

# METRO PICTURES

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## Slominski the Magician

Germano Celant

The artist and the magician share the same destiny: they propose visual — but apparently superfluous — surprises that occupy the spectator's attention for a long time. The works are traps for the eye in which suspense and the incomprehensible event hold sway; in them the unreal and the real, the logical and the irrational are intertwined without offering an answer, aside from something that's between useless and absurd. Andreas Slominski (b. Meppen, Germany, 1959) works like a magician, taking out of his hat simple, almost illogical objects, in which the inefficacy and the length of the execution reveal a world of paradoxes, almost like a child's comic book where what counts is the aimless gesture. His procedure is that of an extreme sport, where the risk and the adventure lie in complicating a simple and banal thing, in constructing objects and events, without ascribing them to universal aims, and in preparing questions not subject to specific linguistic and ideological dictates. What matters is an artistic form that characterizes the independence of the individual and the planned progress of existence. He conceives his artistic practice as the exercise of freedom outside schemes and expectations: this is a procedure that is at odds with the organic and unequivocal discourse governing the system of art.

Slominski's artistic production is a transversal one that involves different areas of thinking, seeing and acting, without having to refer the discourse to an unchangeable essence and a single center of irradiation. He relies on a practice that nurtures itself on the inventive capacity of existence that is inscribed in a variable context, that of exhibiting one's own concepts and vision in relation to multiform situations. What is at stake is surprise: while in the magician's gesture this tends to invent inversions of our perception of things and their interweaving, here instead it aspires to overturn the fixed models of artistic procedure, with its capacity for unraveling and rewinding incessantly into itself, so as to produce innumerable unfurlings and the same number of refoldings.

The hypothesis is that of avoiding unilaterality and seeking an unrenounceable complexity that appears to be unclassifiable and irreducible to any aesthetic or philosophical movement. In a period dominated by the interference of the routine of art, which favors unequivocal behavior, Slominski, as an experimenter, tends to conceive a critical and mutable vision. He is not interested in confirming an existing schema of procedures, but wants to produce an indocile and uneasy criticism of the certainties of current artistic reasoning. Rather than agreeing to be the tool of a certain visual rationale, he simply attempts to control himself and move where what matters is questioning and surprise, adopting a manner that does not respond to any model or tendency.



*SlominSki*, 1986



*Fallensteller*  
(Creatore di trappole | Trapper),  
1989

In order to understand the context in which Slominski was trained from 1983 to 1986 — the years of his artistic education at the Hochschule für bildende Kunst in Hamburg — it is necessary to consider his encounter with the culture of the period characterized by the boom, after the recession of 1974–75, on the artistic stock market, celebrated by the emphatic return to painting. The triumph of Neo-Expressionism coincided with and was linked to a concept of art as investment, while art and artists became one of the favorite themes of the mass media. This change of direction was due to the crisis in values, which, with the decline in political activity and the dissolution of the utopias generated by the rebellion of 1968 and the end of the Vietnam War, led to the formation of a disillusioned generation in which the inability to change society caused people to withdraw into themselves and focus on their personal problems. A heroic vision of the artist developed in which the megalomaniac and romantic vision prevailed over the stylistic contribution. Art began to be regarded as a means of attaining celebrity and its market became the locus of public consensus, capable of informing us about “values” more rapidly than museums or journals. Slowly the spectacle of decorum and consumption became hyperbolic, the standards of quality were entrusted to taste and the product tended to be seductive with regard to common expectations. The change was towards “seeing” rather than thinking and feeling, which had dominated the period from 1960 to 1980, so that it was no longer logic and meaning that counted, but simply looking. The conceptual and minimal language of art disappeared and another emerged, committed to the personal and emotional — thus expressive — account as well as to the mechanical animation linked to the media, such as television and photography. In fact, together with pictorial Neo-Expressionism, a style characterized by the use of the mass media developed. Many artists appropriated the language of the media: recycling the imagery of cinema, television, advertising, and consumer goods, they started to investigate the arbitrary and casual nature of their figuration and narration, seeking their social and psychological bases. Thus the stereotypes of visual motifs recurring in all the media were revealed and the instrumental propositions of the consumer society were highlighted.

