

Passing – Captive – Still

(Rare Breed Birds)

Snæbjörnsdóttir / Wilson

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Abstract: The images in *Passing Captive Still* depict humans together with birds in cages, their respective presence conjoined at eye-level. In this series, both human actors and the birds themselves are, in every case, seen through the cage bars suggesting a subversive, equalizing narrative. The strategic, pictorial conflation produces an uncanniness, which is both quaint and unsettling. As far as the images themselves are to be believed, both species are apparently “imprisoned” in the pictorial space. In order further to upset what might be the expected power balance of the auction house and event, the various bird individuals, pairs or groupings, appear always in front of the human actors, thereby privileging them within that space. An objective, reflective and contextualizing commentary is interspersed alternately with a subjective view, apparently from the position of those held captive against their will.

Keywords: *contemporary art; othering; captive birds; interspecies; interspecific gaze; anthropocentrism*

Bio: Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson are a collaborative art partnership. Their interdisciplinary art practice explores issues of history, culture and environment in human and more-than-human relations. Working very often in close consultation with experts and amateurs in the field, their work tests cultural constructs and tropes, and human behaviour in respect of ecologies, site, extinction, conservation, and the environment. Underpinning much of their practice are issues of psychological and physical displacement and realignment in respect of land and environment and the effect of these positions on cultural perspectives. Their artworks have been exhibited throughout the UK and internationally and they are frequent speakers at international conferences on issues related to their practice. Their works have been widely discussed in texts across many disciplinary fields and regularly cited as contributing to knowledge in the expanded field of research-based art practice. www.snaebjornsdottirwilson.com

Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir (PhD) is Professor of Fine Art at the Iceland University of the Arts, Reykjavík.

Mark Wilson (PhD) is Professor in Fine Art at the Institute of the Arts, University of Cumbria, UK.

Email: bryndis@btinternet.com – mark.wilson@cumbria.ac.uk



but if I were a bird

A series of photographs by the artists, taken in the early 2000s at an auction of “rare breed” domestic birds. In all, there are over forty images, from which this is a selection.

Foreword

Between 2004 and 2011 the artists lived in the country, in a house surrounded by farmland. This being the case, they took an interest in the relationship between farmers and their farmed animals and one aspect of this exploration involved occasionally attending the local livestock mart where the photographs in the accompanying photo essay were taken. At this time, as keepers of a large tract of land including a river meadow, we looked after hens, ducks, and geese ourselves. The chickens were a mix of breeds, some of which we had “rescued”, and amongst them was a cockerel. Before too long, inevitably, he found himself with rivals, which resulted in fights breaking out amongst them. A decision was taken to auction two of them, each with a couple of hens. One trio sold but the other didn’t. We attempted to take the unsold cockerel and his hens back a second time, but on being pushed into the cage he protested, broke free, and ran away as far as he could, down onto the meadow, only to return to join the others that same evening. It was clear to us that he had not wanted a repeat of the auction house experience. We understood this and chose to let him stay. Before long, things reached an equilibrium of sorts, but at the time, we had wondered about his experience and indeed, what he might have been thinking. This photo essay in which we attempt to consider the position of the birds, is in memory of our feisty cockerel.



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But how is it I am here at all? There's movement all around me, yet, for now, I am still — motionless. I watch — and I see. There are other eyes too — bright, alert eyes scanning me and others in the room. Some are hiding. Some are sleeping. Some strut their floors and some pass by — some inside and some not — and yet, within this circus, all are somehow inside.



In still photography, the absence of sound can be deafening, or suffocating—it may also, as we believe is the case in these images, serve to deepen the conflation of the respective agents within this environmental relationship—where considerable audible chaos may be imagined, the sonic peace which is a quality of a photograph, instead becomes the oxygen, or lack thereof, that feeds a newly-offered appraisal of the auction mart, its capitalist, agrarian assumptions and associated oppressive and suffering behaviours.



It is a cacophony. The sound surrounds me and seems to come both from nowhere and from everywhere at once. We are the prisoners of noise. And yet if I call out—perhaps I might escape. Once summoned (once I find my voice), my call extends beyond the bars, flying freely in the air to join the babble of all other voices in the hall—the chattering, the shrieks, the grumbling and shrill—recalcitrant, defiant—the coos of admiration and contempt. We are all obliged to speak out sooner or later—if only in some way, to occupy and claim the space as ours.



The photographs were necessarily candid, taken discreetly, so as not to affect the behaviour of the human attendees. This means that across this narrow depth of field, the focus moves appropriately between birds, bars, and humans and on occasion will indiscriminately snag all, or none in particular — in this, we can say that the camera too played its part in precisely shaping the narrative architecture and choreography of the space.



Having been here for a while now—I have the sense, I sense strongly—that something else is afoot. We are the ones upon whom extra value is bestowed—as possessions, as decoration, whim, or fancy. Bargaining chips or not, some things for us are soon to change. We are fewer now; the din diminishes, though distant voices seem to shout. Still, we who remain will watch and wait—this is the antechamber. The main event's not here.



That this is a theatre is beyond question. But more, it is a room (and a building) full of theatres. Each little stage here invites the gaze of onlookers, detached, disinterested, the passers-by, whose attention may be caught. Each plot is a sub-plot of the whole. And so we too are implicated, trapped in time with these subjugated players, within this apparent equilibrium. The photograph is a “putting into-context”, a placing that makes perpetual drama from a fleeting, interspecific intersection. And what does that drama reveal — a tumultuous truth, or some dubious contrivance? Are these snapshots of circumstance, the consequences of which would otherwise pass unnoticed? Do these multiple, momentary plays provide a secret window on a long forgotten, buried world, where species came to know each other once, and in that moment, humans drafted rules of dominance and submission, subservience, and use, as their adopted behaviours for eternity?



