

## ArtReview

FEATURE ANDREAS SLOMINSKI

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# CAUGHT IN A TRAP

Are art lovers the hunters or the hunted?

words ADAM JASPER

**UNDER THE HARSH FLUORESCENT LIGHT OF THE GALLERY**, a small row of bushes and a trough of water is laid out. Around each, two large nets are attached to a hinged jaw that is in turn linked by cords to a hunter's hut. The hut, with its sinister horizontal slits for windows under a low browed roof, sits glowering over the bait like a predator. Within it may or may not be the hunter, ready to spring the jaws of the trap. The complete effect is simultaneously morbid and comical, for as earnestly malicious as the hut looks, there are not many starlings to be caught within the gallery. The piece is Andreas Slominski's *Vogelfangstation* (*Bird Trapping Station*; 1998–9), and truth be told, he's not hunting starlings.

Towards the end of his life the Australian anthropologist Alfred Gell composed and published a series of essays and a book about the problem of constructing a cross-cultural definition of art. In the 1996 essay *Vogel's Net*, Gell recounts a story about trapping from a village leader of the Fang of West Africa – a tribe whose name, as it happens, means 'catch' in German. It's a tale told in the context of a discussion of *evur*, or wisdom.

*In my youth I got to know the Pygmies well. The Pygmies belong to the forest, they are not village people like us... I often went hunting with the Pygmies, they have special traps for every kind of animal, that is why they obtain so much game. They have a special trap for chimpanzees, because chimpanzees are like human beings: when they have a problem, they stop and think about what to do, instead of just running off and crying out. You cannot catch a chimpanzee with a snare because he does not run away [and thus does not pull on the running-knot]. So the Pygmies have devised a special trap with a thread, which catches on the arm of the chimpanzee. The thread is very thin and the chimpanzee thinks it can get away. Instead of breaking the thread, it pulls on it very gently to see what will happen then. At that moment the bundle with the poisoned arrow falls down on it, because it has not run away like a stupid animal, like an antelope would.*

As Gell observed, this is no mere hunting anecdote. For the Fang, the story of the chimpanzee trap functions as an allegory about the Faustian nature of knowledge. Evanescent and elusive, you think you have it, and then in the next moment you realise that it has you. It's the chimp's caution and curiosity that leads to its downfall.

All traps, according to Gell, are more than mere implements, they are automatons. The arrow trap in the forest, with its tensed bow and arrow held delicately frozen by a tripwire, is a physical manifestation of the hunter's will, more dedicated in its unpausing anticipation of prey than any human could be. The trap is therefore a more faithful representation of the hunter than any figurative statue; for with the tripwire as nervous system and the bent bow as muscle, it is a functioning robot, crystallised intent. 'What carving', Gell asks rhetorically, 'which only shows us our outward lineaments, actually reveals as much about human beings as this mechanical device?' His question could be squarely directed at Slominski, the German *Fallensteller* – a setter of traps, snares and pranks – who recently enjoyed a major retrospective at the Frankfurt Museum für Moderne Kunst.

Slominski's absurd constructions have been notorious in Germany since the mid-1990s, and well known in Britain since his solo show at the Serpentine Gallery in 2005. My first encounter with one was in the 2000 Berlin art fair. A steel box that seemed half the size of a shipping container, complete with trapdoor, pulleys and a hook large enough to hang a side of beef upon. I asked the gallerist what it was and he explained, poker-faced, that it was a *trap for the feral St Bernard dogs that roam the streets of the city of Hamburg* (2000).

