

Why Look at Dead Animals?  
Taxidermy in Contemporary Art

by

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## Abstract

Current artists who engage with the historical traditions of taxidermy are producing works that comment on the ways in which animals are regarded and used. This paper specifically focuses on “natural taxidermy” in art: animal objects that blur the boundaries between art and nature. Artists using taxidermied specimens in their work ask the viewer to think about institutional framing of “nature” and animal life in the discourse of natural history, museum display, and our contemporary relationship to the animal specimens that often remain forgotten or neglected in the back rooms of institutions. *The Marvelous Museum* by Mark Dion (2010) reclaimed “life” in the forgotten “orphans” in the storage rooms of the Oakland Museum of California through museum intervention. The project *Nanoq: flat out and bluesome* (2001-2006) by artist duo Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson sought to find all remaining taxidermied polar bears in the British Isles and attempted to renegotiate these “animal things” through photography and installation. The interventions these artists make through the use of taxidermy point to our changing historical relationship with animals, and the history of the production of the specimen by regimes of taxonomy, collecting, and display.

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*Dead animals do tell tales. There are decoding secrets for interpreting the mute testimony of these animal specimens. Only in death do most animals pause long enough for our analytical minds to torture some truths out of them.*

—Stephen Asma, *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads*



## Introduction



Figure 1. Idiots, *Geological Discovery II*, 2012

The artwork *Geological Discovery II*, 2012 by the Dutch duo *Idiots* uses the lower half of a bisected female lion's body as its main material.<sup>1</sup> This section of the animal's body has been further sliced into two sections and stuffed with amethyst, aesthetically referencing a geode. Surely this is not a real geological discovery – but it can be considered as a specimen of sorts. *Geological Discovery II* is an object that functions within the long trajectory of the natural history specimen: the geological slice of mineral and the taxidermied animal. Consequently, because it is an *artwork*, a simple reading of either the amethyst or the lion as a museum-type natural specimen is denied. Artists using taxidermied specimens in their work ask the viewer to think about institutional framing of

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from *Geologische Vondst II*. Afke Golsteijn and Floris Bakker make up the Idiots.

‘nature’ and animal life in the discourse of natural history, museum display, and our contemporary relationship to the animal specimens that often remain forgotten or neglected in the back rooms of institutions. While this paper is considering only one aspect of taxidermy in contemporary art – the ‘natural’ specimen – all such works provide a basis for artists to reflexively comment on the way humans currently use and conceive of animals.

A half-century after falling out of popularity after World War II, taxidermy is fashionable again. These objects of exclusion have been brought back from outsider status and into the realm of art.<sup>2</sup> This time, however, the popularity of taxidermy has reached many streams of visual culture: home décor, film, books, websites, store displays, do-it-yourself artists, workshops, curiosity shops, and reality television. Recent years have also seen a trend whereby actual animals – whether dead or alive – have been increasingly present in the gallery and art museum.<sup>3</sup> Taxidermy has a longstanding relationship to morbidity in popular culture, but how have our tastes changed to appreciate this sort of *thing*? The artworld is discovering taxidermy at the very moment that specimens are being rejected as embarrassing relics by museums. The downfall of the taxidermied specimen makes possible, and helps inform, reflections on the historical and

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<sup>2</sup> Taxidermy as an object of exclusion or ‘marginal’ can be seen in various cultural moments in history. For example, the character Norman Bates from Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, 1960 extends his passions for taxidermy to his mother. This is one instance of the type of stigmatism attached to this type of profession and the objects produced.

<sup>3</sup> A short list of prominent international artists using taxidermy over the past decade include: David Shrigley, Maurizio Cattelan, Adel Abdessemed, Ian Baxter&, Edwin Wurm, Guy Maddin, Huang Yong Ping, Wim Delvoye, David R. Harper, Damien Hirst, Banksy, Steve Bishop, Polly Morgan, Zhang Huan, Kent Monkman, and Cai Guo-Qiang.

cultural frameworks that formerly employed these strange objects to produce knowledge about “nature.” Through artistic practice specimens can be seen for what they are: simulacral objects, rather than preserved objects of nature itself.

No longer are representations of the animal in art simply metaphor or symbol, now we are seeing the real *thing*.<sup>4</sup> While works that use taxidermy specifically are about animals, they are more so about *taxidermy*, pointing to our habits of collecting and displaying (dead) animals, and our relationship to this dead nature. Investigating why and how contemporary artists are using taxidermy points to this trend as ingrained in the history of “nature” and “natural history” and historical frameworks of knowledge about nature and animals. The works under discussion here fit in the mode of taxidermy I label as *natural animal*, described as an attempt to depict life, posing the animal skin in a “lifelike” and “natural” pose imitating its state while alive and in the wild, often in what appears to be a frozen moment in time. The *natural animal* draws on the history of the taxidermied specimen as an epistemological tool, a gnoseological object, and an object of display, wonder, and observation. While using traditional modes of taxidermy, artists employ this mode in order to consider, reveal, or contest the complex set of forces and ideas that such objects represent, from the eighteenth century to the present. Artists

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<sup>4</sup> While taxidermy is about something different than the *live* animal – this trend is in conjunction with the increase of animals in art in the past two decades, most recently dOCUMENTA (13) was nicknamed dogUMENTA, for example. The nickname resulted from Pierre Huyghe’s *Untilled*, that consisted of a living white dog with a painted pink leg roaming the grounds; Brian Jungen’s *Dog Run*, a dog training course; curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev’s comments that there is no fundamental difference between humans and dogs (or other species); and her 18-month *dOCUMENTA (13) calendar – the world of dogs*. <http://db-artmag.com/en/71/feature/loss-of-artistic-control-pierre-huyghes-biotope-at-documenta/> and <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Dogumenta/26696> (accessed April 1, 2013)

working with taxidermy also critically reflect on this history, and the frameworks within which such objects (taxidermy mounts) have operated.

There are of course, other modes of contemporary taxidermy art outside of the traditional *natural animal*. I have identified three main modes of animality in contemporary taxidermy-based art: 1) anthropomorphic, 2) abject, and 3) natural. Anthropomorphic taxidermy is rooted in the tradition of the beast fable, and historically expressed in works such as Victorian taxidermist Walter Potter's *Kitten's Wedding* (1890), an over-the-top scene of a kitten wedding, at once playful and doll like and equally uncanny. Contemporary anthropomorphic taxidermy frequently has a darker outlook, presenting the deadness of the animal directly to the viewer, or even staging death. David Shrigley's ironic standing *CAT* (2007) holds a protest sign declaring "I'm Dead," while Maurizio Cattelan's suicidal squirrel in *Bidibidobidiboo* (1996) looks like the scene of a suicide. Both are doubly dead.



Figure 2. David Shrigley, *CAT*, 2007.

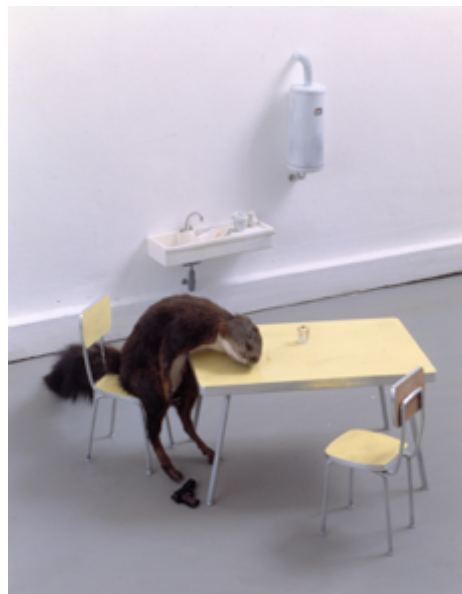


Figure 3. Maurizio Cattelan, *Bidibidobidiboo*, 1996.



Figure 4. Ondrej Brody and Kristofer Paetau, *Dog Carpets*, 2007.

The abject animal, on the other hand, can be described as depicting and pushing the boundaries of the materiality of death in the animal object. Presenting the deadness directly, more than the ironic stance of Shrigley or Cattelan's work – the abject animal does not ask for the sentimentality of anthropomorphism. What we see in the abject animal is the sensationalizing of death: dead animals are used as waste material, found objects; the mount is no longer a closed entity but open and deconstructed; at times artists are directly involved in the animals' death and mounting. Such works have been criticized as unethical, and in some cases illegal: as with the artist duo Ondrej Brody and Kristofer Paetau, who commissioned a taxidermist to make *Dog Carpets* (2007) out of euthanized street dogs in Bolivia and Prague [Fig 4]; Wim Delvoye's ongoing practice of tattooing live pigs at his farm – and the taxidermied results displayed in the gallery; or Yang

Maoyuan's hollow horses that are inflated like giant balloons, their legs barely touching the ground [Fig. 5].<sup>5</sup> These three modes cover a range of aesthetic and conceptual aspects of taxidermy in contemporary art, and all point to different histories of our use and understanding of animals.



Figure 5. Yang Maoyuan *The Mongolian Horse*, 2008.

Artists who incorporate taxidermy in their works are dealing with questions about our contemporary relationship with the animal, not just in the realm of art, but also in the history of the animal *object*. For the purposes of scope, I focus here on the natural animal in taxidermy – the animal specimen – and its history from the curiosity cabinet through the natural history museum and the work of contemporary artists to interrogate these historical modes of use and meaning.

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<sup>5</sup> Outside the realm of high art another example of the abject animal in recent years: the work by Bart Jansen titled *Orvillecopter* from 2012, a functioning toy helicopter made out of his dead cat. This adds to the negative view that taxidermy is strange.

A number of contemporary artists are employing the forms of taxidermy and presentation of animal specimens associated with the natural history museum. Engaging with natural animal taxidermy, they seek to renegotiate the ideologies of the natural history museum and the history of collecting the natural world. These artists are either engaging with old taxidermy and re-purposing it, or creating new works that attempt to emulate the aesthetics of animal specimens, such as the Idiots' *Geological Discovery II*. The most prominent artist who has engaged with natural history collections and natural taxidermy is Mark Dion. Predominantly referencing the curiosity cabinet and the classification of objects within it—and within natural history more broadly—Dion's work functions as a key site for the use of these kinds of objects and frameworks in contemporary art.

This paper focuses on contemporary art projects that use natural taxidermy (either repurposed or newly created) to engage with, or perform an intervention on, the ideologies of natural history and its practices of collecting and display. Dion's project *The Marvelous Museum* (September 2010 - March 2011) will be discussed in relation to taxonomy and collecting; his practice consciously attempts to engage and explore the moment of rupture between the curiosity cabinet tradition and the Enlightenment. Secondly, the project *Nanoq: flat out and bluesome* (2001-2006) by artist duo Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson will be considered in the context of our current understanding of nature, compared with British exploration and collecting of the nineteenth century. *Nanoq* was a project that sought to find all the existing taxidermied polar bears in the British Isles, which were then photographed, documented, and

presented in gallery space and in a book. The interventions these artists make through the use of taxidermy point to our changing historical relationship with animals, and to the larger questions of how we have used and conceived of nature.



Figure 6. Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, *Nanoq: flat out and bluesome*, 2001-2006.

Projects such as *Nanoq* and *Marvelous Museum* challenge the viewer to look at these curious ‘things’—animal skins mounted on forms and arranged into lifelike poses—differently. The immediacy/transparency between specimen and living animal to which it refers is broken by these artworks; something that should have remained hidden has been brought to light (one definition of the uncanny).<sup>6</sup> Taking these (mostly) forgotten things

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<sup>6</sup>The uncanny (German: *Das Unheimliche* – “the opposite of what is familiar”) Sigmund Freud wrote: “The ‘uncanny’ is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar.” While at the same time, “an uncanny effect is often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, such as when something that we have hitherto regarded as



out of their “habitats” (public or private) and into the art gallery opens a new multi-focal perspective of understanding. By no longer looking at taxidermy specimen through the lens of natural history, a different way of looking is opened up, one that merges art and nature.

The title *The Marvelous Museum* implies a space that holds a possibility for viewers to be amongst objects of wonder and the unknown. We can see that Dion’s work draws not only on the formal devices of the curiosity cabinet, but is also concerned with bringing back curiosity and wonder into the realm of aesthetic experience and contemporary art. This key feature of Dion’s work is shared with other contemporary developments that demonstrate a longing for curiosity in the museum.<sup>7</sup> There are multiple examples of museums or exhibits that have opened in the past few decades that go against the institutional norm, in order to merge art and nature. These are places of wonder: the pop-up exhibit The Museum of Everything, Paris, London; The Museum Jurassic of Technology in Los Angeles; California; the House on the Rock in Wisconsin; The City Museum in St. Louis; Missouri; or the Museum of Old and New Art in Tasmania.<sup>8</sup>

Stephen Bann clarifies the new use of curiosity in the museum: “Curiosity is potentially at

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imaginary appears before using reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions and significance of the thing it symbolizes, and so on.” If we think of taxidermy as a representation of animal – taking over for the thing it symbolizes, it is the essential uncanny *thing*. Familiar (aesthetically animal-like), yet strange. Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” 1919. pp. 1-2, 15.

<sup>7</sup> The return of curiosity within the contemporary museum, may also be seen as a counter act against the canonical museums of modern art, “whose role was conceived as one of giving historical and objective validity to the masters of Modern Movement.” Stephen Bann. “Shifting Paradigms in Contemporary Museum Display” edited by Andrew McClellan in *Art and its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2003), 126.

