

## The matter and meaning of museum taxidermy

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### Abstract

Focusing on taxidermy in contemporary museums and art galleries, my paper explores relationships between the materiality of taxidermy and its multiple readings or narratives. I present four such narratives – descriptive, biographical, cautionary, and experiential – and examine the ways these overlapping and competing readings manipulate and transform taxidermied mounts and, conversely, how mounted creatures always embody an excess that resists full disclosure.

**Key words:** taxidermy, natural history museums, contemporary animal art, aesthetics

### Taxidermy bonfires

Various theoretical engagements with “nature” ... have made it impossible to maintain previous understandings of “nature” as an innocent given; it is always a construct, created between “absence” and “presence”: impossible to pin down, yet necessary for the production of meaning. (Robertson *et al.* 1996: 2)

The thing seen is recognized as an animal; the nature of the experience may be less recognizable. (Baker 2000: 98)

The meaning of museum taxidermy has been complicated in recent decades. It is true enough to say that museums are no longer uncritically accepted as the cathedrals of nature that they were during taxidermy’s heyday in the nineteenth century. Contemporary museums are no longer collecting for public display with the same energy as their predecessors. Museums with nineteenth-century roots have been criticised as complicit with the colonial project, and their collections branded as imperial archives. Where taxidermy was once considered beautiful and the practice a delightful recreation for young ladies, it now makes people squeamish; it is seen by many as a gratuitous spoilage, as death on display. Further, in a Discovery Channel age, when wildlife videos can bring living, breathing, fighting, mating creatures into everyone’s home, no shooting or stuffing required, filling darkened halls with dead animals seems – to some – as almost perverse. Let me offer a vivid example of taxidermy’s twentieth-century’s fall from both nature and innocence.

Between 1958 and 1960, Gillian Spencer, the curator of the Saffron Walden Museum in Essex, successfully urged the Saffron Walden District Council to expunge the relics from the museum’s golden age of international collecting. In fact, she had been almost ordered to do so. Under the terms of the Carnegie Trust grant the museum had received for upgrades and improvements, Spencer was required to follow the advice of Dr. N. B. Marshall of the British Museum who stipulated that only the museum’s British specimens and a superior collection of tropical birds were to be kept while the other foreign specimens were to be discarded. As Spencer explained in the Saffron Walden Museum Society’s 1960 *Annual Report*, local museums must exhibit local nature not the haphazard remains of eccentric Victorian ramblings. The imperial history of the animals was an embarrassment and besides the animals were in a ‘dreadful condition, many of them were more than a hundred years old, all very dirty and some very dilapidated. Most of them were so badly stuffed as to be mere caricatures of the creatures

they were supposed to represent' (Saffron Walden Museum Society 1960: 7). Plus, Spencer argued that 'it is felt that television and the zoos now give people, and especially children, opportunities of obtaining a far truer picture of wild life in other parts of the world' (Saffron Walden Museum Society 1960: 7). And so, after having convinced Council that 'nostalgia should be banished in the interests of greater usefulness for the Museum', Spencer sent a letter to every museum in Essex in the hopes of unloading what she tepidly described as 'foreign mammals which have been pronounced tolerable (though not outstanding) specimens' (Saffron Walden Museum Society 1960: 7). No museum wanted them. Over 200 animals, birds, reptiles, and fish were hauled to the city dump and set on fire. On 4 May 1960, nostalgia reeked like burnt fur (fig. 1).

How much nature could possibly remain in a fusty piece

of Victorian taxidermy? Grimacing with wizened lips and wooden teeth, the straw-stuffed survivors from the past century seemed better labelled as 'cultural relic' than 'nature'. When Spencer purged her museum of pitiable creatures, she was sluicing out the imperial heritage of the Saffron Walden Museum, Britain's second oldest purpose-built natural history museum. But yet, if these objects were eradicated because they were dubious cultural relics, why not remove other Victorian items from displays as well? What makes taxidermy so particularly deserving of elimination?

