

Fieldwork
Sanna Kannisto

Essay by Steve Baker

IMMENSE DISORDER

“I notice that my characters, my animals, my insects,
my fish, look as if they are escaping from the paper.”
Hokusai¹

“The forest and its diversity are overwhelming,” Sanna Kannisto wrote recently,² condensing into one short phrase both the preposterous ambition and the absolute necessity of her photographic project. That project, since the late 1990s, has been to represent—and, simultaneously, to acknowledge the impossibility of representing in any conventional manner—the baffling complexity of the tropical rainforests in which all of her work is made. In the course of eight lengthy trips to the forests of Brazil, French Guiana, and Costa Rica since 2000, Kannisto, usually working alongside scientists in biological field stations for two or three months at a time, has developed a beautiful and bewilderingly dense body of work.

The work displays a deep fascination with scientific procedures and with the history of scientific representation, but it has its own distinctive relationship to order. In a revealing statement from 2005, Kannisto notes: “One cannot adequately describe the various aspects of reality in a rainforest, or express them numerically or visually.” Thinking of works such as *Dark Forest 1* and *2* (figs. 57 and 58), she speaks of trying “to reflect the opposite perception of the world to the scientific. The forest is present as something that we cannot quite reach or explain. It’s uncontrolled and chaotic.” The photograph itself is a reaching-out, a faltering illumination of chaos:

The entire reality of the forest seems to be created by the light. When the light disappears or when weather conditions alter the perspective, the immense disorder of the forest becomes clear. The forest in the photograph becomes more like a surface and no longer gives any information about itself.³

Elsewhere, and again with direct reference to the *Dark Forest* images, she remarks: “At night the forest tells nothing; it is just surface. It preserves its concealment.”⁴

In these remarks, some of the key concerns and characteristics of Kannisto’s work begin to emerge. Her photographs are a response to what she sees as the inadequacy (or at least the incompleteness) of a scientific worldview. The forest is presented as an active and almost wilful presence; Kannisto’s work is equally active in its engagement with the forest’s “immense disorder.” Her own understanding of the forest’s mute reality is shaped by and through the photographs.

Three Photographs

Unlike the biologists she meets in the rainforests, who have more quantifiable concerns—“field science is a lot about measuring things,” she notes wryly—Kannisto is fascinated by that which slips away, or only just remains in the frame, or by objects that, even when “caught” in the image’s frame, still may not be quite what they seem. Three examples, picked almost at random, will begin to give a sense of how this fascination is manifested in Kannisto’s photographs.

In *On Forest Floor* (fig. 35), the artist’s forearm and palm intrude from the right, photographed at ground level. The hand lightly holds a snake—a false coral snake—looped through its fingers. The white line of hand and arm and the bright line of the snake are the key “marks” in this far-from-scientific image. The human element here evokes nothing so much as Robert Mapplethorpe’s photograph *Young Man with Arm Extended*, and in particular Roland Barthes’s observation that “the photographer has caught the boy’s hand . . . at just the right degree of openness,” so that it is “offered with benevolence.”⁵ In Kannisto’s photograph, the hand is the pale ground from which the snake escapes (like Hokusai’s animals) into the cover of the dark forest, the forest that “tells nothing.”



Private Collection



Dark Forest 1

Phasmidae (fig. 4) is a photograph taken in the artist's portable "field studio," a temporary work-station that can be put up easily in the forest under a tarpaulin or indoors in the field station, and can be dismantled and packed as a pile of Plexiglas plates. Kannisto describes it as "an isolated space that has the feeling of a laboratory, and a white background." The black velvet curtains on either side cast shade on the objects in the photograph, adding three-dimensionality, and deliberately enhancing the stage-like theatricality of the space. *Phasmidae* also has a strong sculptural quality that is not uncommon in Kannisto's photographs. The thin branches look almost as though the forest itself was pacing out the space available to it, discovering just how little effort it would take to fill and to appropriate the artist's space—a neat reversal (or mirroring) of her own traversal of the space of the forest on her long daily walks through it. The shape and angle of the branches also recall the steep angle of the tripod seen in *Bee Studies* (fig. 37), a very different photograph from the same year. And the stick insects—all too easy to overlook despite the title *Phasmidae*—provide further scaled-down echoes of the branches, just as they should.

