

Interview Oswald Wiener

When the Vienna Actionists urinated, masturbated, and vomited at an event titled “Art and Revolution” in Vienna University’s Lecture Hall 1 in 1968, the proceedings were accompanied by a lecture on the relationship between speech and thought by the then thirty-two-year-old Oswald Wiener. One year later his literary montage *die verbesserung von mitteleuropa, roman* (the improvement of central europe, a novel) was published. With its excursions on linguistics and cybernetics, it now reads as an astonishing foreshadowing of the Internet and virtual reality. Later, Wiener turned to the figure of the dandy, who maintains his difference from machines by cultivating a practice of self-observation. Hans-Christian Dany visited him at his home in southeast Austria to talk about the peculiar standstill of art and science in the digital age.

*Oswald Wiener was born in Vienna in 1935. With the poets H.C. Artmann, Friedrich Achleitner, Konrad Bayer and Gerhard Rühm he was part of the Wiener Gruppe in the 1950s. From 1959 to 1967 he worked as a data processing specialist at Olivetti. He participated in various actions of the Vienna Actionists, and his groundbreaking work *die verbesserung von mitteleuropa, roman* (the improvement of central europe, a novel) was published in 1969. In the 70s Wiener co-ran the legendary Kreuzberg café-bar Exil before settling in Canada in 1984. From 1992 to 2004 he was a professor for aesthetics at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. Today he lives in Kapfenstein in Austria. In 2015, Suhrkamp will bring out a volume of Wiener’s research in the field of the psychology of thinking.*

The moment I get into the hire car, I know they've given me the right vehicle for my mission. A small screen shows what I could drive into should I choose to reverse. I hesitate briefly but resist the temptation. On the way there I don't see anything but the road. The world has disappeared into fog, but a voice is guiding me. My destination is somewhere just before the border to Slovenia and Hungary. On a mountain there lives a who professes to have been cultivating idiocy for fifty years. Where I come from, he enjoys an almost magical reputation. When I told my friends I was going to meet him, they looked at me in disbelief. "I didn't think he really existed". And indeed, it isn't easy to imagine the life of a person who described, fifty years before the fact, the peculiar unreality that would come to pass through the Internet. A person who seems to rise above the current of time, one whose life story reads like a novel. A person who today hopes that our attention might again shift to the self-observation of human thought as a form of artistic research.

"You have reached your destination". I park the Nissan in front of an inconspicuous house. The name Wiener really does appear on the door. Ingrid Wiener opens it. Further back, in the darkness of the kitchen, I make out Oswald Wiener. The seventy-nine-year-old seems real enough, and bears no resemblance to a fictional character who can travel in time inside his own head. One wonders whether it was just such an interconnection of real and linguistic existence that enabled him to write one of the most shattering novels of the twentieth century. Or whether it was this way of thinking that enabled him to use the historical figure of the dandy to cast light on the problems of the artificial intelligences of the future. For this was the kinetic logic of a writer who it was impossible to pin down, who would disappear behind pseudonyms or among gold prospectors at the furthest ends of the world, only to return with recordings of the songs of wild Canadian dogs. This was author of a work that for a long time appeared to be hopelessly fragmented, but which

today has constituted itself as a compelling intellectual achievement. A blinding sun is shining through the window. I unwrap my recording device from a white silk cloth. The man opposite me picks up exactly the same device, and sets it up next to the first one like a reflection. At one and the same time, both of us say: a good machine.

You initially wanted to be a jazz musician, but then you switched from playing the trumpet to working for Olivetti.

Jazz was implanted in me at the age of twelve. There was a radio station run by the American Occupation, the Blue Danube Network, which was a kind of request programme for the soldiers. It was on seven days a week, and once a week it played a piece of jazz. This was in 1947/48. I was living in a reform school at the time, and all the boys had a germanium diode crystal receiver with a piece of wire that you could bend and adjust until you got the right frequency. For headphones we used earpieces stolen from phone box telephones. And with them we'd listen to the radio under the covers every evening.