From the convergence of these excessive attitudes towards maximum personalization and extreme depersonalization a period of transition developed, in the mid-1980s, that cast doubt on any formal, social, aesthetic, and intelligible certainty of art. Every definition became “problematic,” thus preventing any method or hierarchy from surviving. Any pre-eminence, or greater centrality, of one culture, gender, or ethnic group over another was rejected: the focus was on marginality and



*Die Kompaniekuh*  
(Vacca di una compagnia  
dell'esercito | Cow of the  
Company), 1994-1995

the other. Decentralization and deconstruction began, without preferring any element; the patriarchal figure of the genius and its polarity was abandoned in favor of the obscurity and repression of marginal conditions. By shifting marginality to the center, all the assumptions could be overturned and it could be asserted, as Roland Barthes put it, that the author was dead or, in Jacques Derrida's terms, that the self and society were linguistic constructions. Everything became unstable and artists adapted themselves to a multiple condition in which art became a self-producing language without a creator.

It was in this cultural climate, in which the context constructed the work, that Slominski's artistic career began; as he wrote in his book *Die Geige, Die Geige* [The Fiddle, The Fiddle] (1986), he was catapulted or parachuted into the world of art. It seemed that this descent was intended to induce individuals to find art rather than make it, over and above the centrality of their person, history, and taste. Their role was just that of entering space and time to reveal, surprisingly, with a touch of the magic wand, what already existed: not in the sense of Duchamp's ready-mades, which started from zero, but in the direction of an unoriginal condition where what mattered was only the revelation of linguistic processes. The interpreter took the place of the creator and the meaning no longer resided in the work but in the interpretation of the observer and reader, whoever that may be. Slominski's process posed the question of the independence of the event and the object, which became a "hunter" of meanings, a trap into which the interpreter — that is, the public — fell. For Slominski, art was transformed into a "field" in which the gaze and experience of those interested in the artistic language were "imprisoned": this was a "closed system" that inevitably returned to itself as an intellectual and logical machine that was both plastic and visual. This was a method for understanding the extent of our interpretation and the conditions informing it. They were real traps that set in motion the ritual of consumers and creators, entities of solid and void containing nothing aside from the captured element — that is, participation.

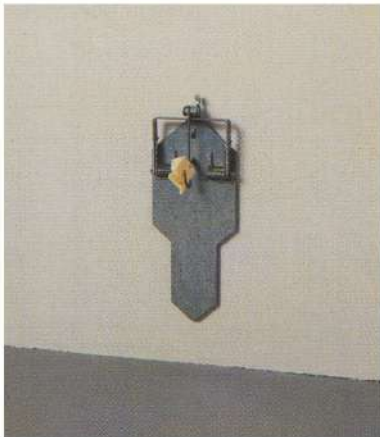
From 1984–1985 Slominski started to collect and to produce traps for animals and draw portraits of trap setters, symbols and metaphors of networks of meaning and images that sent out visible and invisible threads in every direction and in which all animate beings could be imprisoned. These were objects large and small, closed and open to the outside world, in which physical and mental elements coexisted, and were equally pleasant and unpleasant. Thus they were dual objects, both material and immaterial, interacting with the context and swallowing it up with bored indifference, like *Magnet* (1987). At first the construction of magnetic and capturing entities was



