

## HARRI KALLIO

### THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS BACKWARDS

BY CARLO McCORMICK

Harri Kallio begins his epic photographic recreation of the long-extinct dodo bird with a modest quote from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*: "'Why,' said the Dodo, 'the best way to explain it is to do it.'" Indeed, for all the research and writing on the dodo (surely, volumes more than any other extinct animal), the actuality of this enigmatic cultural symbol adds up to no more than a skeleton of facts, a litany of not-so-scientific anecdotal entries, and a kind of magical mythology that keeps cropping up in popular culture. With his project *The Dodo and Mauritius Island: Imaginary Encounters*, Kallio, a Finnish photographer now living in New York, attempts an idiosyncratic recreation of a lost species and its environs that is at once a compelling natural history and a fantastical, visionary journey.

If we are to accept what we see through Kallio's lens, we must also appreciate how photography—having long ago settled the murky issue of fact-versus-fiction—is still able to trespass truth in ways that open the chasm between seeing and believing. The artist has worked painstakingly to reconstruct the dodo scientifically, anatomically, and photographically, to the closest possible simulation of how it existed on the remote island of Mauritius, before its unfortunate encounter with humanity brought about the bird's rapid extermination in the late seventeenth century. Kallio is not trying to assert the authenticity of his pictures, nor is he particularly interested in revisiting the debate over the "veracity"



of photography. Instead, he takes us somewhere else—exotic yet familiar, lost and found—to an experience of an experience. It's a kind of documentary photography about a memory: the registration of an absence that still fills our dreams after three centuries.

For all his daunting scholarship—including extensive work at Oxford University, the Natural History Museum in London, Copenhagen's Zoological Museum, and Narodný in Prague, the four institutions in the world among which the scant skeletal remains of the dodo are scattered—there is something about Kallio's emphatic methodology that slips into a kind of wonder that borders on whimsy. If the text that accompanies his "Dodo" project reads more like a scientific and historical text than your typical coffee-table photography tome, it's also a bit of a shaggy-dog story, with the dodo appearing at the end like a punch-line. By stripping away all the mystery of a priori sources and the anatomical and mechanical issues of constructing his bird, to see it "live"—even within the theatrical frame of his camera—gives the viewer an impossible sense of animation. We experience pictures as vicarious witnesses, to feel like *we are there* or *we know* this subject, but Kallio allows us to do so much more here. He doesn't just transport us back in time to an island that has been ecologically savaged by tourism and to the spirit of an animal vanquished by our own hands, he returns us to a different kind of aesthetic experience, to the sense of visual equivalence we might have encountered in





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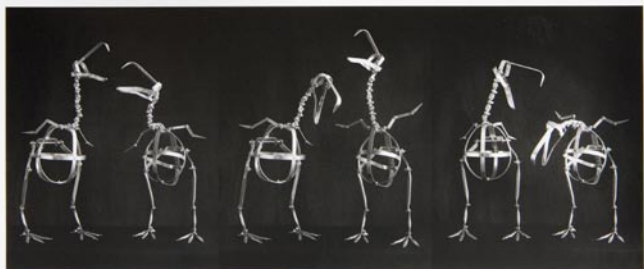
Kallio, whatever sympathy he clearly has for this brutal case of extinction through human intervention, doesn't dwell on this morbid consequence. It is, by his subtle measure, evident enough in the subject that it hardly needs to be underlined. His pleasure—or, perhaps more aptly, our joy—is in the retelling of such a completely weird story. The dodo inhabits our cultural landscape as the benign caricature of everything our social ethos abhors. It is stupid and slothful, without wit. And why? Because, born into an existence without natural predators, it could not survive the most brutally cruel and ignorant species ever: humankind. Eradicated a mere half century before the publication of *The Origin of Species*, the dodo is a reposi-

tory for the hierarchical values and naturalist equivalencies we inherit from Darwin.

Kallio must still believe in that most ineffable aspect of photography: its potential to explore and make visible the unseen. His most radical departure from scientific theory and public perception is in enlivening the dodo with muscularity and athleticism—defying its characterization as perpetually in a state of hopeless stupor. But Kallio does not wish to reinvent the dodo; he knows that its cherished yet debased position relies on the wisdom of fools. His bird is not so far from the ones that make cameos in movies ranging from *Ice Age* to *Master and Commander*, nor is his bird so very different from Lewis Carroll's, who (much like the artist himself) knows that the best way to explain it is to *do it*. ●



PAGE 70: *Benares #3*, Mauritius, 2002; PAGE 71: *Rivière des Anguilles #4*, Mauritius, 2002.  
 THIS PAGE, ABOVE: *Dodo Fossil Skeletons*, Cambridge, London.  
 BELOW: *Mechanical Dodo Skeletons #3* (*Dodo* reconstructions in progress).  
 OPPOSITE: *Rivière des Anguilles #7*, Mauritius, 2002.



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OPPOSITE, TOP: *Le Gris Gris #2*, Mauritius, 2001; BOTTOM: *Rivière des Anguilles #3*, Mauritius, 2001.  
 THIS PAGE: *Macchabee Forest #1*, Mauritius, 2001.  
 Photographs courtesy Bonri Beretti Gallery, New York