

Henrik Håkansson: Three Days of the Condor

**at Kettle's Yard
29 September - 18 November 2007**

Teachers' Pack

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*If you would like to plan a visit, please contact the
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Background Information

The Artist

Henrik Håkansson was born in Helsingborg, Sweden in 1968. His installation work combines elements of scientific research on biodiversity with technology, focusing on the relationship between human beings and plants, animals, birds and insects. The nature of observation, and notions of fragmentation and isolation are prevalent in most of his work, as are references to popular film and music culture.

Through his videos, sound works, and complex installations, Håkansson extracts fragments from natural cycles that he documents and recreates, questioning at the same time our perceptions of art, culture and nature.

The Exhibition

Three Days of the Condor is Håkansson's first major exhibition in the UK. The exhibition takes its name from a new work 'Three Days of the Condor', one of three installations concerned with bird species whose survival in the wild is threatened – the California Condor, Gurney's Pitta and Spix's Macaw - evoking the isolation, vulnerability and beauty of some of the loneliest birds in the world.

Håkansson's exhibition provides a timely and thoughtful opportunity to explore our conflicted and often contradictory relationship to the world around us. The exhibition has been organised by Kettle's Yard, with grant-aid from the Arts Council England and the Elephant Trust, and the support of BirdLife International. The artist also acknowledges the help of Ventana Wildlife Society in the making of 'Three Days of the Condor'.

The Birds



California Condor



Gurney's Pitta



Spix's Macaw

At the heart of the exhibition is a reconstruction of the bunkhouse at Big Sur from which Håkansson filmed the **California Condor**. Footage recorded by the artist, with rare sightings of the bird, is presented for the first time in 'Three Days of the Condor'. Thousands of condors once flew from British Columbia to Mexico before declining precipitously during the Gold Rush. They reached a low of just 27 birds in the 1980s. Desperate biologists captured all remaining wild condors in 1987 and began breeding them in zoos. In 1992, they began re-introducing them and 125 of the 272 birds in existence are back in the wild.

Gurney's Pitta survives in very small numbers in southern Myanmar (formerly Burma) and Thailand. Lulled into a visual trance by the dense jungle undergrowth in Håkansson's film, it takes a while to notice the tiny bird with its jewel-like plumage. Håkansson also pressed a record of its song, which plays on a turntable nearby. Copies of the record are available for visitors to take away for free from the exhibition.

Håkansson's most recent research has been concerned with **Spix's Macaw**, now extinct in its native Brazil and only preserved in a few private collections. 'The Spix's Macaw is a beautiful, heart-breakingly rare bird', says Håkansson, 'and its loss in the natural world reveals the fragility of its very existence –and of nature itself- not unlike the fragility of great works of art that we expect to last forever.' Poignantly, the installation includes a museum specimen on loan from the Natural History Museum; the preserved 'skin' of a bird whose discovery was also its tragedy.

Key Themes

- **Art versus Nature:** nature in the perception of art. In his work Håkansson often compares art and nature, and highlights their similarities; their diversity, changeability and fragility, as well as the aspect of looking, experiencing, interacting and interpreting.
- **Popular Culture:** the natural subject as 'spectacle'. Håkansson's work highlights the 'misuse' of production mechanisms, techniques and equipment from specific fields of the scientific and cultural industry. Analogies can also be drawn between his work and reality TV, in which behaviour, observation and interpretation all play equally important roles.
- **Research:** Håkansson often incorporates the proof of his research; web pages, maps, pinboards etc, into his art works. This highlights the relationship between science and aesthetics, with the 'work in progress' becoming an important component to the actual work of art.
- **Technology, Nature and Aesthetics:** Håkansson is interested in the organic shapes of the equipment he uses; the simplified versions of forms you can find in nature, and the way the equipment -like nature- is modular, flexible, expandable and adaptable. In the same way that the research is incorporated in the art works, the technological equipment, too, plays an important role.
- **Observation and Reality:** the perception of what is observed within time and space. How do personal interpretations and the transfer of signals and experiences influence our own observations? Håkansson's work is based on ideas of intrusion and disruption, and what happens when we look.

Quotes from the Artist

"In the natural world ... there are so many different realities, and so many questions, and it is perhaps very human to want to try and understand what is going on."

"I'm dealing with a human reading of nature, nature in the perception of art. I've always been interested in the technological methods that we have developed in relation to this reading of nature, the way these technologies affect our behaviour. When I'm looking at scientific methods, for example, I'm also looking at human behaviour."

"I want the viewer to have a reflection of a nature other than their own: a reflection of a method or a strategy of survival, the method of life, a method of observing [...]"

"I see the arrangement of the technical aspects of the installation as the frame of the work. I sometimes refer to the technology I use as a study of the methods developed to observe the natural world. I'm interested in the way these artefacts are developed to achieve an ideal situation for recording or documenting a particular creature, its behaviour or its specific environment. They're designed for a purpose, but I put them in a position of representing an idea, they have a more abstract meaning."