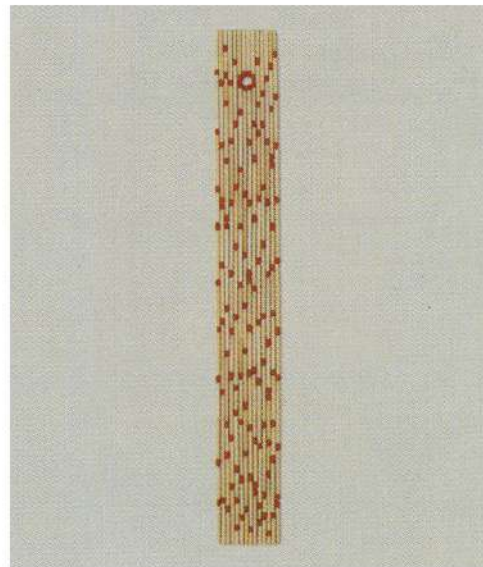
*Falle*  
(Trappola | Trap), 1984-1985



*Ohne Titel*  
(Senza Titolo | Untitled), 1987



*Falle*  
(Trappola | Trap), 1985



*Ohne Titel*  
(Senza Titolo | Untitled), 1988



*Anfeuchten einer Briefmarke*  
(Inumidendo un francobollo |  
Moistening a stamp), 1996

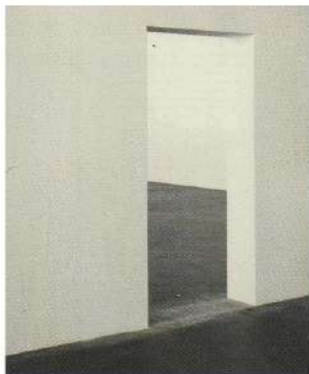
translated into *Ohne Titel* (Untitled, 1987), consisting of towels and tablecloths, perfectly folded and piled up, which appear to have been treated with care and delicacy and are ready to be used — that is to say, ready to capture the dust and dirt surrounding them. They are clean and unsullied entities corresponding to the action of the world, although they remain extraneous to it. Their position, passive and immobile, is, however, visually dynamic: they lie supine, but imply stasis full of action. They are oysters ready to capture the interpretative scraps and promising dazzling and astonishing images, such as *Ohne Titel* (Untitled, 1988): this consists of a large number of matches arranged to form objects such as a ruler, a pair of scissors, and other everyday tools. These are constellations recalling the sense of the surprise event and roaming about in the interior of things in search of a hidden, burning meaning. This involves exploring the visual processes from the inside; entrusted to the causal lighting up of an element, this may lead in directions that are not only unforeseeable and unpredictable but also illogical and surprising.

The peculiar characteristic of many events organized, according to precise instructions, by Slominski, embodies this procedure where what counts is only the result, even if it is obtained with convoluted and complex processes that are arbitrary and concealed. The artist starts, in fact, with the result and, in order to express it — after his mind, like a computer, has supplied him with all the possible operations — chooses what makes him feel freest with regard to the spirit of the times, whether this be expressive or media based. This confirms that he is in charge of his own practice — “self-governing,” in fact. It does not matter whether the operational journey is dangerous and difficult: since the possibilities are infinite and arbitrary, the artist does not have to explain. Thus a bicycle tire was placed round the base of a street lamp, not by dropping it from above, but by lifting the street lamp out of the ground so as to place it at the center of the tire (*Laterne mit Reifen* [Lamp with Tire], 1996); or else the tongue of a giraffe from Münster Zoo was used in *Anfeuchten einer Briefmarke* (Moistening a Stamp, 1996) to moisten the back of a stamp that is then applied on a letter; or the external walls of a building were removed in order to reunite a piano and its stool — the former had been placed inside the building, the latter outside it — which were brought together in the Kunsthalle in Zürich, in a narrow doorway between two rooms, the walls of which had been destroyed (*Klavier II* [Piano II], 1998).

These actions demonstrate that in order to obtain a visual and performative result, typical of the art of that period, there is neither a single style nor a preferred path. There are unlimited and infinite possibilities of conception, just as a coherent



*Klavier I*  
(Pianoforte I | Piano I),  
1998



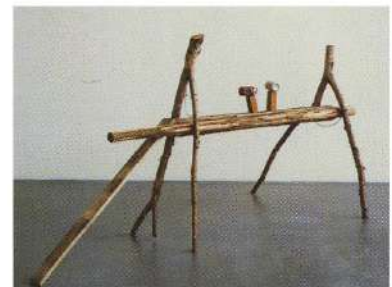
*Klavier II*  
(Pianoforte II | Piano II),  
1998