Private Collection (fig. 56) is one of seven photographs Kannisto has taken since 2000 in which the artist herself figures prominently. With a brightly illuminated sheet suspended from branches in the forest night, the image gives the impression of an open-air reconstruction of her portable field studio. Here, however, along with the moths and other insects caught in silhouette in the light against the white rectangle of the sheet, is the artist. And despite the lamp on her head and the hard-to-identify subject of her "scientific" gaze, Kannisto's pose at that instant makes it look as though she is caught up in nocturnal revelry with the insects. The image is one of benevolent containment, framed above by the arch of palm fronds and branches, and below by the arc of the

sheet's folds. Its playful feel is also found in *Close Observer* (fig. 26), where the rainforest researcher takes on the guise of a child happily paddling around a weirdly tropical seaside on a drizzly summer's day, fishing net in hand, the oversized leaves overhead reinforcing the Alice-like distortion of scale.

Artifice and Authenticity

Private Collection and *Close Observer* give some indication of the space for elaborate contrivance in Kannisto's work. But that impulse is counterbalanced elsewhere by a far more direct approach. In photographs such as *Marked Dracontium gigas* (fig. 34), Kannisto simply records the visual evidence of the scientists' experiments in the field stations and the rainforest. In reference to these images, the artist has observed: "These objects are not intended to be aesthetically pleasing, which adds a certain peculiar authenticity to them that is not easy to stage." She acknowledges that her own work includes "photographs both of 'real' research situations and of situations I have staged." But, she is careful to note, "the distinction between these two types of photographs is sometimes very subtle."⁶

Bat Studies (fig. 55) certainly appears to be one of the scientists' experiments because, very unusually, it is a scientist's hands that appear at the top of the photograph. Shot directly from above, the distribution of the various bits and pieces on the forest floor certainly does not look contrived. The image recalls John Cage's comment about one of Robert Rauschenberg's early paintings: "This is not a composition. It is a place where things are."⁷ But the image does include more subtle elements of staging and self-reference. The white ground of the notebook, above which the bat is held to



Maxillaria fulgens



Abandoned Study

be measured, recreates in miniature the white rectangular space of Kannisto's field-studio photographs, just as the sheet in *Private Collection* was seen to do. More tellingly still, the Polaroid seen on the floor alongside the camera, rotated by ninety degrees, reproduces almost exactly the image that the artist is herself recording in this photograph.

The self-conscious use of white ground is especially evident in Kannisto's two series recording birds in flight. In the 2005 series *Hummingbird Flight: Eupetomena macroura* (on the cover), for example, the edge of the image cannot always be relied on to contain the bird. And in the 2006 *Act of Flying* series, a stalk and blossom appear at one point, simultaneously edging the bird out and echoing its shape. White space is flat space, *surface*, the artist seems to remind the viewer, just like the forest night.

But what happens to the objects, caught in that flat space—the orchid in *Maxillaria fulgens* (fig. 10), or the parrot snake in *Leptophis ahaetulla* (fig. 13), for example? Kannisto has expressed an interest in the use of white ground in early printed natural-history illustrations. She emphasizes the connection to “man's growing desire to control nature. Against a white background, objects are clearly under observation and ready to be classified.”⁸ She has recently summarized her photographic concerns in these terms:

I'm interested in how nature is portrayed and represented in the practice of art and science. And in how we approach nature or the tropical forest through different methods, theories, and concepts and according to different needs. To me it's more about trying to research human ways of seeing and working than claiming to make research on nature.

