

Choreographies of Unruliness

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Quote as: Bartsch, Jan, Ködding-Zurmühlen, Oleg, Langbein, Atidh Jonas and Margherita Tess (2023). Choreographies of Unruliness. <https://umweltethnologie.com/2023/01/02/choreographies-of-unruliness/> (Jan 2, 2023).

Margherita Tess, Jan Bartsch (JB), Oleg Ködding-Zurmühlen (OKZ) and Atidh Jonas Langbein (JL), together with Cornelia Ertl as member of the organizing team, explored the Naturpark Südgelände, a former marshalling yard which fell out of use after WWII. Trees, shrubs and herbs started to grow in wide areas of the yard. Facing its reconstruction in the late 80s, civic groups campaigned for the preservation of the area, resulting in the area being converted into the Naturpark Südgelände – natural park Südgelände. Coming from different disciplines - sociology, cultural geography, anthropology and landscape design – we walk the walkways of the park in conversation about our experiences, observations and thoughts. Through this encounter, a transdisciplinary space was formed in which we could all let different "arts of noticing" interact with each other (Tsing, 2015, p. 17). Our background provided us with a variety of methodological approaches (participant observation, drawing, sketching, associative exchange of ideas), which are reflected in our small description of this "snooping in" into a field of the unruly.

Commandos

OKZ: A lifeless machine sucks a symbolical Euro into its belly and we pass a stiff entry door into Naturpark Südgelände in Berlin. The slogan 'Die Kunst ist der nächste Nachbar der Wildnis' - Art is the closest neighbor of wilderness - greets from a warm yellow wall and behind we assume to find one of Berlins famous "Brachen": a post-industrial ruin comprised of old train tracks overgrown by a forest and a manufacturing site turned into art space.

JB: We have to go through a turnstile to get into the park. Park? Is this actually a park. Aren't we negotiating unruly places since yesterday? Isn't a park the most regulated or controlled place there is? Anyway, wait and see for now, but the turnstile somehow acts as the first indicator of a specific form of order. A gatekeeper sorts out who is empowered and who is not. Even if the price is a symbolic amount, this first hurdle somehow regulates the tone of the visit. I resist the urge to jump over.

JL: Entering the first time a public park where you are supposed to pay upon entry, I encounter a perfectly manicured, triangular lawn. Due to dry Berlin summers, lawn sprinklers wait for their time to be used in the less hot hours of the day. It's not what I expected in a 'Naturpark' – a natural park. Such formal gestures and such pointless effort to maintain the grass (green) and free from any other plants.

OKZ: First we have to leave our bikes at a bike parking lot as a "park official" wearing a vest harshly points out. We – a group of four scientists from sociology, cultural geography, anthropology and landscape design – are about to explore an "unruly site". Yet, only within the first meters we find rules to be ubiquitous. It seems that here is nothing left to chance – but isn't this exactly what an unruly site is supposed to do?

JB: I'm getting annoyed because of the widespread "Spießigkeit" (loutishness, snobbery), which is only too often found in such places. We don't even know if the person holds an official position. At the first walkway, we notice a number of signs that forbid something, some of them in a humorous way, which does not really resonate with me.