Spencer's purge can be read either as a pragmatic spring cleaning or as cautionary tale of loss. For the pragmatists, taxidermy is an educational tool for presenting a vision of nature and disposable when the didactic value of this vision is diminished, undermined, or superseded by improved technologies and display tactics. The Saffron Walden animals failed on all three counts: badly stuffed, objectionable imperial relics, and inferior educationally to television. The opposing position is more complex precisely because it is not altogether clear what was burnt by Spencer, and, as such, without knowing what was destroyed, it is difficult to advocate its preservation. Did the bonfire eradicate animal skins, educational resources, cultural history, or – and most nebulous of all – the experience itself of encountering taxidermy, that moment of recognition between viewer and animal form? As I will argue it was a hazy combination of all four. Taxidermy is a shape-shifter, easily sliding between categories of objects and between objects and experiences.

Spencer's taxidermy purge is not a unique twentieth-century episode. The International Committee for Museums and Collections of Natural History (ICOM NatHist) has established a working group on the Art of Taxidermy and its Cultural Heritage Importance in the hopes of raising awareness about the loss of many natural history collections around the globe. The website of the working group laments that as museums 'modernize', taxidermy mounts are frequently the first items to be removed:

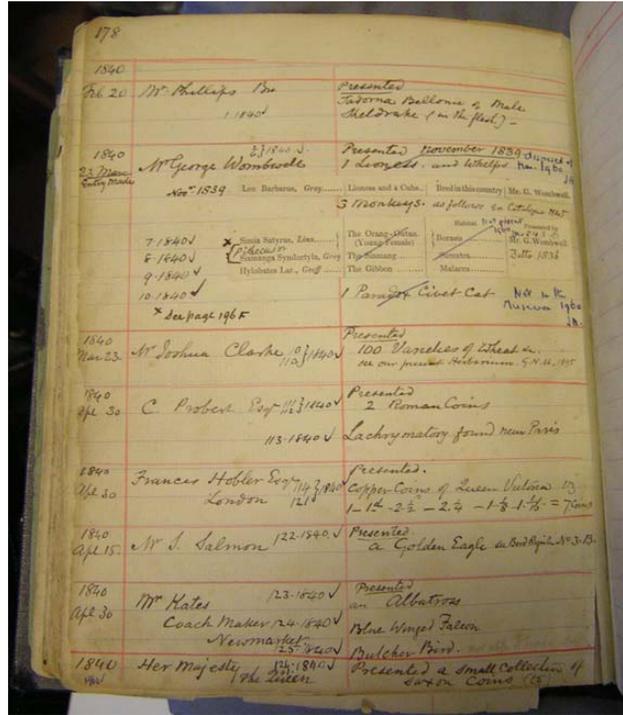


Fig. 1. Animals donated by George Wombwell in 1840 were marked for elimination. A page from the Saffron Walden Museum's catalogue.

When fire, earthquakes and wars destroy the world's historical and cultural heritage, it might not be possible to do anything, but when that destruction is undertaken by the very people employed as guardians of our heritage, then it is a criminal act and we must all despair for the future of our collections. It is especially difficult to understand the fact that those causing the disastrous damage call themselves scientists when, due to a lack of scientific and historical rigour, they burn or otherwise destroy historical evidence ... both through the destruction of irreplaceable specimens and the context in which they were displayed. (Norris 2005)

Questioning the uses and benefits of keeping, reducing, or eliminating museums' taxidermy collections seems particularly pertinent in the light of contemporary concerns of species and habitat loss. But here, I am not as interested in the merits or ethics of disposing or retaining museum taxidermy as much as in taxidermy's provocative loquaciousness.

In recent decades taxidermy has been critically reappraised as a historical and cultural object, by which I mean two things. First, the historical bracketing of taxidermy and the practices engaged in collecting and mounting animals, and second, an unravelling of the various cultural, political, and ideological forces which have shaped how nature has been used and interpreted within museums. My interest in these historical and cultural shifts engages both the ontological and the symbolic. That is, I am interested in the relationship between taxidermied animals and their various narratives, both the ability of those narratives to manipulate, transform, and even subvert their objects but also, and more particularly, the power of the objects to fashion their own readings. This latter dimension of museum taxidermy, this loquaciousness, is rarely discussed. By close analysis of several examples of taxidermy, I will explore how these animal-objects talk to us, not only about ourselves as human agents and manipulator but also about their own significance and salience. To quote from Lorraine Daston's recent introduction to *Things that Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*, I am interested in how 'talkativeness and thingness hang together' (Daston 2004: 11). If taxidermy can no longer be unproblematically read as nature, neither can taxidermied animals be simply understood as mute mounted skins.