In the strange, scaffold-like assemblage of clamp, plant, and snake seen in *Leptophis ahaetulla*, the clamp's rigid grasp

seems to allude to science's attempt to control nature. In *Maxillaria fulgens*, on the other hand, a wonderfully makeshift bit of masking tape comes across as the real point of the picture. It reflects not only Kannisto's stated interest in Claude Lévi-Strauss's notion of bricolage, but also her view that scientists' tools and equipment “are fascinating, but also look very inadequate and limited to me.” The ramshackle wooden constructions in *Flight Tent* (fig. 40) might be a case in point.

It is true, of course, that viewers cannot always reliably judge what they are seeing in a photograph, nor the extent to which the artist may have had a hand in it. *Abandoned Study* (fig. 33), by its title alone, stages a set of expectations only to frustrate them. What sense could anyone begin to make of this tangled mass of undergrowth and wiring that a praying mantis has apparently happened upon? As Kannisto muses: “Abandoned study, a study left behind, a study that fell into decay: it's not serving its original function anymore; it's mocking the exactitude of science.” Like *Marked Dracontium gigas* some years earlier, it presents the marks but not the meaning.

The Whole Forest

Reflecting on the circularity of the idea that “photographed objects are made intelligible by being photographed,” Kannisto has written: “In the same way as in science, art too is used to try to bring the world under control. The impossibility of this task is also linked with a certain absurdity that I have noticed in my pictures.”⁹ It could even be said that Kannisto nurtures this “absurdity,” quietly and productively, in works such as *Considerable Darkness* (fig. 42). The measuring



Field Studies I



Untitled (Self Portrait)

jug alludes to the scientific measurement in which the artist's hands, at rest on the table, are manifestly not engaging. Something like a wry smile crosses her face. There is a sense of contentment to the picture, just as there is to *Zona antisismica* (fig. 54). In that photograph, the bright white square of the field studio shines out from the surrounding night, though the leaf-cutter ants under observation on its surface could easily be overlooked. And in both works, the artist's soft gaze resembles the calm and attentive *drishti* of yoga practice, rather than a fierce and possessive scientific interrogation.

Kannisto acknowledges something of this perspective herself: "When you are quiet, calm, perceptive, you can see hidden things. The knowledge I have gained is not just about how different habitats, plants, and animals are interacting. It's a kind of instinct, or being animal-like yourself." It's the taking-on of a degree of imperceptibility, like the stick insect, or the praying mantis in *Abandoned Study*—a photograph that deals "with situations where natural processes and something made by humans tangle up with each other." It's a reflection on (and a picturing of) the way that binaries such as "chaos and reason" often, as Kannisto says, "twist and work side by side."

Entanglements and echoes pervade Kannisto's work, as does the delicate balance she maintains between artistic and scientific claims and methods. As she says, "I see equal efforts there, equal determination . . . I guess in my work I want the two approaches to be able to live side by side—where else but in art would that be possible?" This determination to improvise some kind of holistic inquiry or critical method marks the urgency and relevance of her practice.

Summarizing the dominant scientific outlook of his time, Lévi-Strauss wrote in *The Savage Mind*: "To understand a real object in its totality we always tend to work from its

parts. The resistance it offers us is overcome by dividing it."¹⁰ Something of that outlook lingers on in the relentlessly specialized inquiries of the scientists Kannisto works alongside, as she notes in her accounts of their methods. But recent research in fields such as systems theory, complexity science, and biosemiotics has emphasized the value of viewing organisms and ecosystems as complex wholes. As Fritjof Capra explains, "human hierarchies, which are fairly rigid structures of domination and control" are "quite unlike the multi-leveled order found in nature." He continues: "The web of life consists of networks within networks. . . . In nature there is no 'above,' or 'below,' and there are no hierarchies. There are only networks nesting within other networks."¹¹

Kannisto's photographs depict something very close to this. In *Field Studies I* (fig. 38) the highly sculptural, sack-like container strung up from the surrounding trees temporarily holds a few specimens just above and apart from the forest of which they are a part. It is the forest nesting within the forest. The photographs featuring her field studio present another variation on this theme. They show animals Kannisto has temporarily "nested" in that contained space—like the smokey jungle frog in *Untitled (Self Portrait)* (fig. 41)—prior to their swift and safe return to the forest.