<sup>8</sup> See: Museum of Everything - <http://www.museumofeverything.com/> and Lawrence Weschler, *Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder* (New York: Random House, 1995).

play when the ideology of Modernism falters: in this sense what we inadequately term 'post-modernism' is not simply the state of being cut off from history, but the return of an 'other' history."<sup>9</sup> An 'other' history is presented in both *The Marvelous Museum* and *Nanoq*, drawing attention to the past and present structures of collecting (both private and publicly)—and to the past and present structures we have created to understand “nature.”

The artworks under discussion here re-engage with old taxidermy that has lived in the storerooms of natural history museums or private collections, and which has been largely forgotten or avoided. These works make visible the *afterlives* of these animals while pointing to the long history of collecting nature. In order to discuss the works at hand, however, one must first understand something of the historical stages through which the collection of natural things/objects progressed, and the role of the natural animal specimen in the production of "natural" knowledge. The changes the animal object underwent, from curiosity object to object of reason, will be outlined to unpack the meaning of the *specimen*. First, I discuss the curiosity cabinet as the origin-place of taxidermy during the age of wonder, as a site in which art and nature were intertwined. Secondly, I consider the changes these animal *things* underwent in function and meaning when scientists needed evidence of nature for study and classification. Today the taxidermied specimen no longer has use-value; artists today are returning to and addressing the earlier values and functions, as well as the current forgetting and rejection of the specimen.

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<sup>9</sup> Mark Dion and Lawrence Weschler. *The Marvelous Museum – Orphans, Curiosities & Treasures: A Mark Dion Project*. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2010), 127.

## Why Look at Dead Animals Today?

Cultural critic Akira Mizuta Lippit has recently argued that animals are more present than ever in visual culture as a result of their having never been *less present* in daily experience.<sup>10</sup> Could it be that artists are using taxidermy because of nostalgia for the natural world, or for a time when we supposedly had a closer connection to nature and animal life? Contemporary writers on taxidermy (and animals more generally) in art propose a range of rationales for its re-emergence in culture, using an interdisciplinary approach of history, animal studies, aesthetics, literature, environmental studies, ethics and activism, museum studies, art history, philosophy, anthropology, and science.<sup>11</sup> Steve Baker, in his book *The Postmodern Animal* (2000), points to an all-encompassing characteristic of taxidermy in contemporary art that he describes as “botched taxidermy.” The “postmodern animal” as defined by Baker is a confronting *thing*: fractured, wrong, or

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<sup>10</sup> “Modernity can be defined by the disappearance of wildlife from humanity’s habitat and by the reappearance of the same in humanity’s reflections on itself: in philosophy, psychoanalysis, and technological media such as the telephone, film, and radio.” Akira in Ron Broglio, *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>11</sup> For more recent literature on taxidermy and animals in art see: Rachel Poliquin, *A Breathless Zoo*, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012); *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, 2007-present; Steve Baker, *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity, and Representation*, (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Melisa Milgrom, *Still Life: Adventures in Taxidermy*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 2010); Joan B., Landes, Paula Young Lee, and Paul Youngquist, *Gorgeous Beasts: Animal Bodies in Historical Perspective* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012); Nigel Rothfels, *Representing Animals*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002); Ron Broglio, *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); The Animal Studies Group. *Killing Animals* (Illinois: University of Illinois, 2006); Samuel J.M.M. Alberti ed., *The Afterlives of Animals: A Museum Menagerie* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001); Dave Madden, *The Authentic Animal: Inside the Odd and Obsessive World of Taxidermy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2011); Jay Kirk, *Kingdom Under Glass: A Tale of Obsession, Adventure, and One Man’s Question to Preserve the World’s Great Animals* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2010).

wronged, tatty, avoiding sentiment, avoiding metaphor, awkward, and ironic.<sup>12</sup> While his readings of the postmodern animal through the philosophical perspectives of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* and Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'becoming-animal' are insightful, his account is under-historicized, ignoring both the history of the animal in art and the history of taxidermy. Considering these histories, and the history of "natural history" and "nature," help us understand what artists are doing today, and how and why they are manipulating and commenting on historical forms. In the case of natural animal taxidermy the history of natural history and the role of the animal-specimen are integral to a discussion of what these works are about and why they are made. Natural history frames animals in certain ways, and the specimen animal made it possible for all kinds of natural-historical knowledge to proceed; now artists are critically looking at this history, using the specimen to think about the meaning of the specimen.

My title for this paper, "Why Look at Dead Animals? Taxidermy in Contemporary Art," plays off John Berger's 1977 essay, "Why Look at Animals?" published in *About Looking* (1980). In it, the author emphasizes that there are theoretical and ethical reasons to study animals in the humanities, pointing to the rich history between man and animal. Berger situates the importance of animals: "The first subject for painting was animal. Probably the first paint was animal blood. [...] it is not unreasonable to suppose that the first metaphor was animal."<sup>13</sup> Berger's concerns surround the loss of meaningfulness in our relationship to nature that resulted in inauthenticity in animal

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<sup>12</sup> Steve Baker. *The Postmodern Animal*. (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2000), 50-54.

<sup>13</sup> John Berger. "Why Look at Animals?" *About Looking*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 5.

imagery. Berger emphasises that in our late capitalist society, animals have disappeared in their original form, and are instead replaced by symbols. After the emergence of what Baker calls "the postmodern animal," this is reversed.<sup>14</sup> Baker makes clear that the postmodern animal avoids metaphor – emphasising a critical change in our relationship to animals, and our representation of them. Baker argues: “This may be the animal’s key role in postmodernism: too close to work as a symbol, it passes itself off as the fact or reality of that which resists both interpretation and mediocrity.”<sup>15</sup> To resist interpretation, the postmodern animal asks to be seen through a different framework.

Among the most promising recent views of the role taxidermy can play in contemporary art, is that put forward by Giovanni Aloï, author of *Art & Animals*, who looks at the use of animals through a historical lens to draw out what it means to be present in art today. Aloï argues that, “the surfacing of taxidermy in contemporary art has little to do with the grandeur of nature’s beauty but becomes a painful reminder of our difficult relationship with nature itself.”<sup>16</sup> Recent artworks challenge us to understand nature and animals outside an anthropocentric point of view. Artists who use *natural* animal specimens point to the wrongness of only looking at these objects from one perspective. Aloï asks, “Can art then contribute to the defining of new and multi-focal

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<sup>14</sup> Baker points out that there was no modern animal, no ‘modernist’ animal *in art* (with the rare exception of a few works) because the “imperatives of formalism and abstraction rendered the image of the human difficult enough.” Baker. 20. There are also earlier (and rare) appearances of taxidermy in the gallery space that are not discussed here – the earliest dates back to 1938 in which Salvador Dali presented *The Rainy Taxi* at the International Surrealist Exhibition at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts in Paris, curated by Marcel Duchamp; 1955-59 as part of Robert Rauschenberg’s *Monogram*, a *Combine*; Richard Serra’s *Live Animal Habitat* in Rome, 1966. See Giovanni Aloï, *Art & Animals* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2012) pp. 6-8, 26-27.

<sup>15</sup> Baker, 82.

<sup>16</sup> Aloï. *Art & Animals*. 27.

perspectives on nature and the animal in order to move beyond ourselves?”<sup>17</sup> This is not from an environmental or animal rights agenda – but an “unlearning’ of the animal as we know it through contemporary art.”<sup>18</sup> Aloï writes:

effectively to suspend one’s knowledge of nature in order to reconfigure it, or perhaps to let it reconfigure itself; it means to deconstruct the certainties offered by nature, in order to acquire a critical awareness of the relational modes we establish with animals and ecosystems, and simultaneously to find the courage to envision new ones.<sup>19</sup>

An ‘unlearning’ of the animal reconsiders the break between art and nature. The postmodern animal considers animals/nature in themselves, while also recognizing our approach to these as too caught up in our understanding of ourselves as masters of nature. This apparatus of thinking about taxidermy in art as offering an ‘unlearning’ of the animal as we know it is seen in Dion’s *The Marvelous Museum* and Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson’s *Nanoq*, both of which posit a re-engagement with the specimen, and with natural history museums.

## **Taxidermy**

Literally meaning the arrangement of skin, the etymological origin of the word taxidermy stems from the Greek word for order, *taxis*, and skin, *derma*. Taxidermy is the art of preparing, stuffing and mounting the skins of animals for display. Most historians agree that taxidermy, as we know it began in the early eighteenth-century, but animal preservation that developed into taxidermy originates in the curiosity cabinet, while also

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., xxi.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., xvi.

being linked to the hunter's trophy. In a sense, all taxidermy in this era is a trophy: preserved animals from near and far were trophies of the seeker of wondrous objects and the collector's prizes. However, there is a much longer history of taxidermy, with much older precedents for the arrangement of skin.<sup>20</sup> Evidently the reasons for displaying a dead animal, and the process of doing so, have changed over time. Taxidermic practice has various functions: to educate, to decorate, to collect, to flaunt, and to immortalize.

The history of these *things* reveals more about us than it does about animals themselves, revealing our understanding of "animals" as objects of scientific knowledge. Historical uses of taxidermy are rooted in older conceptions about the animal; where once the taxidermied specimen disappeared en route to delivering the information for which it stood, now the constructed-ness of both the specimens and the ideal of 'nature' they expressed, become visible. Rachel Poliquin sees taxidermy as a physical manifestation of longing, something that is constant in its entire history:

As organisms whether you're animal, human, or plant [...] we're all born, we die, we decompose, and we materially disappear. [This] is what it means to be organic. For me, taxidermy sort of subverts that natural urge towards decay. It says, 'this piece I'm going to keep immortally whole.'<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Historian Stephen Asma considers taxidermy, in this sense, to begin during prehistoric times of hunter-gatherer societies; the skins of animals were placed over rocks or mounds of earth to look like live animals during hunting rituals. Other early examples – are perceived by some to go back to Ancient Egypt; though in this case they were not literally arranging skins but preserving bodies. Stephen Asma, *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). "[T]he first taxidermists were the ancient Egyptians, who, despite the fact that they seldom or never appear to have removed the skin as a whole, as in our modern methods, yet, taking into consideration the excellent matter in which they preserved their human or other bodies for thousands of years [...] be fairly placed in the front rank as the first taxidermists the world has known." Montagu Browne, Chapter I. "The Rise and Progress of Taxidermy," *Practical Taxidermy*. 1884.

<sup>21</sup> Transcribed from <http://vimeo.com/48487720> Rachel Poliquin describing her book *The Breathless Zoo*. Video by Michael Mills. (accessed March 13, 2013)

This is connected to the larger longing behind taxidermy: for a connection to the natural world, a longing for wonder, for allegory, or to find some deeper meaning in nature; a longing to see order within the natural world, and a longing for remembrance. The longing as manifested through taxidermy, to keep something immortally whole, has problems within the larger context of *time*. This is revealed in *Nanoq*, where we see the longing behind (polar bear) taxidermy changed from a longing for order and power over the natural world (the killing and collection of the animal) to a longing of remembrance, or a revealing of this earlier relationship with nature. *Nanoq* displays the longing for a new perspective on animals outside the frameworks of classification. Contemporary artworks that incorporate taxidermy are working within the broader history of natural *things* and natural history to point to a new way of considering the animal (and nature) outside the confines of our systems of order.



## I. From the Curiosity Cabinet to the Order of Things

*I hate museums; there is nothing so weighs upon my spirits. They are the catacombs of nature. One green bud of spring, one willow catkins, one faint trill form a migrating sparrow would set the world on its legs again. The life that is in a single green weed is of more worth than all this death. They are dead nature collected by dead men. I know not whether I muse most at the bodies stuffed with cotton and sawdust or those stuffed with bowels and fleshy fibre outside the cases.*

*Where is the proper herbarium, the true cabinet of shells, and museum of skeletons, but in the meadow where the flower bloomed, by the seaside where the tide cast up the fish, and on the hills and in the valleys where the beast laid down its life and the skeleton of the traveller reposes on the grass? What right have mortals to parade these things on their legs again, with their wires, and, when heaven decreed that they shall return to dust again, to return them to sawdust? Would you have dried specimen of a world, or a pickled one?*

— Henry David Thoreau, 1837<sup>22</sup>

What right do museums have, to hoard the natural world? Thoreau's diary entry from 1837 eloquently rails against the natural history museum, a place where death – collected and posed – is presented as the privileged mode of experiencing and viewing nature as something *natural*. From whence did the normative frameworks of natural history derive, and what does it say about collectors/viewers in our relation to the animal specimen? Describing natural history collections as “dead nature collected by dead men,” resonates today. Reaching back 175 years, Thoreau's writing reminds us of the origins of the natural history museum, and his critique is echoed in contemporary re-examinations of the museum and its collection of nature. The opening of the Natural History Museum

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<sup>22</sup> Henry David Thoreau, diary, 29 April 1837, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, 20 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 7:464. Quoted by Samuel J.M.M. Alberti, *The Afterlives of Animals: A Museum Menagerie*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), 5.

in London in 1881 displaced an earlier model for the collection and display in the curiosity cabinet. In the nineteenth century, collecting and displaying natural objects shifted from the private realm of the curiosity cabinet to the public sphere. The very reasoning behind collecting natural objects changed from things deemed to be curiosities or oddities (and collected on this basis), to providing objects of reason and proof. This shift is exemplified in the rise of the genre of the *specimen*.

