

Harri Laakso is a photographer and post-doctoral researcher at University of Art and Design, Helsinki. *Language editing* Tomi Snellman.

- (1) Michael Taussig, "The Language of Flowers", *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Autumn 2003), 108.
- (2) Georges Bataille, "The Language of Flowers", *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927-1939*. Trans. Allan Stockl, Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie Jr. Ed. Allan Stockl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 10-14.
- (3) *Ibid.* 10.
- (4) *Ibid.*
- (5) *Ibid.* 11.
- (6) Taussig, 109.
- (7) Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*. (New York: Mentor, 1958), 450.

Harri Laakso

# The Silence of Species

There are some artists to whom Nature speaks, but the nature of the artist's medium speaks to every artist.

Nowadays it might seem strangely out of place to say that the cultural construction we call "nature" could speak and odder still to extend that capacity, in the post-medium era, to the "nature" of a medium. Yet these two natures are symptoms of the same persistent dream, one that is under constant threat – that of the irreducible base.

In the work of the contemporary Finnish photographer Sanna Kannisto both natures remain visible. Kannisto's work resides on the thin divide between appearance and artifice, or what could be called "art in nature" and "art of nature" – the former acknowledging art's debt to forms pre-existing in nature and the latter to the artist's skill in arranging them for us to see.<sup>(1)</sup> Her art also superimposes these two natures, displaying the natural world as a theatre of light (a sort of camera) while also curiously speaking about photography in a natural way.

The starting place for Kannisto's art is the diversity and density of the rain forest, not a blank page or a white canvas. This plenitude is the source and mental backdrop of her work, from which she isolates and frames her images and against which their fantastic forms become projected. The white background of the field studio that Kannisto uses is only the secondary, although important, stage in the play – the act in which the details of

the isolated specimen reveal the specimen's own uncontainable fullness.

Kannisto works on the edge of science, sometimes using its instruments, always examining scientific ways of thinking and its limits. Kannisto's art positions itself alongside the philosophy of science, keen to observe in visual terms the ways in which the forms and patterns of nature adhere to, or escape from, the conceptual frames of reason. Fed by this slippage new and elusive figures of thinking also evolve. But how can one conceive of such unscientific forms of thinking?

## The language of flowers

In his essay "The Language of Flowers", first published in *Documents* in 1929, Georges Bataille also sought to display some of the ways in which natural models might fertilise our thinking.<sup>(2)</sup> This thinking was not just directed at an increase in knowledge, caressing instead the crevasse that separates experience from knowledge, flirting with the heterogeneous elements of nature. Bataille's text is an embrace of *non-savoir*, a plunge to the limit of reason, yet at the same time attentive to the possibility of a secret language – listening carefully to what *flora*, flowers in particular, might have to say about things, about the constant movement of thought dipping and elevating itself, knitting and binding the beauty and fragility of blossoms with eroticism, violence and decay.

Bataille *knew* that what "the fresh-

ness of the pistil betray[s] doubtless cannot be adequately expressed by language".<sup>(3)</sup> For him it was nevertheless necessary to approach this "inexpressible *real presence*", to expose it and to expose oneself to it.<sup>(4)</sup> In his text he starts out by agreeing that connections between plants and their interpretations can be based on well-known legends (like that regarding the narcissus) or on functional claims (flowers are connected to love because they precede fertilisation.) But Bataille was also looking beyond, for the more elusive bonds, especially for ones between *appearance and word*.

To show this Bataille examines the relationship between flowers and love. It is immediately evident to him that it is not altogether true that flowers are connected to love because of their function: a lover gives the corolla of petals to his loved one, not the pistil and stamen. This displacement Bataille finds to be similar to amorous sentiments between humans, who also do not fall in love with the organ, but with the person who has the organ. He takes the thought a step further pointing out several other "betrayals" of a rose: how a rose, stripped of its petals leaves behind only a "rather sordid tuft" (in some other flowers the "filth" of their organs) and how the fragile corolla, after its short period of magnificence, "rots indecently", becoming earth again.<sup>(5)</sup> Thus Bataille, presents on the stage of his natural theatre a play of tragicomic oppositions, even-

tually binding the flower, stem and root of the plant – the high and low – together in one endless cycle. Blossoming and rotting, beauty and death, sacred and sacrilege tied in continuous oscillating motion.

