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ANIMALS' EYES — APPROACHES TO A TRAP

These camera trap photographs may have been originally shot to observe animals in the wild for such pragmatic purposes as scientific research, population control, hunting. Now that they've infiltrated the perceptual world of art, however, they turn out to outfox human vision in several ways. The camera traps are set to meet our visual expectations — to yield satisfying *visuals* in the physical as well as social and psychological sense of the word. Four aspects of these images open up possible interpretations.

Mirror view

The longer I look at these pictures, the longer they look at me and the more unnerving they become. Stags and does, tigers and hares, hyenas, foxes, lions, monkeys, wild boar, a panda, an armadillo and a bear look at me from every angle, wherever an automatic camera has captured them. As though they had to observe me at close range, wordlessly, harmlessly, beautifully, and suddenly I'm the one captured. The camera has caught us both off-guard in an unanticipated instant of helplessness. The flash-lit wildlife may be 'trapped', but so is the trapper.

I don't know how to construe what is so suddenly apparent: naturally, the animals can be discerned and for the most part identified. Only they somehow seem to elude relegation to subject-hood in order to expose the viewer's voyeurism. What in the world am I doing lurking here on a dark deer path in the middle of the night? What's my motive for intruding on this hidden world? The animals cannot be caught by the camera and I can see that eternal elusiveness in their eyes, as though I were standing in front of a metaphorical mirror. This strange creature facing me feeds my fascination, while any psychological interpretation falls flat.

Alex Hanimann's photographic face-offs do not involve actual eye contact. The immediacy of face-to-face confrontation gives way to a mediated encounter in an intermediate realm with a logic of its own. The animal remains abstracted by the eye of the camera, just as I have a recording apparatus stand in for me. There are also a number of shots in which the animal isn't looking at the camera, in which the shiny hippopotamus eludes the camera's searching gaze — as well as my voyeurism —, distanced forever by being photographically fixed. When I look at a single picture, all the recognizable elements appear in an odd equivalence, so that the surrounding woods and the deer paths through the undergrowth make a vital contribution to the atmosphere. The flash, sometimes reflected in the animals' gleaming eyes, often becomes the decisive director of the moment.

In one particular essay, John Berger looks at how we look at animals. He likens direct eye contact to playing around an 'abyss of non-comprehension', even as the animal seems a silent mirror and blank space onto which to project daydreams and fantasies, wishes and fears:

'In the accompanying ideology, animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance. They are the objects of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, thus an index of what separates us from them. The more we know, the further away they are. [...] [T]he life of a wild animal becomes an ideal, an ideal internalized as a feeling surrounding a repressed desire. The image of a wild animal becomes the starting-point of a daydream: a point from which the day-dreamer departs with his back turned. [...] 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 recognized as familiar. Other animals are held by the look. Man becomes aware of himself returning the look. The animal scrutinizes him across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension.'¹

Our exchange of looks with animals remains abstract. It blots out a great deal in our sensory experience of them, their soft or bristly fur, their very particular odors in a house, forest or zoo. Or does camera trap photography intuitively summon up these very experiences so that they unconsciously figure in our contemplation of the images? In any case, the surprising immediacy of the flash photos taken by camera traps never lets us forget that the exchange of looks between man and animal is highly codified by individual experiences and tradition.

Zoo exoticism

The pictures in *Trapped* come up against a complex of collective conceptions of animals that oscillate between the greatest affective closeness to an alter ego, exotic delight in contemplation of the other and sheer revulsion towards the unfathomable. In his *Aesthetics of Ugliness* (1853), German philosopher Karl Rosenkranz elaborates on such affects:

'Certain jellyfish, squid, caterpillars, spiders, rays, lizards, frogs, toads, rodents, pachyderms, apes are positively ugly. Some of these animals are important to us, or at least interesting, such as the electric ray. Others impress us in their ugliness through their size and strength, like the hippopotamus, the rhinoceros, the camel, the elephant, the giraffe. At times, the animal world takes a comic turn,

1 John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?", 1977, p. 5.

as with some egrets, toucans, penguins, and some mice and primates. Many animals are beautiful. How beautiful are some conches, butterflies, beetles, snakes, doves, parrots, horses! [...]

