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Chinese Crested Tern with chick and decoy in South Korea. © Yunkyoung Lee

THE ART OF TWISTS AND TURNS

SAM FORSYTHE

Today, many of us have the feeling of needing to escape. Escape from the future, from the past, from the inexorable complexities of the present. Many have the feeling of being pursued by hidden forces, entangled in unseen snares, ensnared in unknown traps. The feeling of being tracked and harried is often accompanied by an awareness of one's complicity in the hunt, of being capable of various forms of violence, of knowing just how to do unto others that which is being done unto us. The feeling of colluding in an adversarial relationship is, however, quite natural. Conflict is always to some degree cooperative, and adversarial knowledge always entails two mutually dependent propositions—attack implies defence, hiding implies seeking. The prey necessarily understands the techniques of the hunter, otherwise they could not ever escape.

Thus vulnerability makes hunters of us all, despite our best wishes and our desire to live and let live. We seek each and every opportunity, we try to divine the secret and discern the latent, in the hope that we can acquire even a minimal advantage that might permit us to ride out the onrushing waves of chance and uncertainty that we know will soon catch up with us. We don't need to exploit every lever that we find in the world, but it seems necessary to be able to find them nonetheless. It is not about being strong or powerful, but about being aware, awake and alert to the way in which the transformation of circumstances might take place. Contingency forces us into a position of internal tension, pressures us to become both hunter and quarry, hound and fox.

So if complicity, duality and opposition are our lot today, what can we gain from this situation, beyond our own moral compromise? The techniques of the prey are useful, to be sure, but they are known to us all. We are born at a disadvantage, and only slowly do we acquire more potent abilities. Some, through their privilege, forget what it is to hide and survive, but most do not have this luxury. But if not the techniques of escape and evasion, what about those of seeking, tracking, or trapping? What can we we learn from the knowledge of the hunter?

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It would be nice to say, ‘nothing’, for hunting is brutal even when it is necessary and cruel when it is not, yet it is obviously significant if only because hunting behaviours are present in all forms, scales and environments of life. From microorganisms to social bodies, the forms and codes of hunting appear and reappear across landscapes, species and media, and their functions represent critical links between the systems of ecology, the drives of biology and the designs of technology. Even the basic forms of pursuit and capture implied by hunting are significant as diagrams for modern relations of power—as in the predator’s prediction of the prey’s line of flight, and its simulated interception at an imagined point in the future. However, if we wish to go beyond these metaphors of domination and capture, to find the means by which such relationships can not only be reversed but inverted, we can find an even more subtle model of survival in the technological lifeworld by examining the complex weaving of time, technics, knowledge and violence that is implied in the creation and use of traps.

In the art of creating and using traps we find a field of action exemplary of the form of intelligence commonly known as *cunning*, a mental disposition shared by snare hunters with tricksters, sophists, generals and con artists, and indeed with all beings who make use of hidden signs and advantages. Cunning is the art of twists and turns, a combined ability to detect, exploit and reverse the hidden relations of power and meaning latent in an environment—all to one’s advantage, of course. The layer of traps manipulates the forms and signs of life and world, combining hard truths with subtle illusions through the skill of their minds and hands. To hunt with traps is quite different from the overt power of hunting with speed and force, the hunting of chasing and running down to strike and destroy. The trap implies a very different kind of knowledge, a different domain of technique and ability.

First, to construct a trap requires deep and detailed knowledge of the form-of-life to be trapped—its habits, needs, desires, potentials—and then for this knowledge to be realised through the construction of a technical system, using only certain materials inherent and native to a particular landscape. This knowledge concerns both being and signs, a combination of sensitive observations and an intuition that comes only with years of experience. Second, the trap maker needs to understand the environment, the ecology, the interrelation of life and growth that situates both themselves and their target. Like the pursuit hunter, the trapper needs to read the weather signs, the trails and paths, the signs of other beings, to infer from all of these the right steps to take and materials to select. But unlike the tracker who uses their knowledge to create the linear form of the chase, the layer of traps takes this knowledge and enfolds it, knots it, weaves it into more subtle forms, trusting in their skill and mind to produce effects distributed across time and space.

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And thirdly, not only is a trap a model of the target, but it is also a diagram of the maker, demonstrating their knowledge, their skill, and their sensitivity to the world around them. The form of a trap, the efficacy of its sensors, triggers and restraints, the cleverness of its functioning and the obscurity of its concealment, all these can be read as a model of the mind of the maker. Like all skills rooted in artifice, in the combination of detecting and deceiving, concealing and inventing, a trap is the material embodiment of an ecological form of knowledge, the knowledge of a system whose circuit continually feeds back between other-environment-self, insisting on their continuity, and allowing no false separation between them.