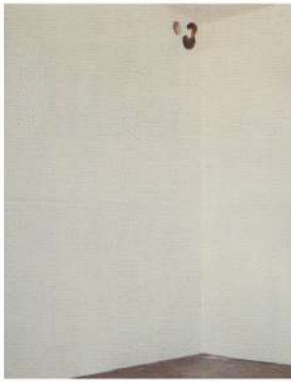
*Dreiecksfalle*  
(Trappola triangolare |  
Triangular trap), 1997



*Spechtfalle*  
(Trappola per picchio |  
Woodpecker trap), 1998



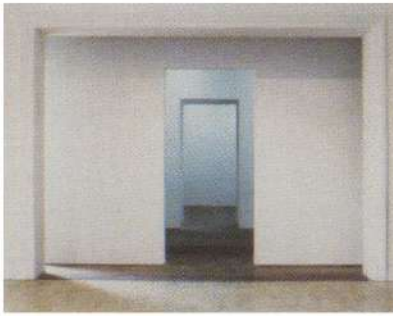
*Marderfalle*  
(Trappola per martora |  
Marten trap), 1998



*Selbstporträt mit Sombrero*  
(Autoritratto con sombrero |  
Self-portrait with Sombrero),  
1998

and objective sequence cannot be established while moving the horizon of its meaning at the same time. After all, it is the enunciation of the failure of a quest for the meanings of art and the world; nothing absolute can be affirmed and one way may be as excellent and comforting as another — thus they are all arbitrary. If there is a multiplicity of facts that do not contradict the possible logic of the result, it is possible to give all the possible explanations, or else to imply that the simplest way is just one version of an interminable list of concatenations and constructions. These may be grotesque and inexplicable, like *Selbstporträt mit Sombrero* (Self-portrait with Sombrero, 1998) in which Slominski, a new van Gogh and thus an artist par excellence, portrays himself wearing a sombrero, placing himself in the upper corner of a wall separating two rooms in which two small holes have been made. The artist passes his hand and the camera through one hole in order to photograph his face, while he looks through the other — with difficulty because of his large hat. This is an extreme and illogical condition that enunciates the artist's mental capacity to arrange conceivable, albeit difficult, operational combinations. In this way, according to Slominski, the artist's behavior becomes a synonym of complexity, heterogeneity, and variety.

This marked a return to the mystery and secrecy of artistic investigation, because it sends the work towards an area considered incommunicable, as in *Eimer Wasser* (Bucket of Water, 1998). Here the artist displayed a bucket of water on the counter of the museum shop of the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin. But in order to achieve this result, initially the bucket was exhibited empty among the gadgets and books. Subsequently a plumber was called in to install a system of pipes that drew water from a source in the building. To these were attached a plastic tube and a faucet, which the artist turned on to allow the water to flow into the bucket. Once it was almost full, the plumbing system was removed and only the bucket of water



*Die Leiter*  
(La scala | The ladder), 1998



*Trap for Edible Dormouse*  
(Trappola per ghio  
commestibile), 1997-2004



*Candle*  
(Candela), 2004





*Baumstumpf*  
(Il ceppo | Tree Stump), 1998

remained, and this is all that visitors were able to see. All this construction implied the coming and going of things, the intermediate and hidden space that is a metaphysical trap in which the observers are made to fall. These are internal and indiscernible deviations and shifts that once again underscore the fact that art is appearance, full of imperceptible modulations, facets, and articulations. It is not, therefore, necessary to illustrate the event in all its details, or in all its possible variations, because empty nothing is solid presence. In *Eingemauerte Hand* (Hand, Walled Up, 1991) visitors entering the Kabinett für aktuelle Kunst in Bremerhaven found themselves in the empty space of the exhibition room where Slominski had embedded the bones of a hand in one of the walls. The room was empty, but behind the surface of one of its walls was an invisible object. This was a further enigmatic and secret aspect, in which art was occupied by a communicative strategy, but not by a manifest condition. With astuteness, the artist conveys the information, which is never trivial or futile, but catches the gaze unawares because he does not allow it to relate directly with the phenomenon and the process. The exhibition is another trap in which the visitors must transform themselves into unsuccessful diviners subjected to the surprising and disturbing effect linked to art.

