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EMBODIED PARADOX:  
TAXIDERMY AND CONTEMPORARY ART, 1990-PRESENT  
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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Embodied Paradox: Taxidermy and Contemporary Art, 1990-Present

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Taxidermy—the product of preparing, stuffing, and mounting animal skin—is constructed of both animal and man-made materials. It promotes an illusion of life predicated on the reality of death. Although popular in the late nineteenth century, taxidermy fell out of scientific favor during the twentieth century. At the turn of the twenty-first century, however, the relevance of taxidermy was revived by visual artists. By peeling back the layers of taxidermy's unique materiality and revealing its hidden historical, cultural, and theoretical implications, this dissertation argues that taxidermy was resurrected as a popular artistic medium due to its ability to—literally and metaphorically—embody paradox.

*Embodied Paradox* examines the contemporary art world's fascination with taxidermy by investigating the oeuvres of Damien Hirst, Mark Dion, Maurizio Cattelan, and Petah Coyne. These artists gained notoriety in the nineties and their work, which heavily features taxidermy, embraces contradiction. They demonstrate that opposites—such as truth and illusion, nature and culture, and the masculine and the feminine—do not exist in opposition of one another; rather, they coexist.

Furthermore, by forging connections among the fields of Art History, Animal Studies, and New Materialism, it will become clear that taxidermy is linked to important

issues of the 1990s and 2000s, such as: technology and craft, beauty and abjection, identity and the environment. It will also become clear that contemporary artists are using taxidermy to comment on humanity's ever-present, ever-changing, and ever-troubled relationship with animals.

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## **Introduction: Taxidermy, Contemporary Art & the 1990s**

At the 1997 Venice Biennale, Maurizio Cattelan perched hundreds of taxidermied pigeons along the rafters, heating ducts, and sprinklers of the Italian Pavilion (Figure 1). Visitors to the exhibition were confused upon walking into the space. Expecting to see art, they saw pigeons. Seeing pigeons, they expected to see bird droppings, which Cattelan comedically sprinkled across the floor. As a result, viewers feared for their own safety as well as the safety of nearby artworks. Furthermore, although viewers were expecting to look, they were filled with the sensation of being looked at. Rather than passively inhabiting the Italian Pavilion, Cattelan's pigeons actively confronted their viewers and engaged them in an experience equal to "being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another person."<sup>1</sup> Fourteen years later, Cattelan's *Tourists* returned to Venice under the title of *Others* (Figure 2). In this re-mounting, Cattelan's pesky stuffed birds multiplied from 200 hundred to over 2,000 specimens. Their growth in number from 1997 to 2011 not only created an intensified encounter between man and animal but mirrors the flourishing popularity of taxidermy in contemporary art.

## **Taxidermy: Passive Object or Active Agent?**

Deriving from the Greek words *taxis* (to arrange) and *derma* (skin), the traditional meaning of the term taxidermy refers to the act of re-arranging the skin of a dead animal in an attempt to make it look alive once again. Today, the term can be applied "to any work that attempts to realistically recreate the appearance of animals using the real animal as a starting point."<sup>2</sup> Composed of both animal fragments and artificial materials, taxidermy is a constructed representation rather than a genuine example of an animal. Its

animal exterior and artificial interior simultaneously tell tales of man's domination over and admiration for nature. According to art historian Rachel DeLue, taxidermy allows science and art to join forces, producing "an experience that is equal parts education and fantasy, one that interweaves rational contemplation and imaginative projection."<sup>3</sup> Rachel Poliquin, cultural historian and curator, asserts that taxidermy signifies humanity's longing for escapism and truth.<sup>4</sup> Dave Madden, author of *The Authentic Animal: Inside the Odd and Obsessive World of Taxidermy*, asserts that, "depending on whom you talk to, taxidermy is either an homage to nature or a violation of it....No other human activity sits so squarely at the intersection of nature, science, and art," expressing so much about our highly mediated relationship with the natural world.<sup>5</sup> The taxidermied animal is therefore paradoxical for it embodies the ways in which humans concurrently manipulate and idolize animals.