These musings on "betrayal by appearance" are not far removed from the oeuvre of Kannisto. Neither are Bataille's claims that interpretation should not rely heavily upon the connection to function or metaphor. In her work Kannisto examines the appearances, events and mechanisms of the natural world. More than that she examines our ways of looking at them – in the moments governed by an objectifying scientific gaze, as well as in those moments when looking itself becomes veiled in awe. Her work highlights and adjusts the relationships of things, fervently contesting the notion – which Bataille was already questioning – that only words could be useful when considering relative situations, things in relation to one another. In fact much of Kannisto's work centres around collecting, the very act of removal from the environment – and its recourse to the photographic gesture itself.

Black and white images by Karl Blossfeldt – the German photographer, for whom nature was a sculpture garden, an ornamental cathedral of forms accompanied Bataille's original text. Michael Taussig has suggested that Bataille put Blossfeldt's images in connection with his text because he saw how the unresolved tension be-

Top, left: Sanna Kannisto, *Dictyophora indusiata*, 2003, c-print, 75 x 94 cm, edition of 7.

Top, right: Sanna Kannisto, *Aristolochia gorgona*, 2003, c-print, 76 x 94 cm, edition of 7.

Bottom: Sanna Kannisto, *Passiflora vitifolia*, 2003, c-print, 76 x 91 cm, edition of 7.

Next spread, left: Sanna Kannisto, *Bee Studies: Orchid Bee Males*, 2004, DVD, 8'06.

Next spread, right: Sanna Kannisto, *Bee Studies*, 2003, c-print, 130 x 160 cm, (105 x 130 cm), edition of 7.







tween "what is art and what is nature" became visible in them.<sup>(6)</sup>

Kannisto's vision is more pulled back. She seems uninterested in the design elements of nature as such, but in the ways in which our confrontation with nature designs our thinking. It could be said that in this respect Kannisto's works fulfil and accentuate the promise Bataille saw in Blossfeldt's images.

#### Science and fiction

A second oblique angle from which one could illuminate Sanna Kannisto's work and thinking (if the first one was the *non-savoir* of Bataille) could be that of "science fiction". Like many works of science fiction Kannisto's work is also often based, usually in a very subtle way, on postulated scientific discoveries, on science pushed to its limits. The fact that these postulations are not openly verbalised or sensationalised in the work, as would be customary in the more popular science fiction genres, does not abolish

this connection. In Kannisto's works science fiction becomes redefined, not as a genre, but as intermittent movements between science and fiction.

A look at Kannisto's video *Bee Studies*: We see an extreme close-up of a leaf in front of the darker background of a tropical forest. The setting comes from nowhere and the viewer intrudes upon it unprepared. Suddenly the setting is disturbed by human hands, fine nails, introducing a Petri dish filled with white cotton wool, balancing it on a leaf. Immediately action ensues. Tropical flies, in all metallic colours and of various sizes, invade the Petri dish in a rush. Intoxicated by an invisible scent, the leaf swaying softly under their weight, the insects buzz at various pitches, landing and taking off again. Their flight postures and minuscule armatures are reminiscent of space ships, machines or alien creatures. (Reminding one also of the long history, most notably represented by artists like H. R. Giger, that combines insects with figures of science fiction.)

Once the initial sensation of witnessing a science fiction scene or an absurd video game fades one becomes aware of the many layers present in the work: the construction of the space in depth; the way in which the colourful insects are drawn by the invisible, colourless substance, (as if to conquer and fill the whiteness of the cotton); the constant motion of the flies that creates an energised space, a mesh of movement. In the video there are many layers of transparency – both visual and acoustic.

