

Wild Life And Living Wild

By Kalle Brolin

The work *Wild Life* by Claudia Del Fierro was produced during a residency at IASPIS in Stockholm, the capital of Sweden. Being a look at the lives of some outsiders - literal outsiders in this case, since they are all living outdoors in the forest - the work can be seen both as a conceptual and as a personal piece. It is also a play with methods and formats of art making and exhibiting.

When it was first exhibited, at Gallery Box in Gothenburg, it consisted of three filmed interviews, a collection of diary-like drawings made by one of the interviewees, and a projection of a staged play in which two little girls acted out lines found in the interviews as a disjointed dialogue.

The artist-run gallery, a non-profit small-scale institution, had been given the air of an anthropological museum - the wall behind the collected drawings was painted over with a background colour, and a glassed-over table held some further images, in a manner similar to the display-cases found in museums. Some of the images were sketches of observations made by Claudia during her visits to the forest of the outsiders. There was also a copy of the book "The Wilds of Patagonia, 1907" written by Swedish botanist Carl Skottsberg, included as a reference point.

In the three interviews, Claudia records the stories of Jennie, a woman suffering from hypersensitivity to electricity who finds it impossible to live in a city, where she would be surrounded by power lines and force fields; of David, a man who after a period of what sounds like almost catatonic soul-searching decided to make a life for himself in the woods, where he would be more in tune with both his own spirit and that of the world; and finally the stories of two girls, Sara and Emma, who moved out into the woods for similar ideological reasons, in opposition to modern lifestyles. They are all living in the Nacka reservation, an ecological reserve next to a

suburb of Stockholm, which is often visited by people out for a weekend walk with their dog or their children. Both the visitors to the reservation and the outsiders living there would probably agree on access to nature as being part of a quality life. The Swedish state has even instigated a right of commons, which states that everyone should have the right to enter nature areas even if these would happen to be private property. The right of commons also allows you to raise a tent or temporary shelter in these areas for one night, though you are not allowed to stay longer than that.

Claudia Del Fierro: - I think my interest in the Nacka camp was more of a conceptual choice in the beginning. I was concerned with the idea of "the other", and in a way this cultural other that they embodied was a consequence of their individual journeys into the self (as the Jungian self/other dichotomy). So it seemed like there were more layers to their problem and so, in theory, I could try to go both into the community issues and the individual stories. But I think what made it more compelling to me was the fact that I felt very much an outsider in the Swedish society while I was staying in Stockholm, more so than I have in other foreign places, I felt a kind of resistance to the environment, so it made sense for me in personal terms to explore their reasons for rejecting mainstream Swedish life.

I would propose two ways of reading, or interpreting, the exhibition. One starts from the method used in the work, treating it as a conceptual piece. The other starts from the content, the people and their stories, treating it as an existential piece. These are only two out of many possible interpretations.

Let's start with the conceptual reading of *Wild Life*. The working method seems to echo that of a research project: documenting and gathering materials, at first open-ended but eventually developing a telos; editing and processing; finally, displaying both the collected documents (the filmed interviews) and the result of the edit (the staged play) seems to indicate the importance of the process. The area of scholarly research nearest to this project would seem to be some

version of anthropology, basically, letting some people tell us about their lives and their relations to the society they live in.

Claudia Del Fierro: - Acquisition of cultural objects, legal or not, documentation of foreign subjects, to me is not very different from how an artist is working today in an intercultural context. There is some negotiation going on, but also some violation of integrity, some use and re-interpretation of stories, images and even people.

A similarity between an artwork and, let's say, an anthropological display, could be that they both deal with representation. Basically, every language invented is always less than the totality of reality, slightly inadequate when it comes to describing existence. Some aspect is always left out, and so it becomes necessary to invent ever-new languages, signs, symbols and images, in short: representations, to embrace more and more aspects of life. But art is a different language than anthropology, even though there are likenesses, in that it deals more freely with metaphor. In art, you don't have to have a literal connection between the metaphor and what it stands for; it just has to feel real enough. Let's say by way of an easy example, that in a poem I can feel blue, and most people will know what that means, but there is no scientific way to measure the similarity between the colour and how I feel, and no units. The point is, finally, that something can be gained by marrying art to anthropology, if we accept art as the specialist area for innovative metaphors.

