



The Field Guides of Hans Waanders

In Peter Carey's novel *Oscar and Lucinda*, Oscar is petrified of the sea. In order to make a necessary voyage, he carries a piece of celluloid onto which he has drawn a grid. A fellow passenger asks him how such a strange device will help alleviate his horror:

'Oscar then explained his plan for viewing water through the celluloid. He could then view it one square at a time, thus containing it. What was terrifying in a vast expanse would become "quite manageable"'¹.

The system of the grid will, in theory, restore to the observer a degree of control over the potentially limitless ocean. Placed between subject and object it creates a safe distance, reducing infinity to a human scale.

Similarly, it is the nature of the Field Guide, a book genre in which Hans Waanders chooses to make interventions, to contain immensity. Such books frame their subject matter (in Waanders case ornithology, lepidoptera and modern aviation) by utilising exhaustive systems of identification and classification. The subject is pinned down and presented for the viewer in a logical and comprehensive manner. An occurrence that is highly unlikely in reality becomes commonplace on the page: in *The Observer's book of Birds*, the flights of bullfinch, chaffinch, house martin and wheat-ear are frozen in rigid formation. The birds have been reduced to a repeating pattern; all fly in the direction of the left margin, wings poised at identical angles. There will be no confusion on paper, as they remain fixed in our sights. We can return to the Field Guide at any time, in order to commit their features to memory. The only gaps that will appear are in the reader's knowledge. As one recognised category replaces another, the notion of the unknown is eliminated. The 'grid' that empiricism imposes allows the observer to control nature, within the limits of the book.

In Hans Waanders' book interventions, the static territory of the Field Guide becomes a freshly contested space. The artist employs the blue silhouette of the kingfisher, his chosen motif and the subject of his art for the past fifteen years. As an illustrative device the birds' silhouette aids simple recognition, with the subject reduced to a one-dimensional plane, a contained shape with a distinctive outline. The artist stamps a kingfisher on top of every bird which appears, that is not of the species *Alcedo atthis*. If on page, there is a kingfisher, its image is left unmarked. The repeated stamps cancel out each bird, obliterating its features. Thwarting the process of

identification, each bird is returned to the topographical unknown. Furthermore, the artist's interventions breach the confines of the book, with stamps appearing on covers- front, inside and back. The project spans volumes, countries, languages, time and singular species classification. The repeated mechanism becomes a ritual, reinstating the potential for a limitless and boundless space.

Through these actions wanders shares territorial traits with the kingfisher, which establishes its territory with its call. He forges his own terrain within a space belonging to another; his process violates the sanctity of the autonomous printed book. The symbol of the kingfisher colonises pages in a methodical take-over. Frequently its image is overtly war-like; a dive-bombing kingfisher stamped onto a series of birds in flight. System fights system in this quiet invasion. These found books become the ideal place, habitat, nature and conditions for his chosen bird to establish itself in.

Hunting through the Field Guides to discover the untouched illustrations of the kingfisher mimics the real life preoccupation of the artist engaged in his own search for the next glimpse of this bird. When we discover it, the image of the kingfisher takes on a heavenly quality. Within the descriptive passages of Field Guides, observers refer to their sightings of the kingfisher in the wild with a choice of language that has celestial connotations – 'like a bright blue light'², 'an electric blue flash'³. Within Waanders' books the kingfisher stamp marks time, until the bird itself emerges. Its appearance is then divine in nature. The repetition of its afterimage, its shadow, is the required incantation in the artist's quests to become closer.

Waanders' interventions return mystery to the pages of the guides. Unlike Oscar's grid, his system seeks to expand rather than to reduce. However, like any system, it is human in construct. His marks mingle with the traces of previous book owners. A preserved newspaper cut out is trapped in the pages of one book. Small, precise handwriting appears in another. A single foreign word systematically repeats under each bird where a sighting has been confirmed.

In previous interviews Waanders has said that for him, the kingfisher represents a metaphor of life – its possibilities, survival, flight and fall – and of mortality. After viewing his Field Guides the observer is left with an after-image, the weight of blue.

Jenny Brownrigg, P. 142-144, *The Libraries of Thought & Imagination*, pocketbooks 12, edited by Alec Finlay. Published by Morning Star Publications, Spring 2002.

Footnotes

¹ *Oscar and Lucinda*, Peter Carey. Faber and Faber, 1988.

² P.110, *The Observers Book of Birds*, I. Warne. Frederick Warne & Co. Ltd. 1965.

³ P.55, *Birds of Ireland*. The Appletree Press Ltd., 1986.