### Unnaturating taxidermy

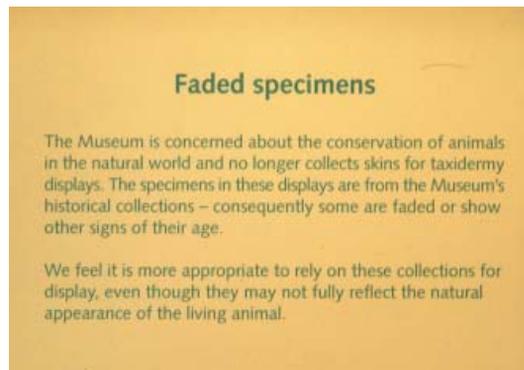


Fig. 2. A sign from the Natural History Museum, London. Author's photograph.

Perhaps the most concise and forthright example of the historical bracketing of taxidermy are the small signs (fig. 2) scattered throughout the taxidermy collections at the Natural History Museum in London which state:

The Museum is concerned about the conservation of animals in the natural world and no longer collects skins for taxidermy displays. The specimens in these displays are from the Museum's historical collections – consequently some are faded or show other signs of their age. We feel it is more appropriate to rely on these collections for display, even though they may not fully reflect the natural appearance of the living animal.

The apologetic signs distance the museum from the now dubious acts of killing and mounting, and allow the museum to present a fresher outlook, more in tune with current sensitivities while still displaying their collections. The museum's acknowledgment of its own discomfort with its collecting history perhaps has the effect of making taxidermy more palatable to the typical museum goer, who, living in our current age of environmental awareness, has become acutely sensitive to the human uses and abuses – both past and present – of the natural world and its inhabitants. Yet by undermining the mimetic value of the animals – *they may not fully reflect the natural appearance of the living animal* – and through a barely veiled critique of past collecting practices, the signs suggest that what is on display is not so much nature but another era's vision and manipulation of nature. By drawing attention to the historical depth of these animal-objects (and away from their surface appearance), the signs tacitly acknowledge the objects' origins and significance within particular cultural, intellectual, and political practices. This faint nod to the material culture of science opens discussions around the history of the museum, its collecting practices and curators, and the way surrounding political and cultural climates influence the expansion and exercise of natural knowledge. But the signs also raise issues about why the museum maintains such displays and why visitors should bother looking at the animals.

The dioramas at the Field Museum in Chicago offer an example of the cultural and ideological deconstruction of museum exhibits. The dioramas are accompanied by narratives about past damage done to animals and their habitats and the abuses perpetrated by hunting and the exotic animal trade. While a natural history museum is an appropriate institution to examine past and present encounters between humans and the rest of nature, the pairing of dioramas and abuses of ecology has the effect both of highlighting active human history against a placid backdrop and of exposing the illusionism of the diorama. That is, rather than attempting to enchant viewers by creating a mysteriously 'real' vision of nature, the signs call attention to the human forces which killed, skinned, remounted and brought these creatures into view and the inherent constructed perspective of that vision.

Again, the viewer's attention is shifted away from the theatrical realism of the dioramas. In a sense, looking at nature almost becomes secondary to knowing human history: rather than textual description illuminating the animals, the animals now supplement a cultural exegesis. This emphasis lies at the heart of Donna Haraway's dismantling of the epistemological and aesthetic realism built into the dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History's African Hall, opened in 1936. For Haraway, taxidermy was wielded as a fallacious technology of perspicuity and sanctity, tantalising visitors with the anticipation of communion with nature and offering a curative for the threats and decadence of modern life: 'each diorama presents itself as a side altar, a stage, an unspoiled garden in nature, a hearth for home and family' (Haraway 1984-5: 24). This communion was constructed, or rather 'discovered', by the stance of taxidermic realism, whose power lies precisely in its magical ability to engineer a spontaneous revelation. What is so laborious constructed appears effortless, and more, spontaneously found: from upholstery to epiphany. But far from being spy-holes into nature, Haraway exposes the racist, imperialistic, and masculinist motives unpinning the entire performance. To be seduced by the vision, is, in some sense, to be complicit with social relations of domination, of white, robust, wealthy, progressive American manhood over the effeminate, the uncivilised, the dark, and the animal.