What happens when you take part of a work of fiction, is that you agree to a contract set up between audience and artist - I pretend to enter the head of another person, and try to look out through that person's eyes, and even though it's only imagination, and utterly impossible, and academically discredited, the feeling is still real. I have not learned what it is like to be Jennie after watching a six minute recorded interview with her, she hasn't been represented to the fullness of her being in this film - but what I have done, is to see the world as someone other than myself for a short

while, even though this other does not actually exist.

Claudia Del Fierro: - Maybe it's useful to know that I never along the process thought about how the works will be or what they will look like, it wasn't an issue for me. I just started making decisions at some point as a way of questioning the material and its content. So the workshop with the girls was a way of taking this material a step further, out of its context, to see what happened. I scripted out many lines from the video interviews that would be paradoxical grouped together, as questions, as a way of stretching this material out.

This bounces back. Through the inadequacies of representation, and opening up to fiction, we also realise that other languages are to some extent fictionalised - history is indeed written, geography is indeed drawn, and behind it all there is some dominant ideology that stands to gain from a specific interpretation. Mock-anthropology in art, through the works of artists like for example Renee Green, Christian Phillip Müller, Fred Wilson, or Juan Downey, often serves as critique of some dominant worldview, some representational hegemony. It is done through satire, slightly exaggeratedly repeating old mistakes in order to make them visible; it is done through subtle re-arrangements of existing museum collections, letting the faults of old research methods throw light on the practices of today through contextual comparison; and it is done through turning the tables, through mirroring, by for example making an object of study out of the western scientist and using his own methods against himself, in order to reveal a power-relation.

Claudia Del Fierro: - In 2006 I was working for museums and as a photographer for an archaeology project with cultural remains in the south of Chile. I also travelled to Sweden where I had learned there were some objects brought by Carl Skottsberg from his trip to Patagonia early in the 20:th century. I went to the Ethnographical Museum in Stockholm where I asked to see a wooden boat that was found in the south of Chile in 1904 and had been kept in Stockholm all this time. I learned there

was another boat in the Museum of World Cultures in Gothenburg. So I went to Gothenburg and met with the conservator of the museum and he showed me the second boat and also some photographs from that expedition. The photographs contained humans, natives of the south of Chile using the boats, walking around, standing around, etc. I found it sad, and fascinating. At the time the subject of giving back objects to native Americans was an issue in the museum world, so it got me thinking about the trip the boats had made, how they had been acquired, who they belong to and so on. When I was walking out of the storage at the Museum of World Cultures I was introduced to the conservator who was working on the wooden boat and when she learned I was from Chile, she asked if I could give her my opinion on how the boat should be assembled. I had no idea, of course.

This story was going on in my head for some time. I have not really a specific academic interest in the conservation practice or in the archaeological aspects, but on the politics of collecting, exploring and cross-border projects.

A conceptual reading of Wild Life could be, then, that Claudia follows the method of Carl Skottsberg, and uses it to study the savages living in the forests of his own native Sweden. The work is complete once she returns to Chile with her documentation of these savages, and displays it in a Chilean 'museum'.

An existentialist reading of Wild Life would start with someone looking for the literal wild way of life. It's a question for the romantic poets of the 1800's and for the mid-careerists of today alike - how can we have a more intense life, a life more true, more connected, more focused on what is really important? For the people interviewed in Wild Life and for the characters played by the little girls talking in the video Wildlife, it starts off with a negation: we know what we do not want; we have to discover what we want.

David speaks of how he for the first time found lust in his life, how up until then he had

only done the things that he had to do, motivated by guilt and obligation. Emma says 'I don't have any ready forms of how I should live and of how things should be.' Sara says 'I know some things. I know that I want to grow, and to live in the woods.' For Jennie it's not even a question of choosing a lifestyle, it's rather a physical necessity. But she says she has come to like the forest, and has an interest in this way of life. It's a starting point.

The outsider is the prototype existentialist human. Willingly taking yourself out of the game, adopting a position and perspective from which to look back upon the context of your earlier self, allows for a new vision, new metaphors. Being disconnected from old patterns could help you open up to other possibilities. And where would these statements have been tried and tested? What were the results? A girl in the video Wildlife says 'We need to have an image, some fantasy of how this life could be'.