### **In the Curiosity Cabinet**

*What properties linked coral, automata, unicorn horns, South American featherwork, coconut shell goblets, fossils, antique coins, turned ivory, monsters animal and human, Turkish weaponry, and polyhedral crystals?*

— Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park<sup>23</sup>

In sixteenth-century Europe, under the influence of humanist scholarship, there began to appear collections of a special type: the ‘curiosity cabinet’ or *Wunderkammern* (wonder-room or chamber of wonders).<sup>24</sup> First housed in private rooms of Italian princes, these collections contained a variety of *things*: figurines, coins, art objects, scientific instruments, books, items from exotic lands, and for the first time on a large scale, natural specimens.<sup>25</sup> The curiosity cabinet is the first mode of collecting and displaying ‘nature’,

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<sup>23</sup> Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*. (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 266.

<sup>24</sup>For scholarship on the on the act and history of collecting see: Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500-1800* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1991); Susan M. Pearce, ed., *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (New York: Routledge, 1994); John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds., *The Cultures of Collecting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience* (New York: Pantheon, 1998).

<sup>25</sup> Irmgard Müsch. *Albertus Seba's Cabinet of Natural Curiosities*. (London: Taschen, 2005), 8.

in a very different way from the later ‘specimen’; these animal-objects were portals to distant lands, offering incomplete visions of a strange world. Collecting and displaying natural objects next to art or antique objects marks the first key moment in considering the natural world through a humanist perspective. To the contemporary viewer, the curiosity cabinet looks unorganized or haphazard, when in fact these medleys of things were carefully organized to create specific meaning between things: “The disjointed list typical of the travel journals and catalogues might serve as a nominalist’s brief – one irreducibly individual object after another, the brute singularity of each resisting all attempts at generalization and categorization.”<sup>26</sup>

Resisting any generalization of objects was evident in how the meaning of different things were not fixed meanings. In fact, the meaning of objects changed within different collections. A piece of coral for instance, was given different meanings, “Initially... regarded as a remedy for illness such as anemia, [coral] was subsequently also imputed magical powers, such as protection against lightning bolts or the evil eye.”<sup>27</sup> The same object had a variety of meanings and functions, suggesting various links between different fields. What today may seem a random display was actually “grounded in...[a] network of meanings, and arose out of correlations with religion and alchemy as well as out of classification of objects by their specific material properties.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Daston and Park, 266.

<sup>27</sup> Müsch, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

The largest of these early curiosity cabinets was established by Francesco I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, around 1570 in Florence.<sup>29</sup> This example and other princely collections influenced members of the emerging middle classes to compile their own private collections that emulated these extravagant cabinets in the second half of the sixteenth century.<sup>30</sup> With the exception of a handful, the curiosity cabinets did not survive the onslaught of modernity—what we know is mostly through contemporary drawings that documented these collections. Although idealised in many cases, these etchings and drawings of curiosity cabinets document the first methods of display and collection of nature, demonstrating a clear and evident distance from later systems of ordering natural specimens. In the etching of Francesco Calzolari's curiosity cabinet from 1622, the typical pell-mell display of 'nature' is evident [Fig. 7]. Objects are placed on every surface of the room. Precursors of taxidermy are seen in the balloon-like animals that hang from the ceiling. The image's inscription reads, "Viewers, insert your eyes. Contemplate the wonders of Calzolari's museum and pleasurably serve your mind."<sup>31</sup> To serve your mind pleasurably through *looking* is very different from the close observation of the animal specimen in the natural history museum that we see later on. Collections of

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<sup>29</sup> Francesco I de' Medici's *studiolo* that housed the collection still exists today.

<sup>30</sup> Famous examples of middle class cabinets include the collections of: Abraham Ortelius (1527-1598), a geographer and cartographer in Antwerp; Ole Worm (1588-1654) Danish physician and antiquary; and Herman Boerhaave (1668-1738), professor of medicine at Leiden. Münch. 8.

<sup>31</sup> Animals appearing from the Calzolari etching include: a mummified head, snakes, birds, a crocodile, bat, a small shark, starfish, a spotted mammal with a tail, and a hedgehog. Rachel Poliquin blog post, "Francesco Calzolari's Cabinet" November 4, 2006. [http://www.ravishingbeasts.com/curious\\_collections/2006/11/4/francesco-calzolaris-cabinet.html](http://www.ravishingbeasts.com/curious_collections/2006/11/4/francesco-calzolaris-cabinet.html) (accessed January, 2013)

curiosities were never for learning; instead, they acted as depositories of raw potentiality offering possibilities and anticipation of the unknown and undiscovered world.<sup>32</sup>

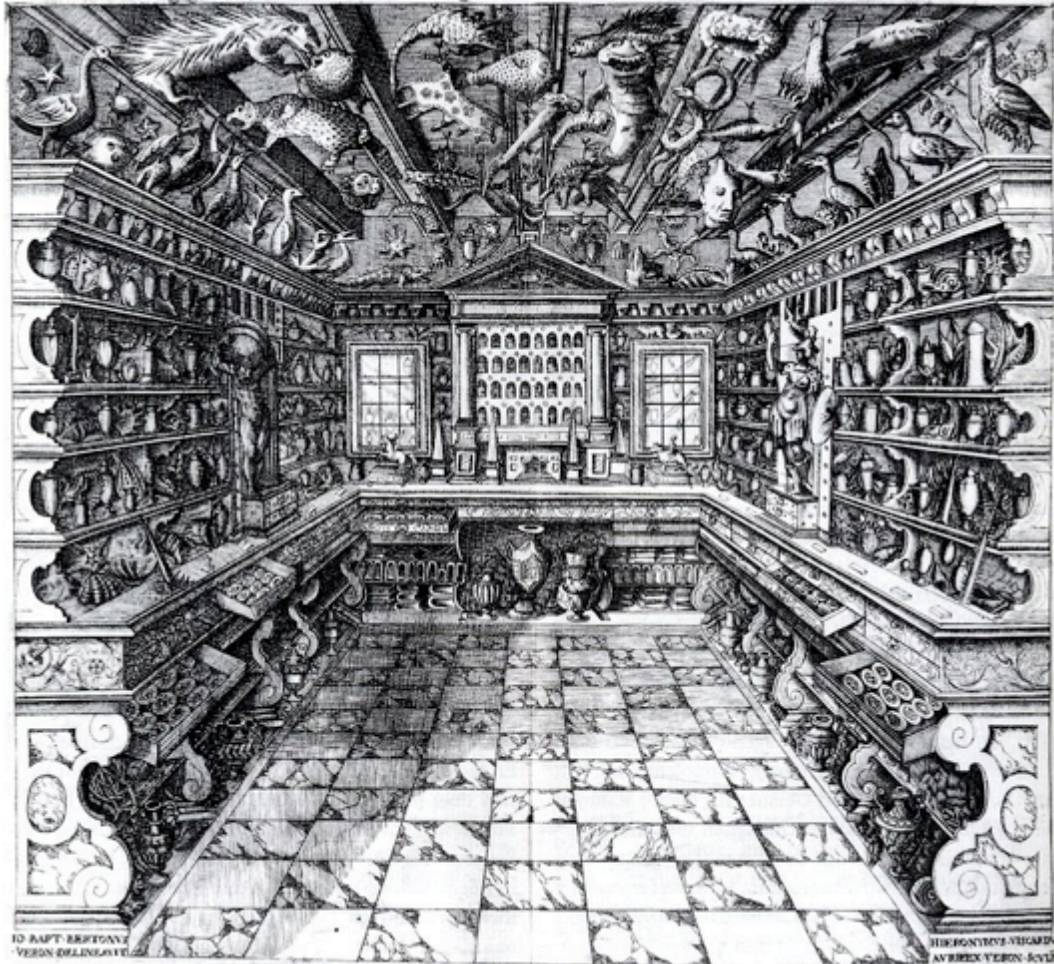


Figure 7. Etching of Francesco Calzolari's collection published in an inventory of his cabinet from 1622.

The eccentricity of the curiosity cabinets and the sense of wonder that the things housed in them conjured were due to the materiality and the *thingness* of these rarities. *Thingness*, meaning these things were collected as *things*, rather than as *specimens*; in contrast, a taxidermied *specimen* is no longer a “thing” but a pointer to some other order. Martin Heidegger distinguishes between objects and things: “[o]nly what conjoins itself

<sup>32</sup> For more see Poliquin, “Wonder” in *The Breathless Zoo*. pp. 11-42.

out of the world becomes a thing”<sup>33</sup> By letting a thing stand out in the world, “then we are thinking of the thing as thing.”<sup>34</sup> The desire to collect or revisit animals because they were curiosities led to preservation, and animals became *things*. According to Poliquin:

If collectors and naturalists had not been amazed at the eccentric varieties of nature’s forms, the art of taxidermy might not have been developed until the eighteenth century, when taxonomy and classification of the ordinary – not extraordinary – possess and revisit, and rough-and-ready preservation techniques slowly matured into what we call taxidermy.<sup>35</sup>

Preservation of ‘nature’ rather than ‘wonder’ in the eighteenth century led to the slow emergence of more sophisticated preservation techniques to depict more lifelike animal-objects. In its beginning, taxidermy grotesquely presented the materiality of death more clearly than what we know today.<sup>36</sup> The crude techniques of early taxidermy typically resulted in the strange animal-objects whose unmistakable deadness is evoked in Thoreau’s account.

With the discovery of the New World, collecting natural oddities became the norm in curiosity cabinets — rarities from far away lands were prized and made collections more valuable. Pre-Columbian natural wonders were mainly of Asian origin: “the claws and eggs of the mythical beasts known as griffins (part lion, part eagle), crocodiles, unicorn horns, ivory tusks perhaps carved into drinking horns, sharks’ teeth,

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<sup>33</sup> See: Martin Heidegger. “The Thing” *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2001), 180.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>35</sup> Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo* 13.

<sup>36</sup> The materiality of death was explicit in the crude first attempts at preservation of animals— “blown into three-dimensional balloons, and shellacked for display.” Methods of taxidermy emerged in the eighteenth century, indistinguishable from furniture construction. Animals were brought to upholsterers and the skins were stuffed with cotton and rags – leading to the phrase “stuffed animals.” Asma. 68.

lion skins, and serpents tongues.”<sup>37</sup> These rare and exotic things prompted the experience of wonder, overwhelming the human comprehension of the world: “They suggested that untold forces were at work in the earthly realm, and they become vehicles for infinite reveries of possibility, expectation, and hope in a way that lowly nature, abundantly available – cows, pigs, and cabbages – never could.”<sup>38</sup> As the discovery of new animals emerged with exploration and colonization, so too did the emergence of natural history and scientific inquiry, an urge to closely observe these things in a different way than contemplation.<sup>39</sup>



Figure 8. John Evan Hodgson (1831-1895) *The French naturalist in Algiers*. Oil on panel. 1879.

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<sup>37</sup> Poliquin. *The Breathless Zoo*. 14.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>39</sup> While this paper does not undertake a postcolonial reading of taxidermy, I acknowledge the importance of this discussion. If we look at taxidermy in its historical trajectory, it is tied to conquest. Early taxidermy acts as representation of Imperialism. While the artists I discuss here do not address colonialism specifically, the exotic animal objects they work with (elephant, polar bear, giraffe) simultaneously represent the history of specimens, and the history of conquest.

## Art and Nature

Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, in *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, describe the *Wunderkammern* as collections of marvels that replaced strange facts with strange things.<sup>40</sup> To describe art and science together is hard to imagine in today's organization of *things* – we are conditioned to look at art and nature as separate entities. No longer are works of art and natural specimens placed in the same display cases, as in the curiosity cabinet, because we now consider these things to belong to different orders with correspondingly different means of contemplation. The modes of display in the curiosity cabinet demonstrated a lack of firm boundaries between art and nature. Daston and Park describe the collection and the design of cabinets to embody the design of wonders of both art and nature: from objects such as a Seychelle nut carved into a goblet, to gemstones forming part of a cabinet's back panel, to paintings that were depicting nature – and nature was already depicting art.<sup>41</sup> Because nature suggested artistry and artistic shapes, seen in coral branches, spiked seashells, crystals, and fossils, their close relationship made sense:

The natural object has formal and structural features that are shared by the artistic object and the antique one. They all indeed share similar formal syntaxes, possess similar aesthetic qualities and are equally, albeit in different ways, entangled with the concept of time.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> See Daston and Park, "Strange Facts" in *Wonders and the Order of Things*, pp. 215-253.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>42</sup> Aloï, *Art & Animals*. 31.



Within the curiosity cabinet objects of wonder were “things that ha[d] no function but to be looked at.”<sup>43</sup> Rather than simple aesthetic appreciation, the idea behind curiosity cabinets was to display things that were sources of wonder and delight.<sup>44</sup>

Many of the oddities collected in the curiosity cabinet took the form of chimeras, or artificial composites of different species.<sup>45</sup> Daston describes such chimeras as objects “that straddle boundaries between kinds. Art and nature, persons and things, objective and subjective are somehow brought together in these things, and the fusions result in considerable blurring of outlines.”<sup>46</sup> From their place within the curiosity cabinet, these chimeras express the boundary-less nature of the age of wonder, in which objectively “rational” and subjectively “irrational” things coexisted eg., real fossils or shells alongside a mermaid. These historical chimeras return in the recent *Misfits* series (1996-present) of artworks by Thomas Grünfeld, works that have been described as “counter-Enlightenment taunts.”<sup>47</sup> These hybrid taxidermy specimens of multiple species, such as the goat/fawn are contemporary chimeras.

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<sup>43</sup> Barbara Benedict. *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) 3.

<sup>44</sup> In *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry*, Barbara Benedict views curiosity in the age of wonder as linked to discontent, and pursuit beyond what you have, explaining that collecting and hoarding objects was a means of inquiry.