Kannisto's works open up theatres (operating theatres as well as theatres for plays) where the actions of nature and photographic events fuse and become exposed against each other. The photography of nature becomes superimposed on the nature of photography. In Kannisto's theatres one sees what adhesion is, what collecting means, and what it signifies to be attracted by a scent or by the brightness of a light.

More than anything Kannisto's works teach about the existence of two

different kinds of light, or about two different "wavelengths" of light. There is a fierce inquisitive light, that of science, harsh and powerful, but one-dimensional. Then there is a luring light, maybe just as strong, but a light that points to the places where the more silent parts of nature speak.

Such divisions are by no means forced in Kannisto's work. They are sometimes barely even visible. She has examined the ways and the rigour of natural sciences far too carefully to make such generalisations. Yet, in time, these elusive and more fleeting visions of the world, of relating *appearance* and *image*, might turn out to be the ways towards which knowing evolves.

Maybe, in the end, it all comes down to appreciating – alongside studying the instinctive behaviour of animals – also one's own instincts, to being able to say in wonderment how "[...] endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved" as Charles Darwin chose to end his famous book.<sup>(7)</sup> +





## Sanna Kannisto in an E-mail Conversation with Harri Laakso

**Harri Laakso (HL):** It seems that you have recently become more active in using the video medium. The video camera even earlier had a "presence" in some of your images – *Bee Studies* for example – but the main focus of your work has been on still images. Is this how you see it, or has video always been one of your interests alongside photography? What do you think of the relationship between these two ways of image making?

**Sanna Kannisto (SK):** I think it is the idea that decides which is the best way to execute it. For many years now I have worked almost exclusively using still photography. It takes time to learn a new medium (video) and to learn to think using its vocabulary. Photographers' videos can easily have a "still" quality in them; camera on a tripod and start shooting, with only a few edits. My videos are also such "moving photographs". I think it is even fun in a way that an artist's background or premises are visible in the end result. There is so much moving visual stimuli and bombardment by advertising imagery in the world that I am not at all worried if I make videos that are subtle and simplified. The moving image has become important for me because I want to extend the range of my work. I try to constantly break my own conventions.

**HL:** You have previously also made a number of image series, in which you examine change, variety and motion.

For example, you have made a series where you alter the tropical landscape, "making it more natural" (change), examine decomposing leaves alongside each other (variety) or capture the flight patterns of birds (motion). Such series have their reference points and precedents within the history of photography (motion series in the work of Muybridge, Marey, for example). How do you see the relationship – in your work – between these different photographic series and video?

**SK:** It is inevitable and interesting that my work has something in common with the history of photography, early natural historical illustrations, or the tradition of still life painting. In this way my images are not alone in the world.

Lévi-Strauss speaks of the artist as a *bricoleur*, who always works with materials and elements that have already been used. They carry earlier meanings and an earlier history. An artist then collects these elements and arrang-



Sanna Kannisto, *Poison Dart Frog Males*, 2001-2004/work in progress, DVD.



es and combines them in a new way. Chance always has a say in the work of the *bricoleur*. The choices made by the artist-*bricoleur* also reveal something about the artist, about his or her person and life. I think it is always possible to read references and influences in artworks.

HL: But you do see a connection between your serial works and your video works – in relation to time or to interpretation, for example?

SK: The sense of time is different in a photograph and in video. Video is more present in the time at hand; in a way it is in the same time dimension as us. In that way one can get more involved and drawn into video works. The viewer can, for example, begin to hope for or fear a specific turn in the story. I think my video works always have at least some dramatic structure and tension, even if one cannot identify with the main characters, since they are insects and frogs.

A photograph, on the other hand is absent, always in the past tense. Somehow it is more declaratory, more available as an image for the viewer, but not as an interpretation. I believe that my photographic series *Making Nature More Natural* – which examines change in landscape – is more open to interpretation as photographs than it would be as a video piece. As a videowork it would have a more documentary feel, the viewer's interpretation might have more to do with the genres of environmental or performance art. As a series of photographs it is more open to interpretation. Personally I enjoy this feature in photography

– the openness to interpretation that a photograph offers, and the problem or mystery that it poses.