The huge contraption sat roughly 15 years into Slominski's ongoing practice of constructing innovative, humorous and sometimes perverse traps. Ranging from traps for badgers through to traps for slugs, the objects themselves have been extraordinarily varied in appearance. Some, such as *Trap for Ermine* (1997), have been Heath Robinson-esque contraptions of great size and complexity. Others, such as *Trap for Slugs*, have been austere simple, their purpose >

facing page:  
*Red Deer Trap*, 1999, metal, wood, 384 x 300 x 531 cm.  
Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York





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opaque until the mechanism has been explained. Slominski's traps do not have a recognisable style, the formal unity of the works being provided by their functional unity as traps. This aesthetic eclecticism has led to comparisons with artists ranging from Chris Burden to Joseph Beuys, although the closest visual analogy is probably to be found in the humorous play on causality in the Hasbro boardgame Mousetrap, or in Fischli and Weiss's *The Way of Things* (1987). The attempt to find visual reference points in terms of other artists conceals, however, the obvious cause of the diversity of the work: Slominski's traps cannot have a style, because each trap is directed at a different species.

In Slominski's dark allegory, each animal is lured by an appeal to its peculiar vice. Birds are motivated by fear, mice by domesticity and primates, it seems, by greed. The *Monkey Trap* (2005) that Slominski exhibited at the Serpentine was even crueller than that used by the pygmies: a small cage containing a banana, with a hole large enough to put a hand in but too small to take a fistful of fruit out: and we all know that it is impossible for a chimpanzee to let go of a banana it has already grasped. Rats, for their part, are drawn to enter the comfort of a small model church only to find themselves in a cage before the scale-model altar. It is part of Slominski's sardonic humour that the lower the animal, the more laudable its motivations. Worms are induced into their trap by trust; the first, harmless level is full of salad, the second inescapable. Slugs are tricked by hope, as they cross a long, painfully abrading piece of fibreglass only to fall into a perfectly smooth basin of water. What, then, is the fatal weakness of the highest of primates?

In one of the better essays written on Slominski's work, Patrick Frey made the offhand comment '...that animals have no knowledge of their own deaths, and therefore can have no consciousness of art' (*Parkett* 55, 1999, p. 86). It's a Hegelian observation. The insinuation is that we can come to terms with our knowledge of death, the terminus that renders all of our life projects utterly pointless, by consciously engaging in pointless activity; by definition, making art.

But it's questionable whether we humans are aware of our own mortality. It's the sort of thought that is always fleeting, relegated to the outer limits of speculation and certainly beyond experience. And even if animals are not aware of the immanence of death, they do have a finely attuned sense of danger.

The aesthetics of the trap are not, in the first instance, aimed at a human audience at all, but at the individual animals that it has been designed to lure. And these aesthetics are in direct violation of the entire tradition of the Enlightenment. The bait must be attractive, and this is best premised not on beauty – Kant's disinterested pleasure – but on the very *interested* appetites of its prey. The snare, for its part, must be concealed, or at most a source of indifference. The fine netting that catches the starling's wings, the tensed stainless-steel jaws waiting for the foot of a fox, the trapdoor in the half-submerged car that waits for the long legs of wading birds: all are designed not to disturb the expectations of their quarry. In the end, the only thing we know about the synthetic experience of animals is what the trap, speaking with its mouth full, tells us they *don't* notice. As Frey helpfully points out, 'for us, the being-in-the-World of a garden slug is a total riddle'.

Slominski's traps are not readymades, although he would willingly grant that readymades may be traps. Slominski's earliest traps were purchased from hardware shops, but since 1985 he has either made them himself or had them custom-fabricated, leading the viewer away from the unhelpful association with Duchamp. A peculiar property of readymades, as objects shorn of context and beached in a gallery, is that they are mute, indifferent to the attempt of the viewer to conjure up a justification – whether aesthetic or functional – for their presence. Representational art refers to things in the world, and readymades refer, explicitly, to nothing. Traps refer to themselves. A trap, properly perceived, is a highly articulate object. It's a miniature dialectic, with the bait as thesis, the snare as antithesis and the bait, trap and victim, bundled together, as a glorious and fatal synthesis and confirmation of the exactitude of the logical progression.

facing page, above:

*Untitled*, 2003, pram, iron, plastic, wood, birdseed, 85 x 72 x 37 cm.  
© the artist. Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London

facing page, below:

*Dog Trap*, 1999, metal, wood, 105 x 312 x 152 cm.  
Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York







