

Discussion: Sanna Kannisto & Mikaela Lostedt

Local Vernacular

Mikaela Lostedt: For your previous solo exhibition, *Fieldwork*, you took photographs in the South American tropics, using a studio that you had developed yourself, and you worked with researchers. The exhibition was the culmination of a project that you had been working on for a long time. What were the key aspects of that exhibition for you?

Sanna Kannisto: The *Fieldwork* exhibition and the *Close Observer* series involved, perhaps more than before, a contemplation of my own personal position as an artist working at research stations. Of what my role is in that environment, what kind of material I produce, how do I experience it, interpret it, and finally exhibit it. Images that particularly refer to these questions are *Close Observer*, *Zona antisismica*, *Considerable Darkness* and *Densimeter*. In all these pictures I myself appear as a “character”, and all the pictures tell a story, and are partly documentary in nature, but are staged. I also wanted to incorporate more fairy-tale-like elements into both these works, and into *Transient rain* and *Spider*. On my last photographic expedition to the tropics I had a German photography student and assistant with me, with whose help these pictures were created. There was a lot to prepare for the pictures and, since I appeared in them myself, it would have been a lot more difficult to make them alone. Many of the ideas in the images had already been incubating for a long time before I was able to realize them. The exhibition’s title, *Fieldwork*, came from the monograph of the same name published by Aperture in the USA.

ML: For your new exhibition you have photographed in Finland. How has that process felt, or the continuum in which the field studio is the same, but the environment is new?

SK: It has been marvellous and inspiring to work in Finland. In a way, it is very much the same: I have worked intensively in one particular place, at the outermost point of the Hanko Peninsula, at the Hanko Bird Observatory. I went there every week last autumn. There is a ringing station there, and researchers and bird enthusiasts do the ringing work. Photography took place outside, at the mercy of the weather. In the tropics it is warm and my studio photography took place under a shelter, so the conditions here are harsher, with cold mornings, wind and rain. In Finland, the changing seasons are also more tangible, it can even snow in the autumn, and the mornings are horribly cold. On some mornings, I cleared ice from my studio. But working with the animals is similar; you feel the same sense of responsibility for your subjects. The field studio has not always been the same. I have developed it to suit my needs. For these shoots I have used two studios of different sizes.

ML: The title of the exhibition is *Local Vernacular*. Tell me more about that.

SK: It means local language or dialect. It began as only a working title for the series, but then it stuck. Previously, I took pictures in the tropics and in rain forests and, now I take pictures in Finland. I still take pictures in my own recognizable style, but now of local species. So now, I “speak” the local dialect. People sometimes talk about the language of photography, which is by nature open and interpretable in many ways, unlike a “real” language, whose meaning structures are exact.

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The title also refers to the birdsong, to their “language” and more generally to the fact that these are migratory birds, with a specific territory or area of their own. I have heard about a study in which urban great tit songs were found to have shorter verses because of the amount of noise in cities. So the dialect of some bird species may be affected by where they live.

I have also been interested in vernacular architecture. In the shacks, huts and cottages that people build themselves. They bear an amusing resemblance, for instance, to insect architecture, chrysalises and nests. In my case, this could apply to my studio and to my entire photographic set-up, which is brutally functional, a bit of a home-made contraption, but it serves my purpose.

ML: In your works you get very close to the bird being photographed. What is it that has most intrigued you about Finnish birds?

SK: I am actually surprised at how splendid they are, all the colours and shades and details, and there really are a lot of details. Around its eye a bird might have a paler streak, a dark ring, or little spots. Long-tailed tits have a small patch of yellow, a bit like eye shadow, traced above the eye. The long-tailed tit, with its extended tail feathers, is particularly splendid in other ways too, and is also oddly parrot-like. I have not been able to see many of the birds that I have photographed this close-up before. They do really have so much that is impossible to see when you observe them in a tree or a bush. Another surprising feature is all the shades of grey and brown of their feathers, the minute differences in tone. The blue tit, too – it is one of our most common species – but it is so splendid, and extremely brightly coloured.

ML: In the pictures we can see a ring on the bird’s leg?

SK: All the birds have first been ringed and then I have photographed them. The ring links the bird to our culture or to research. It is a human-made marker on the bird, the individual is numbered and recorded, and can be identified if it is found somewhere. Ringing is a part of avifauna conservation and research. The ring is like a piece of jewellery or a manacle...

ML: Can you say something about the photographic session.

SK: I visit the nets with the ringers and bring the bird to my studio as quickly as possible. The birds are with me in the photographic box for about 10-15 minutes. In ringing they have what is known as “safe time”, meaning the total time that birds can be handled, which has to include my photographic time. At first, I leave the bird to itself in the box and I observe it, and see whether it sits on the branch that I have provided. The birds behave in a very individualistic manner. I have often pondered the behavioural and personality differences between individuals of the same species, or between species. Much of their reaction is presumably affected by species-specific behaviour and by the kind of habitat the bird has come from. Urban and garden species have presumably grown bolder. From a photographic perspective a bold and inquisitive bird is best. The kind that moves around and flies from place to place in the studio. If the bird stays frozen to the spot, I let it go immediately. The ringers have also first checked the birds’ condition and, for example, the thickness of their fat layer. I have developed slightly different branches and perches for the studio, for photographing different bird species. The field studio is made of white

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plexiglass, and I light it from behind – which gives it a whiteness. I used a lot of small flash units in the shooting.

ML: How do you build up the arrangements in your pictures?