And yet, the strength of Haraway's argument rests precisely on the visual power of the dioramas. The magneticism is, of course, produced by the union of a particular set of social relations and technologies – guns, photographic references, impeccably crafted taxidermy, atmospheric backdrops, exact reproductions of trees, rocks, foliage, etc. However, it is the achievement of a vision of transcendence (whether deceptive or not) that sustains Haraway's analysis of the dioramas' ability to facilitate a fantasy of communion, salvation, and truth. A question that hardly ever gets asked is why stuffed animal skins artificially posed in fabricated backgrounds should be able to concretize and communicate such a cumbersome and powerful set of aspirations.

As Lorraine Daston describes, there are certain things that make 'us want to talk about how these particular things talk to us' (Daston 2004: 11). These talkative things are typically objects that stymie tidy classification and blur boundaries, particularly between subject and

object, art and nature. Overflowing expected outlines, they are richly enigmatic, evocative, and fascinating chimeras which instantiate unpredicted constellations of experiences. In short, 'things helpfully epitomize and concentrate complex relationships that cohere without being logical in the strict sense' (Daston 2004: 20). This often startling 'logic' arises from the way that things are simultaneously material and meaningful: they communicate by what they are as much as by what they mean within particular cultural circumstances. In his article 'Thing Theory', Bill Brown proposes that things always hover just beyond full explanation, an excess of significance that resists being fully reducible to language. 'As they circulate through our lives', Brown writes, 'we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture – above all, what they disclose about *us*), but we only catch a glimpse of things' (Brown 2001: 4). Elusive and somewhat magical, things are 'what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as object or their mere utilization as objects – their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems' (Brown 2001: 5).

Taxidermy, I would argue, is precisely such a thing. Or perhaps it is more accurate to define taxidermy as a species in the genus of things in order to keep in focus what makes taxidermy distinctly enigmatic and to avoid, as Jonathan Burt cautions, eliding 'the animal' (if such a thing exists) into a 'more generalised, and inflated, concept of otherness' (Burt 2008: 8-9). Unlike the astounding Wear Collection of Blaschka Glass Models of Plants at the Harvard Museum of Natural History, Hieronymus Bosch's chimeric Treeman, or the fragile nostalgia of soap bubbles explored respectively by Daston, Joseph Leo Koerner, and Simon Shaffer in *Things that Talk*, the thingness of taxidermy rests in the recognition that this animal-object on display was once a sentient creature. Taxidermy's excess of significance originates in the relationship between an original and re-animated liveliness: at once lifelike yet dead, both a human-made *representation* of a species and a *presentation* of a particular animal's skin. In spite of the death, the skinning, dismemberment, and refashioning, the animal form holds. The eyes may be glass, but the animal stares back. An animal – even if taxidermied – is not an arbitrary object, materiality indistinguishable from a bowl or a painting. The astounding realism of the Blaschkas' glass flowers is not the same as that of the animals in the African Hall's dioramas since the verisimilitude of the latter is not technically verisimilitude: these *are* the actual animal skins. This uncanny animal-thingness of taxidermy has the power to provoke, to edify, and even to undermine the validity its own existence.

To return to the Field Museum's dioramas, despite the acknowledgement that this vision is a manipulation and the tacit commentary that perhaps these animals should not in fact be here to look at, the overall aesthetics of the hall - a dark passage flanked by superbly crafted 3D pictures of animals in landscapes – creates an undeniable visual magnetism (fig. 3), and brings to mind the wonder-generating display tactics in museums and art galleries, where, as Stephen Greenblatt claims, the precious object is dramatically spotlighted in order 'to evoke an exalted attention' (Greenblatt 1991: 42). The very visual power of the display, this exalted attention it commands, strangely serves to strengthen the critique of the animals' very presence. That is,



Fig. 3. A diorama at the Field Museum, Chicago. Author's photograph.

the sheer magnetism of the animals impels viewers to look at nature and implicitly encourages them to appreciate the creatures on display, and simultaneously to recognize the problematic of looking at them within a museum context. This paradoxical constellation of experience is engendered quite precisely in the fusion between the meaning and materiality of the dioramas, between a realization of the cultural, historical, and ideological causes of taxidermy and the experience of witnessing a genuine piece of nature, between visible and invisible pedagogy, between the ethics and aesthetics of display. The animals are not fixed entities fully explained by the hierarchies of natural order, nor – either - by recent cultural or political discourse, but rather provocative forces, both ruthlessly physical and semantically ambiguous.