Extensive knowledge of animal physiology and expert sculpting skills are needed to fashion a successful piece of taxidermy. First, the dead body of an animal must be broken down, skinned, cleaned, and chemically preserved. Next, its internal structure must be replicated. Metal armatures, wire, and steel rods replace skeletons. Clay, plaster, papier-mâché, fiberglass, and plastic become muscle. Glass beads serve as eyes, varnish mimics saliva but animal skin remains animal skin.<sup>6</sup> What was once fully animal now only appears so. Through the process of taxidermy, the actual animal becomes a representation of itself, a thing that merges man-made and animal materials. This *animal-thing* is both agent and object, something that constantly oscillates between notions of actuality and artifice while representing man's historical interactions with and cultural attitudes toward animals.<sup>7</sup>

According to Timothy Morton, the field of Object-Oriented Ontology argues that all forms of life, both animate beings and non-animate *things*, coexist because they not only share space but exchange molecules. Because of this constant transference of matter, borders cannot be easily drawn around an individual being or *thing*. We cannot “construct a ‘within’ (where life lives) and a ‘without’ (where it doesn’t).”<sup>8</sup> All beings and *things* are therefore connected to each other and embedded within their environment.<sup>9</sup> Since all *things* are in a sense indistinguishable from the living beings and inanimate matter that surrounds them, everyone and *everything* can be considered uncanny because they are simultaneously “themselves and not-themselves.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, *things* “constitute a *mesh*,” or an open-ended system of “interrelations that blur and confound boundaries at practically any level: between species, between the living and the nonliving, between organisms and environment.”<sup>11</sup> Although envisioning this mesh can be difficult because “it defies our imaginative capacities,”<sup>12</sup> taxidermy gives it form. Straddling the line between animate being and inanimate object, taxidermy can be named an *animal-thing*.

The act of taxidermy, which renders a once living animal forever motionless, theoretically imposes an *animal-thing* with an unstable temporality. The materiality of taxidermy is constantly vacillating between the past, the present, and the future. While predicated on death, taxidermy gives new life. This *animal-thing* conjures visions of the animal’s previous biography while raising emotions regarding its death. It forces one to contemplate its past, present, and future bodily incarnations. It straddles the border between states of being, seeing death as another beginning, a promise of immortality, a means to become something new. As organic material, however, taxidermy—no matter how well preserved—is subject to processes of decay. It does not simply “present a static,

ossified understanding of nature” but one that acknowledges the dynamism of the environment, the vitality of matter and the ever-shifting exchanges between human and animal worlds.<sup>13</sup> Taxidermy thus has the unusual ability, as Morton states, to “blur and confound boundaries at practically any level,” and thus embrace contradiction.<sup>14</sup>

In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett argues that inanimate *things* are agentic because they have the ability “not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.”<sup>15</sup> New materialists such as Bennett assert that “all bodies, including those of animals (and perhaps certain machines, too), evince certain capacities of agency.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, by wielding its *thing-power*, or the ability “to act, to produce effects [both] dramatic and subtle,” taxidermy forces us to think “beyond the life-matter binary” that serves as “the dominant organizational principle of adult experience.”<sup>17</sup> It emphasizes the coexistence of all beings and *things*. It focuses on the animal while decentering the human. Now, rather than existing on a higher level, humans and animals live on the same plane.

Furthermore, because taxidermied *animal-things* exhibit agency that allows them to act as human proxies, they gain a voice. They become “speaking agent(s),” rather than “mute object(s),” with the ability “trigger all manner of narrations.”<sup>18</sup> The agentic qualities of taxidermy allows the stuffed animal to “chatter, scream, moan, laugh” and join in larger cultural conversations that address “our relationship with things and what we make of the world, rather than what we find in the world.”<sup>19</sup> Taxidermy’s opinion provides us with insight on how to develop “new strategies, technologies, and modes of perception” that will enable us “to consult with and respond better to” the “statements,

objections, and proposals” of animals.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, taxidermy’s inherent agentic powers have the ability to incite change and subvert prevalent power structures, making it an appealing artistic medium.