By contrast, the structure of the animal is in and of itself definite. As a consequence, should a limb be wounded or taken away, the animal would become immediately uglier. The horse is undisputedly the most beautiful animal; for this very reason it is the one that through disease, age, rheumy eyes, hanging belly, protruding bones, visible ribs, and spotty baldness looks particularly repulsive.²

Some of the photographs in the present collection show individual animals whose figures have been cropped or whose contours are hard to make out. The visual deformation affects us differently from actual dismemberment, however, insofar as it does not actually jeopardize the integrity of the body shape: once we've identified a given animal, we visualize it as it would ordinarily look. The visual focus on details has a dramatic rather than repulsive effect.

The possible kinship between man and animals is a poetic genre. The peculiar combination of the strangeness and familiarity of animals, both native and exotic species, puts them at a medium distance that is used in fables for moral instruction. Rosenkranz pointed up this relation as well:

'Were the supernaturalist hypothesis of the origin of ugliness through an evil that has corrupted nature true, then the predators and poisonous snakes would also have to be ugly on principle, which is so little the case that on the contrary the poison-fanged snakes and the wild cats are distinguished through beauty, indeed through splendour. The unnatural, however, has in fact no application to nature, since, lacking freedom of consciousness and will, nature is unable to break a law intentionally. For animals, there exists no law of self-respect and filial piety and thus also no crime against it. Self-dirtying, incest, and infanticide are concepts that only belong to the world of minds, and it is false sentimentality to be appalled by the misdeeds of the animal world, which does not judge them as such.'³

So we can approach the predators calmly and with aesthetic composure. *Trapped* initially prompts us to view the pictures with a scientifically objectivizing eye, all the more so as the camera trap originated as a tool for scientific research. Captured by an analytical camera that is triggered without any authorial decision, animals from faraway lands bear an uncanny resemblance to those from our local woods. The lion and the deer are put on a peculiarly equal footing, until the projective imagination

2 Karl Rosenkranz, *Aesthetics of Ugliness: A Critical Edition*, trans. Andrei Pop & Mechtild Widrich, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015, pp. 40ff.

3 *Loc. cit.* pp. 41–42.

with its exoticist biases reintroduces a fundamental distinction in our perceptions. The creatures shown here are wild animals, not pets. The protagonists are mammals, for the beetles, ants and snakes in the undergrowth remain hidden from view. And yet do they still figure in our conception of the jungle or forest all the same?

Even as our love of animals is readily bought and sold in the mass media and the retail trade, the scientific community is well aware that whole species are dying out. Their accelerating disappearance, primarily due to encroachment on and increasingly intensive use of their habitats by man, gives a special ambivalence to our direct confrontation with the animals in these pictures. Their gaze into the silent mirror also takes on a menacing directness, as though they knew more about their plight than we would wish. The endangered exoticism of wildlife suddenly and unexpectedly ties into the logic of zoos, reservations we've set up for displaced species. Have photographs of animals in their natural habitats attained a status similar to Bernd and Hilla Becher's photo-documentation of heavy industry?

Self-portraits

Camera traps are technical tools for making animals visible to humans, day and night, wherever they're still hidden from our view. These automatic cameras are triggered by self-timers, thus producing 'self-portraits' in more than one sense. The technical metadata are visible in every corner of the resulting photograph, in any case more conspicuous than in ordinary photographs. Each picture shows a subject as well as its own mediality. Inasmuch as the shutter is triggered by the subject itself, the photograph skips the authorial level of the photographer's decisive eye. The 'author' is an anonymous contraption — or rather the firstviewers: the voyeur beats the artist to it here. This technical setting makes good on Roland Barthes' remark that the death of the author is the birth of the reader.