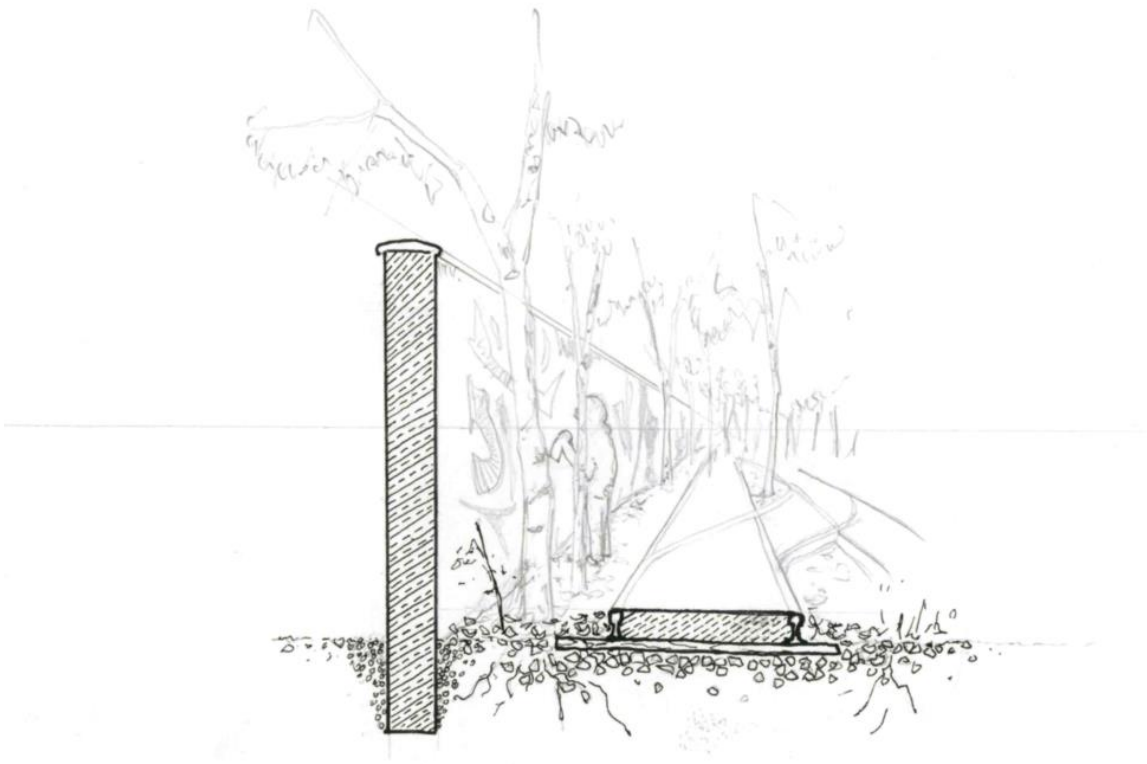


Fig. 1 and 2: Entering the park, prohibitions and instructions are ubiquitous. Signs tell you where to go and where to stay out: “Stop! Do not enter! Lions live here* –*Antlions” (Fig.1), while the design of the pathways

more or less subtly makes indications of where to walk. At least signs also tell us when it is allowed to go beyond these clear delimitations: “Spraying permitted only Mon.-Sat. before 15:00” (Fig.2).

JB: Prohibitions and instructions manifest themselves in signs. “This is prohibited...that is not possible...this is forbidden”. In a tight bureaucratic commanding tone, the possible and impossible are marked. At the same time the signposts point us in the “right” direction. The boundaries, which are determined by symbolic and physical barriers, are difficult to overcome. It would be downright morally questionable to simply leave the fortified path.. The lined paths are a warning that it would not be wise not to comply to the given directions. If we weren't talking about invisible borders and mental infrastructures all the time, I wouldn't necessarily have questioned the demarcation of the site. There will be reasons for exploring the site in this specific way, won't there?

Fences

JL: The formalism continuous but at least ruderal plants take over from the lawn. We follow a path that had been made by filling up train tracks. Lifted from the ground level you hesitate when stepping down, but it is allowed. Even spraying on the walls – at least Mondays to Saturdays, before 15:00. From in between the trees the path takes us into the open meadow. The walkway is now elevated higher, leaving no doubt that the ground is off limits due to species that are rare in Germany but invasive in other regions. A natural protected site. I imagine that the designer of the park imagined it to be some sort of island of wilderness ‘rescued’ from the ongoing process of urbanisation. Walking along this too well choreographed sequence of density and openness, of darkness and light, the natural park becomes something like a botanical garden, throwing itself into the embrace of planetary urbanisation (conf. Brenner 2017, p.17) while actually trying to evade it.