### **A Brief History of Taxidermy**

Although taxidermy is most associated with the Victorian era, its history leads further back in time to the Pre-Enlightenment. The oldest piece of taxidermy still in existence dates from the 1500s and hangs from the ceiling of a church in Ponta Nossa, Italy.<sup>21</sup> Despite its age and poor preservation, this crocodile has stood the test of time, a testament to the durability of its skin.<sup>22</sup> During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, European royalty and scholars began exploring the world, traveling to exotic destinations, and discovering new species of animals. It was not uncommon for these men to capture, kill, and taxidermy the most “absurd, curious, or monstrous” creatures discovered on these journeys.<sup>23</sup> Subsequently, these stuffed animals were displayed in *Wunderkammern*, or Cabinet of Curiosities, along with other ephemera. These rooms dedicated to displaying souvenir collections were carefully curated and highly idiosyncratic, serving as self-portraits of the individual collector. They also represented humanity’s growing interest in understanding—and controlling—the natural world.

Most of the taxidermy mounts fashioned during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did not survive due to crude methods of preservation. At this time, the bodies of dead animals were either suspended in alcohol or gutted, dried, and stuffed with tobacco, straw, or herbs in hopes of fending off insects. These efforts proved unsuccessful. However, in the mid-eighteenth century, noted apothecary Jean-Baptiste Bécœur (1718-

77) developed a recipe for arsenical soap, which more effectively preserved animal skin, and thus revolutionized the art of taxidermy.<sup>24</sup> Due to this innovation, the practice of preserving, collecting, and displaying taxidermied animals began to flourish.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the modern discipline of Natural History emerged. Scientists started garnering knowledge of nature by carefully observing the environment and studying the animal world. And, taxidermy served as a major source of primary information. For example, Carl Linneaus (1707-78), the famed Swedish botanist, undertook the immense task of classifying all life on earth. In order to categorize every animal, vegetable, and mineral, Linneaus developed a system of binomial nomenclature, using dried flowers and taxidermied animals as reference material. In 1786, Charles Willson Peale established America's first science museum whose mission was to educate the public by displaying the wonders of the nature. Located in Philadelphia, this institution displayed beautifully taxidermied animals which were ordered according to the vertical hierarchy put forth by Aristotle's Great Chain of Being, which crowns man ruler of the animal kingdom.<sup>25</sup>

In the second half of the nineteenth century, interest in taxidermy blossomed amongst scientists and began rooting itself in popular culture. Charles Darwin incorporated taxidermy into studies that resulted in the publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859), causing taxidermied specimens to be seen as "emblems of evolution."<sup>26</sup> Both American and European naturalists mirrored the actions of *Wunderkammern* creators by acting within a "scientific gift culture."<sup>27</sup> However, rather than collecting the most obscure specimens, they sought out the most generic examples of a species.<sup>28</sup> Colonizers and the colonized began trading natural specimens in an effort to create power

networks, fashion personal identities, and spread scientific knowledge about foreign landscapes.<sup>29</sup> The trade of taxidermy between amateur and professional naturalists served as a means to disseminate information across nations, cultures, and social groups.

