

**A CONVERSATION
BETWEEN SANNA KANNISTO
AND CHIARA BARDELLI NONINO**

Sanna Kannisto is a visual explorer: the modern equivalent of those romantic past figures venturing into the unknown. The Finnish photographer investigates with her work the relationship between scientific knowledge about nature and nature itself, highlighting the limits of what we carelessly regard as “truth” with her deeply poetic and surreal images.

What is immediately evident in her pictures is the contrast between their style and their subject matter: Kannisto has a thorough knowledge of the methods of representation of natural science, but instead of using them to categorize nature’s phenomena, she creates an ode to nature’s “immense disorder”. Her pictures are evidently staged, scattered with witty hints and references: images that challenge the concept of photography’s distinctive connection with reality.

White Space is a selection from Sanna Kannisto’s latest work *Local Vernacular*: a series of landscapes from Finland (and Sweden) that are in a visual dialogue with her acclaimed still lifes, shot at bird-ringing stations at Tulliniemi, on the Hanko Peninsula in Finland, at Baikal in Russia and on the island of Ponza in Italy. *White Space* presents some unpublished photographs that make up one of the most compelling collections of the artist’s impressive work. The visible set-ups, which simultaneously isolate the subjects and openly declare their artificial decontextualization, and the seemingly standardised nature of the images that shatters at a closer glance, when you realize that Kannisto shoots only live specimens, meaning that chance, chaos and the personality of the individual bird all play an essential role in the final outcome. All of these elements come together in this mesmerizing publication that manages to shed an otherworldly light on a supposedly familiar nature.

How did your interest in representing nature begin?

When I was a child we spent every summer, holidays and often weekends at our country home. I played alone in the forest, singing, building huts, collecting flowers and insects and small creatures, such as frogs. We also went mushroom and berry-picking, fishing: it was a great outdoor life. I think that all this has had a big influence on me: I’m used to being near nature and forests. Also, I have always been fascinated by how science explains the world to us.

Why did you choose photography as your medium?

I had the urge to express myself and my thoughts, but I had no skills or practice in drawing or painting, for example. I was thinking of becoming a journalist, but then I decided to study photography. A funny thing is that between the ages of 13 and 18 I was visually very impressed by MTV music videos. In Finland, MTV started broadcasting in 1987 and our home had cable tv, so I spent a lot of time watching music videos. They were a kind of pivotal for me, at that young age, like nothing I had seen before: they probably played a part in my visual education as a teenager. I also collected some foreign music magazines and studied the pictures. I come from a normal working class family and my parents did not expose me to much culture, so perhaps this is one of the ways I got closer to photography when I was young.

How did you develop your very personal aesthetics, this unique mix of scientific methods of representation, traditional still life painting, documentary and art photography?

It’s not easy to say how everything came together. Many things are connected – like an entangled mesh. It all developed over a long time-period and through practice. Scientific field stations, for example, have been inspiring places for me, both to work and to interact with people. They have offered me many possibilities to see different scientific projects and to work together with researchers - they still do. Then I have been looking at the past, reading about the history of science, voyages of discovery and how early natural history collections started, about cabinets of curiosities and museology. I also started to explore the concepts of scientific visualisation. Some of my images in the *Fieldwork* series are inspired by still life paintings from the 16th and 17th century.

Can you talk to me about your portable field studio? How did you develop it?

The field studio is a small scale studio and I can put it up anywhere I choose. A key point when photographing birds, for example, is the proximity.

I work together with scientists and bird banders, so my studio is close to the mist nets where the birds are captured and studied. The studio is made of white plexiglass and I light the subjects with a number of small flashlights. After the photoshoot, I can easily release the birds simply by opening the studio netting that connects the plexiglass part to the camera. I developed the first model of the studio in 1997 when I first traveled to the Peruvian Amazon and I wanted to make portraits of the flora and fauna of the rain forest.

What do you think about post-production?

I do creative post-production. I might, for example, modify the branches afterwards. I might change the dimensions or turn them a bit. I might also alter the focus when I combine several images. I think that my medium should give me freedom and possibilities rather than restrictions. My pictures are documentary in style, but I’m an artist so I don’t have any rules except my own.

Which artists’ work do you admire?

Étienne-Jules Marey for the early movement studies, Marcel Broodthaers especially for the conceptual work called *Musée d’art Moderne, Département des Aigles*, Masao Yamamoto – I have seen his small prints and they are so beautiful in so many ways. Also, the unique prints of German photographer Jochen Lempert. And I love the sensual world of Japanese photographer Rinko Kawauchi. I admire Taryn Simon a lot too. She makes such multidisciplinary and intelligent works. And Alec Soth for his documentary based works and writings. Lately I have been deeply touched by the works of Tamas Dezso and Danila Tkachenko.

Can you walk me through a typical day working in the field?

When I photograph birds I normally wake up before sunrise. I set up my equipment and I do the lighting so that everything is ready. I often walk the net-round with the bird banders and choose birds for my studio. I have a selection of branches ready that I have collected earlier. Then I make a snap decision on what to use. I first wait to see how the bird is behaving and reacting and then I take the photographs. After shooting one bird there might already be another one waiting or there might be some idle time, if no birds have been netted. During these interludes, I either walk around to find more branches, enjoy the landscape or I simply go inside to get warm. *Local Vernacular* has mostly been shot in locations where the weather conditions, especially in late autumn or early spring, can be pretty harsh.

In your editing process what makes one image stand out more than another?

I look at the posture of the bird, its eyes and expression. From a photographic perspective, a bold and inquisitive bird is the best: the kind that moves around and flies from place to place in the studio. This adds an element of chance that creates something extra in the image.

What about the role of chance in your art?

With landscapes, I search for locations beforehand and I also make test shoots. With the *Landscape 28th of April, 2017*, weather conditions, specifically rain and hail, destroyed the first possible shoot location. When I shot *First snow, 2017* I thought it was already a bit too dark but I knew that the snow would no longer be there in the morning. Photographing landscapes is a lot about timing. Working with live birds is exciting and surprising. They are intelligent, mysterious creatures, so you always need some luck I guess. I try to be as prepared as I can.

You stated that you find particularly interesting the special relationship that photography has with reality and time: “*the fact that the things depicted have actually been in front of the camera in some way.*”

This is a central element that makes photography such a compelling medium. A connection with the moment at which the picture is taken, with the subject of the image, or alternatively playing with that idea and manipulating the documentary nature of a photograph.

What is the importance of working in a series?

The fact that it is a thematic series and the fact that this allows me to work on a particular subject for longer are both important to me. It is somehow like a repeated mantra, state of mind, or a yoga move that is repeated over and over again. Through continuity, my work also deepens and evolves.

Are you interested in the reactions of the viewers? Do you have a message that you are trying to convey?

I am interested in the human desire to control nature but on the other hand I also explore that sense of wonder and surprise that can be experienced in nature. Photographs can be used to portrait their targets precisely and in detail. It’s almost easier to make precise observations about a bird from a picture than in nature. It’s often hard for an audience to understand how the pictures have been taken and that I photograph live birds, even when I explain it to them. The photographs that comprise the bird series are documentary yet simultaneously strange and even dream-like. I want my pictures to stimulate thoughts and feelings. And, most of all, to surprise.