first to plunge into it. When we are only passive to a scene, it overwhelms us and, for lack of answering activity, we do not perceive that which bears us down. We must summon energy and pitch it at a responsive key in order to take in. (Dewey, 1934, pp. 59-60)

Wong goes on to try to map which conditions need to be met in order to facilitate deep engagement. Thereby he tries to move beyond the constructivist teaching approach in which, in his view, the cognitive/ rational perspective is dominant. Therefore he wants to add an aesthetic perspective. Here, the learning process is not only about giving students control and engaging their rational thinking, but also about engaging the imagination, stimulating spontaneity and surprise and "being acted upon" (Wong, 2007, p. 210).

In the context of this paper, however, one may say that allowing oneself to be acted upon by wild Others, and letting one's self solely be guided by the blind, passionate energy of Dionysus, seems risky at best, but potentially lethal in the cases like interactions with Alaskan brown bears. In the case of Treadwell, it is hard to deny that in his transgression in the more-than-human world, he in effect went beyond a point of no return. It is telling that he deliberately refrained from carrying or use any protective devices against the bears, even at a moment in time when there were extraordinary ecological pressures (too many bears competing for a limited amount of food resources), as was the case in the late summer that he and his girlfriend got attacked and killed. It goes without saying that no responsible educator would intentionally put a group of learners in harm's way amidst a wild environment where there are risks of attacks, or other foreseeable physical hardships such as exposure to extreme weather conditions, hunger or thirst.

Sometimes, however, the line between proper and improper conduct is not so easily drawn, for example in cases where one would take groups along into semi-wild areas, or in situations in which the participants are stimulated to relinquish some of their rational (Apollonian) control

to allow for new and deep experiences. They could for example be encouraged, for a given period, to be completely on their own in a natural environment and such an experience could be a highly rewarding learning practice, even more so if it would involve making a work of art at such a location.

Therefore, it is instructive to turn once more to Dewey and his views on "art as experience." Dewey would insist that the complete human experience is always the unity of surrender and receptivity to the unknown (the Dionysian) and "acting upon" through reason (the Apollonian). With Wong (2007, p. 195), I would hold that in education it is due time to pay more attention to non-rational and "opposite of control" qualities in aesthetic experiences; experiences which, in the context of this paper's theme, are both receptively undergone and rationally acted out in the natural environment. Just as Alutiiq culture provides the members of this indigenous people with a meaningful context for coming to terms with "Otherness" of "bear," so the art-in-nature teacher/facilitator must make a sound assessment of potential risks and seek to embed his or her "Dionysian"-infused art activities within an "Apollonian" frame of reference. When encouraging the participants to stretch the boundaries of the known and to undergo compelling experiences in Nature, these safeguards can turn out to be of life importance.

Notes

1. For a thorough critique on this approach to learning, see for example Jonassen, 1991.
2. Dewey succinctly summarizes his view as follows: "Only by wrestling with the conditions of the problem at hand, seeking and finding his own solution (not in isolation but in correspondence with the teacher and other pupils) does one learn" (Dewey, 2007, p. 121).
3. It can be argued that there are similarities here to approaches in expressive arts therapy, and I my view arts-based environmental education practices may indeed have therapeutic effects but in the context of this paper these are not my primary focus.
4. Charlie Russell (2006), who has studied bears for over 42 years, has this to say about Herzog's reference to Treadwell crossing a line: "Even with his city-kid background, I found myself mesmerized by what [Treadwell] could do with animals. Most people now see him only the way Herzog skillfully wanted his audience to see him; as an idiot who continually "crossed nature's

line," what ever that means. Perhaps, in his mind, nature's line is something behind which bears and other nasty things reside who will inevitably kill you if you go there without a gun."

5. Regarding this element in the film, Brinks rightfully criticizes Herzog for failing to investigate the role or meaning of myths of human-animal metamorphoses or shamanistic practices within native cultures (Brinks, 2008, p. 316).
6. An organism responds differently to the same kind of stimulus in different contexts. In human life, signals exist, the function of which is to classify contexts. It is this source of information that is called a 'context marker'. (For a discussion of context markers see Bateson, 1972, pp. 289-291.)
7. The term is used by Kuper (1997, p. 197) in an article on abstract expressionist painter Jackson Pollock and his artist contemporaries in the 1940s.

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