

Bird's Eye Perspectives

Sanna Kannisto's Ornithological Stagings
Barbara Hofmann-Johnson

IN SANNA KANNISTO'S photographic work presented in this book, birds from various regions of the world are shown against white backdrops, some of which are framed by folds of black velvet drapes that extend diagonally into the pictorial space.

As individuals, in pairs or in groups, in the centre of the image, sitting on branches, some of them with leaves or berries, or in flight, in the Finnish artist's purist-aesthetic stage sets the birds pose as in portraits. With their colorful, graphically patterned plumage and individual physiognomies, they demonstrate once again why, in the diversity of their species, Charles Darwin already considered them belonging to the most aesthetic animals in nature.

In the images, we do not hear their chirping and songs as an individual 'language.' These particular qualities become moments of the videos, which represent another element of Sanna Kannisto's comprehensive group of works.

The photos were created in the vicinity of ornithological stations in Finland, Italy, the Lake Baikal region in Russia and in South America, which Sanna Kannisto repeatedly visited in order to observe birds, to capture and isolate them from their natural habitat for a short period of time and to free them again into a portable white 'field studio' as protagonists in their own pictorial world. From then onwards, it is the birds that decide how to position themselves, whether they become conspiratorial partners in Sanna Kannisto's photographic enactment and whether they permit a composition and their own specific pictorial quality.

Observing the birds throughout different seasons, Sanna Kannisto let them free for a short time in her field studio, where, after flying about and orienting themselves for a while, they would find a place to perch and were subsequently released again. Based upon an artistic concept, which involves patience and unpredictability, the creative and aesthetic qualities of the image are dependent upon interaction.

Referring to this collaborative aspect and the respectful relationship between the artist and the birds, in one of the images in this book Sanna Kannisto's hand appears gently holding a *Chloroceryle americana* (green kingfisher) (fig. 2).

Opening the sequence of pictures, whose titles usually designate the respective bird species by their scientific Latin classification, is a sedge warbler, *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*, sitting upright on a reed (fig. 1). Just as the two greenfinches in the following picture, *Chloris chloris* (fig. 6), or the blue tit in *Cyanistes caeruleus* (fig. 7), the sedge warbler belongs to the most common birds in European nature. The robin is not always a migratory bird and in some regions it stays in the European forests and in people's gardens during winter as can be seen

in the motif entitled *Freezing Rain* (fig. 3) from 2017. Works such as *Luscinia calliope* (Siberian rubythroat) (fig. 8) and *Emberiza leucocephalos* (pine bunting) (fig. 9) were created in the area around Lake Baikal. They show “Asian species that are only rarely seen in Europe apart from occasional infrequent sightings. They fly via Asian migratory flyways”, says the artist.

Other birds, however, like the blue-black grosbeak, *Cyanocompsa cyanooides* (fig. 4), or the spot-crowned euphonia, *Euphonia imitans* (fig. 5), are at home in South America and, sitting on bent or bizarrely formed branches, occupy an individual position in the pictorial space.

“The white backdrop removes the animals from their original context and shifts the experience of nature to the realm of culture”. This is how an earlier work by Sanna Kannisto including birds as motifs and how the artist’s aesthetic concept is described in the catalogue from the exhibition *observing beast, time, evolution*. Using a selection of pieces by international contemporary artists, the project explored the subject of art and science and also introduced cultural-historical references relating to the tradition of this subject, which is also a constant reference point for Sanna Kannisto’s work in the field of photography.¹

For about two decades, Sanna Kannisto’s photographic work has focused on the observation of nature and its particular manifestations as expressed in the landscapes of the rain forest, in the world of flora and fauna including its different species of reptiles, insects, frogs and bats, or, as in this book, in the particular beauty of birds.

Pursuing this thematic interest, the artist worked alongside scientists in field stations in South American rain forests or cooperated with bird researchers in ornithological observation posts in order to find the protagonists for her photographic stagings. Similar to a scientist, she studies the birds’ behaviour or the special features of plants in order to eventually let them perform in the artistic pictorial worlds of her portable studio.

The focus in scientific research is on observing the biodiversity of plants, animals and natural phenomena over certain periods of time in their natural habitats, on classifying them and on gaining objective scientific knowledge. The subject of Sanna Kannisto’s artistic work, however, is to highlight both the particular characteristics of nature and the methods we have developed to observe, explore and perceive it, in order to transfer these methods into individual aesthetic models.

“I’m interested in how nature is portrayed and represented in the practice of art and science. And how we approach nature [...] through different methods, theories, and concepts and according to different needs”, she once described her concept, continuing “to me it’s more about trying to research human ways of seeing and working than claiming to make research on nature”.²



MOBILE STUDIO-SET ON THE RIVER BANK,
GOLFITO PUNTARENAS, COSTA RICA 2018.

1 Elke Falat, Sabine Mila Kunz (Eds.): *observing beast, time, evolution. Art and Science*. Exhibition catalogue, Hildesheim, 2008, Bielefeld/Leipzig: KERBER ART, p. 66.