### Unravelling taxidermy

In order to attempt some clarity on the relationship between the materiality of taxidermy and its competing meanings, let me offer a close reading of one particular piece, a Hawaiian mambo collected in 1778 and which is now part of the Harvard Museum of Natural History. The species, *Drepanis pacifica*, once endemic to Hawaiian forests where it fed on nectar from lobelia flowers with its long curved bill, is now extinct – with the last recorded sighting over a century ago in 1898. It is believed that habitat loss due to the introduction of cattle and deforestation determined the mambo's fate, and now the mambo, like all preserved extinct species, signifies irreparable loss. Paradoxically, the specimen both condemns and validates its own inclusion within the museum's collection.

But this particular mambo has other stories to tell. The bird was collected during Captain Cook's third and fatal voyage to Hawaiian between 1778-9 on which Cook was stabbed to death during fighting between the Hawaiians and his crew. When the ship returned to England, this mambo was given to Sir Aston Lever along with many of Cook's other natural and ethnographic objects and so became part of the extraordinary Leverian Museum in London. Less than a decade later in 1786, Sir Aston was forced to dispose of his collection for financial reasons, and the entire collection was auctioned off by lottery. The mambo was bought by Leopold von Fichtel commissioned to buy specimens for Emperor Francis I of Austria and so became part of the natural history museum in Vienna. Later, the mambo was obtained by an American bird collector, who gave the mambo to the Harvard Museum in exchange for another extinct Hawaiian honeycreeper (Pick 2004: 36–37).

This mambo, then, has a complex, overdetermined significance. It is at once a dark moral lesson of nature's fragility, a symbol of human transgression, and evidence of the environmental damage that accompanied colonization. It is a document of Britain's geographic exploration and conquest, a biographic memento from the life of a significant historical figure, an exemplum of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European infatuation with natural history, and a sign of the transnational networks of communication, knowledge, and power created by naturalists' passion. But besides being a moral lesson, a memento, an exemplum, a sign, the mambo is also the preserved remains of one particular bird and – especially in light of the species' extinction – an object representing mambo-ness, something totally unique, an ineffable, inimitable piece of the natural world. These overlapping meanings have been variously articulated by several distinct areas of scholarship, which I have attempted to simplify into the following four narratives or readings.

*Descriptive readings* depend on and presume the mimetic capacity and value of taxidermy and are exemplified by the labels identifying and describing characteristics of creatures in contiguity with the mounted skins. Although the mounted animals are understood to be meticulously created to offer as close a representation of the living animal as possible, ultimately descriptive narratives encourage viewers to see *through* the particularity of the animal on display to access the general: from the stuffed remains of this particular mambo to a general concept of its species and the species' placement with a classificatory scheme. As a representative of the species, the specimen individual history is typically ignored – 'their individuality must be subjected to the needs of scientific pedagogy' (Asma 2001: 3). Typically put forward by biologists and older, positivist intellectual histories of science, descriptive readings sidestep social processes and cultural contexts, focussing instead on the creature as a biological and classificatory fact (Thorsen 2006: 279). Descriptive narratives, therefore,

fluctuate between reading a taxidermy mount as the material presence of an animal and as an abstract marker within a theoretical system.

Informed by material cultural, anthropology, and social histories of science, *biographical readings* are focused on the trajectories of specimens as they travel from field and forest, through the hands of naturalists, collectors, and curators, and their eventual display in particular institutions, as well as the various uses to which the objects have been put. As the recent interest in object biographies has stressed, objects – whether animal or otherwise – accrue meaning as they move between and interact within various social contexts: objects provide material evidence of the relationships and mechanics which have enabled their existence and display within the museum (see Alberti 2005, Gosden and Marshall 1999). Biographical readings of the mammoth, for example, include the bird as a token of Captain Cook's fatal voyage and as material sign of the geographic networks of power and knowledge established by Imperial Britain. The mimetic value of the animal pales in importance since the focus is on information viewers are not able to decipher directly from the creature on display. In short, biographical narratives are historical narratives for which the animal is more interesting as material evidence of human activity than as material presence of a particular species, unless that species has particular cultural significance. Judith Pascoe's analysis of a passion for hummingbirds, for example, explores how the technical difficulties of exhibiting the tiny birds fuelled romantic desires of early nineteenth-century collectors. As their vivacity and splendour could not be captured by taxidermy, the brilliant birds provided 'mute testimony' to their collectors' insatiable longings cultivated during the romantic period (Pascoe 2006: 52).

