How to Hunt invites us to contemplate Danish hunting scenarios. Since 2004 Trine Søndergaard and Nicolai Howalt have been joining bird and deer hunts. At first glance places where hunting occurs appear orderly, in some instances austere. This is because they are highly organized in three respects: first, areas have been set aside for hunting; second, the hunt is a managed event; third, because the pictures in How to Hunt are edited composites, scenarios extracted from particular occasions rather than real-time narratives documenting the progress of a specific hunt. As such they relate as much to painting as to photography. The artists stand back from the action, making photographs that will subsequently be used as the basis for digitally composited images. The process and the summary scenarios constructed have more in common with studio paintings based on drawings or photographs than with “straight” photo-documentary, although the photographic basis of the imagery lends a crucial sense of authenticity.

The “Golden Age” of Danish painting, early to mid-nineteenth century, was characterized by a new detailed mode of depiction and by focus on everyday subject-matter that can be seen as proto-photographic. This was a century of social and political change across much of Europe, initiated by the Napoleonic Wars (1800–15); Denmark experienced two major battles in Copenhagen during this period. Expanding empires, intensifying industrial revolution (particularly in Britain), and the 1848 social revolts in many parts of Europe were among many factors inducing a sense of social unrest. Artists, as historical witnesses, became interested in exploring everyday phenomena that included countryside and rural pursuits. This was the era of Realism in France, centrally concerned with the painting of everyday life, and of Constable's naturalistic explorations of the English landscape.

Nineteenth-century Danish painting can thus be seen as part of the broader Counter-Enlightenment that followed the Napoleonic Wars. Philip Conisbee argues that Danish art contributed to subverting the classicism, universalism, and mythological themes that characterized post-Renaissance European culture. He remarks that Danish painting featured a concentration on “present virtues: the pleasures of a well-ordered daily life; the quiet beauty of their country, with its islands and cliffs, woods and dunes, meadows and beaches; and the silent ships, moored in the harbors or plying the coasts.”1 Amongst the various ideological shifts and re-configurations of the political map of Europe at that time, Denmark—formerly the principal imperial power in the Nordic region—ceded Norway to Sweden in 1814. Conisbee proposes that “in spite of the reduced circumstances of their country, the Danes were nurturing a positive sense that they had much for which to be grateful, both in their heroic past, mythic or historic, and in the continuity provided by their native landscape.”2 Interest in nature and in small-scale farming could be seen as a return to rural roots and a source of replenishment of national pride. In Nordic Landscape Painting in the Nineteenth Century, Torsten Gunnarsson remarks that across Europe the middle classes had emerged as a significant social group and had become influential as buyers of art. If one of the functions of art is to draw attention to social circumstances, then naturalistic styles underpin focus on everyday surroundings. He characterizes Danish painting in terms of “bourgeois realism, expressed mainly in a classical idiom.”3 Denmark was Lutheran; engagement with everyday realities also fitted the down to earth values associated with Protestantism. There are many examples of paintings of the Danish landscape from that era, for example, Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg’s View from the Three Crowns Fort towards Copenhagen (1836) or Christen Kobke’s Copenhagen Seen from Dosseringen (1837), that look out over water bounded on both sides, reminding us that Denmark is configured from islands and
peninsulas. The literalness of the titles reinforces an anti-classicist and anti-mythological focus on actual vistas. Where people figure they are going about their daily activities as, for instance, farm workers or oarsmen. This is a calm environment, orderly and reassuring. By contrast with the symbolism that became associated with the Danish style towards the end of the nineteenth century, the painting mode of the Golden Age was primarily naturalistic and observational.

The Danish landscape is relatively unassuming; land blends into sea. Topographic paintings typically depict flat fields, gentle slopes, and clear views spread below expansive, often cloudy, skies. Denmark shares the distinctive light qualities and broad horizons of the Baltic region of northern Europe. As a flat peninsula jutting up where the Baltic and the North Seas meet, Denmark is particularly subject to the elements as winds rage across the country bringing rain, mist, or intense clear Nordic sunlight. The horizon is wide and, inhabiting a network of peninsulas, most of the population live by or near coastal or inland waters where they experience the enhanced intensity of skies reflected in the water. It is no surprise, therefore, to find that in Danish painting the movement, effects, and affects of light feature significantly both as indicators of mood and as subject-matter itself. For instance, Eckersberg’s *Study of Clouds over the Sea* (1826) is a small (twenty-one by thirty-one centimeters), intense examination of cloud forms over a dark sea in which the sky area fills three-quarters of the picture (fig. 1). In the mid-nineteenth century, a number of artists started visiting Skagen on the northern coast of Jutland (hence, the Skagen painters). They were likewise intrigued by the effects of the elements, especially the changing sky and clarity of cool daylight reflecting on the land. *How to Hunt* relates to this painterly lineage not only in terms of subject-matter—rural areas and pursuits—but also in terms of bourgeois realism and an aesthetic wherein the affects of climate and weather contribute to the poetics of the imagery.