<sup>45</sup> CHIMERA: “an imaginary monster compounded of incongruous parts; an illusion or fabrication of the mind; *especially*: an unrealized dream; an individual, organ, or part consisting of tissues of diverse genetic constitution.” Merriam Webster definition.

<sup>46</sup> Daston, *Things That Talk: Objects Lessons from Art and Science*. (New York: Zone Books, 2004) 21.

<sup>47</sup> Steve Baker quoting Anthony Julius in his book *Transgressions: The Offences of Art*, opinion on Grünfeld series. “Something’s Gone Wrong Again,” *Antennae*, Issue 7, p. 7.



Figure 9. Thomas Grünfeld. *Misfit* (goat/fawn) 2001.

*Misfits* conjures—from a 21st-century vantage-point—the moment in history when “wonder and wonders hovered at the edges, both objectively and subjectively.”<sup>48</sup>

Grünfeld’s *Misfits*, have no seams: these beasts seem as believable as the griffin did in the ‘age of wonder,’ morphing the real and the imaginary.<sup>49</sup> So too, can *Geological Discovery II* be read as work that would fit into this description of “counter-Enlightenment taunts,” evoking wonder.

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<sup>48</sup> Daston and Park. 13.

<sup>49</sup> Although the artist designs the works, an expert taxidermist crafts them.

## Close Observation and Order

The emergence of scientific observation of animal-objects (preserved animals) within the framework of the age of wonder can be seen emerging as early as the sixteenth century, when the mathematician Girolamo Cardano (1501-1576) claimed that the only way to tell if a mermaid was real was to examine its joints, that a fake mermaid would have a seam between the monkey top and the fish bottom.<sup>50</sup> Implicit in this anecdote is the belief in ‘real’ mermaids, implying the emergence of a scientific mode of close observation and discernment between the natural and the artificial, at the same time as a wondrous belief in oddities and mythic beasts. Other instances of close observation during early natural history shows unfamiliar animals being found and described using animals that were familiar. For instance, the camelopard, now known as the giraffe, “was described having the height of an ox, and a leopard’s spots.”<sup>51</sup> Another example is the discovery of the platypus, which created complete anatomical confusion for naturalists, seeming to “possess a three fold nature, that of a fish, a bird, and a quadruped” as Thomas Bewick wrote in 1824.<sup>52</sup> This description of a strange animal – strange but familiar – is also evoked in Grünfeld’s *Misfits*. The emergence of natural history in the moment between the age of wonder and the age of reason changed the concept of “nature”: objects became evidence, specimens for understanding the unknown.

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<sup>50</sup> Erik Frank, “Thomas Grünfeld: The Misfits” *Antennae*. Issue 7, 25.

<sup>51</sup> Poliquin. “Grünfeld’s Misfits” October 12, 2008. <http://www.ravishingbeasts.com/taxidermy-artists/2008/10/21/grunfelds-misfits.html> (accessed April 4, 2013)

<sup>52</sup> “On inspecting the skin of a platypus for the first time in 1802, George Shaw, director of the British Museum, observed that it appeared to have ‘the beak of a Duck engrafted on the head of a quadruped.’ [...] the specimen Shaw examined still bears the marks from his efforts to prise the beak off.” Ibid.

As explorers discovered new lands, they also discovered new plants and animals “yield[ing] a host of exotic new naturalia for study” and “prompt[ing] a reconsideration of how nature herself might be explored.”<sup>53</sup> As a result, sixteenth-century Europeans began to thoroughly catalogue, and describe local and exotic natural phenomena. The inadequacies of ancient knowledge were clarified by Cardano: “among natural prodigies, the first and rarest that I was born in this century in which the whole world became known, although the ancients were familiar with little more than a third.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, the interest in the collection of the natural world changed from princely collectors who valued elaborate craftsmanship and rarity, to scholars and medical men who sought animal objects to study.

The classification (taxonomy) of things was transformed when Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) published his *Systema Naturae* in 1735. Much early modern taxonomy and natural history, including *Systema Naturae*, reflects the inescapable influence of the Christian worldview.<sup>55</sup> Thus, studying (but more so *naming*) nature was a devotional study that reproduced this first act of knowing nature.<sup>56</sup> In *Objectivity*, Daston points out

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<sup>53</sup> Daston and Park. 147.

<sup>54</sup> Cardano quoted by Daston and Park, 148.

<sup>55</sup> Lawrence Weschler writes that the history of classification goes back (in this paradigm) to Eden, “the tradition of Adam naming the beasts: God created all these things and then he brings on Adam and he says: ‘Now, you name them.’” *The Marvelous Museum*. 24.

<sup>56</sup> Linnaeus felt himself to be close to ending this task of naming and classifying natural things, after he named more than 9,000 plants, 820 shells, 2,000 insects, and 470 fish. “A Lutheran minister’s son from Sweden, Linnaeus was utterly devoted to the project of a rational and useable taxonomy that would both advance the science of nature and glorify the creator.” Though taxonomical structures already existed, Linnaeus added variety, order and class, making taxonomical distinctions of species a five-level system that remains within the larger methodological foundation of classification of animals and plants today. Asma, *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads*. 115.

that Linnaeus and other Enlightenment thinkers maintained not a true objectivity but a "truth-to-nature."<sup>57</sup> The term, *truth-to-nature* meant to exclude any accidental, impure inconsistencies and sought out the essential, relying on the trained judgement of a learned scientist. These subjective practices were factors in the Enlightenment's establishment of the natural specimen. Linnaeus, Daston relates, was selective: his depictions of a plant's appearance hid any inconsistencies.

In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault questions the system of order by which we make sense of the world, as being

at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression.<sup>58</sup>

In the section of this work titled "Classifying," Foucault discusses the early modern turning away from the Classical history of things to "new privileges accorded to observation"<sup>59</sup> The taxidermied specimen allowed for such new observations before live animals and plants were successfully able to be brought over to Europe. Foucault marks

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<sup>57</sup> Daston. *Objectivity*, (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 58.

<sup>58</sup> Foucault begins *The Order of Things* with Jorge Luis Borge's passage of describing a 'certain Chinese encyclopedia' in which animals are divided into: (a) *belonging to the Emperor*, (b) *embalmed*, (c) *tame*, (d) *suckling pigs*, (e) *sirens*, (f) *fabulous*, (g) *stray dogs*, (h) *included in the present classification*, (i) *frenzied*, (j) *innumerable*, (k) *drawn with a very fine camelhair brush*... This classification of things is reminiscent of the way things were ordered in the curiosity cabinets – meanings unfixed, resisting generalization. Foucault claims that upon reading this passage, he was struck with laughter at the absurdity of this exotic system of order—but he soon began to question his own taxonomy of the world. We are so accustomed to our *order of things* that they have become second nature and beyond questioning. Michel Foucault. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), xx.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

1657, the year Jan Johnston published his *Natural history of quadrupeds*, as a symbolic landmark of the beginning of *natural history*, “This event is the sudden separation, the realm of *Historia*, of two orders of knowledge henceforward to be considered different.”<sup>60</sup> Prior to Johnston’s work, to write the history of a plant or animal was, “a matter of describing its elements or organs [...], the virtues it was thought to possess, the legends and stories with which it was involved, its place in heraldry [...].”<sup>61</sup> Foucault emphasizes that prior to this, the division—self-evident to us—between what is seen firsthand, what others observe and hand down, and what we or others imagine or believe, did not exist. The difference that occurs after Johnston’s work is that animal semantics, heraldry, and myth, etc. disappear, “like a dead and useless limb. The words that had been interwoven in the very being of the beast have been unravelled and removed.”<sup>62</sup> The preserved animal no longer belonged to the world of wonder and curiosity, but stands as proof of a constructed system of order.

### **Taxidermy as Representation**

The attempt to bring live exotic animals and birds back from voyages frequently led to their death at sea; as a result, the preservation of animals in order to capture the essence of life became the only means of observation outside nature. The preserved animals also became proof of what these travellers had found in exotic lands, allowing previously unknown species to travel to Europe for the first time. The scientific and

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 129

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

Baconian insistence on direct observation resulted in the extensive use of taxidermied specimens, both in themselves and as a basis for illustration. As techniques evolved, the simulacral, the artful presentation emerged that could make a dead skin stretched over a mount serve as a specimen of the natural – and living – animal. Finding a taxidermist was not challenging, as most naturalists in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries had to be well trained in the taxidermic arts as part of their practice: long before Darwin wrote *Origin of Species* he was trained in the art of taxidermy.<sup>63</sup> The goal of 'lifelikeness' or 'natural-looking' specimens points, in fact, to the artificial and simulacral nature of this practice: one would never describe a living animal in this way.



Figure 10. Taxidermist P.E. Fedoulov working on a gorilla specimen for the Darwin Museum in Russia, 1914.

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<sup>63</sup> Darwin was given lessons in taxidermy by the freed black slave, John Edmonstone at Edinburgh University in the late 1820s. See Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*, originally published 1887. New York: Barnes & Nobles Publishing, 2005. 15.



Figure 11. Male lion specimen (center). Natural History Museum in London.

Aloi describes the specimen as “a deterritorialized animal body that has acquired the status of *species representative* through a state of isolation and preservation in the scientific cabinet.”<sup>64</sup> Technically called a ‘holotype,’ a species representative is anonymous in that it is rendered to hide any unique features. Still seen in natural history museums today, a lion in its display case acts as a representative of that species of lion.<sup>65</sup> Further, the lion— standing in as a specimen for the species— becomes an *object* rather than the *subject* or individual animal it was in life. By capturing an animal and mounting it into a taxidermic mount, we are practicing power over nature: the animal is always for

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<sup>64</sup> Aloi. *Art & Animals*. 35.

<sup>65</sup> For the scope of this paper the diorama has been left out. See: Giovanni Aloi, “Chapter 2 Taxidermy – Subjugated Wilderness” in *Art & Animals*. pp. 24-48; Donna Haraway “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936” *Social Text* No. 11, Winter 1984-1985. pp 20-64; Rachel Poliquin, “Matter and Meaning of Museum Taxidermy” and “Dioramas: Destruction or Exaltation?” December 2007. <http://www.ravishingbeasts.com/what-to-think/2007/12/1/dioramas-destruction-or-exaltation.html> (accessed January, 2013)



us to look at, never the other way around. By preserving an animal as a specimen, it loses its individuality, becoming in a sense the classifying framework within which it is caught—no longer "*a* lion," but "Lion - *Panthera Leo*."

Specimens came to act as the basis for what Bruno Latour calls 'immutable mobiles,' rendered in texts and illustrations (and, later, photographs); they can be replicated without change and dissemination, serving as objects for knowledge.<sup>66</sup> By the fifteenth century there was a desire for accurate representations—Latour's immutable mobiles' – of animals, propelled by European exploration and advance by the development of the printing press in 1450.<sup>67</sup> Immutable mobiles such as scientific illustrations are easily transported between people, but also have some permanence, allowing for mobility of knowledge and object. The most famous such representation is Albrecht Dürer's *Rhinoceros* (1515), a detailed woodcut of an Indian rhino. Dürer's print shows the problem and difficulty of this period, moving towards direct observation, while not quite there yet. *Rhinoceros* was not drawn from observation, but through the verbal description of the animal from someone who had seen it firsthand.<sup>68</sup> Dürer's print is a famous example of errors in natural history illustration: Indian rhinoceroses do not have a

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<sup>66</sup> Over time species have altered – and these "immutable mobiles" become scientific evidence of change – or scientific artifacts. An example of this is seen in the dog collection at the Natural History Museum, London. The various breeds of dogs differ than those today – evidence of selective breeding – pointing to the impossibility of 'immutable mobile'. See Latour "Visualisation and Cognition: Drawing Things Together." *Knowledge and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Culture and Present*, 6 (1986): 1-40. <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/21-DRAWING-THINGS-TOGETHER-GB.pdf> (accessed March 25, 2013)

<sup>67</sup> See also Linda Kalof, "The Renaissance, 1400-1600," *Looking at Animals in Human History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007).

<sup>68</sup> The story has been retold a few ways – that the person had seen the rhino in a private zoo - other recall that someone saw it on a boat. *Ibid.*, 72.

second horn on their shoulders, as Dürer depicted. Nonetheless, this inadequate illustration was reproduced numerous times by scientific illustrators resulting in the non-existent horn to appear on the shoulders of rhinoceroses in natural history illustrations until the nineteenth century.<sup>69</sup>

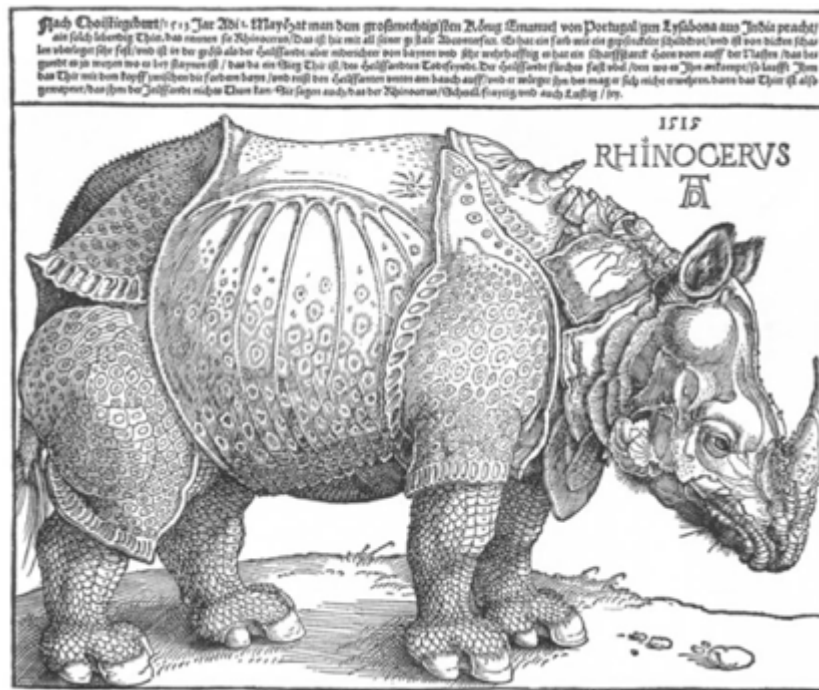


Figure 12. Albrecht Dürer, *Rhinoceros*, 1515.