Furthermore, the Great Exhibition of 1851, which was housed in London's Crystal Palace, brought taxidermy to a wider audience. Attracting more than six million viewers, this event serves as a turning point in taxidermy's history because many of the displays included accurately preserved specimens and fantastical displays of stuffed animals.<sup>30</sup> German taxidermist Hermann Plouquet, for example, produced miniature scenes of anthropomorphic animals engaged in human activities. With taxidermy, he made two white mice fence and literary characters act out their adventures in three-dimensional form.<sup>31</sup> His work inspired other taxidermists, such as Englishman Walter Potter, to create similar vignettes of card-playing squirrels and school-going bunnies. In the nearby Zoological Gardens at Regent Park, London-based taxidermist John Gould displayed three-hundred-and-twenty stuffed hummingbirds in twenty-four elaborate display cases.<sup>32</sup> Within these cases, perfect bird bodies were perched on tree branches, ordered by genus, and seen by over seventy-five-thousand people.<sup>33</sup> Taken by the beauty and educational abilities of such presentations, Victorian housewives began fashioning taxidermy at home and natural history museums started incorporating theatrical displays of taxidermy into their permanent exhibitions.

According to Karen Wonders, taxidermy reached the height of its popularity in the late nineteenth century due to the introduction of the diorama.<sup>34</sup> These vignettes presented illusions of nature's grandeur and beauty while fabricating personal encounters with real animals.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, these habitat dioramas originated during a moment of

accelerated frontier expansion and “human exploitation of the wilderness,” thus providing a glimpse of what was being lost to acts of colonialism and Manifest Destiny.<sup>36</sup> Dioramas not only helped people quench their thirst for information, order, and power but acted as a means to bring “greater awareness of the conquest and degradation of the natural environment by humans.”<sup>37</sup> In addition to educating the public, dioramas were created to instill visitors with a conservationist mentality by promoting “an appreciation of the natural-national heritage that was being damaged, diminished, or lost all together” due man’s mistreatment of nature.<sup>38</sup>

Carl Akeley (1864-1926)—the father of modern taxidermy—and Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919)—hunter, naturalist and beloved politician—led the American conservationist craze and helped fashion the nation’s most renowned dioramas. Best known for creating the American Museum of Natural History’s African Hall of Mammals, Akeley not only turned the practice of taxidermy into an art form by developing new methods to preserve and replicate the animal body but participated in hunting expeditions to procure animal skins for his dioramas. Akeley asserted that “as a naturalist interested in preserving wild life, I was glad to do anything that might make killing animals less attractive,” even if that meant killing animals himself.<sup>39</sup>

In order to fill his dioramas and keep species on the brink of extinction “around as long as possible, if not for eternity,” Akeley killed, took apart, and reassembled animal bodies.<sup>40</sup> Ironically, taxidermy was deemed the most appropriate means to sustain animal presence. However, due to this paradox, the empirical authority of taxidermy soon diminished.



## **A Brief History of Taxidermy in Fine Art**

In the mid-twentieth-century, natural history museums began deaccessioning their taxidermy collections, seeing them as controversial, unethical, and irrelevant educational tools in the age of photography and video.<sup>41</sup> It was during this time that taxidermy was first featured in a fine art context. Just as the stuffed animal body fell out of scientific favor, it gained artistic prominence. The dismissal of the didactic value of taxidermy allowed the stuffed animal body to be re-contextualized by the art world. When the field of natural science became more attracted to virtual technologies than actual artifacts, artists shifted focus from pictorially representing the animal body to using the actual animal as a confrontational entity. Artists appropriated taxidermy not only for its formal properties but its historical, cultural, and theoretical implications. Artists used taxidermy to draw parallels between the past and the present, construct their personal identity and re-shape the identity of others, and comment on our relationship with nature. As a result, taxidermy's relevance migrated from the scientific to the artistic.

According to Petra Lange-Berndt, French surrealists were the first artists to incorporate mounted animals into their art (Figure 3).<sup>42</sup> In the 1930s, they used taxidermy as a means to symbolically “carry out a nostalgic archeology of nineteenth-century bourgeois society” while accessing “the unstable areas of fantasy and dreams.”<sup>43</sup> In the 1940s, American artist Joseph Cornell filled glass-covered shadow boxes with found objects, stuffed birds and other natural remnants to construct intimate dioramas rife with symbolism and nostalgia for a simpler past (Figure 4). In the late 1950s, Robert Rauschenberg found a discarded stuffed Angora goat, placed it at the center of his

combine *Monogram* (1955-1959; Figure 5), and revolutionized the way taxidermy functioned as an artistic medium.