Landscapes represent the inter-relation of natural phenomena with human intervention in the organization of land and that which is built on it. The contemporary Danish landscape is highly managed; there is no wilderness. The migratory patterns of birds are well documented, and animal roaming is contained. During the second half of the twentieth century the small-scale (family) farming economy was largely supplanted by agro-industry fuelled by the demands of supermarket chains across Europe. Within this, however, areas of land have been set aside as places of leisure, including a number of estates and coastal regions designated and planned as hunting areas. As a rural pastime, hunting has roots in ancestral hunter-gatherer modes of existence. It is a largely male pursuit, and, as such, is associated with masculine pleasures of stalking and conquest. It is a pursuit legitimated through an ideology of the hierarchy of species wherein it is deemed not simply acceptable but also instinctual for humans and animals to prey upon the weaker. Within this model hunting is viewed as innate to the human condition. Given the agro-industry that permeates much of the Danish landscape, there is a certain irony in the notion of hunters pitted against the forces of nature. This is a region of Europe wherein “wild” life is managed and land as “nature” has long since become organized and tamed.

Hunting is now a purposefully organized leisure pastime. This is not new; the organization of hunts in season figured historically within the social calendar not only for the aristocracy and upper classes as a ritual part of the round of visits and house parties, but also for estate managers, game-keepers, and workers (including cooks and housekeepers along with land laborers) for whom this was a busy season, integral to land management and also to kitchen provisions. It was part of the round of culling, harvesting, transformation, and storage of food for use through the forthcoming winter. However, the contemporary hunt differs as it is largely based not on necessity, but on leisure and pleasure, which perhaps includes the reassurance offsetting a link through such traditional pastimes to a rural heritage. A day out would seem incomplete
without a catch, even though it would be easier to buy the already plucked bird or jointed venison from a butcher or supermarket. Making sure that there will be birds or deer to shoot involves deliberate strategies. For example, if a wild bird habitat is in one area then a food trail may be laid to entice them to another coppice, thereby encouraging a habit of visiting this second woodland place for food from whence they return to their original sanctuary (fig. 2). When disturbed (by hunt beaters) whilst out for food the flock rises en masse and flies overhead back to their “home,” thereby creating an ideal opportunity for hunters, standing in wait, to shoot them down.

As partners Sondergaard and Howalt sometimes work together, sometimes independently. Neither would define themselves as documentary photographers; rather, as visual artists, they observe people and phenomena. Sondergaard has pursued a number of projects wherein staged portraits relate to art-historical themes and styles. This is most evident in Versus (2003), wherein contemporary individuals are juxtaposed with and echo the poses of classical statues, or in a series of small, square-framed Monochrome Portraits (2009), flatly lit and slightly indistinct, thereby perhaps referencing fading daguerreotypes. Strude (2007–09) expresses the artist’s interest in the culture of Fanø, an island off the west coast of Denmark, where the strude, a mask-like headdress, was used by women to protect their faces from the wind, sand, and sun (fig. 3). Only the women’s eyes can be seen. As traditional costume it is now only worn for an annual fête. The artist visited three years running, photographing the women by a window in a small attic as they dressed for the festival. Shafts of daylight flatten the textures of clothing, drawing attention to the whiteness of skin. The series is not a specific study of place or of costume; rather, the artist is concerned with ways in which folk costume becomes specifically coded as a bearer of meaning within local histories. Light is crucial to the mood of Sondergaard’s imagery, whether in staged portraiture or in un-staged workssuch as Interieur (2008), a series of three tableaux depicting empty rooms in a large and, it seems, abandoned stately home.

Howalt similarly works through staging, although his references are more contemporary. The imagery in Car Crash Studies (2009) is abstract: air bags, inflated, appear as large sculptural forms, and close-ups of the colors and textures of crumpled metal refuse identification of parts or types of cars (fig. 4). In Boxer (2001), attention is drawn to physicality as young male boxers are photographed twice—before and after their first fight. Howalt was interested in boxing as a ritual transition from adolescence to manhood. Both series concern activities within which the threat of injury or death is never far away. Existential questions relating to masculinity and to mortality quietly resonate. The series also show physical tension in the eyes of the boys, or, more evidently, in the contours and textures of dented metal.