OKZ: Centimeters of grass grow through the rusty looking metal walkway that hovers on the derelict train tracks for minimum human impact. Touching the more-than-human world appears not to be allowed even for a minimum of infrastructure nowadays, yet it had been even violently touched for industrial purposes long ago as we learn from one of many signs along the walkway telling of the history of the site. From signs explaining recent conservation efforts and the “ecosystem services” of bees and plants, we learn that only sheep are allowed to touch (or better: to eat) in order to manicure the unruly growth of grass. Animal and plant life in this protected area of the Naturpark Südgelände can only thrive in its alleged unruliness once the human visitors are made ruly. I can feel this process creeping into my body, directing my gaze only up into canopies or towards lookouts built for the ruled gaze to assure itself of the neat unruliness of desired growth and abundance. Looking out into “the green world” from the rusty metal outpost, as a visitor called it, we inherit the colonizers’ gaze. Like from a surveillance tower we look onto the domesticated nature, rarely laying down in the grass with our bellies touching ground and watching the creepiness of insects acting out their cultural geographies.

JB: If it were allowed to enter the meadows, it could happen that the habitats of the different species would not be respected. But will they in the form of an enclosure? Questions arise regarding accessibility, appreciation, and preservation. We see a contradiction or rather a tension between the desire for control and the unruly. But who is controlling and who is being unruly? It always comes back to me wanting to play around. Possibly an urge to disobey in the clearly structured grids of this urban museum. The reduction of the experience to the visual, and perhaps to the auditive, displeases me. I want to climb, dig, lie down, run, explore in an intuitive, maybe bodily way. Being able to experience the place only in a certain way also suggests a specific audience which is desirable. The question is also who is actually the audience here and whether we ourselves are not perceived in a specific way. Perhaps by all the other-than-human actors. Are we intruders or caregivers, threat or welcome guest? What role do we play in this more-than-human performance? Are we just being observed, registered, analyzed and evaluated by the multitude of living beings in the field? Who exactly

is looking at us? The plants, the animals, the bacteria, the fungi, and if they are looking at us, how will we ever know?





Fig. 3 and 4: The paths in the meadow area: slightly elevated steel structures under which the grass can grow with all its inhabitants. The entire site is crisscrossed by these paths. Through the elevation you can see what is happening down there. A way not to disturb the different forms of life? Or perhaps a symbol of the inscribed hierarchy?

JB: We don't want an ant to look down on us from the tower of our flesh and yet we are constantly watched by chirping birds hiding from our gaze in the canopies. As Barad once made clear, "the point is that the very practices of differentiating the "human" from the "nonhuman," the "animate" from the "inanimate," and the "cultural" from the "natural" produce crucial materializing effects" (Barad, 2011, p. 124). And here I am walking upright on a rusty materializing effect through which the unruliness of the grass grows. I, myself, feel ruled by this effect to the degree that it materializes in my directed gaze, my erect body. I can feel the energy effectively leaving my body, as I am deprived from interacting, from getting to know what surrounds me in my own way. I am bored. But then, as soon as we have left the protected part of the Naturpark Südgelände and entered the open-air art exhibition reviving the derelict manufacturing complex, I remember the colorful sticky dots that I picked from the workshop tool box. They came back into my mind while I stared at black coal spread out in front of me, an artistic means of reminding us of the park's past. I pull out a blue dot sticking it to the piece of coal. Then a green, a yellow and a red one. I take a photograph and repeat this procedure with a neatly cut quadrant of green grass I presume to be the other part of the art piece. This time, I have a hard time sticking the dots. The grass surface appears to have an unruly materiality in its relation to the sticky dots. Finally, I manage to stick them to the grass, yet not in a way that is aligned with my aesthetic expectations. I take a photograph and leave.

Later that day, in discussions with the participants of the workshop on what an "unruly site" is supposed to be or do, I keep thinking of Karen Barad's concept of intra-action emphasizing that relations between subjects exist prior to their boundaries. Relations actively shape a "Brache" into being. Unruly is not the site but rather its relational becoming. Once I brought the sticky dots into relation with the grass, their boundaries and "unruliness" formed. In the Q&A after his keynote, Matthew Gandy mentioned an aspect that had summed it up for me: Against the background of gentrification sprouting along well managed parks like Naturpark Südgelände that invite mostly an old white middle class aligning with their rules like the prohibition of

barbecues, what needs to be protected is not the unruly site itself but the neighborhoods in which unruly sites flourish. It's about recognizing intra-active human-nature relationality, once again

Literature:

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Drawings by Athid Jonas Langbein; Photographs by Jan Bartsch.