Then, in the 1950s, my childhood friend Konrad Bayer inducted me into the circle of artists and poets. My interest in poetry grew with my realisation that my musical talent was not going to turn me into a world-famous jazz trumpeter. I liked the poems of Gerhard Rühm or H.C. Artmann as much as I liked music. Then I got sick of all that as well, I saw that my poetry was a kind of imitation of Rühm's – at best, an imitation with different intentions to his own. That was the end of my foray into art, and now I wanted to do the exact opposite: marry, have children, take up a bourgeois profession. I very quickly had a successful career at Olivetti; they were waiting for a guy like me. That's where I learned the principles of programming.

Was this applied programming, or was it linked to the debate over cybernetics that was going on at the time?

The term cybernetics had only just reached Central Europe. People didn't exactly know what it meant. In 1959 I stole the first copy of Norbert Wiener's *Cybernetics* from the lending library of the Vienna Information Center, a propaganda institute run by the American occupation forces. At the time I didn't entirely understand it. I still don't know whether I entirely understand it today.

And then you began slowly working on an attempt to create the opposite of poetry, to create its destruction, which led to your book die Verbesserung von Mitteleuropa, roman (the improvement of central europe, a novel). Naturally after a year at Olivetti I couldn't stand it any more, I hated the whole attitude there, the obsession with money, the ever more expensive cars. I had chosen this career as a protest against my friends. Then suddenly I was inside it and it didn't take long until I was asking myself what I was actually doing there and I started writing the book. In the beginning I had to struggle against my inhibitions, you can tell this from the way the book lashes out so much. I would compose a sentence, and if I didn't find it hurt enough I'd look for other words until it became more and more painful. When I had the feeling that I'd got something I should under no circumstances write down, that's what I'd write. That's how

almost the entire book was written.
You tried charging language with your own pain?

I was living under the delusion that something was making me who I was. I didn't think I was being manipulated the way a schizophrenic does, but rather in a far profounder manner to have been pre-formed by the existing culture that I'd discovered under the name of language. Language was the cipher for everything that was out of kilter. I found fault everywhere but within myself, and even to this day I couldn't really say what I might have found there apart from gullibility. When people used to tell me that Hegel was a giant, I believed them. While I was writing the *improvement*, I leafed through Hegel and wondered what was supposed to be so great about all this bullshit. And that's how it went on, effectively there was nothing there any more, only consciousness. A metaphysics of consciousness was the only thing that I didn't condemn and reject.

As well as being a record of complex state of conflict, the book contains a quite astonishing passage on the "bioadaptor", which emerged in reaction to an object by the artist Walter Pichler.

Walter Pichler saw himself as a utopian architect, he was one of the first, along with Hans Hollein, who declared everything to be architecture, as I had declared everything to be language. He built a helmet with a small television screen that shielded people off from the world around them. That was enough for me to dedicate the bioadaptor to him.

*The "bioadaptor"** that you outline in the book foreshadows what would later come to be called virtual space. You very precisely predict the structures that would come into being half a century later, at an advanced stage of the Internet, through social networks or with Google Glass. You anticipate closed systems where the human gaze no longer operates in the world around it but only ever reflects its own desires,*

*gradually forming a closed system. To what extent was this influenced by ideas like, for example, Ross Ashby's homeostat**?*

The bioadaptor came out of two strands of thought. One was the idea of society as a homeostat. I noticed that cybernetics had the particular quality of functioning as a mechanism that prevents the emergence of innovations. I drew every possible analogy, such as for example that Copernicus had had access to modern computers. If he had, the Ptolemaic worldview might have lasted indefinitely, since the main reason it was abandoned was that the epicycles kept on increasing and the calculations were becoming ever more complicated. However, an enhanced capacity to perform calculations might have prevented the emergence of the Copernican worldview. Perhaps not for ever, but for a hundred years. At a time when the contradictions are no longer manageable and the leap into a qualitatively new state, another way of conceiving the world, is imminent, the computer would function as a means of prolonging the old, existing state of affairs.

The other strand came out of certain epistemological problems. It's difficult to ignore the fact that we only have representations of reality in our heads which we improve, worsen, adapt. We haven't been able to get rid of the idea that the world is effectively pre-stabilised for life forms like ourselves. I've evolved into this physical world, I know only a tiny part of this physical world, namely the one that is crucial to my being able to continue living, the one to which my organs react, the one I can act on using my motor skills. So the pre-stabilised relation to reality, produced by evolution, is already a bioadaptor.

