

**Albena Yaneva<sup>1</sup>***Birds Make Cages for Humans**Hanimann's Techniques for Artistic Capture, 2004*

Birds staring at us, birds enclosed in cages, sitting on ropes criss-crossing spaces - that is what Alex Hanimann invites us to see. «It's about birds!» we might say at first glance, continuing to stroll around the exhibition. Then, stopping surprised in front of a door, we hesitate, read the sign and finally cross the threshold, having been both provoked and invited to do so. Enclosed in the tiny space, we find ourselves «entrapped» by the setting and captured by its artistic potential. Caught in the bird-made cage, we realize that the exhibition is not simply about birds, but even more about various ways of human entrapment. The door of the installation, large enough for people to enter, instantly encloses them in a small space. The birds, playing the role of a lure, are the only creatures that will share the space with the few entrapped visitors.

The installation is composed of two types of cages: the first is situated at the entrance and supposedly shelters the human visitors; the second type of cage (a blue room and a red room) is inhabited by birds. The installation can be interpreted as a scale model for a house that accommodates both animals and humans, enabling them to live together for a while. Their togetherness would not be possible without specific barriers embodied in the installation architecture: large spaces in which the birds are free to fly around and circulate, and small spaces in which the humans are «trapped». The layout may also be read as a metaphorical rendition of the contradiction between the desire to be totally free and unencumbered, and the need to be totally secure and protected. Both sets of feelings could apply to Hanimann's birds in the red and the blue cages, and also to the artist's human visitors in the entrance cage. What humans experience once entrapped in the cage may be equivalent, to a certain extent, to what the birds experience while flying around in the closed, room-sized cages of the installation. The animal and human cages are sites of dwelling and represent possible natural resting-places in the artificial environment of the exhibition hall. The strategy of a reduced architectural scale makes the art accessible; it fosters a physical and emotional proximity between humans and non-humans. The affective nature of this artwork comes from the sense of sharing the private visions that smallness engenders, in contrast to the scale of the environment outside the exhibition hall, where encounters between birds and humans take place in a much more expanded, inaccessible and uncontrollable context.

In terms of the symbolic meanings that Hanimann's art evokes or the political and social implications it embodies, one may interpret it as a means of explaining how the world is and how humans and animals can intervene in its making; on the other hand, one may look more concretely at how his art functions in practice. Painted, captured in pictures, birds are used as modules to compose images, but they can also literally act as nets that trap visitors. The traps

Hanimann builds are not imaginary or spiritual but rather utilitarian, such as the box that traps visitors in the installation.

By choosing to exhibit birds entrapped in an installation, the artist plays with the social nexus of entrapment: who is the hunter and who is the victim? What is a trap? Who is being trapped in it? What role is played by the juxtaposition of the drama of hunting with the exhibition of birds as contemporary artworks? How are visitors persuaded to enter the bird-made traps? Who can tell them a tale sufficiently compelling to induce them to think about birds differently, to step aside and avoid interaction with them, or to enter a zone of possible interaction? Hanimann deploys specific artistic techniques to capture his visitors.

The first very important technique is the fundamental ambiguity about who plays the hunter in this setting, what has been trapped in the cage, what serves as a lure, and how do creatures get caught in or escape from the bird-made cage? Since the birds have already been caught before the installation takes place in the museum, the real hunter of the visitors is not the artist, but the birds trapped in the two cages. Their songs, their rustling and movement, provoke the viewers into entering the space, thus transforming the installation into a huge bird-made cage for humans.

The second artistic technique is to question the disposition, both spatial and social, of humans and birds, hunter and victim. As soon as visitors enter the installation, they become victims. The aesthetic experience establishes a hierarchy of birds and humans. People remaining in the installation space stare at the birds without being able to catch them or get closer to them. Similarly, the birds flying around the closed cages move in all directions without being able to go down to the visitors' space and interact with them. Enclosed in separate cages, visitors and birds remain side by side in the well-structured installation space. Their positions are equalized in the aesthetic experience; the roles of victim and hunter are blurred. The canaries in the exhibition are caged in the same way as the visitors who (voluntarily) walk into the space of the installation; they both prove to be easy prey.

Any transformation of birds in the space of art engages in a discourse about human beings. There is explicit human participation in the making of every bird painting, of every bird-cage construction, of every bird entrapment. Reversing the usual anthropocentric meaning of «trap», Hanimann's birds say more about us than they do about themselves inasmuch as the artist's practical exploration of bird pictures and installations demonstrates their potential to influence mutual relations and interaction. His installations are therefore transformed representations of maker-hunter (the artist), victims (the birds), and the social relationship between them. However, the vertical relationship of human hunter to trapped animal is essentially inverted: the installation acts as a real hunting device, a mousetrap for viewers. The hunter must be well versed in the habitual responses of the victims in order to make them believe and play the game that the art installation implies. Provoked by the installation, surprised and attracted, human visitors finally enter, only to find themselves captured and effectively trapped in the space. But once there, they become victims of other victims; their trap is a trap within another trap. This redundant setting establishes a different order between birds and visitors, animals

and humans, artist and public, a horizontal order of mutually interfering relationships in which none can take a central, dominant position. In this center-less and heterogeneous social nexus every participant is at the same time trapper and prey; visitors, artists and birds are simultaneously hunters and victims in a long-term artistic venture.

In this way, Alex Hanimann reconfigures conventional power relationships.

His artworks function as nets. And since nets are used for hunting, and hunting is a means of obtaining food, it means that the net is a tool, namely, an artistic tool. As we know from anthropology, the import of hunting lies not only in its ritual impact but also in the metaphysical significance of its equipment. Hanimann's installation plays the metaphysically significant role of functioning as a tool that hunts visitors. Instead of merely exhibiting trapped birds, the artist manages to turn his bird-made traps for humans into artworks in which both intentionality and agency are embedded.

The cogent metaphor of a trapping net possesses profound practical significance for Hanimann's oeuvre. It may ultimately lead to a radical redefinition of the meaning of the artwork in contemporary art. What we experience in Hanimann's installations is the very essence of «capture». To a certain degree, all art resembles these bird-made artworks; every piece of art is a trap or a snare that attracts and seizes, compels and captures a number of victims within its fine net. The gallery that exhibits them is nothing but a space that keeps its victims captive for a given length of time. Hanimann brilliantly demonstrates the power of art to capture different forces – times and spaces, gallery-goers and, for instance, birds – in «one fell swoop.» Hanimann's artistic venture successfully elaborates such entrapment settings, which are becoming more and more complex, more puzzling and, paradoxically, more consistent and consolidated, for it is able to capture birds and visitors, subjective and objective forces, with exceptional and binding intensity. By foregrounding movements of entrapment and subversion, of disjunction and readjustment among all the participants in the installation, that venture reconfigures and makes visible relations and dispositions among them. That is what art is about. The impact of Alex Hanimann's art does not lie in the participants nor in the formal significance of their actions, but rather in the forces of capture, the trickery of getting trapped, the puzzling dynamics of construction, the intensity of entrapment and, above all, the charged density of the time that birds and humans spend enclosed together in the space of the installation, swept away from the hubbub of the exhibition hall.

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