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By Merijn Oudenampsen and Jakob Proyer

Since the early days of the net, the electronic pastoral has lent itself to all sorts of dubious agendas pushed by science, the military and even libertarian tendencies. In the most recent configuration of this new media - new nature clash Merijn Oudenampsen and Jakob Proyer visited the Natural Habitat exhibition at Montevideo Amsterdam and find amidst the pixelated wilderness a difficult to swallow cocktail of Faustian bargains, hyper-modernism, and pineapple shampoo

Montevideo has dedicated this show to artists researching the changing paradigms, borders and ongoing crossovers between art, science, technology and nature. It is a show that places itself at the blurred boundaries of a 'new nature' which have emerged from technological advancements complementing, reshaping and imitating the natural. Montevideo's press material states that the works have been selected solely to transfer 'positive ideas for a new nature' by focussing on the way 'nature and technology complement each other'. Having experienced the exhibition, one might ask why more critical works referring to scientific and technological advancements were ignored in the curatorial selection process. Is it the case that contemporary artists neglect widespread discussion on topics such as genetic modification or environmental degradation? The work of groups like the Critical Art Ensemble would suggest otherwise. Is it then instead that we are just badly in need of some good news?

Geomania by Steina Vasulka

Image: Steina Vasulka, *Geomania*, 1987

On a big video screen in one of the exhibition rooms, two tiny bots appear in an autumn golden woodland surrounding. A smooth voice reminiscent of a Discovery Channel wildlife documentary narrates the action taking place. The bots seem to be playing for some time, checking each other out and happily darting around; the commentator describes dryly an ongoing mating ritual. Finally, the male bot lures the female under a particularly big leaf and fornication ensues; electric blue fills the screen as sparks spring from bot to bot. These scenes are part of a series of video shorts related to the project *Next Nature*, comprising of the blog and a design publication by Koert van Mensvoort and Mieke Gerritzen. The message they intend to communicate about our understanding of nature and what is natural is elaborated further by a quote on one of the walls of the exhibition room:Â

There may even come a moment that our connection with an industrially manufactured coke bottle may be richer and more mythical than our relation with a genetically analysed and manipulated white rabbit in the woods.

The comparison between a coke bottle and a rabbit is borrowed from *The End of Nature*, (1989) by New York writer Bill McKibben, who describes a thought train set in motion by his chance encounter with a huge white rabbit in the woods. What if the rabbit were genetically modified? Would it be any more natural than a mere coke bottle? While McKibben's philosophising about a future with genetically modified rabbits was deeply cynical - he simply abhors the loss of a spontaneous natural surrounding and is equally negative about the rise of a technological management of nature - Mensvoort and Gerritzen harbour no such negative feelings for a new nature. In the essay, *Exploring Next Nature*, [http://www.nextnature.net/research/?page_id=244] Mensvoort describes a city girl out on a walk with her father. The girl, who happens to wash her hair with pineapple shampoo, exclaims while walking through the forests: 'Daddy, the woods smell of shampoo!'. Mensvoort soberly

concludes that such a young girl would surely perform better at discriminating corporate logos than tree or bird species.

According to the *Next Nature* project, arguably the discursive backbone of the exhibition, notions of nature and culture seem to be trading places. The natural environment is being incrementally controlled by man made technologies and thus becomes a cultural category. Products of culture, on the other hand, have become so complex and prolific that they tend to outgrow us and become autonomous. According to the project's authors, the term 'next nature' serves to identify our new hybrid natural surrounding.

Tak

Image: Merijn Bolink, *Untitled (Tak)*

Of course the positive appraisal of the endless possibilities of a new nature might have some relation to the changing position of the designer in this new habitat, (both Mensvoort and Gerritzen are employed at the design department of the Sandberg Institute). When Mensvoort describes a biotope of corporate logos as a city girl's proper natural surrounding, then what is the designer, but a god-like creature that suddenly produces 'nature'? Design in this new natural habitat is not just limited to corporate logos. With the advent of genomics and biotechnology, we can become our own gods, we read in one of the articles on *Next Nature's* website. Although there are also works that should be appreciated on a more aesthetic level, this provocative hyper modernism is a dominant presence in the exhibition. Due to the absence of more critical contributions, it pretty much defines the atmosphere.

Entering the scenic canal house where the Montevideo is housed, the first view of the exhibition is taken up by a strange branch hanging opposite the entrance with a very fitting title: *Tak* (Dutch for 'branch'). At first view it seems to be a pretty normal *tak*, but then one's eye is attracted to a part of the branch that actually has more in common with a Mondriaan painting. Bolink manipulated the growth process of the branch by grafting one side consecutively at right angles, and letting the natural growth process take place on the other side. The remarkable outcome is a little tree with a few branches, growing organically into all directions, with the exception of the grafted one that keeps changing its direction of growth every few centimetres by an angle of 90 degrees.