Physical tension and atmospheric light come together to characterize How to Hunt, which dates from 2002 when Sondergaard and Howalt moved to a part of Copenhagen that was close to a nature reserve on the edge of the city. This was a place where wild birds came into their garden. Sondergaard started buying meat at the wildlife reserve and became curious about its source and about the organization of animal rearing. Howalt’s interest emerged slightly differently. As a visiting art school lecturer he found himself contributing to a series of briefs whereby photography students explored everyday pastimes under the rubric of “How to . . . ” within which “How to hunt?” was one.4 This turned into a working title and the starting point for researching the business of hunting. Sondergaard and Howalt decided to work together. Although they are not always both able to be present on the same occasion, collaboration is crucial to the overall project as each artist brings slightly different interests, skills, artistic sensibilities and judgments into play. The series also represents a shift for each of them. As the artists comment in their exhibition statement:
We both come from a documentary tradition in which personal access and the “authentic” moment of capture is central. In *How to Hunt* we chose not to “direct,” meet the gaze—or get personal. The intimacy and relationships central to our earlier individual works are here secondary. This represents a shift in working with photography for both of us—a move from intimacy to distance. Something reinforced by the choice of collaboration in which the immediacy of the one-on-one documentary tradition we both come from is replaced by a productive dialogue where nothing is “ours” individually. In *How to Hunt* our intervention and interpretation comes not in but after the photographic moment.5

Such collaboration perhaps harks back to early renaissance artists’ studios wherein family members and work associates would share responsibilities for the production of a painting in response to a specific commission.

The source photographs were mostly taken at large hunts. Establishing access to various venues was not easy at first; in common with other parts of North-West Europe, in Denmark there is a wariness of green activism on the part of hunt organizers (although there is no organized anti-hunt movement unlike, for example, in England). Whilst audiences might interpret the imagery in terms of sympathy or antipathy to blood sports, this is not at all their motive. Rather their interest is conceptual; as artists, Søndergaard and Howalt stand back and observe everyday phenomena. Now that this has become clear to the organizers, they have reasonably regular access to places where hunts occur, some of which are private estates. Access to estates is not in itself an issue since in Denmark, as elsewhere in Scandinavia, there are rights to traverse privately owned lands—although walkers are usually required to stay on footpaths. On the whole, however, people do not go there, precisely because they cannot explore the woodland, picnic, or camp. *How to Hunt* shows areas of Denmark—estates, landscapes, and views—that, despite being technically accessible, are rarely visited.

For the artists, following the hunt—attending briefings, talking with participants, observing events as they unfold, as well as discussions with those who manage the killing fields—obviously requires cooperation with the organizers. Their work method developed pragmatically in response to what was possible under the circumstances. They shot from tripods, standing still and at a distance, in order not to disturb the hunt. More particularly, they did not want to be in the line of fire. The conditions of working influenced point of view and photographic form as shots were inevitably medium or wide, not close-up. It also retained anonymity for the hunters who are never depicted as individuals but rather appear as figures in a landscape, thereby avoiding overt social documentary. The limitations of what could be achieved photographically on-site contributed to their decision to edit through digital compositing, allowing them to build a scenarios with a degree of detail that would not otherwise be possible. It also contributes to constructing a sense of distanced observation rather than emotional involvement; as viewers we are invited to spend time figuring out what is going on.

Typically, each scenario is developed from about ten separate photographs, although some are based on up to fifty source images all of which will have been made at one location and during the course of a single hunt. When the two photographers are both present their tripods are well apart, offering differing viewpoints. On occasion we discern a figure (a person or a dog) appearing face-on as well as in profile, sometimes multiply within the same picture. That the source is a single event links their imagery to documentary tradition, lending a sense of authenticity. The first image to be composited is an “empty” environment constructed to create a sense of harmony and beauty; this links the work to a landscape pictorial, perhaps reminding us that “landscape” is constructed through land management and through aesthetic form. Their landscapes have been
stitched together to create an illusion of seamlessness as the foreground is harmonized with the middle distance and the background, and attention is paid to aesthetic qualities. Then a set of questions about reality and illusion are addressed. How many birds might there be? At what point do numbers of people or animals and repetition of the same figures stretch credulity to a point where the image denies the actuality of the source event, becoming a technical exercise in digital construction rather than a picture that, as a construct, retains a sense of fidelity to types of place and circumstances depicted? Titles locate places. These are not cartographic designations but rather names given by land owners, sometimes as a reference to personal histories: Hans Jørgens Lykke, “The Happiness of Hans Jørgen,” Tyskervejs Søtten, “The German Beat,” Svigerindens hævn, “The Revenge of the Mother-in-Law,” or a literal description such as Rævebakke, “Fox Field.” The composites typify scenarios, but the titles remind us that places are imbued with local histories.