But is this really what cybernetics is? The homeostat that constantly seeks to maintain itself, or the feedback loops that Norbert Wiener developed – are these really simply means of preventing innovations? Wiener ini-



tially thought of the feedback loop as an object of scientific study, and then pretty soon applied technologies were being developed from it which were mostly geared towards stabilisation, security, homogenisation and normativity. Was it really cybernetics in its original form that led to this innovation-suppressing apparatus which always seeks to stabilise itself, or was it the way that cybernetics was relatively rapidly taken up and applied?

The American profit mentality is "we want new technologies", and it bears most of the blame for the whole thing. One of its consequences is that the ideological framework reacts in turn upon the feedback loops, to balance out the effects of the loops and manipulate them to have a conserving effect. What is conserved? Values. Back then we had the McCarthy era and the debate over what was American and what was un-American. The point was to preserve the Christian heritage and the lifestyle of the white families, naturally only that of the tax-paying families. On the other hand, revenues needed to increase. Whether cybernetics inherently tends towards conservation is something I wouldn't like to say, but in actual fact we haven't seen anything different.

To what extent is it worth trying to separate some strands of cybernetic thinking from its application in attempts to stabilise, and again try to use it in an entirely different manner? The whole thing really was an own

goal, because the gradual institutionalisation of a cybernetics that aimed at security, stability and the avoidance of the new has led to the extremely stagnant state of contemporary society. It's a society that can barely come up with any kind of vision, which is actually afraid of thinking about the future in any shape or form, and whose innovations are, for that reason, regressive. The whole thing is slowly drifting towards a kind of heat death.

Agreed. André-Marie Ampère, who invented the term cybernetics, saw it as a form of statecraft, and introduced it as a potential policy measure. The things that should really be getting attention from any sensible person today are being initiated by individuals who have not been incorporated into the feedback loop. In the impoverished neighbourhoods of European cities there are immigrants whose lives are being wasted because of a lack of opportunities; they are disqualified solely on the basis of their accent and their appearance, and have no hope of a future. These people have not been incorporated by cybernetics. That they are now making headlines should surprise no one.

Those not incorporated into the system would also be the only forces who could produce real innovations, actual game-changing breakthroughs.

The question is whether they are capable of innovation. They are capable of destruction, but I don't know what the Islamic State has come up with in terms of innovations that could delight us or command our respect. Because if one thing is clear, it's that science and barbarism go very well together. The scientists needn't necessarily be barbarians themselves, they need only shut their eyes or want to live nice lives or have a voice within the structures of power. The stagnation isn't just in the social or aesthetic fields, but is also present in the natural sciences. In physics there has been no new idea that has really pushed things forwards for a hundred years. This is perhaps putting it very crudely, but thousands of the best researchers would cut off their own right arm to have an idea that amounted to a comparable scientific advance as quantum physics a hundred years ago. All kinds of things are going

on, but, in the best cybernetic tradition, the simulation apparatuses are reconciling the contradictions between the theories of physics – it's known as a "handshake" – and innovation is being thwarted.

Many of the simulation techniques used by physics are successful: weather forecasting, for example, has become a lot better, but they cannot explain why. The method is to calculate on different levels that are incompatible with each other. These different levels are then glued together by a form of creative accounting. The glue they use is the same cybernetic kind that I make fun of in the *improvement of central europe*. It's a pure invention, a fiction, but nevertheless it works.

I feel that the text is, in part, a remarkably precise description of what has come to pass: that the world around us has been replaced by largely narcissistic self-reflection. And, at the same time, by communication systems that make it ever easier to turn us into controllable objects.

I incorporated several digressions into the text. That this machine, the bionaptor, is itself intelligent and invents, so to speak, new needs. But that is also pure fantasy. Such devices don't exist yet, we still don't have intelligent machines. The machines that prevail against humans do so in a different way than humans do. Their so-called thinking is not human thinking, but something else. It makes me feel creepy just thinking about it. What has several different levels in a human takes places on a single level in a computer, the level of the sign. It is just signs that are moved around, according to certain rules. This involves the sophisticated use of statistics, with the final result that machines function faster than human beings and can perhaps even be funnier. But they aren't really funnier, they only seem that way, because machines cannot understand. Human beings can understand, they understand the phrases that are fed into them, they understand other phrases as properly answering these phrases, but machines can't understand any of that. Of course, we can't predict what will happen if this surface technology continues to develop.