Camera Lucida by Evelina Domnitch and Dmitry Gelfand

Image: *Camera Lucida* by Evelina Domnitch and Dmitry Gelfand

The largest part of the exhibit is comprised of digital reproductions, imitations or alterations of nature, with the exception of *Reeds* by Simon Heijden and *Camera Lucida* by Evelina Domnitch and Dmitry Gelfand. *Reeds* is a neat, complicated interactive design installation; it is an assemblage of flexible plastic reeds, with LED lighting on top and a small speaker system hidden somewhere in the corners of the room. The reeds react to passers-by and apparently also to the movement of the wind outside of the building. Fluctuating lights and the wind whispering out of the unseen speakers create a weird and uncanny feeling of the techno-pastoral. The work is part of an effort by the artist to recreate a sense of nature's rhythms in our secluded indoor work living and living spaces. *Camera Lucida* is more of a public chemistry experiment. Sound waves are visualised through a bowl filled with a special mixture of fluid and gaseous substances. The phenomenon is officially called sonoluminescence, first observed in the 1930s and according to the artists still quite unknown to the general public.

sonoluminescence

Image: Sonoluminescence from high intensity ultrasonic horn

At the core of the exhibition, which is also more properly *media art*, all the works the common characteristic of the use of computer technology to digitally rework nature. This may be in a relatively direct way, such as Steina Vasulka's *Geomania*, 1987, where video scenes of Iceland's rough ecologies are continuously mixed and electronically altered to produce psychedelic effects that a VJ wouldn't be unhappy with. Most of the works, however, use quite complicated programming to achieve their desired effects. The artists have tried to simulate natural reproduction mechanisms or have created their own. *Vanda, Life Support Systems* by Mateusz Herczka even tries to create a possibility of 'life after death' by facilitating the translation of a living Vanda orchid into information. Mateusz attempts to create a 'virtual organism', or, according to the text, a 'virtual personality', by making detailed measurements of the plant's voltage changes. He is inspired by specialised companies that offer 'longevity services' to clients through the rather rudimentary process of digitally storing as much of the client's information as possible for future reference by younger generations. Of course, the personality of an orchid - let alone the virtual one visualised on a screen - is a thing more difficult to relate to than the average grandfather. But the ambitions of the artist stretch beyond mapping the personalities of vegetation: 'The next milestone is a scan of the [human] brain to directly create a virtual personality, which exists in the virtual domain - i.e. uploading a personality. The *Life Support Systems* project attempts to achieve this milestone, starting with an organism which has both an inspirational beauty, as well as behavioural simplicity.'

Vanda, Life Support Systems by Mateusz Herczka

Image: *Vanda, Life Support Systems* by Mateusz Herczka

Other works at the exhibition dig even deeper into the virtual after life, and focus on the possibility of creating artificial digital life through programming. Works by Boredom Research, *Ornamental Bug Garden*, 2005, and *Biomes*, 2005, show how interaction between a few digital creatures, each with a set of simple rules, can develop into unending variety. Marloes de Valk and Aymeric Mansoux's *Metabiosis*, 2006, researches how the insertion of programmed data packages into a computer network can create an on-line ecosystem that is self-reproductive. In organising principle, these works are very alike. In different ways, they all use computer code to create a digital imitation of nature's organising principles, from gravity to genetic reproduction. *Life Species II*, 1999, by Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau is described as 'an interactive artificial live environment'. It's the result of earlier interactive web projects, *Life Species I*, 1997, and *Verbarium*, 1999. On these websites (currently offline), internet users were able to send messages which were instantly translated into visual forms on screen. A custom designed editor would analyse the message's syntax and sequencing and recode those into visuals. The sequel, *Life Species II*, is accessed by visitors of the exhibition using a keyboard to enter words into the program. Each message entered produces a specific insect-like flying creature on screen with those words ingrained in its code, or 'genes'. The form and movements of the creature change depending on the complexity of the message. As a test, we tried feeding 'Ariofdkiyutre 86454' into the program, but the resulting creature still moved more fluidly and skilfully than our pronunciation would have. After thus having created several happily hovering insects, you get to feed them by typing text characters into mid air. Each creature can only consume the letters that are part of its code, for example the creature 'love' would be restricted to a diet of 'l', 'o', 'v' and 'e' whereas 'riofdkiyutre 86454' is endowed with a more omnivorous diet. The creatures will compete over text characters that are shared in their diet, those out of food will starve and perish. On the positive side, however, when a creature has eaten a sufficient amount it will mate with another creature and procreate. Its offspring will then carry the combined genetic code of the parent creatures. If any visitor would take the necessary time to keep feeding the creatures, the program would probably develop in its own unforeseen ways, a characteristic it shares with the other mentioned works. The artists mention inspiration from Chomsky's linguistics and especially the translation by the human

brain of language into visual sensations. Sommer and Mignonneau's work makes one think of discursive struggles on the internet, but it could equally be taken as an unintended, but very apt and brutal metaphor for academic life.