According to many art historian Paul Schimmel, Rauschenberg's Combines are "veritable self-portraits" fashioned at a time when he was constructing his artistic identity as a globally-informed American artist.<sup>44</sup> As a child, Rauschenberg kept a multitude of pets. Among these animals were a horned toad, a banny rooster, a gold fish, several hunting dogs and a nanny goat.<sup>45</sup> One day, Rauschenberg's hunter-of-a-father decided to kill his pet goat.<sup>46</sup> Decades later, when Rauschenberg came across a taxidermied goat in an office supply store, he purchased the stuffed animal to incorporate into *Monogram*, using it as a means to push the limits of artistic media and conjure memories of his lost childhood companion.

*Monogram's* Angora goat serves as analogy for the artist by revealing "fragments of Rauschenberg's own life story" and mirroring aspects of his personality.<sup>47</sup> Although lacking explicit rational explanation, some art historians argue for an erotic reading of the goat's presence. Forced to penetrate a rubber tire, Rauschenberg's goat can be metaphorically read as a male phallus or symbol of homosexual love.<sup>48</sup> In Greco-Roman mythology, satyrs—creatures with the upper body of a man and lower body of a goat—were debauched beings known for insatiable sexual appetites. As a discreet gay man, Rauschenberg's inclusion of a goat in *Monogram*, as suggested by Lawrence Alloway, is indicative of his inconspicuous sexual identity.<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, Robert Saltonstall Mattison describes the Angora breed as a scavenger, one who subsists on a diet of trash, as well as a valuable commodity, for its hair is used in a plethora of commercial applications. The Angora goat thus has a split

personality: it is a self-reliant forager and a commercial product, much like Rauschenberg.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, the taxidermied Angora goat is not only part of a personal iconography but a surrogate for the artist himself.

However, Rauschenberg's work differs from that of his predecessors. Although critical interpretation renders Rauschenberg's use of taxidermy as a symbol, a marker of his identity, the artist adopted the medium with different intentions. Instead of forcing this goat to function in symbolic terms, Rauschenberg used the taxidermied animal as a literal aesthetic object, a means to construct a disruptive and confrontational image.<sup>51</sup> Standing on a painted board with a rubber tire encircling his mid-section, *Monogram's* goat directly challenges its viewer with its awkward physical presence.<sup>52</sup> Freed from the two-dimensional confines of the canvas, the goat is permitted to exist in three-dimensional reality. The goat is "encountered and experienced" rather than "rendered familiar through interpretation."<sup>53</sup> Additionally, by incorporating unconventional and banal objects into his multimedia combines, Rauschenberg's mentality "demonstrates his conviction that anything could be used to make art—that a taxidermy animal's just another material."<sup>54</sup> Rauschenberg's use of taxidermy marks a revolutionary shift in how the animal body is artistically employed. Now, instead of merely acting as a conduit for symbolic meaning, the animal body simultaneously acts as an unsettling presence. Because of its paradoxical properties, taxidermy can incite—and sustain—multiple readings of a single artwork.

Installation art, especially works that incorporate taxidermy, imagines its viewer as an embodied being rather than simply a pair of eyes.<sup>55</sup> Because taxidermy requires visual attention as well as bodily engagement, it emphasizes the literal presence of itself

and its viewer.<sup>56</sup> This forced physical interaction causes the stuffed animal and viewer to interact. Art and viewer become active participants rather than passive observers.<sup>57</sup> By stressing the corporeal qualities of taxidermy, *Monogram* forces its viewers to literally and metaphorically share space with its stuffed goat. As a result, animal and human are required to exist on the same plane. Viewers are decentered. Pre-existing practices that emphasize the centrality of the viewer are disrupted. Therefore, the *thing-power* of *Monogram*'s taxidermied Angora goat not only disturbs conventional art-viewing paradigms but entices us to consider how humans and animals interact.