In reality, basic algorithms from statistics and information technology have nothing to do with intelligence. Intelligence is here replaced by the management of exceptions. Once you've grasped what a harmonic vibration is, you can express this understanding in a formula. You can derive anything from it because you understand what the formula describes. A computer doesn't need this formula, it needs only speed and memory capacity, and starting from rather primitive premises it carries out a vast number of generate-and-test experiments in order to achieve the same result as you, who have spent two years finding this profound formula. This makes me a little nervous. Perhaps what we call consciousness and meaning was only necessary for a particular era in the evolution of the universe. In the time before, there was no meaning and no consciousness, and nor will there be meaning and consciousness afterwards. It is easy to imagine a time when human beings are no longer necessary. Popular philosophers like Vernor Vinge or Ray Kurzweil have already suggested that we have got to the point where machines are about to take over everything.

I have to say I have my doubts about whether things are looking quite so good for machines. So do I, but it's being debated.

But also in the context of a vast system of machines that supposedly functions marvelously, but which not everyone is necessarily able to perceive. This management of exceptions, as you described it, hadn't really been developed very far in Austria in 1968 – as it hadn't in most countries – at that time the system relied on much blunter disciplinary measures.

Yes, it was no longer possible to live here. The pressure was so great, people would tap me on the shoulder in the street, take out their ID and say, "Herr Wiener, come to the police station today at three o'clock, the commissioner would like to speak to you". We were under surveillance here – that's not paranoia, that really happened.

Then you had to leave the country, and you

opened a café-bar in Berlin called Exil.

Exil had already been an artists' club in Vienna, the name came from H.C. Artmann. It was the name of a kind of secession, where several of the more important younger artists took refuge from the Art Club. We took it up again in Berlin because it suited the situation so well. We were in exile.

Was there a whole group of Viennese artists who went to Berlin?

Günter Brus and his wife, Ingrid and I, Rühm and his girlfriend were already there. Three people who knew each other well and had worked with each other before – that's all you need. Once we had our café-bar, people kept joining us. You could earn money there, and work unconventionally ...

Did you really serve proper meals there?

Totally. Seven days a week. It was exhausting, but we were young and strong enough.

Was it more of a bar or a restaurant?

It was both. Even today you can't run a café-bar unless you sell a lot of booze. You only earn money from alcohol and coffee. There's no money in food. After eleven o'clock at night it was an art bar, and that went on till six o'clock in the morning. There was no closing time.

Starting out from the dandy's desire for self-fashioning, it was in Berlin that you began your investigations into the observation of the self, something you continue to this day. This involves observing what happens in your head when you touch a table or imagine a certain shape. Is the point to work out where a machine-like formalism operates, and whether thinking follows a human dynamic?

The dandy actually has a great deal in common with the bioadaptor. I understand the dandy not as a sort of tailor's mannequin but as a philosophical problem. The dandy is still a metaphysician, he suffers from the thought that that he is comprehensible and explicable, and he experiments ruthlessly upon himself in order to learn more about himself. He is under the illusion that he becomes more fluid the more he understands about himself, and that he

can use this to extend his capabilities. This information must not, of course, come into the possession of other consciousnesses. He tries to control others and make them more predictable, while at the same time not letting himself become predictable to others. He "sins against the Holy Ghost" in that he denies others such fundamental attributes as being human, regarding them instead as sets of rules, as machines. He proceeds in a similar manner against himself, and this in itself makes a small but crucial difference. The bioadaptor can be seen as a kind of self-regulating narcissist, but it can also be seen as an experimental workshop. If there are billions of bioadaptors in the world, this doesn't mean that they will bring evolution to a standstill. Though it might be possible that feedback loops could be developed which work against evolution and in favour of stabilisation. But there's a very long way to go before we get there.

Is the dandy a figure who necessarily remains unknowable to himself?

Not necessarily, and you can also put it another way: it's a kind of self-contempt. You are merciless towards yourself, you try to see yourself through the eyes of others – though not in order to influence them but rather to alter your own point of view. Real life teaches you after all how difficult it is to change yourself. I'm almost eighty and I'm no longer the same person who wrote the *Improvement of Central Europe*, a novel. I'm no longer so egocentric, no longer so full of myself, and I don't hate like I used to. An old man doesn't hate with the same intensity as a young man. But in this case something else also happened, and indeed in a dandyish manner. I simply tried to see myself through the eyes of others and found a great deal that I didn't like at all. Simply the fact of seeing something you don't like is itself a great step forward.