2 Sanna Kannisto, cited in Simon Baker: ‘Immense Disorder’. Essay in Sanna Kannisto: *Fieldwork*, New York: aperture, 2015, without page numbers.

The isolation of motifs against a white backdrop is reminiscent of the iconographic tradition in scientific and also in art-historical illustrations from the 16th century onwards. Another important aspect of Sanna Kannisto's contemporary photographic compositions lies in the lab stands and vintage bunsen burners used for holding the branches: they are technical items derived from other scientific contexts that anchor the pictorial space between nature and human construction, and, like the branches, they have their own forms.

"Rooted in the traditions of scientific illustration and often drawing on the methods of the community, her work departs into a more subjective visual research—one that often acknowledges the processes and techniques we use to produce knowledge on the natural world around us. A dance between art and science, information and enigma. The intimate glance exchanged between observed and observer becomes all the more poignant in the context of our current ecological crisis", states Sophie Wright in her essay *Observing Eye* published in the online magazine *lensculture*.³

She thus also indirectly refers to the critical potential inherent in Sanna Kannisto's aesthetic-artificial stagings, relating to the portrayal of endangered species—an aspect which was also the subject of the artist's recent collage works (fig. 40 and 41) that combine and juxtapose images, texts and diagrams about research on nature and ecological questions, such as the dwindling numbers of birds and insects. As a new aspect in Sanna Kannisto's work, these collages give an insight into her working process.

Birds are metaphors for the longing for freedom—both of mind and of movement. The ability of birds to fly and to rise above the Earth—also a symbol of rising above the burdens of life—has always aroused a sense of longing in humans. Some of Sanna Kannisto's motifs also relate to the context of both this symbolic tradition and the particular aesthetic of the flapping wing with its splayed feathers. The robin shot in flight in the work *Erithacus rubecula in Flight* (fig. 12) or the goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* (fig. 13) are examples of this.

When relating the theme of representing birds to the tradition of illustration and painting, one could also consider Carel Fabritius' small painting *The Goldfinch* from 1654. It is part of the Royal Collection of paintings at Mauritshuis in The Hague and also served as inspiration for a novel.⁴

Unlike Sanna Kannisto's goldfinch shot in flight, Carel Fabritius' painted finch sits on a small wooden box mounted on a light-colored wall. Tied to the upper of two perches with a little chain around its right leg, the finch's captivity once again illustrates the human desire to domesticate the beauty and alienity of nature. The small-format picture is painted from a low angle and was most likely intended to be mount-



PHOTOGRAPHING CHERRIE'S TANAGER,
GOLFITO PUNTARENAS, COSTA RICA 2018.

3 Sophie Wright: 'Observing Eye', in: www.lensculture.com, accessed on 30 October 2019.

4 The painting *The Goldfinch* by Carel Fabritius became the subject of the eponymous novel by Donna Tartt. The book was first published on 22 October 2013 by Little, Brown and Company. The German translation by Rainer Schmidt and Kristian Lutze was published by Goldmann on 10 March 2014.



SHOOTING VIDEO AT HALIAS BIRD
OBSERVATORY IN HANKO FINLAND
2019.

ed above the viewer's head height, which is also underpinned by the fact that the bird's eye is gazing downwards.

Emphasizing the bird's eye perspective as a metaphor for overview, despite the bird's captivity and the small size of the picture, the image seems to imply the question as to who dominates whom or, respectively, who is dependent upon whom—also a significant aspect with regard to the waiting times necessary for successfully achieving Sanna Kannisto's photographic compositions.

As a reflexive and reflecting moment, viewing the world and things from a bird's eye perspective is usually metaphorically equated with wanting to gain both an overview and a clarifying distance.

In Sanna Kannisto's images, too, the eyes of the birds redirect the viewers' gaze to themselves, just as in portraits. In his essay *Why Look at Animals?* the art philosopher and artist John Berger explores this special relationship between humans and animals. He states: "The eyes of an animal when they consider a man are attentive and wary. The same animal may well look at other species in the same way. He does not reserve a special look for man. But by no other species except man will the animal's look be recognised as familiar. Other animals are held by the look. Man becomes aware of himself returning the look."⁵

In the sense of this quote, the series of images introduced in this book by Sanna Kannisto with the title *Observing Eye* alludes, in many and multifaceted respects, to the question of perception, observation and exploration, and to seeing as a possible philosophical dimension of acquiring knowledge, with photography playing a special role as extended human vision enabled by technology.

Hence, the title *Observing Eye* can be interpreted as an ambiguous reference to the human being and, above all, to the ultimately unfathomable gaze of the birds. While language may bridge the 'abysses' between humans, according to John Berger, the relationship between human and animal remains uncertain—even if birds have their own language, one might add.⁶

And yet, the eyes of the birds appear like a complicit moment in the stagings in Sanna Kannisto's studio, as they seem to initiate the dialogue with the viewer as they had before with the artist. For a brief moment the birds are willing—so it seems—to pose for a picture, sitting on branches or little trees set against a white backdrop or framed by black velvet drapes, before being released again and flying off to get on with their lives in the cycle of an only marginally comprehensible and endangered nature.