SK: The entire set-up in the pictures is precisely built. Spring is a good time for this, when the leaves are still small – in summer, the leaves are too big in comparison with the birds. The branches and plants are thus carefully chosen, including with regard to their colours. Some of the branches are dry, some are green fronds of early summer, and some have clusters of berries, for example, rowan berries, which provide colour. I photographed the Eurasian siskins on alder branches, because they feed on alders on the grounds of the Observatory. This is specifically about constructing an arrangement, and not just about photographing the bird. All the parts of the whole have to work together.

Sometimes, it feels as though the branch is harder than the bird! When I search for a branch, I am already thinking about where a bird could possibly perch on it. Things don't always go as planned. The bird's movements always bring an element of chance into the picture. When I am taking the pictures, I have a varied selection of branches available, because I cannot know which bird I will get to photograph. I try to decide quickly what kind of an arrangement I will make, so that the picture might succeed. The stands that I have attached the plants to are old laboratory stands and, for example, Bunsen burners. The final picture looks effortless in comparison with the amount of work that I have done. Whenever I start taking pictures, I am always amazed at how hard it is to take photographs, and at how I have previously managed to get everything in the right place.

ML: Your pictures are linked to the still-life tradition in an interesting way.

SK: In this respect what is interesting about photography is specifically its relationship with reality and time. The fact that the things depicted have actually been in front of the camera in some way. And what kind of a reduction of reality can be created with the aid of a photograph. A photograph can also be used to make things visible that have not necessarily been visible before. Above all, a photograph is an instrument that can be used to show things. A photograph with all its details can feel real. On the other hand, with my pictures the first thing that springs to mind may be disbelief – can the birds truly have been photographed in that way. With a photograph people can feel a powerful urge to figure out how the image has been “made”, unlike with a painting or a sculpture.

ML: How do you see your works in relation to the tradition of scientific visualization?

SK: Photography and science have a shared history. As we all know, as soon as photography developed, it was co-opted into the service of science. Inherently, both science and photography involve the same idea of objectivity, an apparent inbuilt objectivity. Whatever that objectivity may have been – it has, of course, been entirely constructed to serve different institutional truths and needs. We can consider, for instance, of the presentation of scientific achievements in relation to world power politics, or to anthropological measurements that demonstrated the superiority of the white race. With the aid of photographs, it has been possible to collect, classify, categorize,

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list and finally exhibit. Pictures have the power to influence opinions. Scientific visualization is often about simplification and reduction. In photographs, a simple background has been used and the pictures include a measurement scale. In my earlier works I have targeted the irony of the objectivity of science and photography. I have also wondered whether I can in any way present visually, for instance, the diversity of the rain forest.

ML: For some people von Wright's bird illustrations might come to mind? What kind of significance have old natural scientific illustrations had for you?

SK: I have seen these kinds of bird and animal books ever since my childhood. Identification guides have a really particular form of expression, a white background with drawings of birds, plants or animals. That form language feels really familiar to me. I also remember the educational wall-charts at primary school, staring at the same picture of the stages of a butterfly's metamorphosis for a whole lesson. Now, that feels like a really ceremonial way to treat a picture. In comparison, today's children constantly see a vast number of images, but only look at an individual picture for a brief moment. In the two large works in the exhibition, which comprise branches floating in space and the birds settled on them, I was specifically thinking of the form language of natural scientific illustrations. One interesting aspect about natural scientific illustrations is that the artists almost always drew or painted species from dead specimens. They have resurrected the animals and plants with their pictures.

ML: One of the works in the exhibition depicts a forest at twilight, it is a triptych, with three connected parts.

SK: It was also photographed in Hanko, in a conservation area. The title of the work is *The Echoing Green*. In it are the very first buds on the trees, but the landscape is very black and dark. When the birds had left in November, I was left with a terrible emptiness or melancholy. For a moment, the fact that the birds had left felt quite irrevocable or final. I wanted to photograph the empty landscape, the darkness of winter and spring. But in the pictures selected for the exhibition there are already buds and the stirring hope of spring, and of the moment when the birds return. The landscape in itself is raw and brutal. The three-part work is window-like.

ML: Another work that speaks of wistfulness, and a certain melancholy, is *The Days of Departure*. Did you expect feelings like this when you set about working on this new series?

SK: I didn't. The changes of the seasons whilst working in Finland repeatedly surprised me. The leaves on the trees in autumn could suddenly have fallen or the spring blossoms rapidly pass. If you want to photograph a snowy landscape, you even have to look for snow. Last winter, there was nothing worthy of the name in the south. Birds migrate south – which is not surprising! The wistfulness was at least eased by the fact that I had birds feeding in my garden at home in winter. On a more serious note, to me, the variations in the seasons and their “exoticness” are at present the finest element about Finland. It is a continual cycle of birth and death. The title of this series refers to that, too.

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ML: A few of the works in the exhibition have been printed in a large format, all signs of the studio have been excluded, and the bird is many times larger than life-size. What were you aiming at with this approach?

SK: I was searching for a certain sculptural quality. And for the way in which, when the scale of something changes, it also alters our reaction to it.

ML: Do you intend to carry on working with birds, or do you already have some new ideas in your sights?

SK: I will be photographing birds throughout this autumn. In practice, throughout October and on into the beginning of November. I have two series ongoing and, whilst I have been working, some new ideas have arisen. Over the recent years, I have also been photographing things other than birds. I work on several subjects at the same time.

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