Artists of the 1960s and 1970s followed Rauschenberg's lead in incorporating taxidermy—and its related processes—into their work. In 1969 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Nancy Graves presented a series of camel sculptures created out of various materials, including the skin of other animals (Figure 6).<sup>58</sup> Interested in investigating “how representations are constructed and how the pictorial memory of a society functions,” Graves turned to processes of taxidermy to examine the relationship between art and science.<sup>59</sup> In the early 1970s, Annette Messenger's feminist practice subverted traditional methods of taxidermy by fashioning the bodies of small birds from down feathers, knitted wool, and other soft materials (Figure 7). As a result, she adopted the persona of a Victorian housewife and turned “the home into a source of creative satisfaction.”<sup>60</sup> In the late 1980s, Bruce Nauman began working with ready-made taxidermy molds which he first saw in a New Mexico taxidermy shop and then procured from a mail-order catalogue.<sup>61</sup> *Carousel* (1988; Figure 8) drags dismembered animal molds across the floor, alluding to the realities of slaughterhouses. In *Animal Pyramid*

(1990; Figure 9), he again used plastic taxidermy molds. But, instead of commenting on the horrors of the meat industry, Nauman was intrigued by their unique formal properties.

Although taxidermy inspired these artists over the course of the twentieth century, it was not until the 1990s and early 2000s when artists such as Maurizio Cattelan, Petah Coyne, Mark Dion, Damien Hirst, Thomas Grünfeld, Polly Morgan, Yinka Shonibare and Angela Singer started to incorporate taxidermy into their work on a large scale. This renewed interest in the stuffed animal body prompts the following question: Why, almost thirty years after *Monogram* introduced taxidermy as a contradictory and confrontational artistic medium, did so many artists start incorporating taxidermy into their practice?

### **Taxidermy and the Turn of the Century: Why Now?**

Art of the 1990s not only reflected but helped shape societal concerns of the era.<sup>62</sup> The introduction of new technologies caused individuals, groups, and cultures to reimagine their identities by investigating the “complex societal issues of gender, sexuality, race, and class” while contending with the pressures of the flourishing international art market.<sup>63</sup> As stated by Alexandra Schwartz in *Come As You Are: Art of the 1990s*, “links between art and sociopolitical, economic, and especially technological change were strong and complex.”<sup>64</sup> The inescapable impact of these factors transformed cultural, political, and economic structures, affecting all facets of society, especially the visual arts.<sup>65</sup> Additionally, the early 1990s focused international attention on how climate change, pollution, and the planet’s decreasing biodiversity was generated by humanity’s excessive energy use and rampant disregard for the environment, inciting artists and architects to take interest in natural and ecological issues.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, debates

regarding the current state of technology, identity, and the environment provoked discussions of beauty, a third-wave of feminism, and interest in the discipline of Animal Studies.

Because of its varied histories and unique materiality, taxidermy can comment on all of these topics. By asking us to question our relationship with the environment—both our immediate surroundings and ‘nature’ at large— artworks that feature taxidermy “call upon us to reorient ourselves profoundly in relation to the world, to one another, and to ourselves.”<sup>67</sup> The historical background, cultural associations, and agentic qualities of the stuffed animal body can spark dialogues regarding technology, identity, beauty, Feminism, and the Animal. The multiple voices of taxidermy made it an attractive medium for artists working at the turn of the century to conduct socially conscious artistic interventions.

### **Why Now?: The Digital Revolution**

Life in the late nineteenth-century was dramatically altered by the onset and resulting effects of the Industrial Revolution. Transportation, production, and communication systems were forever transformed by the introduction of machinery. In addition, with the introduction of photography, taxidermy was deemed antiquated. Stuffed animal bodies were systematically replaced with photographic images and video recordings of live animals. The late twentieth-century experienced similar changes with the arrival of the Digital Revolution.