Readings blur into *cautionary readings* when their emphasis shifts towards admonition and censure, that is, when descriptive and biographical readings underscore the loss and destruction of species and habitats. As with biographical narratives, the mimetic value is not predominant; in fact, the more awful the taxidermy, the more broken and damaged the creature, the *more* powerful the reading. As Kitty Hauser's writes: 'stuffed animals – especially badly stuffed ones – can signify ... other kinds of contemporary ruination' by offering, for example, 'a dark view of an irrevocably damaged nature' (Hauser 1998-9: 10-11), a reading of taxidermy seconded by Wayne Grady in *Bringing Back the Dodo* when he muses that extinct stuffed creatures should all be 'housed in their own gigantic edifice: the Museum of Lessons Unlearned' (Grady 2006: 173). On display is not so much an animal but a sign of a permanent loss and psychic corrosion, as John Berger famously explicated in his account of capitalism's radical marginalization of animals (Berger 2001). While biographical readings have no necessary emphasis on nature as such – in fact, as a biographic token, the mammoth is not inherently different than Captain Cook's boots – cautionary readings are dependent on a particular concept of nature which accentuates nature's intrinsic worth, a value which frequently becomes lessened with human contact. Frequently informed by the moral commitments of animal rights and environmental thinking, cautionary readings accentuate the extra-discursive immanence of the natural world and advocate a deeper recognition of humans' interdependence (or inferiority) and organic affinity with eco-systems and species. For, cautionary readings taxidermy is hardly the presentation of nature but best understood as supplying traces of lamentable human activity inscribed in nature.

And finally, *experiential narratives* arise not from textual accompaniments but from within the physical encounter between viewer and thing. Experiential narratives are in essence visceral knowledge, that is, the knowledge gained in the recognition of the somatic presence of an animal and the necessary lacunae in our understanding of it. Onno Oerlemans has described this experience as 'an openness to the materiality of the world, to its otherness. It is in part a sense of wonder, a need to take the world in, to try to know it, countered by an awareness that this otherness cannot be made part of the singular or cultural self' (Oerlemans 2002: 13). This experience centres on a recognition of animal form, although it can be heightened by the age of very old taxidermy or by extinct species, which have lingered immortal and musty for decades, or, in the mammoth's case, for 229 years. It can also be intensified by an arrangement of specimens designed to accentuate colour variations or size, by dramatic lighting, or by the sheer magnetism of a diorama's illusionism (fig. 4). Despite such display tactics, experiential narratives are a recognition of the embodied 'thingness' of displays of mounted animals: the strange aura of lively yet dead creatures collected together for the purpose of looking.



*Fig. 4. Dramatic lighting at the Harvard Museum of Natural History, Cambridge, MA. Author's photograph.*

Experiential readings are the most difficult to theorise. Not only are they nebulous and emotional but suggest the need for a rigorous philosophical stance on perception and ontology, and yet they are also the most spontaneous. The excitement of children in natural history museums and the casual comments that taxidermy is eerie, haunting, or 'the eyes followed me', all evince taxidermy's provocatively visceral presence.

The narratives almost always occur in combination and shades of intensity, and they all play with the visibility and ontological presence of their objects. Descriptive narratives fluctuate between taxidermy as object and as abstraction, biographical narratives accentuate animals as historical evidence, cautionary tales see not animal but traces of human activity, and experiential narratives find value in the experience of looking itself. The incredulity of witnessing over a hundred hummingbirds – their brilliancy, diminutive shapes, the sheer number arranged together in one case – shades into regret that so many were killed (fig. 5). Similarly, descriptive readings of extinct species can blur between appreciation of a species, a sensation of wonder provoked by encountered a vanished creature, and guilt for its disappearance. Beyond an appreciation of creatures, science, or cultural history, these voluble animals ultimately have something to say to museum goers about past and future encounters with the natural world, but always cryptically, always enigmatically, always in ways that both challenge and buttress creatures' very presence in museums.