I wanted to bring up the dandy and language again.

In the dandy you find the peculiar phenomenon that's very well exemplified in Shakespeare's *Othello* or, in

slightly kitschified form, Jean Cocteau's *Children of the Night*: the phenomenon of other people being controlled through language. There's something magical about this ability to control others through language – the fact that an opinion can be brought into existence by vibrations in the air. When I'm on very good form, I'll almost always succeed. Back then, it was the fact that it was effected by means of physics that really fascinated me. The fact that there's really just this bridge of language between my idea and what I'm trying to induce in another person's head. That's why I equipped the bioadaptor with the ability to speak to the adaptee in the manner of a benevolent older colleague. Not acting directly on the nerves, but rather simply turning a belief on or off by means of words, depending on what the situation lends itself to. The dandy is excellent at this. Oscar Wilde at his peak could surround himself with a cluster of intelligent members of London society every evening and completely fascinate them by the manner of his speech alone. ... That's another link between the bioadaptor and the dandy.

But language is also always full of ghosts.

Perhaps not so much language itself, but what it brings about. The spoken word is a sequence of vibrations in the air. It conveys no content. The contents are produced in people's minds by means of a very complicated operation, it is not simply transferred.

The contents are produced, but as something quite different to what arrived as a vibration. Don't you think ghosts are involved somewhere here?

To me a ghost is rather something that leaves you at a loss when trying to explain it. Ask almost any contemporary psychologist what consciousness is and he's at a loss to explain it. That's what ghostly is. No one today is brave enough to say, as John B. Watson once did, that there's no such thing as consciousness, that mental images don't actually exist – it's also a rather cocky thing to say, but he had no shortage of

cockiness. He doesn't actually say that there's no such thing as consciousness – I think – he says that the study of consciousness cannot be a subject for scientific research. Why, he asked, should we concern ourselves with consciousness?

Well, there is at least still art.
Is there?

It is disappearing somewhat.

I think that art is degenerating into a business of mystification. The last remaining value of art is its ability to capture the viewer's attention. It functions by capturing people's attention, and the nature of that attention is irrelevant. That was already true of the Vienna Actionists. When they disgusted people, they at least captured their attention and thus legitimised their work as art. They weren't actually being serious, they didn't kill themselves, and even if they had it would only have been an attempt to make a particularly strong impression. There are still countless ways to make an impression, you just

need to punch harder and become ever more extreme. This extremity is not about how much noise you make, but about your choice of subject matter. In Russia, Pussy Riot can still successfully capture people's attention, at the cost of their personal freedom. Whoever comes next will have to climb a rung higher, because the effect is weakened each time. Perhaps you'd need to kill someone, or perhaps someone will come along and say that the Islamic State is a work of art.

How do we move out of this society of the spectacle that is forever turning in its own circle? I think that art still has the potential to do this, but that it has to a large extent subjected itself to a logic of this kind – including the logic of escalation that you describe, which at the end of the day is also a technological and economic logic. The question is rather, where are the ways out of it. The idiot's act of disengaging is not enough; it's merely a way to create other spaces.

It is no longer an expressive gesture; it's a way of defending yourself.

But that's not enough.

Idiocy is not just something you cultivate – the idiot actually does something. It's just that he no longer addresses the public. It's true that he still addresses others, but they are his equals, and to a certain extent he considers them to be capable. And that's really how it has to be. An art that from the start isn't after anything but money

won't get very far. It's clear that there's a huge amount of money in the world. And obviously the majority of artists want nothing but lots and lots of money and fame. If that's the only thing it's about, then I bid it farewell. And then along comes the idiot who's heading back in the other direction and who rejects these terms. He's happy with only a little money ... you need to have bread, and maybe some butter. But it doesn't always have to be caviar. You have to say what really matters. If there's still something as old-fashioned as interest and curiosity for something that can perhaps be discerned but is not yet understood, then we haven't strayed too far from the right path. And this curiosity and this possibility of knowledge seem to be categories that are as outdated as just about anything one can imagine. But I can't help it, they're the only values I have left.

Hans-Christian Dany is an artist and writer based in Hamburg.