Once it's set, the camera trap directs its own visuals. The night vision shots in particular, with their signature greenish tint, recall familiar footage by embedded journalists of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. It was on the basis of such images that Hito Steyerl formulated her theory of 'documentary uncertainty': images produced using night vision devices, or while driving at breakneck speed or dashing madly through house-to-house fighting, and consequently blurred nearly to the point of abstraction are taken as 'documentary' evidence of the authenticity of war reporting instead of images showing clearly identifiable subjects. In

other words, the guarantee of the 'reality' that an image claims to document is not its verifiable contents, but the blurring thereof:

'Not only does this indistinctness give the pictures the desired feel of authenticity, but if you look more closely it is also quite revealing. For this type of image is now ubiquitous. We are surrounded by crude and increasingly abstract "documentary" images, shaky, dark or blurred patterns that hardly show anything but their own agitation. The more direct, the more immediate, they purport to be, the less there is to see in most cases. They evoke a permanent state of emergency, crisis, heightened tension and vigilance. The closer we seem to be getting to reality, the fuzzier and more indistinct it becomes. Let's call this phenomenon the "uncertainty principle of modern documentarism".'⁴

These images, which dissolve into abstraction and for the most part circulate in the immateriality of virtual data rooms, do not 'document' real conditions on the ground anymore, but serve political purposes by presenting 'reality' as an ongoing state of emergency. Following Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben has described in depth the normalization of the state of emergency. Documentary initially served to present a critical look at the world from a reflective distance. Now an affective relation to the message-bearers and their media channels is to take the place of factuality. We are supposed to believe we're right there with them in the thick of it, amid the 'agitated blur' of reality: 'The need for objective, institutionally guaranteed, if not scientifically inspired, reliability, which made for the credibility of documentary forms, is being steadily supplanted by the craving for intensity.'⁵

Steyerl's assessment of the emotionalization of documentary applies to photojournalism and science alike, even if the precision of scientific images looks diametrically opposed to the blurred action shots of photo-reportage: state-of-the-art wildlife photography now supplies us with ever more spectacular close-ups of 'exciting' nature, often by means of high-resolution, high-speed and underwater cameras, extreme zooms and drones embedded among migrating birds and swarming bees.

The camera trap shots look archaic in comparison. Alex Hanimann refuses both blurring into abstraction and any high-resolution suggestion of participating in the action. In assembling found pictures into what we might call a 'still of stills', he leaves them open to the dynamic of multiple interpretation and accords them a different duration of aesthetic contemplation. Each image leaves traces of its own production as well as hints of possible narrative trajectories: With its hind paws in

4 Hito Steyerl, *Die Farbe der Wahrheit, Dokumentarismen im Kunstfeld*, Vienna/Berlin 2008, pp. 7-8.

5 Steyerl, *loc. cit.*, p. 14

front of its ears and muzzle, nearly airborne in its bounding flight, where is this hare dashing off to as it exits (frame right) the field of vision and perhaps even the field of snow? Is there a hunter on its tail? Or is it running late again in Wonderland, no time to say hello-goodbye to Alice — and Lewis Carroll?

These snapshots are the upshot of continuous wildlife observation through a stationary lens. In the context of art, as opposed to analytical observation by game wardens or zoologists, we expect an emphatic view that is at least equally focused on its own composition. The term 'self-portrait' remains polysemous here: as a self-portrayal of the trapper, an automatic snapshot and an image type that reveals and reflects its own production.

In each of his video portraits, Thomas Struth films a seated subject facing the camera, mute and motionless, for an hour. An emotionally charged encounter is thereby prolonged into a period of contemplation. Everyone involved, including of course the viewer, must endure the subject's protracted stare. The prolonged confrontation with these camera trap photographs may be gruelingly fascinating in a similar way. For, although they do freeze an instant in time, these snapshots are governed by a special relation between stasis and dynamism, as though they were stills culled from moving pictures. Fleet of foot as they may be, hares, which figure prominently and surprisingly frequently in this series, apparently can't outrun the apparatus, which catches them just in time. Birds, on the other hand, tend to move in other spheres and seldom alight in these pictures.