Slominski's aim seems to be that of stressing how the value of artistic investigation does not lie in just one scene repeated with infinite variations — as is proposed by his contemporaries, from the Neo-Expressionists to the media artists — but consists of hidden and renewed dwelling. The artistic object is the final moment of a film resulting from the continuous shifting of shots in which elements and constituent passages can be recognized or recounted. Another example of disappearance and interrupted gesture in which the result is linked to an invisible spectacularity is *Die Leiter* (The Ladder, 1998), in which the artist commissioned a builder to make horizontal cuts in the walls at the side of a doorway so he could go through it with a ladder, holding it not in a vertical position, but horizontally, passing it through the cuts in the walls. Once the cuts had been made, however, the artist chose to go through the doorway without using the work of the builder, who was called back to close the cuts and restore the original condition of the wall. This is a process that the final result does not convey, but it implies the concept of invisibility.

This non-visibility is proposed through a ludic and dramatic practice, or else artisanal and artistic activity. These are separate occasions that create tension in the perception of the thing that the artist materializes before the spectator's eyes. Proceeding through "tricks" and "deceptions" involves the sense of realization and Slominski the magician uses it to raise the question: is it possible to remain in the enigmatic circle of art, opening

*Imprint of the Nose Cone  
of a Gilder*  
(Impronta del muso  
di un aliante), 2005

*Trap for Striding Birds*  
(Trappola per trampolieri), 2000



oneself at the same time to society, adopting a conventional and codified language, while what counts is the intermediate value, that of emerging from the irrational aspect of art while remaining within it? This is senselessness that imbues all the writing of *Die Geige, Die Geige* [The Fiddle, The Fiddle] (1986, published in three editions), the book that may be regarded as the theoretical and creative basis of Slominski's artistic strategy, which focuses on the construction of enigmatic images that reveal hidden, deceptive, and ridiculous aspects: "the pantomime artist is a malingerer" and "the pantomime artist is a firebug."

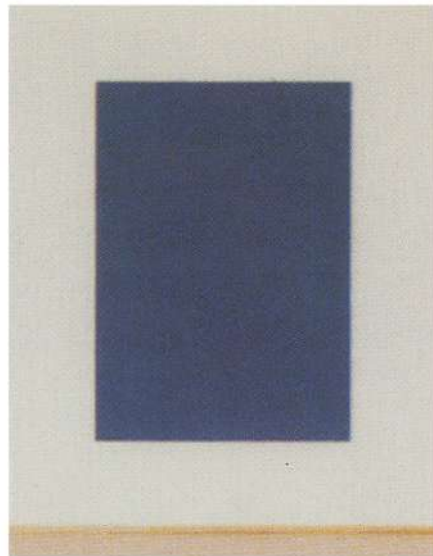
Making the creative process almost unreconstructable and untraceable, Slominski asserted that the visible is born of concealment and the work does not reveal the hidden practice of the possible positions, situations, and framings, even if the observer or the consumer is obliged to interact only with the final result. Thus, throughout his career, the artist has staged numerous extemporary performances to demonstrate how the process of exhibiting cannot be possessed by a single physiognomy, but by a multiple one. In 2005, in the Serpentine Gallery in London, the artist exhibited a candle that was the result of the collection of ski wax, a rare and refined material that was brought to the gallery by a professional skier who, in the mild London spring, crossed a mound of fresh snow linking the garden with the foyer entrance. In the same exhibition he displayed *Imprint of the Nose Cone of a Gilder* (2005) — realized in the gallery — a rectangle of pink foam that had a circular indentation in the center caused by the pressure of two nose cone of a single seater glider on its surface. At the Serpentine he also exhibited "paintings" consisting of Styropor and Styrodur (polystyrene foams) cutouts representing clocks, skis, and nails, painted in pastel colors, while he asked two mime artists to remove an invisible "painting" from the Royal College of Art (located close to the Serpentine) and go through the motions of hanging it in the gallery. Two years earlier, in 2003, at the Fondazione Prada in Milan, he invited one of the painters who had been working on the Eiffel Tower to paint the external gratings over the windows of the building housing the exhibition: the worker secured himself to the bars with a safety harness and applied the same paint as that used on the French structure. Inside the