The first public version of the World Wide Web was introduced in 1991 and the first internet browser was launched in 1993. These technologies altered our everyday

lives, including how we communicate with one another, sell goods, and conduct political conversations.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, with the rise of the Internet, our access to visual stimuli dramatically increased. As a result, people struggled to navigate the world wide web and process all of the information it contained.<sup>69</sup>

Since then, as stated by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, “digital technologies have become part of our lives and of who we are.”<sup>70</sup> We designed electronic devices sophisticated enough to pace heartbeats and track our every movement. We listen to the news on podcasts, find directions via GPS, and conduct business via wireless communications. Moreover, although the introduction of the internet allowed individuals to more easily connect with each other, it did so with ambiguity and risk.<sup>71</sup> People constructed alter-egos and began virtually engaging with each other. By presenting one’s self as an online avatar, people started to separate themselves from their physical bodies.<sup>72</sup>

In the essay “Why Look at Animals?,” John Berger—English artist, critic, and novelist—argues that due to the onset of industrialism and the effects of colonialism, the late nineteenth-century experienced the beginning of a rupture between man and animal that was later worsened by twentieth-century corporate capitalism and the digital revolution.<sup>73</sup> Zoos, toys, photographs, films, and cartoons began replacing real animals—both live and taxidermied—with spectacles of animals.<sup>74</sup> Additionally, with increased access to virtual worlds, actual human interaction with animals was replaced with watching them on television, movie, and computer screens.<sup>75</sup>

In 1996, for example, “Discovery Communications created a new cable network called Animal Planet, which is watched by millions of people in more than seventy

countries.”<sup>76</sup> In *Animals in Film*, Jonathan Burt argues that photography, film, and digital technologies not only dissolved “the empirical animal into pure spectrality” but serve as funerary monuments for actual animals.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, due to the increased presence of virtual technologies, actual animals are systematically being removed from our everyday lives while representations of them are becoming inescapable.

While some artists of the nineties incorporated new media into their work, others turned to the past by embracing traditional modes of creation, updating them for a new generation. This return to tradition is indicative of “a yearning for continuity during a time of rapid change.”<sup>78</sup> This technological backlash also encouraged some artists and sectors of the general population to become “self-sustaining by rejecting mass production” and adopting creative processes associated with the decorative arts.<sup>79</sup> Knitting, bookbinding, and taxidermy are all “expressions of this handwork revolution,” marking a prevalent longing for simplicity, an embodied existence, and a renewed connection with the actual animal body.<sup>80</sup>

### **Why Now?: Beauty and the Abject**

“The issue of the nineties will be *beauty*!” declared Dave Hickey in *The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty*.<sup>81</sup> Because much discourse of the nineties was “tied to a nostalgia for traditional standards of artistic skill and craft,”<sup>82</sup> it is not surprising that many artists started exploring “the vernacular of beauty” as “a potent instrument for change.”<sup>83</sup> However, beautiful art produced at this time was “strangely familiar and vaguely surprising.”<sup>84</sup> Hickey describes Robert Mapplethorpe’s homoerotic photographs as being exemplary of this beautiful frisson because they are “so palpably corporeal on



the one hand, and so technically extravagant on the other, that it seems on the verge of exploding from its own internal contradictions.”<sup>85</sup> Beauty in art of the nineties strived to be visually enticing while simultaneously challenging to one’s morality, generating anxiety in order to incite change.<sup>86</sup>

Over the course of the twentieth century, artists saw the “disturbing co-existence of desire and anxiety” as filled with revolutionary potentiality because it threatens the power of social propriety.<sup>87</sup> As described by Hal Foster, this ‘compulsive beauty,’ which is evoked by reminders of death and trauma, is uncanny and causes a confusion between animate and inanimate states.<sup>88</sup> By not being fixed in any one state of being, compulsively beautiful *things* blur the borders separating subjectivity and objectivity, masculinity and femininity, as well as passivity and agency.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, this increased attraction to compulsive beauty sparked artistic interest in abjection, “a category of (non)being” that “touches on the fragility of our boundaries, the fragility of the spatial distinction between our insides and outsides.”<sup>90</sup>