Time drags as we wait. The group next door was taken out just now — whisked away and disappeared, protesting. Somewhere out of sight, the human clamour ebbs and flows. One voice above the rest — a drone, that threads its way back along these emptying rows, this mesh, these bars and metal walls — a hollow, empty monotone, rises from a growl, through mid-toned, tight, percussive beats to high crescendo — to stop and start again...



The perennial spectacle of animal display. In other contexts of cultural and purportedly educational presentations within museums and zoos, artists Jaschinski, Billingham, Sugimoto, Berger, and Dion, observe and make their subversive pitches, but here, the questions languish at the intersection of animal life and human trade. We create a fulcrum, on which we balance two parallel species who eye each other's moves, we presume, from radically different perspectives.



Once, and elsewhere still, we birds, like dogs, were made to fight. A ring was drawn, around which all onlookers would gather, weighing odds and placing bets, and once the skirmishing began, would murmur, shout and scream—in their insistence that we should kill or else be killed. Now this spectacle again—the circus of desire and danger, decadence and the witnessing of death—the bullfight, the gladiatorial contest, the stonings—the barrel and the fish.



In this framing, where according to pictorial rules at least, the power relationship is ambiguously suspended and a fantasy made possible, in which the birds seem to possess an unruffled composure, a calmness and clear-eyed vigilance which in wit, appears entirely to eclipse their disparate and clearly unwitting human inspectors. The birds, alert, take notice and unlike the humans, in many cases seem to look both ways, to their prospective claimants and to the camera—and in doing so, command the field.



Somehow, suddenly, just now — there was a break. A rupture in the skin, where one world burst, gushing impolitely and noisily into the other. Antibodies rushed to stem and neutralize the breach. It wasn't pretty — more of a farce. I noticed how differently from each other we move, and how this difference gives our weaknesses away. Both parties came to be unhinged — the chaos grew, the wall collapsed — the narrative went rogue. Yet this interruption was significant — a giveaway and existentially at least, the tell-tale break. Things crop up. Events demand response — and order, once disturbed, provokes us all to act in ways which are exceptional, undignified, disorderly. In revolution though, all lies in settled dust.



From the 2021 Berlin exhibition *On Belonging* by the Finnish, New York-based artist Terike Haapoja, the multi-screen video installation reveals a sequence of animal enclosures at the Bronx Zoo. Each space is filmed through protective glass and the environments beyond, though predominately green, appear lifeless, grim and barren. Glimpses of animals are caught as they intersect with the transient, ghost-like reflections of their human visitors. The melancholic soundtrack weaves electronic drones with classical, orchestral lyricism — significantly broken only once, around midway, by the sudden and protracted screams of two lemurs.



And what are you doing here? Do you trap me once again? Not only are we caught, entangled in a dance, where one believes is free and one ensnared—and neither knows the limit of their choice. But you perch on a margin, believing this to be, from simple means, a sign, corrosive in effect, and nonetheless, a rent, through which another world is glimpsed, where no single one of us is less than one. So hold me in this chink of light, examine me, imagine me—consider what I feel. Am I bemused, or intrigued—do I seem deep in thought, my feathers ruffled, or at ease—am I locked in conversation, bound to act, this way or that—does my heart beat faster? Am I perturbed—or still, at rest amidst the din?



In *On Belonging*, Haapoja too explores the nature and ethical implications of the spectacle of the other and along with the essay which supplements the exhibition, uses it to tease out ideas of social power and vulnerability, of inclusion and exclusion more generally. One of the three films in the three-channel installation concludes with a direct confrontation between free (albeit shepherded) human wonder and enforced nonhuman passivity. A young girl's clear reflection in the glass, superimposes the corresponding figure of a gorilla in the space beyond, in seated, blank repose. The child functions as a surrogate for our relational questioning— not least, on matters of our perceptions of interspecific consciousness— before then being gently, but firmly steered from the frame by her guardian, leaving such questions, unsettlingly to reverberate.



I'm not here; I am most certainly gone. So many here departed now are trapped within these stolen tableaux. How many knew, how many others not? It is a glitch—an anomaly, an itch and scratch on the skin of an ancient cycle—bringing significance to the insignificant, where one significance speaks for all time and for all who live. It is nothing remarkable, but a trading place of choice and denial. It is remarkable in every way—my will—in unfair exchange for yours.



Often, much more often than occasionally I think, we become aware of noise only at the very moment such noise ceases. Deaf as we are to the screech-wall of roosting starlings who have gathered in trees beyond the window, over an indeterminate period, with our focus held elsewhere — was it twenty minutes, an hour perhaps, or more? — at the instant they cease as one to chatter, a flurry of a thousand free wings announces both their previous clamour and the sonic rupture of their sudden departure.



This anomaly tells us far more about how unconscious familiarity stealthily accrues and how our assimilation of structure, of our rhythmic surroundings, sonic or otherwise, is a constantly accreting process—shaping us, minute by minute, in ways beyond our conscious register. By this means, power and suffering are customarily imposed, inflicted and perpetuated, all too often far below the horizon of our questioning. If these birds are gone, what is this space, but a receptacle of memory—of colour, of motion, repose, and sound? This metal shed, where birds and others all come and go—placed temporarily in stalls and cages, haltered up or held and led to the adjoining mart, paraded, sold, and bought and trailed away... this space now holds itself accountable—a long, imaginary echo of repeated, unspeakable, imbalanced transaction—a ledger of intolerable acquisition and unthought, unregistered loss.