Life Species II

Image: Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau, *Life Species II*

Most of these works are subtle explorations of what happens when self-reproducing systems that are characteristic of the 'spontaneous nature', whose loss McKibben is mourning over, are transplanted into the digital domain. Of course compared to the real thing, in complexity these models are still very limited. Still, each of these works involves an amount of research and technical skill that transgresses the normal boundaries of artistic craftsmanship. The exhibition could therefore also be seen as an example of the current trend of artists to engage in crossovers with science and technology. At a seminar held during the exhibit, one of the speakers was Robert Zwijnenberg from the *Arts & Genomics Centre* at the University of Amsterdam. He depicts these new developments as a return to the renaissance role of the artist as a Leonardo da Vinci-like inventor, skilfully combining science and arts. However, when we assume one of the primary functions of art in its new 'renaissance' is to address the social implications and moral dilemmas relating to new scientific developments such as genomics- as Zwijnenberg states himself 'we find the Natural Habitat exhibition especially wanting.

The picture Natural Habitat paints of genetic reproduction is deceptively simple and clean. It almost makes one forget that the Human Genome project failed in unravelling the secrets of human genetics and that scientists have far from understood cellular reproduction in general. Back in their laboratories, scientists are now researching the essential role of what was sidelined before as 'trash DNA', and have to admit that it was all somewhat more complicated than their models predicted. It is the same technological optimism that has led to ongoing problems with genetically engineered crops, even though a plant's genetic makeup is more simple, genomics has never left the 'let's-see-what-happens-when-we-release-this-one-in-the-wild' phase. Artists' engagement with science in this case falls short of understanding some of the power dynamics involved, whereby the backyard of peripheral economies has been the unhappy laboratory of western life sciences companies. The hyper-modernist exaltation of technology that some of the exhibition displays should furthermore be tempered by the ongoing environmental problems that the world's digital communication infrastructure help create (see Soenke Zehle's review of *High Tech Trash* [<http://www.metamute.org/en/Environmentalism-for-Net-2.0>]). The idea that nature and technology have become an inseparable entity, as stated in the introduction text of the catalogue for *Natural Habitat*, is not entirely unproblematic. Certainly the semantic merger of technology and the natural environment, in terms such as media ecology, digital biotope or on-line ecosystem has proven to be less damaging than its real life variants.

That said, what we are left with is a clear cut opposition between the nostalgic longing of McKibben, evoking the image of nature as a paradise lost, and the almost futurist embrace of technology of the *Next Nature* project: 'we can become our own gods'. It is this same opposition that Marshall Berman talks about in his classic on modernity *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*:

Whereas 'nineteenth-century thinkers were simultaneously enthusiasts and enemies of modern life, wrestling inexhaustibly with its ambiguities and contradictions; their self ironies were a primary source of their creative power', their 'successors have lurched far more toward rigid polarities and flat totalizations. Modernity is either embraced with a blind and uncritical enthusiasm, or else condemned with a neo-Olympian remoteness and contempt. [...] Open visions of modern life have been supplanted by closed ones.' (Berman 1989 p24)

Berman goes on to depict Goethe's *Faust* as one of the archetypal modern stories, a tale of man's attempt at escaping from oppressive traditional bounds and creating the world anew. In the second part of the play, Faust transforms himself into a developer, 'isn't it about time for mankind to assert itself against nature's tyrannical arrogance?', he asks. With the help of his sidekick Mephisto, he sets out on an ambitious construction plan, which in the end can only be fulfilled by exacting a heavy toll of human sacrifice. This picture of development as a Faustian bargain is, according to Berman, what distinguishes earlier ways of thinking about modernity from the present polarities. The author's approach is that only through the critical engagement with modernity and technology can we hope to use some of their capacities for the attainment of a socially and environmentally just society. While Berman tries to recapture the critical spirit of modernity through Goethe's *Faust*, the *Communist Manifesto* and the literary talents of Baudelaire, Joyce and Dostoyevsky, we would love to find some of this critical modernism in the here and now.

The Natural Habitat exhibition, Montevideo, Netherlands Media Art Institute, Amsterdam 04 November 2006 - 20 December 2006, <http://www.montevideo.nl/>

You can still find descriptions of the work online at:
http://www.montevideo.nl/en/agenda/detail_agenda.php?id=173&archie

The well maintained and resourceful weblog of Next Nature:
<http://www.nextnature.net>

For a more critical take in the art-meets-science format, see the website of the Critical Art Ensemble:
<http://www.critical-art.net/>

Berman, M. (1989) *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air. The Experience Of Modernity*. New York, Verso.