Although the shutter is triggered by motion detectors or heat sensors, leaving a great deal of the composition to chance, certain constants emerge in these fleeting glimpses: above and beyond the specific mood of each individual shot, the infra-red images are steeped in an all-encompassing greenish tint, featuring flash-lit bright spots beside blind spots of tenebrous darkness, razor-sharp details beside dim or blurred passages. Since the cameras are, as a rule, placed at the animals' eye level, their point-of-view is closer to that of other animals than of human observers. So where does this unfamiliar role change in perception put us? In most of the scenes we are quite close up, often right in the thick of it, as though out there in the wild with them, part of the scene. With no barrier or distance between us and the subject, this immediacy remains at variance with our dissociating awareness of the above-described mirrored gaze and of the technical mediacy of the pictures.

Unlike shots of animals in zoos or wildlife photography involving weeks of patient observation in the field, a camera trap captures

animals as passersby at a spot where they are likely to be found. Each picture becomes a still of a continuous movement, so we use our imaginations to fill in the blanks before and after that frozen captured instant. What we see is the moment of shock, in which fully unfettered movement suddenly stops.

The dynamism of Alex Hanimann's series emerges even more starkly in contrast with Balthasar Burkhard's utterly static large-format photographs of animals: his elephant, camel, rhino and zebra are portrayed in a setting of studio-like neutrality, and their contours determine the proportions of the picture. Shot in profile and in sharp focus, they seem prototypes of their species. The snapshots taken by automatic cameras, in comparison, seem like stills of individual actors from a GoPro video.

Hiroshi Sugimoto, in his pictures of dioramas, likewise shows animals in their habitat. The extreme stasis of his photographs, however, stems as much from the stuffed animals themselves as from the scientifically based reconstructions of the second nature of their habitat. Photography here becomes an objectified document of purely constructed reality, an unerring record of a naturally reconstructed, stage-lit environment.

In Burkhard and Sugimoto, exemplary animals become the protagonists of a perfect *mis-en-scène*. Alex Hanimann's profusion of camera trap photos, on the other hand, is built up out of unfiltered, non-optimized takes with plenty of ambient noise, redolent of the smell of the wild. On the cavernous sets momentarily floodlit by plain-air cameras, various actors sometimes take the stage, so it's not always clear who's playing which part. In any case, animals come closer to people in their dramaturgy than any artefacts, as Hilla Becher observes in an interview:

'Why conveyors and furnaces, of all things? — Hilla Becher: Because they're honest. They are functional and show what they do. We liked that. A person is always what they'd like to be, never what they are. Even animals usually act a part in front of the camera.'⁶

The nature of language vs. the language of nature

'Is there anybody?' it said in gray letters pasted onto a wall at a 2012 exhibit of Alex Hanimann's text-based works at the MAMCO in Geneva. This short harmless question plumbs an abyss in human consciousness. For would the question exist at all in the absence of a mind with sufficient command of English to decode it and apprehend it as a question? Placed at human eye level in a museum, the lettering on the wall banks on the possible presence of such a mind. And yet it fundamentally calls into question the presence and very nature of all readers. Could it be that a

nobody is reading this rhetorical expression of existential doubt? If we then apply this question to camera trap snapshots of animals, then the uncertainty increases. Do we think an animal asks itself this question when surprised by the camera? Or is it just that we think it ought to? Are animals ‘anybody’? Would we be ‘anybody’ if an animal asked the question? And what would this ‘anybody’ think?