Illustrations were clearly used as basis for scientific knowledge, their inaccuracies sustained, in the absence of direct observation of the animal itself. Linda Kalof suggests that during the eighteenth century “direct observation was the mark of scholarly credibility, with exotic animals sometimes [...] classified based on whether or not the animal had been personally observed and dissected, personally observed but not

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 72.

dissected, or neither observed nor dissected.”<sup>70</sup> This newfound use of preserved animals, not as wonderful artifact but as specimen is symptomatic of the new (and ultimately, persistent and permanent) separation between art and nature. Dürer’s print is an example of the need for the specimen – to see things with your own eyes – that became instrumental in the new regime of knowledge. Not just any specimen, and surely not an odd one as in the curiosity cabinet, but a specimen that was adequate to represent the species as a whole: a natural looking *thing*.

Continuing the history of taxidermy as a stand-in for a living “natural” animal occurs in early photography. Matthew Brower emphasizes the importance of denaturalizing wildlife photography and its constructions of the animal, suggesting an understanding of *how* we look at animals, not *why*.<sup>71</sup> Due to long exposure times, early photography, like early scientific illustration, used taxidermied animals as models. These ready-mades were not true “natural animals” but representations of them. Brower makes it clear that these early photographs were not intended to be read as wildlife photographs in the same sense as today, but can be thought of as “portraits of animal[s] in a seemingly live pose and outdoor setting.”<sup>72</sup> However one reads these images, it is evident that both taxidermy and photography share the same goal: an attempt to capture a frozen moment in time. Shooting (with gun) for trophy or specimen, and shooting (with camera) to capture nature have also been compared as being one and the same:

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 72-73.

<sup>71</sup> See: Matthew Brower. “Take Only Photographs” *Antennae*, Issue 7, and *Developing Animals: Wildlife and Early American Photography*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

<sup>72</sup> Brower, *Antennae*. 65.

Both the gun and the camera's shooting metaphorically merged in the moment the animal is killed to be preserved and an image, for posterity. The shot that kills the animal allows for the preservation of its surface, its appearance, and simultaneously relegates it to the realm of representation.<sup>73</sup>

Michelle Henning writes, "The 'frozen' image, which both realist taxidermy and photography provide, responds to the desire to capture and preserve nature in the face of its gradual disappearance."<sup>74</sup> This understanding of taxidermy and photography is along the lines of Berger's assertion that the natural world is not understood as it once was, describing a "process [...] by which every tradition which has previously been mediated between man and nature was broken."<sup>75</sup>

The natural world was transformed into an object of visual consumption at the same time as it became firmly an object of scientific knowledge. Both realist taxidermy and photography are the products of a combination of encyclopaedism, in which the world must be collected and documented, and popular Romanticism, in which nature becomes a visual object of desire.<sup>76</sup>

The medium of photography offers a credible illusion, much like early illustrations of taxidermy – that the animal we are looking at is actually alive. Contemporary photographers take up this understanding of taxidermy and photography as both frozen moments in time. Instead of capturing the taxidermied specimen as appearing to be "natural," they are depicted as they really are: unnatural, old, tattered, dusty, forgotten—evidently reminding us of the history that made these things possible.

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<sup>73</sup> Aloï. *Art & Animals*. 29.

<sup>74</sup> Michelle Henning. "Skins of the Real: Taxidermy and Photography" *Nanoq: flatout and bluesome – A Cultural Life of Polar Bears*. (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006), 140.

<sup>75</sup> Berger. 3.

<sup>76</sup> Henning. 140.

As natural science emerged, artificially preserved and posed specimens acted as representations for actual animals, while also serving as a source for morphology. Lorraine Daston writes of botanical drawings in the eighteenth century scientific atlases that they conformed to a “drawn from nature” standard, while combining or perfecting aspects of individual specimens; for example, such drawings might represent the fruit and flower of a plant in the same drawing, something that would never occur in nature. Illustrators would use rough sketches from fieldwork and complete their drawings at home. Prior to “early nineteenth-century improvements in taxidermy, images often supplied stay-at-home naturalists with their only exemplars of new species and genera.”<sup>77</sup> Thus, “drawn from nature” means something different than what it suggests – in reality illustrators were working between “reality and fantasy but also between drawing from a model, or often models and copying another drawing.”<sup>78</sup> In Dürer's case, he was drawing from imagination – as a specimen did not exist to be even “drawn from nature.” Taxidermy also becomes just like these illustrations, in pretending *not* to be a subjective representation. However, taxidermy is never an objective *thing*, the taxidermist can always manipulate and mount the skin of an animal a particular way – using different shaped and sized mounts, different kinds of glass eyes, and even facial expressions. In the case of a specimen, “drawn from nature” functions in taxidermy as it does in illustration, erasing any inconsistencies to make the animal (skin) to look “natural”.

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<sup>77</sup> Daston, *Objectivity*. 64.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 99

## II. Collecting as Art

Contemporary artists working with taxidermy specimens are working within the long trajectory of the history of “nature” and the frameworks that have been created around natural *things* since the Enlightenment. Over the past twenty years, the artist Mark Dion has developed a practice, based in an ongoing negotiation with the ideologies of nature in our culture, in which he has brought together interdisciplinary methods such as museum and animal studies, history, archaeology, collecting, biology, anthropology, taxonomy, and display. Dion immerses himself in the transitional moment described by Foucault, when art and science were separated, when the curiosity cabinet was scattered into specialized museums of distinct disciplines.<sup>79</sup> Not only were things separated after the Enlightenment, the sense of artifice and wonder was destroyed with the advent of the specimen. By returning to this transitional moment, Dion brings back the blurring of boundaries between art and science that have become rigid systems of order after the Enlightenment. The PBS series *art:21* “Ecology” segment on Dion gives the viewer a sense of the artist’s working environment: carefully he makes his way through his large storage building along a small path between piles of things, boxes are piled upon boxes. The compulsion of hoarding become an artistic practice: “some artists paint, some sculpt, some take photographs, and I shop. That’s what I do.”<sup>80</sup> Collecting is integral to his work,

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<sup>79</sup> Lisa Graziose Corrin. “Mark Dion’s Project: A Natural History of Wonder and a Wonderland History of Nature,” *Mark Dion*. (London: Phaidon Press, 1997) 38.

<sup>80</sup> PBS Art:21 “Ecology” Mark Dion segment. 2007.

he explains, “I’m really an artist who gets a lot from things. I really love the world of stuff.”<sup>81</sup>

Dion’s practice is equivalent to Asma’s claim that “all collecting and displaying is also classifying.”<sup>82</sup> Out of all the objects collected by Dion, emerges artwork and exhibitions that include a range of different things such as: curiosity cabinets, drawing, photography, museum interventions, archaeological projects, and environmental installations. As an artist Dion renegotiates the collection and display of things, natural or unnatural, in a response to the classificatory systems of science and culture. He explains:

Curiosity cabinets constitute a new field of research for art history. Simultaneously, the fact that some artists work on the history of museums, enables us to perceive these installations in a different way. As far as I am concerned, this is a questioning and reorientation of those cultural models, and this is expressed visually. Perhaps the acceptance of the ready-made, conceptual art and installation art have allowed us to productively re-investigate early collections.<sup>83</sup>

This hoarding of things that Dion calls his artistic practice is the same as the desire to collect things that were wondrous while also questioning and reorienting the cultural models under which these things fall.

In Dion's projects nature and animals are no longer entities fixed as objects of knowledge within natural order, but forces “whose properties remain radically unknown and unknowable,” as Norman Bryson writes of Dion’s *The Library for the Birds of*

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>82</sup> Asma. 7.

<sup>83</sup> Aloï quoting Mark Dion, *Art & Animals*. 32.

*Antwerp*.<sup>84</sup> Dion cites as crucial to his work the conclusion of Stephen Jay Gould that “all taxonomic systems are the result of social structures and the understanding of knowledge that these allow to form.”<sup>85</sup> Challenging the systems of taxonomy and museum display and collecting, Dion asks the viewer to see things—especially the ‘things’ of nature—in a new way. In the year 2000, Dion wrote *Some Notes Towards a Manifesto for Artists Working With or About the Living World*, a list of twenty points that frame how work that uses nature or is about nature should be understood, or how it should function [See Appendix 1]. Point 17 of this work states:

*17. Taxonomy, i.e. the classification of the natural world, whilst a useful tool, is a system of order imposed by man and not an objective reflection of nature.*<sup>86</sup>

We can see this document as a self-conscious articulation of Dion's own approach to his practice.<sup>87</sup> When Dion uses specimens in his work, he reveals the implications of following a subjective framework of nature. In an interview with Lawrence Weschler, Dion suggests that his work draws directly on Foucauldian questions about the fictional element of classification as a concept:

People coming from a more critical tradition always see my work as a *critique* of taxonomy. I always find that a bit strange, because it’s clear that taxonomy is an

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<sup>84</sup> *The Library for the Birds of Antwerp*, 1993. An installation which incorporated eighteen living African finches. The installation was housed in Antwerp’s Museum of Contemporary Art. During the exhibition the finches flew freely around the gallery space. Norman Bryson. *Mark Dion*. 92.

<sup>85</sup> Aloï. 138.

<sup>86</sup> Mark Dion. “Some Notes Towards a Manifesto for Artists Working With or About the Living World.” Reprinted in *Art & Animals*. 141.

<sup>87</sup> In his interview with Aloï, Dion recalls writing *Some Notes Towards*: “The writing functioned as a remarkable tool for clarification of my positions for myself and thus was extremely important.” *Art & Animals*. 142.



absolutely necessary endeavor. It would be like having a critique of vocabulary. We need a shared language. Scientists need to be able to know when they're talking about the same thing from one part of the world to another. But anyone who works in biology knows that things are changing and being reclassified all the time. The critique comes when ideology infiltrates taxonomy.<sup>88</sup>

The critique of the ideology of taxonomy is particularly expressed through his contemporary "cabinets of curiosities." The curiosity cabinet acts as a fossil of a way of thinking about things, but also a continuum of which we are all a part. As Dion explains, his goal is

[...] to find a way to use old taxonomies that creates an opening for viewers and find a way for them to have a playful interest in knowledge, a playful interest in history; to see that not just as a moment in time that we bracketed but as a continuum that they're a part of. They are constructing it, and it is constructing them. It's something that they participate in and that they can direct.<sup>89</sup>

The attempt at creating a playful interest in knowledge and history is successful in Dion's works that use modes of display similar to the curiosity cabinet, allowing a return to an 'other' history. Dion often works with animal and plant specimens and oddities that are no longer being engaged by the museum, dusty in their traditional displays – or hidden in storage. *The Marvelous Museum: Orphans, Curiosities & Treasures – A Mark Dion Project* at the Oakland Museum of California (September 2010-March 2011) was an extensive museum intervention that asked for a continuum of the history of things.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> "The Irritated Cloud," a conversation between Mark Dion and Lawrence Weschler, outlines some of the issues surrounding the influence of Foucault in his work. The two discuss the Borges passage in *The Order of Things*, and Weschler refers to Dion's work as, "rhapsodies on the notion of classification." Dion. *The Marvelous Museum*, 24.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 24

<sup>90</sup> Dion has been invited by museums to create an exhibit that renegotiates or intervenes in their collections, resulting in such projects as: *Oceanomania* (2011); *The Marvelous Museum* (2010); *Cabinet of Curiosities: Mark Dion and the University as Installation* (2001).

Through multiple site-specific installations and inventions throughout the museum's permanent displays, Dion drew upon neglected "orphan" objects that had been forgotten in the collections through the process of selecting the works from almost two million objects.<sup>91</sup> By displaying these orphans to the viewer, Dion prompts a realization of this continuum of history that he seeks to activate. Through artistic intervention the specimen can be understood or looked at outside the frameworks of taxonomy, opening a multi-focal perspective of nature.

### **Changes in the Natural History Museum**

Stephen Asma, in *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads*, writes the long history of the natural history museum, describing how our representation of the 'living' animal in museums and homes today functions differently than it did for hunter-gatherer ancestors and even eighteenth-century predecessors.<sup>92</sup> However, he expresses that the exact differences between these functions are unclear. Exhibiting specimens is not a purely objective process; in addition to disseminating information, the design and display of any object in a museum seeks to evoke emotion or reaction through imagery. The process of preserving an animal is also a subjective thing – never a true depiction of what is "natural," the animal is carefully selected as a canon of that species – never inconsistent or abnormal.

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<sup>91</sup> *The Marvelous Museum*, 24.

<sup>92</sup> Asma. 10.

