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Projekttitel: Straying as Research

Projektleitung : Katharina Swoboda

Zuordnung des Projekts: Elise-Richter-PEEK

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„Straying as Research“ is a project about straying as an artistic strategy with an emblematic patron: the stray cat. The questions posed by my project, which are answered in multimedia form, mainly with videos and texts, include:

- What and how can straying – elaborated on city stray cats and their general, symbolic, and cultural-historical genealogies – endow to non-hierarchical, feminist, and post-anthropocentric artistic perspectives in essays and film experiments?
- What “animal agencies” (McFarland and Hediger 2009) might correspond to artistic research?
- What might feline straying look like in the more-than-human realm?
- What do human and animal strays have in common?
- What can we learn about straying as a research strategy from cats?
- How does the feline ability to survive relate to my film and video practices?
- What can we learn from stray cats about film?
- How will filmmakers interpret the results gained from feline and/or more-than-human straying?
- What would a “stray film” look like, and what narrative and aesthetic qualities might emerge when realising a film through straying?

- How might straying translate to digital spaces?

All over the globe – except, presumably, Antarctica – domestic cats without owners wander the world. In which nooks and crannies, I wonder, do these cats (*Felis catus*) hide in my city? I feel connected to these beasts, living as they do in privileged low-density grounds not of their own choosing, possibly fed. The trade-off? Their neutering. I, on the contrary, gave birth to a daughter.

Culturally, stray animals<sup>1</sup> often illustrate an in-between state; they simultaneously belong to the city and do not belong to it. Not easily placed into conceptual boxes, their ambiguity is potentially viewed as “unclean.”<sup>2</sup> Without being able to definitively classify them, research on stray cats presents a vocabulary along the lines of “wildness,” or, seen from a different angle, degrees of human “socialisation.” Socialisation in cats is not a matter of solid labels but a fluid state of being, “where the different degrees of socialisation flow into each other and create many in-between areas where cats can reside.”<sup>3</sup> According to a 2008 estimate, up to 480,000 million unowned cats worldwide slide across this domestic-stray-feral continuum.<sup>4</sup>

My background in contemporary dance has given me a profound familiarity with movement. Is straying dependent on a body? Conventional walking promotes a body with some conventional ability. Straying rests on other structures, notably some sort of connection to a system or structure that is worth straying away from. Birth families potentially present such structures, where straying away preconditions one’s sanity. From my family’s perspective, I am the error, but taking the stray’s subjectivity, I am the curious researcher and seeker. The eighth-century description of *striunen*, the predecessor to the German word *streunen*, calls it a “roaming around, sniffing, curiously or suspiciously searching for something.”<sup>5</sup> Being active and curious contrasts with prevailing associations of straying – as erring, misplacement, and deviation.

According to Barbara Creed, who echoes a general sentiment, straying is a condition one is forced into; it is defined by a marginalised existence on the fringes of society.<sup>6</sup> Precarity and vulnerability are prerequisites for being called a stray. The conceptual lenses of mishap and abandonment present the glaring spotlights that blind the traces of the curious and

positively engaged among contemporary beings labelled strays. Being immersed in nature/culture (re)constitutions and (re)negotiations, I draw inspiration from homeless animals, and especially stray cats – for instance, their acknowledged ability to intelligently navigate their surroundings, as well as their connections to human culture. Let us approach strays and straying with curiosity instead of pity.

Creed herself strayed when she took the poignant phrase, “I stray in order to be” (p. 8), from the English translation of Julia Kristeva’s *Pouvoirs de l’horreur: Essai sur l’abjection* (1980), referring to it without context. In the French passage, Kristeva invokes a linguistically complex mental state of delusion: “Où je me perds pour être”<sup>7</sup>; that could be translated to “in which I lose myself in order to be” or, in the published English translation, “in which I stray in order to be.”<sup>8</sup> In Creed’s abbreviated recitation, straying develops into a condition of existence – rather than dissolving in psychological turmoil – that may or may not lead to some existential insight. In contrast, and additionally, I propose straying as a conscious action that is neither existential nor essentialist. Straying becomes a way of bringing about encounters, of exploring new territories – and being brave and feminist in the process.

Put yourself in the city. Run after your child inside it. My experience in the city transforms when my three-year-old daughter and I go about the urban landscape. Each dog of a certain size is subject to my snappy remarks, and I lift my daughter up when I do not like the canine’s expression. I am in a constant balancing act of connecting and protecting, of providing a sense of security while at the same time instructing her in self-protection. Close to our home, an automobile in a turning lane crosses a streetcar track. Drivers check the pedestrian crossing but sometimes do not take into account the sneaky streetcar that is rapidly approaching. The almost familiar sounds of cars and streetcars colliding are uniquely piercing and cringeworthy. Street crashes contain their unique sonic notes, a sound I have not found anywhere else. It is a different sound from what I know from the movies in Dolby Surround, the unique, so far unreplicated noise of real-life car crashes – machine against machine. I want to protect my child.

*Mit einer Idee schwanger gehen*<sup>9</sup> / Conceive an idea

For Kristeva the female reproductive body is abject because the transformation of pregnancy disfigures the body. But does it? Why? Did my body not do this? My body did not change all that much. I could not

fathom that a baby was curled inside my belly. When she was taken out, she could have arrived from another star. I would not have known.

Text passage from: Katharina Swoboda: "Stray Cats", Inner Landscapes, Passage #3, 2023, <https://www.projectpassage.net/issues>, pp.147-162

## References:

1 The grouping of “animals” and “humans” as broad categories is deeply flawed, because neither all animals nor all humans are equal. Lacking an adequate and easy-to-read alternative, I continue the flawed generalizations here.

2 Paul Shepard, *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human* (Washington, D.C: Island Press, 1997), 60.

3 Alley Cat Allies, “The Cat Socialization Continuum: A Guide to Interactions Between Cats and Humans,” 2020, <https://www.alleycat.org/resources/cat-socialization-continuum-guide>.

4 CAROCat, “Statistics on Cats,” accessed May 17, 2022, <https://carocat.eu/statistics-on-cats-and-dogs>.

5 DWDS, *Das Digitale Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, “Streunen,” accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.dwds.de/wb/streunen>.

6 Barbara Creed, *Stray: Human-Animal Ethics in the Anthropocene* (Sidney: Power Publications 2017).

7 Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: essai sur l'abjection* (Paris: Édition du Seuil 1980), 19.

8 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press 1982), 12.

9 Translated literally, “Go get pregnant with ideas.”