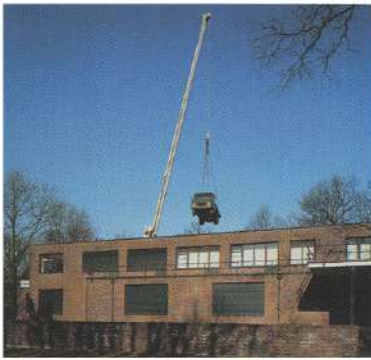
“Hotel Carlton Palace  
Chambre 763”, 1993



*Vogelfanganlage*  
(Impianto per la cattura  
di uccelli | Bird trapping station),  
1998-1999 (particolare | detail)



*Bild aller Augäpfel aller  
Menschen auf der Erde*  
(Immagine di tutti i bulbi oculari  
di tutti gli abitanti della Terra |  
Picture of All the Eyeballs of  
All the People on Earth), 1988



building, on the other hand, Slominski asked visitors to remove their trousers and hand them to a seamstress, who unstitched them, passing the two legs respectively to the left and the right of a pole; on the other side of the pole another seamstress sewed them up again and returned them to their owners, who put them on again, with the impression that their trousers had done a sort of lap dance around the pole.

The intention of the artist is to propose a complicity going beyond the apparent superficiality of the result, which is almost always fragile, like his “paintings” in polystyrene, plastic and other materials — *xHByIz*, 2005 — where clocks, skis, neckties, and various other tools appear. They seem to express the fragility of the image and its temporary nature as a means of communication that flows on the surface, but is able to capture and block the gaze: it is a light and frail world, considering the type of material – with its huge, heavy frames – like the institutional one. It is something that is recognizable, but is evidently simulated and mimetic of reality: thus it is a practice that one doesn't undertake, but proposes itself as an intermediary entity demanding encounters with reality, emotions, and visions. These are clearly unfinished paintings, lacking in something, where, once again, what counts is the suspension of the action that lies behind their existence: that of a figure out of the picture — the artist — whose arrival we are awaiting.

At this point it is clear that a central role in Slominski's practice is played by the spectators, who, at the moment when the object or image appears, are the third presence in the work. And if they are stimulated to share their emotional and intellectual participation, they become part of the event, allowing the scene to be completed.

The participation and independence of the observer and the object as they reciprocally complete each other focus our attention on the artist's reappropriation and control of himself: like the other entities composing the artistic puzzle, he reveals himself to be restless and unruly, and doesn't intend to be controlled and governed by any system. In 1993, when he was invited by the curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist to participate to the exhibition “Hotel Carlton Palace Chambre 763” in Paris, Slominski established the relationship by giving the critic a series of instructions to be carried out daily. He assumed the right to tell the expert what to do. In this perspective, the artist puts himself in what is essentially an anarchic position. In search of complex paths, Slominski intends to introduce deviations and diversified sequences into his investigation of the visual world. He drives it away from paradigms and monisms in order to insist on the puzzle that is incompatible with a normal, linear procedure. This is why he distorts the processes to obtain the artistic result, passing from the absurd to the frivolous and

*Golfball-Aktion*  
Pallina da golf - Azione |  
Golf Ball - Action), 1995



*Rattenfalle*  
(Trappola per ratti | Rat-trap),  
1999

from the ironic to the cunning, as in *Golfball-Aktion* (Golf Ball-Action, 1995), in the Museum Haus Esters in Krefeld, where, in order to exhibit a golf ball — a minute object in the purist and rational space designed by Mies van der Rohe — he organized a tortuous and complicated operation. He arranged for a truck to come to the museum entrance and had it lifted by an enormous crane to the garden behind the building and placed close to the wall, so that the tilted truck bed created a ramp level with an open window. He then invited a professional golfer to position himself in front of the building and to drive a ball over the house onto the truck bed, so that it rolled down it and through the window onto the floor of the museum. This involved the use of ingredients that, although they were strongly present, tended in the end to disappear.

