

EYES IN MESHES

a contemplation on the exhibition

The mist hovering over the beginnings of the camera trapping is not nearly as thick as that veiling the beginnings of photography itself. It is perhaps more noticeable, as it has not been given much theoretical attention in the past. Muybridge's chronophotographs, which famously demonstrated the true nature of a horse's gallop, were, in a sense, taken by the horse itself, as its legs triggered the cameras through a system of strings. We can therefore consider this device a prototype of the camera traps used today.

Camera traps must be considered a special form of trap. According to the anthropologist Alfred Gell, they represent "lethal parodies of the animal *Umwelt*", meaning the sensorial world available to any given organism, as Gell explains with reference to the biologist Jakob von Uexküll and his explanation of the photosensitivity of ticks. In various ways, traps include the model of the hunter and his prey, thus creating materially mediated frameworks of "complex intentionalities" – and, as such, claims Gell, they resemble works of art. Artworks can thus be considered traps laid within a certain ecology of attention.

The setting of camera traps (which we consider in parallel to art) derives from the expected features of animal behavior, as well as from human curiosity. They therefore represent a means of knowledge of (not only species-based) otherness and diverse associations that bridge this otherness. But human animals also enter the notional rat labyrinths used for experiments by behavioral psychologists. We can catch ourselves in front of the lens of the camera trap – or behind it – from novel points of view, on a broader background, and during the execution of something we do unconsciously. And just like the environment determines the conditions of our action, experiences with art promises the possibility of a certain deconditioning when it tickles our sensorially-cognitive habits.

If traces on the ground, once the central means of knowledge about the presence of the animal, became a model for reflections on the photographic logic of the index, they also us to think through photography again in light of images made by camera traps as the most transparent means of knowledge. Reflecting on camera traps as a specific medium can thus uncover many surprising connections between various domains of contemporary life.

The practice of setting camera traps uncovers the meaning of metadata, often more important than the visual representation itself – an economy of knowledge in which the forest’s amateur photographers can use their luminous ambushes to contribute to both academic research and preservation projects. We can learn, perhaps, something of the nature of territories and migration, whether we aim our camera traps at forest paths well trodden by animals, migratory corridors running over highways, fences surrounding private land or state borders. The reproduction technology that monitors feeding racks, animals’ nests or the bedrooms of sex workers makes visible the intentions and needs accompanying reproductive labor. As an interface between different sensorial worlds and incommensurate patterns of behavior, camera traps can aid communication, and not only between species.

In our perspective on the historical development of relevant photographic technologies, we identify their various temporal modes, for instance by comparing the “patience” of traditional camera traps with the unrelenting presence of the live stream. Artworks arising from the logic of the camera trap should serve as invitations to new designations of the place of the observer in the historical configuration of photography and objectivity, in our case extended to the physical absence of the subject as a human who could scare the animals away.