Scientists themselves are notably absent in Kannisto's photographs, with the exception of rare glimpses of their hands. Questioned about this, the artist responded: "I think the interpretation of the images can be more open when there is no human figure." Taken along with her comment about the advantages of "being animal-like" in her dealings with the forest, a work like *Untitled (Self Portrait)* could be regarded not so much as a photograph of Kannisto, but rather as another means of picturing the forest itself. Quite apart from all the other echoes, reflections, doublings, and "nestings" that this particular photograph sets in motion, the



Tree Death 1



Transient Rain

drapes suspended just behind and to either side of the artist's head might be read almost as quotation marks—framing, theatricalizing, and ironizing any human claim to distinctiveness or separateness from the surrounding forest night. The same sense of playful self-effacement is found in her works *Considerable Darkness*, *Zona antisismica*, *Close Observer*, and *Private Collection*; they are not self-portraits so much as photographs of the forest.

The longer Kannisto's works are studied, the more it seems that all of her photographs show the same thing: the totality of the forest and the condition of its representation. The viewer encounters webs, meshes, nests, points of focus, surfaces, all showing the same interconnectedness. Each of the 2010 works—*Tree Death 1* (fig. 53), *Spider* (fig. 51), *Transient Rain* (fig. 50), and *Chlorophanes spiza* (fig. 2)—is a successful and inventive encapsulation of the contemporary scientific perspective in which, as Capra puts it, living systems are understood as “integrated wholes whose properties cannot be reduced to those of smaller parts,” because “what we call a part is merely a pattern in an inseparable web of relationships.”¹²

Like an anthropologist engaging in a reflexive ethnographic practice that openly acknowledges her own presence within that integrated whole, Kannisto brings an entire history of representation into play in her forest imagery. “It is inevitable . . . that my work has something in common with the history of photography, early natural-history illustrations, or the traditions of still-life painting,” she has stated. “In this way my images are not alone in the world.”¹³ *Chlorophanes spiza* exemplifies this reflexive awareness of representation. The shapes of the clamp, and the leaves, and the green honeycreeper's beak echo back and forth across the image; but the whole construction held by the clamp—bird, leaves, and blossoms—has the clarity and simplicity and *flatness* of

a margin illustration from an illuminated medieval manuscript. Here, just as vividly as the un-telling forest night of the *Dark Forest* images, the white ground of supposedly scientific representation is “just surface.” In making light and dark, as well as chaos and reason “twist and work side by side,” it becomes clear that Kannisto's work, as much as the rainforest itself, is a recursive living system, renewing itself by reworking itself, the simplicity (and complexity) of any given detail forever reflecting and being reflected in the complexity (and simplicity) of the whole.

—Steve Baker

1. Katsushika Hokusai, quoted in Hélène Cixous, *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, ed. D. Jenson (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 117.
2. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the artist are drawn from her e-mail correspondence with the author in June and July 2010.
3. Sanna Kannisto, quoted in Birgit Eusterschulte, “A Conversation with Sanna Kannisto,” in *Self-timer* (Kassel: Kunsthalle Fredericianum, 2005), www.sannakannisto.com.
4. Sanna Kannisto, “Sanna Kannisto in an E-mail Conversation with Harri Laakso,” *Framework: The Finnish Art Review*, No. 4, 2005, p. 70.
5. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. R. Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), p. 59.
6. Sanna Kannisto, “Studio in the rainforest,” 2002, www.sannakannisto.com.
7. John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1973), p. 99.
8. Kannisto, “Studio in the rainforest.”
9. Sanna Kannisto, “Personal statement,” 2006, www.sannakannisto.com.
10. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), p. 23.
11. Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life* (London: Flamingo, 1997), pp. 28, 35.
12. Capra, *The Web of Life*, pp. 36, 37.
13. Kannisto, “Sanna Kannisto in an E-mail Conversation with Harri Laakso,” p. 69.