In 1996, on the occasion of an installation at Portikus, Frankfurt, the artist filled the gallery with the old sails of a windmill and, during the exhibition, he returned at irregular intervals saw pieces off them and burn these in an old stove. This is something extreme that, through the process of cutting, allows us to imagine the emotions of a past history that arouses memories of a vanished culture, like all the personal, social, linguistic, and anthropological processes emerging from Slominski's work. This is a paradoxical method that highlights how the history or information that lies behind an artifact travels and arrives before the observer from an infinite number of directions and these must remain incomprehensible so that surprise and discovery are not lost. If, in fact, they maintain a standard procedure, there will not be any violation of the precedent and the existing: thus its novelty will disappear.

Slominski's interest in surprise and inconsistency — with its roots in Duchamp's Dadaism — works on the posthumous and casual effect of the artistic maneuver that obtains a meaning deriving from a program that is indefinite, but certainly based on the contrast and counter-norm, such as that of exhibiting Christmas decorations in 2003 with transformed functions. Thus in Milan he displayed indoors (in the space of the Fondazione Prada) the city lights originally produced for Belfast, and in Frankfurt he used them as decorative lights in the spring, summer, and autumn, although they had been designed for the winter. The introduction of counter-inductive and discrepant uses proposes a non-nominal reading of the object, which asserts itself through its use as much as its temporal assumption. The aim is to break the circle of usual and codified perception in order to introduce insights that don't form part of the existing world.

It is clear that, for Slominski, art isn't the result of specific contemplation and acquisition of objects, but can only be conquered through a defeat, that of allowing itself to be captured



*Vogelfalle*  
(Trappola per uccelli | Bird trap),  
2000



*Rattenfalle*  
(Trappola per topi | Mouse trap),  
2000

by the process set in motion by the artist, whatever it may be. By entrusting oneself to the flow of his thoughts and procedures, which may be complex and absurd or exaggerated and incomprehensible, and sinking into them, one can approach his assumptions, allowing the gaze to be captured, as he demonstrated in one of his early works, *Bild aller Augäpfel aller Menschen auf der Erde* (Picture of All the Eyeballs of All the People on Earth, 1988). This was the first step in the exaltation of uselessness and the investment of energy without any return that sustains the exchange between artist and observer; only subsequently was it possible to proceed to comprehension and historic and linguistic contextualization.

It is, therefore, logical that Slominski identifies this type of relationship in the trap, a metaphorical tool with which the artist — the sculptor, that is — imposes his method. It is a physically concrete and logically abstract construction that exemplifies the relationship between bodies and things, beings and objects, and observers and the artist. It is the locus of “couplings” that are perverse and perfidious, sharp and cunning, mechanical and psychological, and physical and emotional with which the presupposition for establishing communion between different bodies is realized: in order to illustrate the difference between them, Slominski calls them animated beings or different kinds of animals. Indeed, the individual who enters the artistic territory — and will be potentially capturable and hunt-able — is, in reality, a non-identity; thus the traps are for cats, insects, foxes, dogs, bears, mice, birds, martens, wolves, cows, tortoises.... However, there are also traps for human beings, like *Gerät zum Erschrecken von Personen, die sich nachts im Park aufhalten* (Device for Frightening People Who Spend the Night in the Park, 2000), as well as traps for small parasites and useless animals, *Würgefalle für Kleinraubzeug* (Trap to Throttle Small Vermin, 1992), which seem to be an ironical reference to museum- and gallery-goers and the whole system of art. The trap, which also exhibits characteristics of traditional sculpture because it has been made through the assemblage or collage of materials and colors, stands freely in space, offering itself as a visual object possessing its own iconography and recalling a certain kind of imagery. Its scope appears to be that of inviting the public to observe an art event, not because of its repetition that seems to make it equal since it is placed under the aegis of similitude, but as temptation and seduction that encourage observers to think of themselves as prey. Here, in the interplay between negation and affirmation — that is, between life and death — people can identify themselves as part of an existential and artistic process in which the artist’s malice may be converted into virtue and vice versa.