5 John Berger: 'Why Look At Animals?' In: John Berger: *About Looking*. Electronic edition. Bloomsbury 2015, p. 4.

6 Ibid. p. 5.



2 / *Chloroceryle americana*



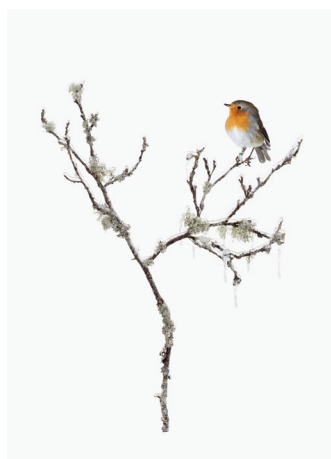
1 / *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*



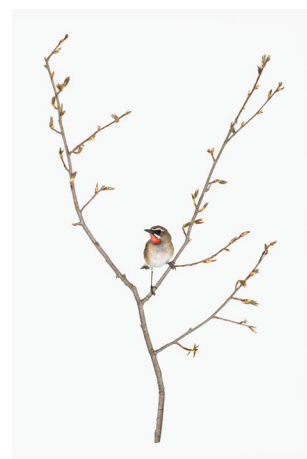
6 / *Chloris chloris*



7 / *Cyanistes caeruleus*



3 / Freezing rain



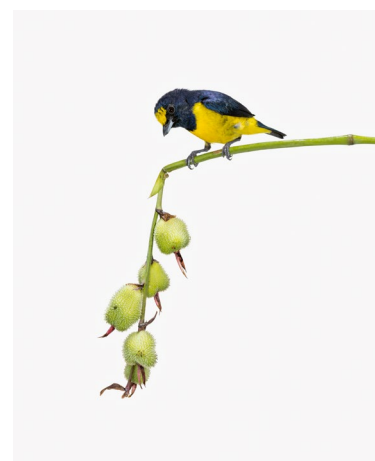
8 / *Luscinia calliope*



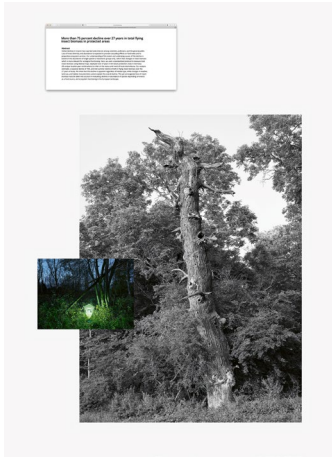
9 / *Emberiza leucocephalos*



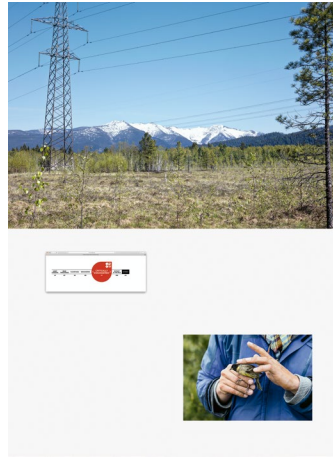
4 / *Cyanocompsa cyanoidea*



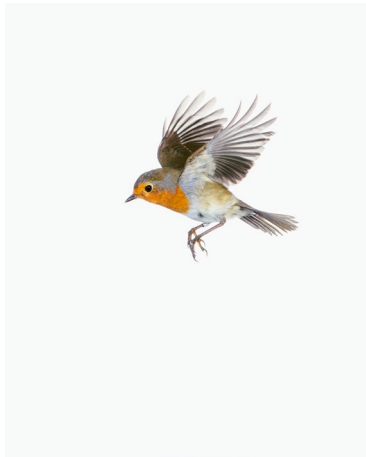
5 / *Euphonia imitans*



10 / Hollow Oak, Insect Trap, Research Article, 2019



11 / Mountains and Wetland at Baikal, Yellow Breasted Bunting, Red-list Conservation Status, 2019



12 / Erithacus rubecula in Flight



13 / Carduelis carduelis

Barbara Hofmann-Johnson graduated in art history, German philology and theatre, film and television studies from the University of Cologne, Germany.

From the early 1990s onwards, she has curated contemporary art exhibitions with a focus on photography in Germany and abroad. From 2003 to 2016, she was also a freelance staff member at Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur—August Sander Archiv in Cologne.

As a guest curator, in 2018, she organised the exhibition Bernd, Hilla und die anderen at Huis Marseille—Museum for Photography in Amsterdam.

Since 2016, she has been director of the Braunschweig Museum of Photography (Museum für Photographie Braunschweig), Germany.

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