That hunting is seasonal means that the work is largely made in the autumn and winter. Light and colors are muted. Soft milky light and mists evoke the chill of early mornings and the cold of winter. There are no highlights from the Nordic summer sun; rather, gray light is dispersed through blankets of cloud or mist, or blended within snowy landscapes to the extent that figures in the distance are dreamlike rather than distinct (fig. 5). This is a romantic pictorial—not soft, idealized. This might seem paradoxical given the focused thrills of hunting and harshness of the kill. But there is a long tradition of depicting the hunt in painting in, for example, seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting or in British popular art. Animals at bay may be glorified, often within stark settings. Paintings of capture, taming, and killing romanticize pursuits historically associated with masculinity, implicitly reinforcing notions of a hierarchy of species. The wash of light softens that which might otherwise seem too blunt a statement about wildlife as human prey. Dreamlike qualities are enhanced through the dulling of luminosity and, very often, lack of specified location. Imagery testifies to the superiority of man through the quelling of the mythological “beast.”

Scenarios in How to Hunt fall broadly into three types. First, locations where hunting takes place. Attention is given to geometric form: the contours of fields, hills, and woodland areas. For example, in Tvedelykkemarke (2007) a diagonal row of trees bisects the flatness of the fields (fig. 6). Second, some pictures particularly emphasize people and animals within the landscape. Here the figurative aspects draw attention not to individuals, but to shapes, body language, and implied movement. As such, people, deer, birds, decoy ducks, trees, and bushes are handled similarly within the composition (fig. 7). The mode is typological, not specific. Only where we see coastline or wild grasses do we get a clear sense of particularity of place, perhaps for the technical reason that it would be almost impossible (or very time consuming) to composite the movement of the tide (fig. 8). Selected scenarios have been developed as diptychs or triptychs, emphasizing again the specifics of place by contrast with the story-telling aspects of those pictures in which animals and people figure. Third, there are a number of close-up shots of birds dying which, without dramatization, detail the effects of flight arrested.

Exploration of the inter-relationship of humankind and nature is a long-established theme within Western art. In terms of subject-matter How to Hunt clearly fits within this. What is more distinctive is the way in which mood is expressed through naturalistic rendering of light, stylistically echoing Danish landscape painting. For example, the soft light over the gentle hillside leading up to a cluster of trees in Rævebakke Sød (2005, fig. 2) seemingly echoes the muted clouds and even understated light of the rolling fields and coppices in Vilhelm Hammershøi’s Landscape from Lejre (1905, fig. 9) and the horizontal geometry of Nordskansen (2008) bears obvious formal similarity to examples of landscapes looking over water by Eckersberg, Købke, or Johan Thomas Lundbye (fig.10). Lundbye’s Landscape at Lake Arre with a View of the Shifting
Sand Dunes at Tisvilde (1838) is typical of the genre as the shapes of clouds and effects of light dominate, diminishing the figures of the animals and the land worker in the foreground (fig.11). However, in Lundbye’s study the summer light is intense, reminding us of the visual joie de vivre heralded by sunlight. How to Hunt reflects more muted moods of autumn and winter.

How to Hunt was included in the Scandinavian exposure section at Paris Photo in 2006, and shown in New York the following year. Gallery prints are one hundred sixty by two hundred centimeters, allowing more detail to emerge than can be discerned when reproduced smaller-scale, as, for example, in this book. The experience of the larger prints is much more immersive and visceral as we imagine ourselves within the scenario, rather than held at a distance as we thumb through the pages of a book within which the pictures are framed and contained. An eight-page section features single birds falling, apparently shot by the photographers as accurately as if they had held a gun. Freedom of flight is implied, yet our attention is drawn to the trauma of death. As with the book overall, the order and juxtapositions are intended to avoid any sense of narrative unfolding. Rather, repetitions and differences between the various scenarios accumulate to create an overall sense of hunting as a particular sort of pastime and occasion. This accumulative method builds not only in terms of thematic connections but also through mood—to the extent that we can imagine the chill in the air or the last squawk of a dying bird. The order of the book is largely dictated by formal decisions, not narrative ones, although the triptychs are time-based in that they trace the gentle rise and fall of decoy ducks in response to the movement of the tide. In a gallery we might be absorbed by the scale of the individual pictures; by contrast the book draws us in through accretion of the affects of the many images.

Søndergaard and Howalt are not interested in socio-political statements; rather, their work results from curiosity about the everyday extraordinary. As such, How to Hunt belongs equally within the tradition of still life—rendered less elliptically in French as dead nature (nature morte)—as within landscape as genre. Life and death are staple themes within art practice. Here the artists weave tales of events that echo romanticism in painting and invite us to reflect on mortality whilst considering the morality of the transformation of killing, once a necessity for survival, into a leisure pastime. As constructed scenarios the narratives are poetic rather than literal. In line with the Danish tradition of observational painting, the artists deploy soft light and muted natural colors to entice us to reflect upon the cycle of seasons and traditional rural pursuits. With metaphorical eloquence How to Hunt invites us to contemplate human behavior and the enduring pursuit of conquest.

Liz Wells writes and lectures on photographic practices. She is Professor in Photographic Culture, Faculty of Arts, University of Plymouth, UK.

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