## IN SLOMINSKI'S DARK ALLEGORY, EACH ANIMAL IS LURED BY AN APPEAL TO ITS PECULIAR VICE

Once every ten years the city of Münster plays host to a sculpture festival in which works are distributed throughout the medieval town. The difficult-to-locate pieces induce a phenomenon among curators and art critics known as truffle-pig syndrome, whereby frustrated connoisseurs search among the architecture for the best-concealed works. Slominski's *Streetlight with Tyre* (1996) set a snare for them. The work consisted of a bicycle-tyre tube laid around the base of an ordinary street lamp. But instead of merely tossing the tyre over the top of the lamp, he had a team of workmen come in and uproot the light and disconnect all its associated cables. He then ceremonially placed the tyre tube around the lamppost from below, before the electrical wiring was reconnected and the lamp reset in the pavement. Once the work was complete, all there was to be seen was a deflated inner tube on the ground. Within two days it was stolen by a passerby.

It's the same principle that is at play in Slominski's inducement of a giraffe – with the aid and abettment of its keeper – to lick a postage stamp at the Frankfurt Zoo. The stamp was then affixed to an envelope and posted. We are not told to whom, but we can presume that the envelope was empty. An empty envelope and also an artwork. But where is the art? The innocent recipient turns it over, holds it up to the light: nothing betrays it.

In Frey's phrase, Slominski's artworks are traps for the 'metaphysically infected eye'. The aesthetic is the lure, but a work of art's success is marked by its ability to interrupt and detain the viewer. The work of art's hold over us stems from its prestige, itself the result of the artwork's 'difficulty', or the amount of intellectual and technical labour crystallised in its production. These observations are truisms, but Slominski manages to turn them into themes. The principle of 'maximum effort for minimum effect' effectively throws our normal model of efficiency on its head.

The works are almost an illustration of Georges Bataille's principle of non-productive expenditure, and of his subsidiary doctrine



that art is prestigious in proportion to how gloriously useless and resplendently wasteful it is. Bataille, hard-core pornographer and editor of the surrealist journal *Documents*, was also the author of the only extant textbook of surrealist macroeconomics, *The Accursed Share* (1949). According to Bataille, far too much attention has been paid to the relatively banal question of how wealth is accumulated. The most interesting question in economics is this: how is wealth destroyed? To escape the eventually catastrophic cycle of reinvestment, profit must be consumed, either through luxuries, war or sexual reproduction. Art, as the fetishism of fetishism, is the ultimate luxury. The best working definition we have of it is 'stuff that is useless'. And taken to its logical conclusion, the best artwork is the one that produces the smallest possible return in proportion to the resources invested.

One of the most remarked-upon pieces in the 2005 show at the Serpentine captures both the eroticism of waste and the mordant humour with which Slominski fascinates us. All that was to be seen on one wall of the gallery was a large salmon-pink rectangle marked by a concavity at its centre – reminiscent, perhaps, of Lucio Fontana or any number of abstract contemporary sculptures. The title gives away more: *Imprint of the Nose Cone of a Glider* (2005). What existed only as a rumour on opening night was that, in the course of installing the exhibition, Slominski had brought a 40-foot-wingspan glider up to the gallery and had the French windows unhinged and the plane brought inside until its nose-cone collided with a prepared rectangle of expanded polyurethane. He had, so to speak, crashed his glider, 9/11 style, into the Serpentine. And it is there, caught by the lure of an enigma that transforms into a reference to terrorism and an unholy joke, that the trap snaps shut around the visitor. And it is here, exerting a sickly fascination, that the assorted animal traps reveal themselves as what they were all along: microcosms of the gallery itself, in which we are stranded in what, for a moment, is a lurching confrontation with mortality. ❧

above:

*Imprint of the Nose Cone of a Glider*, 2005, foam block in chipboard, 102 x 102 x 26 cm.

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facing page, above:

*Rabbit Trap*, 1999, wood, metal, paint, 24 x 26 x 78 cm.

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facing page, below:

*Rat Trap*, 1999, metal, plastic, electricity, 12 x 104 x 14 cm.

Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York