The same careful selection happens when these “natural” things are put on display, while “curators are not without agendas, and displays are not without subtext,” it is also evident that these agendas and subtexts have changed over time.<sup>93</sup> Poliquin also writes about museums using “animal charisma in the service of scientific propaganda.”<sup>94</sup> Artistically displaying specimens in cases that invite looking beyond straightforward illustration of biological facts, she writes, “[w]hat stops the museum meander is rarely the explanatory text but rather the animals themselves: a display’s pedagogical power arises from the visual appeal of the creatures on view.”<sup>95</sup> Through museum interventions, contemporary curators and artists reveal different agendas of museums in history.

However, even in revealing/displaying old taxidermy from museum collections, one thing stays the same – these animal objects engage the viewer because of their visual appeal. For *The Marvelous Museum*, Dion was sought out to breathe new life into the Oakland Museum's collection, and address what senior curator René de Guzman called “one of the most critical issues in the field: What to do with our collections?”<sup>96</sup> Dion revealed the changes in habits of collecting and display through his museum intervention – pointing to the forgotten or hidden objects excluded from museum display because they belonged to a different era of collecting. Projects like Dion’s bring up the question, how do we see these things today?

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>94</sup> Poliquin. “A Case for Darwin” *Cabinet*. Issue 47 Logistics, Fall 2012. 43.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>96</sup> *The Marvelous Museum*. Dion is vocal about his respect for museums, but he has also seen them, as he puts it, “spend millions of dollars to make themselves less interesting.” René de Guzman, Senior Curator of Art, Oakland Museum of California. “Time Machine,” Preface.

To address contemporary concerns about specimen collections, many museums have attempted to develop new ways of displaying these things, rather than simply hide them in storage. During the research for *Nanoq*, attempting to find all the polar bears in the British Isles, the artists often found the bears in a sort of *limbo*, their displays under construction for a “contemporary adjustment.”<sup>97</sup> The artists write:

Clearly we are confused as to what to do with the legacy. It is no longer possible to see the bear as an animal in the way perhaps we might have done before moving pictures and sumptuous wildlife documentaries. So what is it to us now? It was our intention to raise questions about our perceptions of the north, of power in nature, in culture and the tendency of images to supplant reality.<sup>98</sup>

Thinking about the way specimens stand in for nature, in the museums as in photography and illustration, draws our attention to our use of images replacing (and displacing) reality or the way that 'nature' is always a representation, always reflecting a displacement of reality, or a filtering through some conceptual apparatus, ideological framework. This was something that had to be done in the past to depict nature for classification – but it is also something we have continued today, in a different way.

To manage increasing ethical and historical questions viewers ask about collections, museums often didactically justify their continuation of these displays as in the following text from the Manchester Museum:

Most of the Museum’s stuffed animals date back to 1860-1900, so it is not surprising that some of them show age. Many of these animals would have been killed – not by, or for the Museums – but as trophies and curiosities. The Museum is firmly committed to nature conservation and we hope that by

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<sup>97</sup> <http://www.snaebjornsdottirwilson.com/Nanoqresearch.php>

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

displaying these animals visitors will gain an awareness of the natural world.<sup>99</sup>

Likewise, small signs that scatter the Natural History Museum in London 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.<sup>100</sup>

These apologetic signs consciously distance the museum from the act of killing and mounting, allowing these institutions to seem more sensitive to contemporary environmental concerns. Yet their statement that these animal artifacts “may not fully reflect the natural appearance of the living animal” suggests a critique of the past collecting practices and points to the past's vision of what is *natural*. The apology for not looking ‘natural’ also identifies the museum as the site of continuity for the historical specimen: it is scholars who are asking for an unlearning of it.

The question of what to do with museum collections is nothing new, as Asma examines in his history of natural history museums. Using archives from a 1943 meeting to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Field Museum of Natural History, Asma reveals an issue from this time that is still relevant today: where is the natural history museum heading? At this meeting, presenter Albert Eide Parr sketched the development of natural

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<sup>99</sup> Henry McGhie and Peter Brown, exhibit label for *Rucervus duvaucelii*, Manchester Museum, March 2010 as cited in *Afterlives*, 11-12.

<sup>100</sup> Poliquin describes these signs as “unnaturing taxidermy” and the “most concise and forthright example of the historical bracketing of taxidermy.” As shown in Daston's “Matter and Meaning” photograph of sign in the Natural History Museum, London. 125.

history museums and questioned what the future held for them.<sup>101</sup> Parr's outline of the stages of natural history museums is important because it breaks down the functions and meanings they have undergone. The agenda of the earliest museums was to simply collect and make an inventory of nature. In contrast, now the very natures of display and collecting animals, and the ideological apparatuses supporting these activities (and which they in turn reinforce), have become not only evident to us, but have become for many observers (including Dion and Snæbjörnsdóttir /Wilson) the central meaning of these objects.

After Darwin, nature museums began to function from an evolutionary perspective; ordering objects together based on evolution and functioning (in Parr's words) as a “warehouse of ‘proof’ for evolutionary theory.” This is yet again, another moment in the history of the taxidermied animal-specimen as evidence of our collecting and classifying urges that now become materials for artworks. The natural history museum came under its third phase, what Parr calls “exotica merchant” in the early twentieth-century, displaying exotic lions or other novelty faraway animals. Exotic taxidermy specimens were not only collected by museums – but also popular amongst personal collectors. These types of exotic specimen are now being re-engaged with by artistic interventions like *The Marvelous Museum* and *Nanoq* where the novelty animal (elephant, giraffe, polar bear) is being given a new “life.”

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<sup>101</sup> Parr, the director of the American Museum of Natural History in 1943.



Figure 12. Ornithological collection at the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University, 2013.

It is now in the twenty-first century that natural history museums are struggling with their identity and function as we see animals from an ecological perspective. Samuel J.M.M. Alberti reflects on the old practices of collecting, “museums become mausolea, storehouses of millions upon millions of dead things in drawers and jars, grim reminders of

mortality.”<sup>102</sup> The very attitude of “museum as mausolea” demonstrates a change in the attitude towards old practices of collecting natural objects and our relationship with nature. Most natural history museums have not been collecting for decades, owing to a number of factors: embarrassment at the greedy tendencies of previous decades, low attendance rates, the difficulty in preserving a collection of taxidermy, and the problems of space constraints.

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<sup>102</sup> Samuel J.M.M. Alberti. *The Afterlives of Animals*, 5-6.



### III. *The Marvelous Museum*



Figure 14. Installation photo from *The Marvelous Museum*, 2010-2011. Oakland Museum of California.

For *The Marvelous Museum*, Dion created installations that used found specimens and objects forgotten or lost in the museum's vast collection. Much of Dion's intervention in the OMCA involved placing found objects and specimens from storage into the permanent collection of the museum, returning to an 'other' history. Displaying these various things (a stuffed giraffe, a boulder, a wheelchair from 1890) on moving dollies or in crates, rather than vitrines, adds to the artist's attempt at creating a sense of

transparency of the collection. In another installation he replicated the storage room of a museum, in which crates with objects inside were displayed to highlight this often-forgotten space – as a space of another kind of display, a different model of ordering from that in the public rooms of the museum [Fig. 9]. Also included were three office installations – three desks representing different curators working areas from different periods. Recreated were a replica of a 19<sup>th</sup> century curator’s desk, and a museum registrar’s desk from 1976 – both created out of objects from storage. The third desk was an office modeled after the museum’s senior curator Rene de Guzman – a new office for him to work at for the duration of the exhibit [Fig. 10]. His new bookshelves – organized by colour of book spine rather than author or topic, is just one example of Dion asking for us to look at the organization of things differently.



Figure 15. Mark Dion, Curator Rene de Guzman’s new desk. *The Marvelous Museum*, Oakland Museum of California, 2010-2011.

The office offered viewers a glimpse into the daily workings of a real live curator in action: a new kind of diorama. This new space for the curator can be read as an attempt at transparency in a museum – a place where most things are hidden – staff and objects in storage. Moreover, by displaying that which should remain hidden – storage and offices – Dion is revealing the framing devices, actions, decisions, and apparatuses that create the objects as specimens and auratic objects.

Working within the storage vaults, Dion appropriated archaeological methods for this ‘other’ history. *The Marvelous Museum* was created as an exhibit questioning, “the distinctions between “objective” (“rational”) scientific methods and “subjective” (“irrational”) influences.”<sup>103</sup> Acting as an archaeologist of sorts, Dion brought to light objects that seemed odd or strange (especially for a "museum of California" to own). Many of the objects he chose to include from the collection revisit or recall the moment between the age of wonder and age of reason – a blurring of what is wonderful and/or rational. Objects included: a baby elephant, a two day old giraffe, a sled used in a nineteenth century Arctic expedition, a snuff bottle collection, a carved hornbill skull, and a seal intestine parka from Alaska. Dion’s installations and interventions are along the same methods as other well-known works of institutional critique such as Fred Wilson’s *Mining the Museum* (1992). By pulling various objects from the museum’s collection, Dion points to the history of collecting that remains unseen—and of the persistence, behind the scenes, of this history and these older taxonomies.

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<sup>103</sup> FOR-SITE Foundation: art about place. <http://www.for-site.org/project/the-marvelous-museum-a-mark-dion-project/> (accessed February 2013)



Figure 16. Identification card of elephant found in museum storage from *Mark Dion, The Marvelous Museum – Orphans, Curiosities & Treasures: A Mark Dion Project*. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2010)

The book produced to accompany *The Marvelous Museum* acts as a work of art in itself. Contained in a crate-like box are the book and a large envelope containing fourteen object identification cards of objects in the exhibit. One card has a photograph of a taxidermied elephant in a crate in what appears to be the storage room of the museum. The plastic protective sheeting is pulled back on one corner, revealing the elephant. The back of the card reads: *date: 1936; dimensions; taxon: Elephas maximus; object name: Asian elephant; found: Siam; used: Snow Museum; remarks: two year-old Indian elephant from the Snow Museum collections, declared surplus 12/13/88; deaccessioned 5/19/89* [See Appendix 2]. This is the specimen and the artifact in one. We are presented with the specimen facts – origin, species, dimensions – and artifact information – dates of acquisition, and museum collection history. The identification card is a description in one

(verbal) register, providing the facts about this precise elephant, one that makes use of Linnaean taxonomy, but that does not describe the elephant in its visible materiality; the photograph does this, and the specimen itself *is* this material. However, like the Latin name on the card, its real materiality is subsumed by its value as an evidentiary specimen, in which we look at it not in terms of the individuality of this animal, but rather as ‘Asian/Indian elephant.’ In presenting it this way, Dion makes visible the apparatus of classification and display that is normally invisible when we view specimens as specimens. Also, by displaying the elephant as it was found in storage – packed in a crate – Dion makes visible the often-untold issues surrounding taxidermy collections today.

Through a Foucauldian lens, Dion asks us to consider the apparatuses behind the specimen. Dion’s manifesto states:

Artists must resist nostalgia. We never do ‘golden age’ history. When we reference the past it is not to evoke ‘the good old days.’ Our relation to the past is historical, not mythical.<sup>104</sup>

Considering the frameworks and history that give specimens their meaning and power opens a multi-focal perspective on something normally only viewed through a natural history/science lens. Asma states, “The odd thing about a specimen is that it’s a kind of cipher when considered in isolation. Specimens are like words: They don’t mean anything unless they’re in the context of a sentence or a system, and their meanings are extremely promiscuous.”<sup>105</sup> Since Foucault, the specimen has been considered outside the context of these systems of order. Alberti describes specimens as historically and conceptually

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<sup>104</sup> Dion. “Some Notes Towards a Manifesto...” #9.

<sup>105</sup> Asma. xiii.

complicated things: “On display they come to represent things beyond their own material bounds.”<sup>106</sup>

Through display, this elephant and other ‘orphans’ can be read as cultural fossils. They come to represent specimens that no longer function as species representatives, but rather representatives of the taxonomic framework itself, and the way it ‘creates’ objects rather than simply ‘describing’ or ‘ordering’ them: ordering as a meaning-making process. The afterlife of the elephant – now as taxidermic mount – represents the long journey some objects make: from being taxidermied, to being put on display in a museum, placed in storage for decades, brought back on display for *The Marvelous Museum*, documented, put into a book, and then most likely put back into storage.

By engaging with taxidermy in particular, Dion brings to light/recovers significance of something that many natural history museums around the world have discarded. Purging their collections of taxidermy, natural history museums today are trying to deal with the issue at hand of what to do with these things, which often serve today as a somber reminder of past collecting practices. In an unforeseen way, the museums are working through the same kinds of ideas as the artists, insofar as both see these specimens not as what they used to be, but rather as examples of earlier mindsets and frameworks. It seems that contemporary artists are digging through the trash bins of these museums with the emergence of taxidermy in art in the past 15 years.<sup>107</sup> Poliquin

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<sup>106</sup>Alberti. 6.

<sup>107</sup> Dion tells a story of unwanted taxidermy collections in natural history museums: “Once I was working at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh. Due to a shortsighted and aesthetically challenged director of natural history, the curators were forced to dismantle the huge historic bird hall... since they could not

discusses “taxidermy bonfires,” pointing to various instances of natural history museums undergoing “improvements” by ridding their collections of taxidermy specimens.<sup>108</sup>

These things no longer have use, no longer are taxidermied specimens meant for scientific observation or testaments of evolution: their only use now is to be looked at. They are relics of a different age. By re-activating these objects Dion gives them a new purpose – but also points to this turn by museums themselves to put taxidermy out of sight.