My hummingbird series clearly has a video or an animation quality in it. The viewer starts to fill in the missing motions between the images and inevitably starts to read the series in a temporal way. However, there is also another side to it. The hummingbirds, when photographed in the simplified frozen way, distance themselves from photography and start to resemble more drawings or paintings. As a photographic series the work also has qualities that differ from video aesthetics. The prints have specific tones, darkness, sharpness and framing.

HL: A number of Finnish photographic artists have recently turned to video. Do you feel it has partly to do with sensing a certain "inability" within the medium of photography, of brushing up against its limit? To clarify: you work in tropical rainforests which are full of scents, sounds and movement – everything that a still camera is unable to portray. Has your working with video anything to do with wanting to capture and collect more of those actions, which have already had an implied presence in your photographic works (we have seen images of you recording sounds, of scientific experiments to do with insects attracted by fragrances etc.)?

SK: When walking in the forest one first senses the smells, sounds, colours, taste and feel of surfaces and only afterwards the forms, quantities and mobility. As an artist I try to contain narrative and sensory information in my

works. My way of working is based on seeing and experiencing. The moving image could in the future help resolve the contradiction between the performativeness of my fieldwork and the immobility of the photograph. I am first and foremost a photographer and I believe in photography as a medium.

HL: The aspect of a stage has been central to much of your still photography work. Most obviously I see this in your use of the portable studio, framed by the black curtains, where you photograph the different species. But it is evident also, I think, in the way you approach the forest itself (as a gradually revealed place of mystery), as well as in your way of arranging the sites of the biological experiments you photograph. In your videos there is the added dimension of drama – literally of life and death, sometimes. You let us witness the final moments of the prey of a praying mantis, or a wrestling match between tiny frogs. I see this as a natural extension of the stage theme: to set things in motion, once the stage is set. How do you think about this "theatrical" aspect of your work?

SK: The field studio has several meanings for me. It is a research laboratory, in which I analyse and dissect my subjects. On the other hand, it is a place of action or presentation, much like a theatre or a museum.

The theatrical aspect in my images and videos is based on my way of looking and experiencing, on the way in which things appear to me and how I have placed the camera. The image surface is often divided into a space in a similar manner, regardless of how

large or small are the views or details that I have photographed. Space and perspective are important elements in my images. The images often have a clear division of foreground and background. The main subject is often centred and light draws and accentuates it, like on a stage. I often use lighting, two or three flashes. In the video *Bee Studies* it is natural light that creates spatially the same feeling of a stage. In my *Dark Forest* images I have studied how light creates the perspective in the forest. When light disappears, it feels as if the whole reality of the forest was only created by light. The immense disorder of the forest becomes two-dimensional and clear. At night the forest tells nothing, it is just surface. It preserves its concealment.

HL: I think "revealing" or "undraping" things is an important aspect of your work. In many of your still works one enjoys the fantastic forms and appearance of plants and animals – sometimes in awe – while there is also, at the same time, a hint of "staging" – of something that forbids the beholder to fall for the image completely. Your video works reveal things and actions in a different way. At the beginning of your video *Poison Dart Frog Males*, for example, we perceive the "muscular" wrestling of the frogs in a totally different way than at the end when the camera pulls back to reveal how tiny they are. Do you think this aspect of revealing things works differently in still images and video?

SK: It is true that there often are incidents on the "stage" of my field studio, which are not captured in the photo-

Top: Sanna Kannisto, *Hummingbird flight: Eupetomena macroura*, 2005, series of 1-12, c-print, 44 x 56 cm.

Bottom: Sanna Kannisto, *Private Collection*, 2003, c-print, 130 x 161 cm, (105 x 130 cm), edition of 7.