‘In what we call the “natural sciences” [...] the differentiation between humans and animals is still the law, even though most biologists will now say “other animals”. This means that when we study intelligence, we use every ridiculous way to continually say that human, “our”, intelligence is the standard. I must say that that does not seem very intelligent. Certainly our intelligence might be the proper standard for studying the intelligence of non-arboreal upright bipedal primates. But if we mean “rationality”, or “logic”, when we observe our behavior and how it has affected the world, we surely must see that our idea of our own intelligence must also be much more complex.’⁷

In these remarks on his sculptures, which magically transmute found objects and everyday materials into ‘European Animals’, Jimmie Durham does not deny the difference between human and animal intelligence, but he does refute any presumption of biological hierarchy or hegemony. Likewise, over the course of many years’ exploration of the animal kingdom, chiefly horses, and human languages, Alex Hanimann has continually challenged the prevailing taxonomies. Delving into his doubts about the classification of things and the semantic rules of combination, he combines words and expressions in several languages on many different visual media to form a multilayered corpus of semantics and typography. The lettering and its placement often fly in the face of its literal or apparent meaning. The object is to liberate elements of language from their conventional rules of combination. The artist deconstructs verbal language in particular, as a highly codified social system, to extract other potential meanings beyond the usual logic of language. Alex Hanimann puts ‘nature’ into words.

In drawing this connection between language and pictures of animals, his work is closely related to a series of videos from the 1980s and early ’90s in which Marie José Burki looks into the gap between the spoken word and virtually static images, juxtaposing tranquil close-ups of various animals — most prominently, owls and dogs — with names and terms recorded on a soundtrack. Phonetic modulations of the French plural *animaux*, for example, put language into flux like a malleable material, and with it the recognizability of seemingly familiar physiognomies.

6 “Klar waren wir Freaks”, interview with Hilla Becher by Dominik Wichmann & Tobias Haberl, *Magazin der Süddeutschen Zeitung*, No. 20/2008, May 16, 2008, pp. 24–32, in: Ulf Erdmann Ziegler & Dominik Wichmann, *Bernd & Hilla Becher im Gespräch, zwei Interviews*, Schirmer Mosel, Munich 2016, p. 100.

7 Jimmie Durham, *God’s Children, God’s Poems*, catalog, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zürich 2017, p. 12.

'I'm interested not so much in the ideational antithesis between nature and culture, between wildness and civilization, as in their radical otherness. I'm hardly interested at all in the lives of animals in the wild. What does interest me is how we humans relate to animals. But I feel closer to people than to animals. How we humans relate to animals says a lot about people and nothing about animals.'⁸

So does the *Trapped* collection. Although these pictures were shot in the wilderness and are interrelated here without any manifest reference to language, they reveal constant shifts in the way pictorial elements are usually arranged. Alex Hanimann seems bent on setting all the parameters free in his text- and image-based work. The logic underlying his pictures cannot be deciphered according to hard-and-fast rules any more than the logic of known languages. It remains a rebus, whose meaningful combinations we can re-read in ever new ways. The stag, shot head-on, is readily identified. But its gleaming eyes appear all the 'darker' as a result, as though they did not belong to the stag, but to a silent code in an analytic fairy tale of night vision photography.

We're back to square one. The viewers sit behind the image from the camera and complete the role-playing game by looking. Alex Hanimann's long selection process — which is ultimately where he has exercised his artistic discretion — consists in stage-managing our gaze. The immediacy of these pictures is based on an illusion. We know that, and herein lies our underlying desire for illusion. Like Walter Benjamin's dwarf chessmaster hidden inside the chess-playing automaton of history,⁹ we want the artist to serve as a magician who conjures nature. And Alex Hanimann has indeed conjured together a photobook of wordless immediacy.

8 Marie-José Burki interviewed by Christoph Grunenberg (trans. From the German by Eric Rosencrantz), in: *Marie-José Burki, Sans Attribut/Time after Time*, catalog, Kunsthalle Basel/ Art Gallery of York University (Toronto), 1995, p. 49.

9 Walter Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte, These 1", in: *W. B. Illuminationen, Ausgewählte Werke*, Frankfurt am Main, 1980, p. 251.