These taxidermied animals are souvenirs from another time, but artists working with these objects ask for a return to an ‘other’ history. The focus for both Dion’s *The Marvelous Museum* and Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson’s project *Nanoq* was to address the question of how these historical things function now, and what to do with them. The purging of taxidermy collections over the last fifty years can be read as a means of ridding our history of irresponsible collecting of nature in the nineteenth century. Further, these collections act as physical reminders of colonization, “Museums with nineteenth-century roots have been criticized with the colonial project, and their collections branded as imperial archives.”<sup>109</sup> This purging can also be read as strategic “spring cleaning,” getting rid of poorly constructed and inferior taxidermy that fails to be considered as an educational and/or scientific representation of the specimen. In our contemporary

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give the birds away or sell them by law, they were all incinerated. These were hundred of expertly crafted specimens, all wasted.” Mark Dion interview with Giovanni Aloi, *Art & Animals*. 147.

<sup>108</sup> Poliquin describes the instance of the Saffron Walden Museum in Essex annual report archives from 1960 stating that “local museums must exhibit local nature not the haphazard remains of eccentric Victorian ramblings [...] and that ‘nostalgia should be banished in the interests of greater usefulness for the Museum’” and “No museum wanted them. Over 200 animals, birds, reptiles, and fish were hauled to the city dump and set on fire.” “The Matter and Meaning of Museum Taxidermy” (*Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge*) Museum Society, Jul. 2008. 6(2) 123-125.

<sup>109</sup> Poliquin. “The Matter and Meaning of Museum Taxidermy” 123.

viewpoint, taxidermy is no longer being seen as specimen, but as both historical and cultural object. Poliquin explains that, “the historical bracketing of taxidermy and the practices engaged in collecting and mounting animals [and] an unravelling of the various cultural, political, and ideological forces [...] have shaped how nature has been used and interpreted within museums.”<sup>110</sup>

While taxidermy was once seen as a practical thing to collect, now it makes people uncomfortable and seen as “gratuitous spoilage, as death on display.”<sup>111</sup> Kitty Hauser suggests, in an article titled, “Coming Apart at the Seams,” that in the context of contemporary art “stuffed animals – especially badly stuffed ones – can signify [...] other kinds of contemporary ruination” by offering, “a dark view of an irrevocably damaged nature.”<sup>112</sup> Dion himself attributes taxidermy in contemporary art as an expression of our anxieties and contradictions with nature:

I understand the use of taxidermy today as an expression of the power of the uncanny aspect of nature, which has strengthened as our everyday contact with wild places and beings has greatly diminished. [...] there is enormous cultural anxiety around the category of nature, which for so long has been something we measured ourselves against, which formed us in opposition, mistakenly of course.<sup>113</sup>

Dion here takes Akira Mizuta Lippit’s idea, that the contemporary “presence of animals in culture...[is] a result of having never been less present in daily experience,” one step

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 125

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 124

<sup>112</sup> Kitty Hauser, “Coming apart at the seams” quoted by Baker in *The Postmodern Animal*. 62.

<sup>113</sup> Mark Dion: interview with Aloi. *Art & Animals*. 146.



further.<sup>114</sup> Dion re-engages with forgotten animal objects or ‘orphans’ to emphasize that animals, (live ones) used to be present in our daily experience – and now the animals we have collected (dead) are housed in storage rooms. On display, taxidermy signifies a permanent loss, and as Berger emphasises,

In the accompanying ideology, animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance. They are the objects of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them. The more we know, the further away they are.<sup>115</sup>

Dion re-engages with these animal specimens now, not to engage with the animals that they are or were – but with the ideologies and taxonomical orders that have been historically used to represent and construct them. The natural specimen becomes an artefact, not *of* nature, but of *our constructs* of nature.

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<sup>114</sup> Akira *Thinking With Animals*. 2.

<sup>115</sup> Berger. 16.

#### IV. *Nanoq* and The *Afterlives* of Animals

*The grey film of dust covering things has become their best part.*

— Walter Benjamin<sup>116</sup>

The afterlife of taxidermied polar bears was integral to the project *Nanoq: Flat out and Bluesome* by artists Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson.<sup>117</sup> In what began as a quest to find and photograph all the taxidermied polar bears existing in the British Isles, the project was equally concerned with both the outcome and the process. It is a project that begins with the death of the polar bears: taxidermied during the nineteenth century, they were displaced from the wild and put into stately homes, and then many were donated to museums to be forgotten, collecting dust. The afterlives of the bears were the key interest of the artists, researching the history of their taxidermied existence. Similar to *Nanoq*, the book *The Afterlives of Animals* from 2011 is concerned with writing biographies on animals that live in natural history museums.<sup>118</sup> Regarding taxidermied specimen as *subject* rather than *object* by proving a sort of biography on the animal is an

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<sup>116</sup> Walter Benjamin. “Dreamkitsch” 1927. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Vol. 2, Part 1, 1927-1930*. ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Harvard University Press: 2005), 3.

<sup>117</sup> The title of the work is a poetic play on language: *Nanoq* is the Greenlandian and Inuit term for ‘polar bear’; *flat out* has a double meaning, it makes reference to the trips the artists were making *flat out* across the land in pursuit of the polar bears, and it also refers to the skin of the animal before the taxidermic process; *bluesome* refers to the lyrics in country songs that have a knowing and ironic twist, sad and nostalgic, but *self aware*. Snæbjörnsdóttir /Wilson in interview with Giovanni Aloï, “Nanoq: in conversation,” *Antennae*. Issue 6, p. 28.

<sup>118</sup> The word *Afterlife* is not meant in the spiritual way, but in the way conservator Richard Jaeschke has described the fate of archaeological objects: “For the archaeologist, the life of the object is fixed at the moment of its discovery. For conservators, however, the situation is not so simple and the life of the object continues.” *The Afterlives of Animals*. 3.

underlying strategy of this renegotiation of the animal. The afterlife of an object is endless, as Richard Jaeschke describes:

the object is placed in its heavenly home, the museum or archive, to remain for eternity... [but] the afterlife seldom proves a heavenly resting place and usually involves the object in more adventures and perils. It does not cease to age and to have a history, but its history of use has become a history of treatment.<sup>119</sup>

Both *Nanoq* and *The Marvelous Museum* contribute to these specimens afterlives – awakening them from their dusty homes.



Figure 17. Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, *Nanoq: flatout and bluesome*. Bear photographed in situ as the artists found it in the Arbuthnot museum, Peterhead, UK.

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<sup>119</sup> Richard L Jaeschke, “When Does History End?” in *Archeological Conservation and Its Consequences*, ed. Ashok Roy and Perry Smith (London: International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, 1996), 86. Quoted by Alberti in *The Afterlives of Animals*. 3.

As described on the artists' website, the *Nanoq* project consisted of three parts over a five year span from 2001 to 2006, while simultaneously participating in international exhibits from 2004 to 2010.<sup>120</sup> The first part of the project was the survey of all the taxidermic polar bears that they could find currently in the British Isles. Assisted by museum curators, gallery staff and natural historians throughout the UK, the artists were able to discover 34 polar bears. The second part involved photographing the bears *in situ*. Each bear was photographed as the artists found them; the photographs act as both document and artwork. In the end the complete photographic archive consisted of 34 framed colour photographs of the bears in their 'homes.' For each photograph, the provenances are incorporated into the work, either engraved on a brass plate on the frame or at the bottom of the photograph. The third aspect to *Nanoq* was an installation that involved transporting ten of the bears into a converted art space at Spike Island, Bristol in 2004. The installation of the bears does not continue the same curiosity cabinet aesthetic as Dion. Rather, the bears are displayed in a neutral manner, each in its own custom vitrine, mounted on a white plinth.

During the exhibition *Nanoq: flat out and bluesome* at Spike Island the artists and gallery director held a one-day conference *White Out*, inviting four speakers, the artist, and audience to discuss issues surrounding the project. Some of themes included: taxidermy, arctic exploration, subsistence and trophy hunting, museology and display, and attitudes towards the environment. The final outcome of *Nanoq* was the publication *Nanoq: flat out and bluesome: A cultural Life of Polar Bears* (Black Dog Publishing:

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<sup>120</sup> <http://www.snaebjornsdottirwilson.com/Nanoq/spikeisland.php?1>

2006), which brought all of the information gathered during the project, the archives, documentation of the installation, and the conference. Like Dion's projects, the processes of *Nanoq* engage with the afterlives of these specimens, museum frameworks of collection and display, and the frameworks of classification.



Figure 18. Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson. Installation view of *Nanoq: flatout and bluesome* at Spike Island, Bristol, 2004.

Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson looked at the physical condition, intangible history, and geographical journey these bears made from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to their current *afterlife*. The artists describe the beginning of the project:

We began talking about the lost histories of these animals that had been brought to this country on the back of colonial expeditions fuelled with national pride and a thirst for knowledge. Now their function seemed unclear and more, it seemed there was a sense that perhaps they should quietly disappear.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson. "Nanoq: In Conversation" interview with Giovanni Aloï. *Antennae Issue 6*. 28.

The polar bears (and other animals in natural history museums) act as uncomfortable reminders of gluttonous explorers in contrast to animal extinction and animal rights of today pointing to a reevaluation of these animal *things*. As a result of the encounter with humans, the bears were transformed into what Aloï calls an animal-object: a taxidermied animal has only preserved the surface of the real animal.<sup>122</sup> As Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson explain, “When thinking about the inside of the animal, it is seen as a carcass, often as meat for consumption whereas human animals are seen as having ‘a soul’ and an imagined interiority.”<sup>123</sup> This is where *flat out* from in the title comes in, making it clear that these are not actually polar bears, but skin.



Figure 19. An example of past collecting/selling of polar bears: Ye Olde Curiosity Shop founder J. E. Standley posing with a polar bear rug. Postcard, circa 1917.

<sup>122</sup> Aloï. *Art & Animals*. 39.

<sup>123</sup> Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson, *Spaces of Encounter: Art and revision in human-animal relations*, (University of Gothenberg, 2009) p. 3.



Figure 20, 21. Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson. Process photograph of transporting polar bear from Nation Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh (top). Installation of same bear in *Nanoq: flatout and bluesome* at Spike Island, Bristol (bottom).

Through artistic intervention, the polar bears' meaning changes – from trophy or scientific object to cultural artifact. When placed in the art gallery, these polar bears no longer function as specimen or cultural artifact, raising the question: what are these ‘things’? Is it useful to consider these taxidermied polar bears as “animals” or “alive”? These are questions the artists consciously addressed in their exhibit, and in the conference *White Out*.<sup>124</sup> At the conference, Michelle Henning called the bears “things that are trying very hard to be polar bears.”<sup>125</sup> The artists also commented on “the difficult of untangling the contradictory perception that each specimen ‘isn’t an animal, but *is* an animal’, noting how remarkable it seemed that each was ‘simultaneously representative of itself as an object but also of itself as a former living animal.’”<sup>126</sup>

Throughout the project, the artists were very clear that the bears are objects or souvenirs: “These are no longer polar bears – they are renewed objects representing polar bear-ness.”<sup>127</sup> Poliquin writes:

Souvenirs arise from the insatiable demands of nostalgia, the longing to look back and inwards into our past, to recount the same stories again and again, to speak wistfully. But nostalgia cannot exist without loss, and souvenirs are always only fragments of ever-increasingly distant experiences, and so, necessarily incomplete, partial, and impoverished.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Baker. *Nanoq: flat out and bluesome* 152.

<sup>125</sup> Michelle Henning. *White Out Symposium*, Spike Island, Bristol, 13 March 2004. Quoted by Baker in *Nanoq*. 152.

<sup>126</sup> Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson. *Nanoq*. 152.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>128</sup> Poliquin. *Antennae*. Issue 6. 6.



This definition of the souvenir parallels *Nanoq*'s bears – they recount stories, but along the way things are fragmented. The nostalgia and longing that Poliquin associates with taxidermy, seems absent from *Nanoq*. Rather, the artists move away from the sentimentality of longing to create a new dialogue, an ‘unlearning’ of the animal. The artists were conscious of asking for new experiences of the bears, new interpretations of their histories, new emotional responses to them, and new understandings of the spaces that the bears might come to occupy.”<sup>129</sup> Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson's assertion of taxidermy specimens as *representations* of animals, indicates a changed understanding of the specimen from its historical emergence and meaning.

As a result of encounter with the human, these animal-objects exist forever outside of nature. What are these animal-objects in the context of an art exhibit? By transporting ten of the found bears and displaying them together as an art exhibit at Spike Island, they no longer function as specimens. The artists have said, “a crucial aspect of the project was the shift from the bears’ singular use as educational museum exhibits or country house trophies to their collective display at Spike Island with no indication of how they’re to be read.”<sup>130</sup>

Amassed in the gallery, a neutral space, separated from the didactic trappings of the natural history museum, “the bears are transfigured by their multitude and setting, together becoming animal-things that are neither fully science nor fully art: mysterious,

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<sup>129</sup> Baker. “What can dead bodies do?” *Nanoq*. 154.

<sup>130</sup> Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson quoted by Baker. *Nanoq*. 149.

unsettling, provocative, and overwhelmingly visually magnetic.”<sup>131</sup> In the gallery these mounts are no longer understood as animals. In the natural history museum or in the home these objects are able to claim animality because they belong to a certain network of order and history. However, in the art gallery these animal-objects lose their animality in a certain sense, they become art objects, ready-mades. The bears become the postmodern animal, by being grouped outside of their original context and massed together in a neutral white space, where they are encountered by—and confront—the viewer:

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.<sup>132</sup>

Aloi’s concept of ‘unlearning’ the animal through contemporary art becomes enacted through the display of the bears in the art space. The photography and other intervention of the animal does not allow for an ‘unlearning’ of the animal as it still exists in its home. Placed in the gallery though, the animal-objects are able to be read outside the frameworks we impose on “nature” and “animal”. These off-white animals become aesthetic objects, and become about their materiality, while at the same time they are also about the frameworks and history of collecting, display, and “nature”.