"The gallery is a room, often a white cube, made up for a certain kind of presentation. There is a judgement that's already made. Before you enter the room you know you're going to see an art-related creation, something made by persons who call themselves artists, so it constricts itself. But when the space of the gallery is related to another space [i.e. the bunkhouse] it creates another dimension that has also to do with a way of observing culture."

"I simply find the context [of the art world] interesting, the relationships of nature and art, to history and the history of art. More than that, I couldn't make an art work in any other situation. It's the aspect of looking, the creative aspect of the culture, the tradition of standing in front of a painting and just looking, which for me is a starting point."

"I see the work in process as more of a circular and reflective process, expressed in pictures, in documents, as well as in the social sphere as meetings with the birds, and with people and organisations."

Henrik Håkansson in conversation with Will Bradley

Questions and Discussion Topics

- Where would you expect to see a series of installations on endangered birds?
- How does the fact that the birds are shown in a gallery affect their status?
- In which way are the subjects of Håkansson's installations similar to 'traditional' art works, like paintings? (Think of fragility, exclusivity etc)
- What role does the technical equipment play in the installations? Where do you normally find such equipment? Do you feel it has become part of the actual art works?
- Is Håkansson's work science or art, or both?
- What similarities can you find between Håkansson's works and television/film/music culture?

Three Days of the Condor

- What do you normally expect a gallery to look like?
- How has Håkansson changed the gallery space?
- Does this change make you see the art work differently?

Gurney's Pitta

- Why do you think Håkansson prefers to call the birds he observes 'lonely' rather than 'endangered'? (fragmentation and isolation means the birds end up alone within their patch of habitat)
- Why do you think Håkansson gives away copies of the record of Gurney's Pitta for free? (source of the recordings is a free/unpaid voice, not controlled or limited in its distribution)

Spix's Macaw

- Why do you think Håkansson decided to include the bird specimen? (a reminder that the discovery of a species is often its downfall)
- Why do you think Håkansson has incorporated the process of the making of this installation, i.e. maps, notes etc? (a reference to visualisation of the creative essence of the conceptual process)

Activities for the Exhibition

Three Days of the Condor

This is the first time that Håkansson has shown this installation, which is a recreation of the bunkhouse he used in Big Sur, from which he observed the California Condor.

TASK: Imagine your own bunkhouse

- What would your bunkhouse look like?
- What kind of recording equipment would you need?
- Which animals would you observe?

Now imagine yourself being an artist, working on your own version of Three Days of the Condor

- How would you physically make the work?
- What equipment would you be using to build your bunkhouse?
- Where would you be making the installation?
- How would you want it to look in the gallery?

Håkansson sees the recording equipment as an important aesthetic part of his installation, comparing their shapes to the organic ones found in nature, and their versatility and adaptability to natural objects.

TASK: Drawing nature's equipment

- When looking at the equipment that Håkansson has placed in the bunkhouse, which shapes can also you find in nature?
- Sketch the outline of the shapes you have found and turn them either into 'real' natural objects (like shells, rocks, fruit and flowers) to create a still-life, or keep the shapes simple for an abstract work of art.

Gurney's Pitta

In the video footage of Gurney's Pitta, it takes a while to notice the bird surrounded by the undergrowth of the dense jungle. Håkansson is interested in the relationship between culture and nature, and the way in which he observed Gurney's Pitta could be compared to reality TV programmes like 'Big Brother', where you never know whether something will happen. The way in which the bird performs is similar to the talent shows that are currently broadcasted on television.

TASK: Split up in groups, and try answering the following questions:

- What role do we, as observers, play in this installation?
- Do you feel this role is different from when you look at a painting on the wall?

TASK: Draw the installation

- **However, focus on the birdsong; how would the different sounds look on paper?**
- **Now concentrate on the bird's movements and draw them also**

Spix's Macaw

When comparing the bird specimen in this installation to more 'traditional' types of art, it would best be described as a ready-made sculpture. Jim Ede, founder of Kettle's Yard, also believed that nature creates works of art that are as valuable as those made by man. That is why in the house, Ede has placed feathers, stones, wood etc amongst his paintings, drawings and sculptures.

TASK: With Håkansson's bird specimen in mind, try to find another item in the house that you think is the best example of 'ready made art', and sketch it.

TASK: Imagine that one aspect of the installation was removed.

- How would it affect the balance of the work?
- How important is that part to the work as a whole?

Now put the installation in another, imaginary setting

- How would this setting affect the way the installation is experienced?

Further Reading

- *An Introduction to the Birds* (Exhibition Catalogue)
Edited by Henrik Håkansson, Lotta Andersson, Adina Popescu and Edna van Duyn
De Appel Foundation, Amsterdam, 2003
- *Through the Woods to Find the Forest* (Exhibition Catalogue)
Edited by Frédéric Grossi, Akiko Miki and March Sanchez
Paris Musées, Paris, 2006
- *Henrik Håkansson in Conversation with Will Bradley*
Edited by Sara Arrhenius and Bettina Pehrsson
Propexus, Lund (Sweden) / Iaspis, 2004
- www.hakansson.net