*Fig. 5. Hummingbirds at the Natural History Museum, London. Author's photograph.*

### Taxidermy reconsidered

If taxidermy's value has been questioned within museums, animals have emerged as an edgy medium for contemporary artists. Such artists include Damien Hirst and his formaldehyde works, Thomas Grunfeld's *Misfit* series of 'new' species compositely created from various animal parts, Mark Dion whose work critic the history of natural history collecting and display, and a Dutch trio known as the Idiots who transform regular creatures – rabbits, hedgehogs, swans, birds, mice – into the tragic heroes of contemporary fairy tales using glass, metal, and embroidery. The animals in much contemporary works engage questions about how we come to know the natural world and what such knowledge means for humans. Nature and animals become not fixed entities fully explained by the hierarchies of natural order but provocative forces 'whose properties remain radically unknown and unknowable', as Norman Bryson writes about Mark Dion's *The Library for the Birds of Antwerp, an installation piece which incorporated live birds* (Bryson 1997: 92). On display are questions about the abilities (or failure) of science and philosophy to make sense of the world, about the limits of human understanding, and the potential for alternate systems of thought to provide a less confident but more holistic perspective on our relationships with the natural world and its other non-human inhabitants.

As Steve Baker highlights in *Postmodern Animal*, across the works, 'regardless of any ethical stance, materials count, materials create knowledge, or at least encourage open and imaginative thought' (Baker 2000: 61). The materials certainly do count, but I would argue that the sort of imaginative thought they provoke is less engaged in gaining knowledge and clarity than in casting these creatures as troubled and troubling animal things. Indeed as Baker argues, the new animals in contemporary art are *encountered* rather than passively viewed. For Baker, the postmodern animal is 'most productively thought of as an embodied thing', and while it may take various forms – live animals or taxidermied creatures, either whole or disjointed, in installations, sculpture or performance – its essence is always most fully realized through an encounter or, more precisely, a confrontation with a viewer. 'Unable quite to constrain itself, it [the postmodern animal] creates something (a physical space, a situation) which comprises and binds the bodies of the viewer and the thing itself to form a new, awkward, and explicitly non-modernist whole; only the viewer's presence completes the work' (Baker 2000: 53). Baker's viewer is, of course, a postmodern viewer, and the particularity of the encounter is necessarily a disorientating experience of a ruptured postmodern aesthetic. The animal's '*unmeaning thereness*' looms, provokes, and resists: '[t]he thing seen is recognized as an animal; the nature of the experience may be less recognizable' (Baker 2000: 96-98).

Contemporary animal studies, particular aesthetic and philosophical discussions of taxidermy within art galleries, have something to offer museum studies. The strange fusion of unknown and recognizable that characterises the postmodern animal complicates cultural and historical biographies of museums' animal-objects. For all their material similarity to other art objects, for all the manipulation of taxidermied animals, something elusive remains in part because communication both with and about animals is so problematised (Burt 2008: 11). As Burt stresses, even if the imagery is recognized as contrived, audiences still respond to the embodied thingness of the animal – 'as if these images were living animals' – and are provoked to question whether the art's treatment or representation of the animal is ethically appropriate (Burt 2008: 11). This 'aesthetic of livingness' challenges accepted animal-human relations and disrupts 'any possibility of a self-contained aesthetic, where the animal would be simply an art object "out there" in the gallery space' (Burt 2008: 11). Particularly in light of contemporary concerns surrounding the loss of species in the world and the devaluation and removal of taxidermy from museums, to ignore the animal-thingness of taxidermy, to discount the importance of 'the aesthetic of livingness', is to disregard the very essence of what makes taxidermy loathed or appreciated.

The philosophical underpinnings of the postmodern animal necessarily outline and accentuate something called 'the animal'. Influenced by the concept of 'becoming-animal' put forward by Deleuze and Guattari in *Thousand Plateaux*, 'the animal' presents and enables a sort of postmodern un-humaning of the human, a process of dispensing with the human subject's identities and subjectivities. A detailed discussion of the theory is beyond the scope of this article, but what I want to highlight is simply the notion of 'the animal'. Philosophically the concept

may have a provocative validity and certainly facilitates discussion of the trials and disturbances of the postmodern subject, but biologically 'the animal' has no material reality. The animal cannot embrace the specificities of species and offers no guidance for the understanding of animal particularities both in the world and in museums. Nevertheless, the ability of the postmodern animal, as Baker observes, "to take both it and the viewer out of their familiar meaning-laden contexts' (Baker 2000: 98) has productive implications for a deeper, more nuanced appreciation of museum taxidermy.