As a device that models the mind of its target, that embodied the intentions of its maker, and that instrumentalises the signs of the environment, the trap can be seen as more than a tool or technique, it is a complex function of the mind, a set of relations between self, other and world, a relation that can be transposed into almost any medium. From ties that bind to software that ensnares, from technologies of entrapment to the illusions of media, the topology of the trap appears to be present in the very heart of our technical civilisation, a model for the instruments and systems out of which we have constructed our artificial lifeworld, a metaphor for the state in which we find ourselves today: trapped in a complex socio-technical relationship whose nature we have only understood too late. A trap is a story, a beautiful illusion, a subtle device whose action may be both dangerous and liberating.

But despite all of these points regarding the epistemic and semiotic sources of interest and mystery that lie embedded in traps, when we return from abstraction to reality it is hard to see the trap as anything but a cruel and vicious exercise in power and violence. Is it possible, somehow, to imagine a benevolent trap? A loving trap? What would it mean to be cunning without cruelty?

Once again, the trap has something to tell us about the nature of capture. The most perfect example of a trap is not a hidden pit or a woven snare, but a circumstance subjected to a reversal of fortune, accomplished through the discovery of hidden sources of possibility, found just where no one thought to look. A trap is a form of technics that serves to demonstrate that no situation is permanent and universal, that anything can be transformed into its opposite, including techniques whose primary application are deception, suspicion or violence. It is up to us today, those of us who feel trapped, not to ignore, forget or disavow the techniques of the hunter, nor to cynically bow to them. It is up to us to transform traps, to take their topology, their system of relations, and transform them into tools not of capture but of embeddedness, new ways of tying us into the world more securely, weaving us into the structures of life and community such that we can never be forcibly untangled by those who hunt us and capture us, hoping to use us for our life energy.

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Loving traps are those situations that have been designed to implicate all participants in their operations, and instead of the hidden construction of a determinate future, employ the latent creation of a system open to infinite continuity.

If our world is such that we cannot escape complicity in systems of conflict and capture, then we must turn our careful and sensitive attention to their nature and functioning. We must become experts in traps, not only to avoid stepping into them wherever possible, but to dismantle, disassemble, subvert and redeploy them for better purposes. Traps to encourage community, traps to create complicity in creation, traps to entangle us in each others' lives to such a degree that we cannot see ourselves as separate, isolated, unaddressed. The art of the living trap takes what is native to the ecological being—sensitivity to hidden signs, action through opportunity—and, like all traps and tricks and ingenious devices, reverses expectations, upends relations of power and meaning, and transforms the world into a system of conscious, intentional and mutual complicity.



Chinese Crested Terns at nest, Tiedun, China. Photo: Morgan Heim for Audubon

CHINESE CRESTED TERN

SCOTT ROGERS

The Chinese Crested Tern (*Thalasseus bernsteini*) is likely the world's rarest seabird. Up until the year 2000 it was believed extinct, and the species' current numbers waver around one hundred individuals globally. Primary threats to its survival come from illegal egg collection, and habitat destruction. The nesting sites for the species are limited to a handful of islands off the coasts of South Korea, China, and Taiwan. Outside of the breeding season the bird's habits are poorly known, with sporadic sightings throughout coastal Southeast Asia. Recent sightings in the Philippines have occurred in Manila Bay and along the south coast of Mindanao.

Because of the species' Critically Endangered status, an international conservation plan was implemented in order to protect and improve its chances of survival. This plan included the development and monitoring of nesting sites for the birds. Chinese Crested Tern prefer to nest on uninhabited rocky islands alongside other seabird colonies. This was taken into account when constructing the nesting sites at the Tiedun and Wuzhishan Islands (China) in 2013. The islands were cleared of brush to provide ample nesting areas, and traps were laid for rats and snakes. After this 300 decoy birds were arrayed around the site, and audio devices playing the calls of the terns were installed.

The use of decoys and audio playback for the purposes of attracting seabirds to nesting sites is called *social attraction*. Detailed by Dr. Steve Kress, who pioneered the technique in the 1970s, social attraction refers to the observed tendency of seabirds to choose nesting sites based off of the existing presence of other members of their species. Decoys and recorded calls serve as effective imitations to induce this process, with Kress noting that tern species are particularly susceptible to these deceptive tactics. On Tiedun and Wuzhishan evidence for the efficacy of social attraction is strong: in 2018 there were 77 adult Chinese Crested Terns and 25 chicks, where before 2013, none were recorded.

INFO

The work presented in the Kamias Triennial consists of polyethylene Chinese Crested Tern decoys which I have painted by hand. These industrially produced objects are made by Mad River Decoys, a US company that specialises in the fabrication of decoys used for seabird conservation programmes. After the Triennial it is intended that these decoys will be redistributed for use in further Chinese Crested Tern conservation.

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