After the Second World War, philosophy departments in Swedish universities were dominated by analytical philosophy, a turn from the pre-war German to the post-war English-American preferences. Existentialism, being seen as continental, was rejected from philosophy departments and instead dubbed literature. Marxist as well as catholic thinkers inspired by Saint Thomas Aquinas were also kept out. This was in parallel to the political hegemony, wherein the socialdemocratic construction of the People's Home changed from an (pre-war) organic, German-friendly, and racist concept, to a (post-war) bureaucratic, Anglophile welfarestate. The Social democratic party ruled uninterrupted for fifty years between 1932 and 1973, and were engineering a utopia, which would involve all aspects of society - birth control, child-rearing, schooling, housekeeping, health and sports, workplaces, political participation, culture, sexuality, etcetera - attempting to turn Sweden into one of the most modern countries in the world. Modernism was the name for this optimistic transformation from a small-minded, dirty and sickly, agrarian people (one of the poorest in Europe during the 1800's) into the People's Home. Culture, including art,

played the role of refining the soul of the workers, raising them above their stature in life, and was organized in and distributed through associations. Public libraries, reading circles, travelling theatre groups, were all part of a decentralisation and democratization of culture. Life was mapped out as working hours, as spare time where you partake of mass culture, and as spare time when you practice sports and spend time in nature - people who spent time alone, creating art, music, poetry etc. outside of the collectivist structure, were people who belonged in the past, throwbacks. Forests, parks and gardens were shaped according to ideals of light, openness, and fresh air. We still have families visiting the Nacka Reservation during the weekends, for reasons of health and connectivity, feeling that it's important for their children to have this experience. This is also the reason and ideology behind the instigation of the right of commons.

Claudia Del Fierro: - But I think what made it more compelling to me was the fact that I felt very much an outsider in the Swedish society while I was staying in Stockholm, more so than I have in other foreign places, I felt a kind of resistance to the environment, so it made sense for me in personal terms to explore their reasons for rejecting mainstream Swedish life.

Art was seen mostly as other, something private in a society that still is increasingly public, something dark in a society, which is increasingly light and transparent. A certain type of outsider, unusually common in the Nordic countries, is the naivist artist. Caricatured as a lonely man with wild eyes and a big beard, living in a small house in the forest, unschooled, painting scenes from his daily life and his dreams, with highly decorative and ornamental imagery (as opposed to the clean modernist ideal) - provincial, childlike, individualist, fantasist, mad genius-type.

When accord and agreement upon language, meaning and interpretation is necessary in order to build the ideal society, then metaphor and visionary language

becomes counterproductive - this is so in both a social democratic society as well as a neoliberal capitalist one. Though the outsider remains the same, today the surrounding context has changed, and gives us a new reading of his role. In a neoliberal society, true freedom, our goal and promise, is always an other, a fantasy out of reach, and can only be approximated through consumption. All being individualist, with collectivism cleaned out, there follows a feeling of disconnection. The naivist, the outsider, now serves us as projection screen, through seemingly having given up on material comfort in order to pursue his true dream, which could be a connection to creativity, and a connection to nature, and a private darkness. At the moment, there has even been much critical acclaim for a contemporary version of naivist art - equally childlike, individualist, and fantasist, but also reactionary due to its' ascribing outer phenomena to inner, personal origins rather than to societal structures.

To return again to representation, we could say that in a society undergoing modernization, a rationalist, social democratic, and utopian collective project like post-war Sweden, the wild life of the outsider stands for a life less evolved, less civilized, wild meaning closer to an animal existence. In a neoliberal capitalist society like post-millennium Sweden, the wild life of the outsider stands for a life more free from constrictions, closer to an idealized natural state, and more connected to creativity, an unarticulated fantasy. Whereas in an existentialist reading, the outsider figure is an evolutionary agent, who opens up potentialities (whether medical, spiritual or idealist) through negation of a life deemed lacking or untrue, through asking questions and experimenting, and eventually through affirmation of a new way of life. For a contemporary art project, like Claudia Del Fierro's Wild Life, the emphasis lies on asking questions and experimenting, leaving the end open and conclusions up to the viewer. In an existentialist reading, art is the laboratory of life.