Poliquin notes that the display of the ten bears is a profoundly unique historical occurrence: it would be extremely rare to see ten polar bears—a typically solitary

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<sup>131</sup> Poliquin. *The Breathless Zoo*. 4.

<sup>132</sup> Poliquin. “Matter and Meaning”, 11.

species—together in the wild. Moreover, it would be very rare to see ten polar bears within one museum where, “having neither space nor the educational need to display more than one,” there is no need to have more than one specimen.<sup>133</sup> The bears from *Nanoq* function outside the taxonomical specimen framework because each bear is different, each with granted histories and biographies. While specimens are never looked at as individuals, the contemporary importance on the afterlife of a specimen allows these things to be considered as individuals. The bears of *Nanoq*, displayed in the gallery away from any reference to natural history – become unique in pose, physical condition, expression, and origin. The work also seems to collect them as a ‘type’: to display ten bears in one space points to an understanding of the project as being not about presenting specimens of polar bears, but rather of the bears as signs of themselves, or of the structures that produced them.

While the project itself is not focused on environmental issues, works from *Nanoq* have been part of exhibits dealing with this issue, such as *HEAT: Art and Climate Change* and *Polar Shift*, both in Melbourne, Australia in 2008. In line with Dion’s interpretation of why contemporary artists are choosing to use taxidermy in their work, *Nanoq* is a reaction to the “cultural anxiety around the category of nature.” *Nanoq* literally asks us to see these animals in a different way by taking them out of their current context and displaying them in an art space. But through the cultural status of the polar bear as a symbol for climate change, this association distracts the viewer from seeing the animal in a new way, or “unlearning” it. This issue brings in Aloi’s question: “can art then

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 4.

contribute to the defining of new and multi-faceted perspectives on nature and the animal in order to move us beyond ourselves?”<sup>134</sup> Can taxidermy move us beyond ourselves? The answer is conflicting. On one hand it is impossible to see taxidermy apart from ‘us’ given that it is a man made thing. However, we are asked to look beyond the fact that specimens are man-made – and see them as the thing they replicate/double, the ‘natural animal’. Through contemporary artworks such as *Nanoq* we are able to approach the concept of nature outside of the confines of classification – to open a multi-faceted dialogue of history, art, animal studies, environmental issues, science, anthropology, etc.

Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson began *Nanoq* as a photographic project: “both these methods of representation [taxidermy and photography] ‘eclipse’ not only the animal, but the act of killing and thus monumentalize death, molding into another reality – a ‘cultured life’ of polar bears.”<sup>135</sup> The photograph from *Nanoq* that stands out most to remind us of the bears’ dusty afterlives is from the Eureka Museum for Children in Halifax, UK. The artists recall asking the museum if they had a polar bear and they replied first by asking if it was an April Fool’s joke, and second, that they did not have one in their collection. This is most likely because the eight-foot bear had been covered with things in an attic display in the museum; only its face peeks out from all the stuff piled on top of it [Fig 16].<sup>136</sup>

This lost bear brings us back to Benjamin's discussion of dust. As Celeste Olalquiaga writes, while for Benjamin dust, kitsch, the banal are worthless, “at the same

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<sup>134</sup> Aloï, xxi.

<sup>135</sup> *Antennae*. Vol 6. 28

<sup>136</sup> For more see “Provenances,” *Nanoq: flat out and bluesome*. 108.

time [dust] exposes the cultural condition that made this metaphorical dust possible: the loss of use value and the disintegration of the aura.”<sup>137</sup> The loss of aura of this polar bear, crammed into an attic display at a museum is consciously unmasked through a re-presentation in *Nanoq*. This unmasking of the loss of aura in these polar bears is enacted through the artists through their various stages of the project. What makes *Nanoq* so thought-provoking is the ability to change this loss of value into something new – through art.



Figure 21. Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, *Nanoq: flatout and bluesome*. Photograph of bear found in the Museum for Children: Halifax, UK in an “attic” display.

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<sup>137</sup> Olalquiaga. 91.

## Conclusion: Talking *Things*

Photographs of taxidermy in storage rooms and private homes from *Nanoq* and *The Marvelous Museum* evoke a stillness that is not present in the natural history museum galleries: these are places only ever visited by few. These spaces are occupied by a real deadness and quiet as the animals collect dust and remain forgotten. These photographs call attention to the way we collect things, the way we hoard nature – they remind us of Thoreau’s comparison of museums to “catacombs of nature.” Artworks that engage with the forgotten animals in museums awaken these *things* out of the crypt where they have lived for centuries. The re-activation of the taxidermied animals rests in the documentation of their afterlives, and implicit commentary on what should remain hidden in the presentation and encounter with the natural history specimen, namely its status as a manufactured and collected object. What has been brought to the surface here is less (as in other taxidermied art-works) the deadness of the animal, than the production of the specimen by regimes of taxonomy, collecting, and display: the thingness of the thing, rather than a lifelike representative of the order of nature. In some ways *Nanoq* and *The Marvelous Museum* are able to merge the worlds of art and nature to allow a different reading of specimens. In his manifesto Dion writes:

The variety and variability of life is a wonder of infinite complexity. There is no more curious and uncanny a topic than the biodiversity which surrounds us. The objective of the best art and science is not to strip nature of wonder but to enhance it. Knowledge and poetry are not in conflict.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Dion. “Some Notes Towards a Manifesto...” #19.

While these projects do not convey the same sense of wonder and curiosity in the *Wunderkammern*, they create a dialogue outside of classification, allowing new connections with the viewer.

Poliquin asserts that taxidermied “animal-objects” talk to us, not only about ourselves as humans who use and conceive of animals, but also about their own significance.<sup>139</sup> If it is no longer possible to unproblematically read taxidermy as nature, it is also not possible to understand them as “mute” *things*. Daston describes that there are certain things that make “us want to talk about how these particular things talk to us.”<sup>140</sup> Contemporary artists working with “natural taxidermy” make explicit the dialogue with these animal-objects. They talk to us and function outside of the boundaries of classification: they function outside of the limits of subject and object, art and nature. If they are reminiscent of the wondrous or curious objects of an earlier age of animal display, this is an uncanny return. This return to an “other” history brings with it the frameworks that turned the animal-object first into a specimen, and then into a neglected and forgotten remnant waiting to talk again.

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<sup>139</sup> Poliquin, “Matter and Meaning”, 126.

<sup>140</sup> Daston, *Things that Talk*, 11.

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**Figure 7.** Etching of Francesco Calzolari's collection published in an inventory of his cabinet from 1622.

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**Figure 8.** John Evan Hodgson (1831-1895) *The French naturalist in Algiers*. Oil on panel. 1879.

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**Figure 10.** Taxidermist P.E. Fedoulov working on a gorilla specimen for the Darwin Museum in Russia, 1914.

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**Figure 11.** Male lion specimen (center). Natural History Museum in London.

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**Figure 12.** Albrecht Dürer, *Rhinoceros*, 1515.

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**Figure 13.** Ornithological collection at the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University, 2013.

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**Figure 15.** Mark Dion, Curator Rene de Guzman's new desk. *The Marvelous Museum, Oakland Museum of California*, 2010-2011. Source: © Thor Swift.

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**Figure 16.** © Mark Dion. Identification card of elephant found in museum storage from *Mark Dion, The Marvelous Museum – Orphans, Curiosities & Treasures: A Mark Dion Project*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2010. (accessed April, 2013)

**Figure 17.** © Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, *Nanoq: flatout and bluesome*.

Bear photographed in situ as the artists found it in the Arbuthnot museum, Peterhead, UK.

<http://www.snaebjornsdottirwilson.com/nanoq/peterhead.php> (accessed April, 2013)

**Figure 18.** © Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson. Installation view of *Nanoq: flatout and bluesome* at Spike Island, Bristol, 2004.

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**Figure 19.** An example of past collecting of polar bears: Ye Olde Curiosity Shop founder J. E. Standley posing with a polar bear rug. Postcard, c. 1917.

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**Figure 20,** © Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson. Process photograph of transporting polar bear from Nation Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh  
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**Figure 21.** © Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson. Installation of same bear in *Nanoq: flatout and bluesome* at Spike Island, Bristol.  
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**Figure 22.** © Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, *Nanoq: flatout and bluesome*. Photograph of bear found in the Museum for Children: Halifax, UK in an “attic” display.  
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## APPENDIX 1.

### **Some Notes Towards a Manifesto for Artists Working With or About the Living World Mark Dion, 2000.**

First published in *The Greenhouse Effect*, Serpentine Gallery, 2000.

© Mark Dion

1. We are not living in a simple age and as artists of the time our work reveals complex contradictions between science and art, between empiricism and ideal, between nature and technology and between aesthetic conventions and novel forms of visualisation. Our goals vary. While some may wish to dissolve the contradictions in our social relations to the natural world, others may be interested in analysing or highlighting them.
2. A: Humans do not stand outside of nature: we, too, are animals, a part of the very thing we have tried to control, whether for exploitation or protection.  
B: Just as humanity cannot be separated from nature, so our conception of nature cannot be said to stand outside of culture and society. We construct and are constructed by nature.
3. Our work, rather than being 'about nature', can be better characterised as being focused on ideas about nature.
4. Artists working with living organisms must know what they are doing. They must take responsibility for the plants' and animals' welfare. If an organism dies during an exhibition, the viewer should assume the death to be the intention of the artist.
5. Artists do not break international wildlife protection laws (unless those laws are irrational).
6. The relationship we have to living organisms is a passionate one. Our subject rules our lives. We live, breathe, and eat our field of investigation. This passion is essential for the production of compelling artwork.
7. Artists who produce work about biology or who collaborate with fungi, plants or animals are not bound by form or materials. One can produce an argument in many different languages; no form of expression is more perfectly suited to ecological issues. Painting, architecture, landscape design, photography, performance, virtual technology, sculpture, installation, video, horticulture, and agit-prop have all been deployed to great success.



8. Understanding the past's traditions of nature, in folk culture, science, aesthetics, philosophy and religion, is a source of illumination for the present and also the future. The beliefs of the past form foundations for contemporary institutions and more often than not, still persist in their own operation.
9. Artists must resist nostalgia. We never do 'golden age' history. When we reference the past it is not to evoke 'the good old days.' Our relation to the past is historical, not mythical.
10. Nature does not always know what is best.
11. We reject the notion of the environment as a perpetually stable and self-regulating system, existing in a constant state of balance. The natural world is far more dynamic and intricate, and its history, for at least ten thousand years, has been more entwined with human history than notions of natural balance allow for.
12. The more a notion of nature is touted as free of culture, the more likely it is to be a successful product of it.
13. Animals are individuals, and not carbon copy mechanistic entities. They have cognitive abilities, personalities and flexible behaviour, which is not to suggest that they exhibit distinctly human characteristics.
14. Anthropomorphism has long been guarded against in the field of zoology as an impediment to understanding animal behaviour in their own context, While a pitfall in ethology, artists may find the rich tradition of anthropomorphism too powerful a tool to surrender, particularly when probing the boundaries between humans and other animals.
15. 'The first thing you have to ask is, "Is this scientifically right?" This is still nothing but it is essential.' Ruskin.
16. The ivory tower of science is a ruin. Science is not a pure realm of truth beyond the taints of ideology and business, but a field of ideas enmeshed in a power struggle. Increasingly industry and economics dictate the direction and priorities of research. Whilst informed by science, we are ever vigilant against claims of scientific neutrality, and ever sceptical of the 'official story' of natural history presented by scientific institutions.

17. Taxonomy, i.e. the classification of the natural world, whilst a useful tool, is a system of order imposed by man and not an objective reflection of nature. Its categories are actively applied and contain the assumptions, values and associations of human society.
18. Our societies can afford wildlife conservation and the preservation of natural habitats.
19. The variety and variability of life is a wonder of infinite complexity. There is no more curious and uncanny a topic than the biodiversity which surrounds us. The objective of the best art and science is not to strip nature of wonder but to enhance it. Knowledge and poetry are not in conflict.
20. We believe and affirm that human interaction with the natural world need not result in the degradation and homogenisation of natural habitats and landscapes. Cultures have a choice to determine the future of our relationship with the living world, as efficiently as the environment is destroyed it could also be protected.

**APPENDIX 2:**

Both sides of an identification card from the box of *The Marvelous Museum – Orphans, Curiosities & Treasures: A Mark Dion Project*. © Chronicle Books, 2010.

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SW2 1936

**OBJECT ID** **DATE**

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*Elephas maximus*

**TAXON.**

---

H: 58 in, W: 20 in, L: 78 in

**DIMENSIONS**

---

*Asian elephant*

**OBJECT NAME**

---

*Siam*

**FOUND**

---

*Snow Museum*

**USED**

---

*Two-year-old Indian elephant from the Snow Museum collections*

**REMARKS**

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*Declared surplus 12/13/88: Deaccessioned 5/10/89*

**ADD. INFO.**

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*Transfer from the Snow Museum*

**CREDIT LINE**

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© David Maitel, from *The Marvelous Museum: Orphans, Curiosities & Treasures—A Mark Dion Project*, Chronicle Books 2010

THE OAKLAND MUSEUM 