As my opening quote from *FutureNatural* makes clear, while various theoretical perspectives have fully explored 'nature' as a construct embedded in the cultural, symbolic, and political orders of human history, those activities are dependent on things of nature for their operation. Playing between its obstinate thingness and cultural significance, nature is 'impossible to pin down, yet necessary for the production of meaning' (Robertson *et al.*, 1996: 2). As I have suggested, this endless interplay between materiality and meaning is the essence of encounters with taxidermy whether in museums or galleries. The experience depends on the viewer's ability to juggle an appreciation of an animal's obstinate thingness with its prevalent readings or critiques. If, as Haraway has argued, 1930s visitors to the African Hall, experienced a complex relationship of imperial propaganda and masculine prejudices along with the psychological salve of nature and the wonder of exotic animals, our encounters in a new millennium are necessarily as complex, condensing unexpected messages that cohere, as Daston describes, 'without being logical in the strict sense' (Daston 2004: 20). Encounters with taxidermy combine a broad spectrum of talk: the uses and abuse of nature, the validity of the materials of descriptive natural history, the historical trajectory of particular creatures on view, the cultural mechanics choreographing that trajectory, relations between species including humans, and, ultimately, whether the experience is proscriptive or aesthetic or both.

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I want to briefly discuss exactly such a convergence: the photographs and taxidermy composing Bryndis Snaebjornsdottir and Mark Wilson's quest to find and photograph every mounted polar bear in Great Britain, a three-year journey which unearthed 34 bears. Snaebjornsdottir and Wilson photographed each of the polar bear in situ where they found them, sometimes on display in museums, sometimes in private homes or even pubs. Each bear is accompanied by detailed biographies of how it came to be on display in its current situation. Working in collaboration with museum, curators, taxidermists, and private owners, the artists developed a detailed database on the bears, documenting when the animal was caught or shot, how, where, and by whom they were displayed. Many of the bears are old and crusty: Spencer would surely have thrown them out. Yet the photographs have a strange aura, conveying a noble tragedy to these animals, which seem almost to have been caught in compromising, melancholic situations, an aura which is encapsulated by the exhibition's title: *nanoq: flatout and bluesome*, 'nanoq' being the Inuit name for polar bear. The detailed biographies only seem to add depth to their melancholic aura. If the individuality of each bear is highlighted, so too is the bears' symbolic power. As Snaebjornsdottir and Wilson write, the polar bear is 'a catalogue of paradoxes', a 'prism with the capacity to contain and refract all manner of response in us: fear, horror, respect, pathos, affection, humour. It is this capacity above others which makes it such a potent symbol and for, us, in relation to this project, such a powerful reality to seek to reappraise' (Snaebjornsdottir and Wilson 2006: 17).

The other half of the exhibition involved transporting all the bears in stable enough condition to a gallery space at Spike Island, a centre of contemporary art and design in Bristol, England. Together they implicitly convey an anxious narrative of global warming and the threat to arctic species, a narrative which simultaneously critiques past collecting practices and acknowledges their intrinsic worth. These creatures are at once postmodern animals and particular species: they are quite particularly polar bears (potentially endangered arctic species not African or South American creatures) while also symbolizing broader environmental concerns and – most enigmatically – offering a disorienting aesthetic experience of nature as an off-white (whited out) canvas across which human meaning can be inscribed. Yet such readings hardly explain the animals. Outside of a museum context, massed together in spare

environmental, the bears become mysterious and ambiguous objects and overwhelmingly visually magnetic. They engulf the viewer in the space of their materiality. The encounter is provocative and unsettling, and necessarily productive in considering our relationship with animals both alive and wild or dead in museum. At once symbolic and individual, both victimized and saved, the bears resist any easy talk. But then, if taxidermied animals were easy to read, the process of looking at taxidermy would hardly be worth the effort.

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