

The Mad Run | Beny Wagner's *Like the deserts miss the rain* @ KRIEG, Hasselt

The new show by Beny Wagner offers an experience of looking through a steamy window to discover the mirror on the other side.

The green, detached room, a space suspended both architecturally and conceptually, oscillates between a pristine jungle and the virtual space of video editing software. This is exactly a thread intertwining the whole exhibition, blurring the border between natural and virtual environments, which we attempt to simultaneously colonise. *Like the deserts miss the rain* begins at “the intersection between ecology and media technology” (Wagner, 2017). It positions humans as social animals (with the emphasis placed on the ‘social’ aspect), heavily affected by the recent technological and, consequently, cultural advancements. The centre of interest here are borderline states and phenomena such as lust, aggression, madness, fear or death and the question of how their image has been re-shaped by new media.

The concept of the exhibition is built upon the oxymoronic metaphor of reconciling desert and rain, the two lovers who have never known each other and the symbol of unimaginable longing. It is materialised in the form of an installation, constituting the core of the exhibition. We find ourselves surrounded by the imposing green screens (used traditionally in the postproduction process to remove the background), bearing potential of becoming anything we ever wanted. However, instead of an elusive projection, the walls are covered with raindrops. Each of them carries a reflection of limitless dunes – what we see is the desert through the eyes of rain. This utopian ecosystem is not the only thing to see – a closer look reveals a few pop culture icons, famous public figures and works of art mirrored in water surface. Is it then good old nostalgia that underpins the exhibition? It seems like it can be much more – the acute yearning for an undefined loss.



Mirroring is a recurring and meaningful gesture within the exhibition. Wagner uses raindrops as figurative mirrors, while actual mirrors are deployed as a surface for prints in his diptych *Beginnings*. The choice of medium is here symptomatic, as it enables viewers to literally see their reflection in the work. Additionally, the reception of the work is conditioned by the viewing angle, what encourages the movement within the exhibition space. The title *Beginnings* may be read as a reference to the origin of mankind or to something primordial and untamed. The paired images represent a naked man dashing through a forest on all fours. His relationship with the nature seems to be pure and authentic, even if berserk. Those sublime associations may diminish once we realise that the artist made use of an actual footage of a man who, high on LSD, had spent eight hours charging through the woods, enacting a Syberian tiger. However, maybe it should not be the case and the man's mad run should be considered more authentic than the romantic visions of indigenous harmony with nature? Perhaps this man is a contemporary 'noble savage' and *Beginnings* a testimony that in the nature one can't find the 'deliberate living', so sought by Thoreau, but only a liberating madness.

As a counterpart to the natural environment, Wagner proposes the 'technological ecosystem', which is "as dense and incomprehensible as the nature it forced into submission" (Wagner, 2017). In his video, *We Are All Here*, those two conflicting systems coincide resulting in the psychedelic ride through the array of bokeh landscapes, found footage and perplexing visual effects. The recurring protagonist of the video is the archetype of a hunter, who at first attempts to blend in with the environment, only to reconcile with, or rather give in to, the nature in the simple gesture of reclining in the high grass. The video bombards us with the overload of informational and visual stimuli. It contains sequences of controversial footage found on YouTube intertwined with the seemingly soothing shots of landscape, which in fact constitute intricate layered structures. For Wagner, the phenomenon of camouflage was a starting point for the video, in which we see constant transfiguration, best embodied in the use of superimposed images which create a digital camouflage pattern. This video mirrors the complexity of the virtual depths in which we are immersed, or rather on the surface of which we are floating.

Since many aspects of life, including social bonds, labour and money have become dematerialised, it seems like our existence may become easily suspended. By simply destroying credit cards, deleting social media accounts and disposing cell phones, we may descent into a social and economic limbo. *Like the deserts miss the rain* addresses the increasingly problematic distinction between what can be called the 'natural' and 'virtual world' and resulting from it, broadly defined destabilisation.

We use technology to satisfy the needs once met through the immediate human interaction – to improve the distorted image of ourselves, to reduce our fear of social rejection and satisfy our concealed interest in the others' lives. But does this illusionary community cater to our deepest hidden longing? The green screens of Wagner's installation can become the platform for projection of all our fears, regrets and desires. What do we miss?

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