Defined by Julia Kristeva, “abjection is ‘what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.’”<sup>91</sup> Abjection aided artists in conducting investigations regarding the intersection of society and the body. In 1993, the Whitney Museum of American Art presented the exhibition *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, demonstrating that abjection served as an overarching theoretical construct for art of the nineties.<sup>92</sup> Numerous artists of the era incorporated abject materials—including hair, excrement, menstrual blood, fecal matter, rotting food, dead animals and taxidermy—into

their work to challenge dominate culture, confront us with “taboo issues of gender and sexuality,” and blur the boundaries between self and other.<sup>93</sup>

Taxidermy, being paradoxical, not only honors the beauty of the animal body but bears the burden of the animal’s death while alluding to our own imminent demise. “The feathers, fur, hair,” or pelt of a taxidermied animals “looks nice and enchants us to touch and stroke. Afterwards the repulsion part is that, after a while we see ourselves looking at a ‘thing’ which is made out of” animal parts “that had their own lives” and “are now dead and stuck together.”<sup>94</sup> Made through collage-like processes, a taxidermied animal is the ultimate abject material because it is always ‘in-between.’ It is a composite form, made of a variety of organic and inorganic materials, which blur the boundary between life and death, the human and the animal, as well as the beautiful and the grotesque.

According to art historian Steve Baker, taxidermy, although seemingly stable, embodies the moment “where things have gone wrong, but where it still holds together,” rendering the animal—and our relation to it—“abrasively visible.”<sup>95</sup> Because a taxidermied animal remains recognizable by retaining its difference, it disrupts the centrality of human experience by allowing us to respect its animal otherness.<sup>96</sup> Contemporary art featuring taxidermy therefore wields the power of abjection by assaulting “homogenizing notions of identity, system, and order,” and challenging the stability of longstanding hierarchies that deem humans as superior to animals.<sup>97</sup>

### **Why Now?: Identity**

A number of major exhibitions of the 1990s, including the aforementioned 1993 Whitney Biennial, “focused on issues of identities and difference, helping to bring these

debates and the artists who engaged in them, to prominence.”<sup>98</sup> Similar to the scientific gift culture in which Victorian natural scientists and colonized peoples exchanged taxidermied animals to share knowledge and assert their individual and national identities,<sup>99</sup> the digital revolution enabled powerful countries and marginalized nations to engage in conversations by instantly exchanging information.<sup>100</sup> As a result, artists started dissolving grand narratives and allowing individual voices of ‘other’ historical narratives to be heard.<sup>101</sup>

By forming international networks, however, the world wide web also posed a potential threat to individuality. By creating a global community, which could be immediately accessed on the internet, systems of human connectivity not only grew exponentially but encouraged totalizing behavior. Despite permitting individuals the ability to virtually traverse national boundaries, acting as cartographer of their own character,<sup>102</sup> this universal access threatened to widen mainstream borders while conquering peripheral territories.<sup>103</sup> In other words, local individuality was at risk of being dominated by widespread conformity.

Although loss of individuality was increased by the digital revolution, this threat emerged with the onset of the postmodern age. Characterized as the period in which Cartesian rationality, scientific certainties, and philosophical values were called into question, postmodernity can be traced back to the end of the Second World War.<sup>104</sup> Postmodernity lacks a grand human narrative. It champions multiplicity and difference, theoretically liberating the individual from oppressive social conditions. However, living in the postmodern age can also be anxiety-inducing, causing one to live with a perpetual sense of loss, confusion, and insecurity.<sup>105</sup> Wendy Wheeler notes that, ironically, “the

successes of capitalism, with its great emphasis on individualism, tended to fragment communities and identities,” causing the postmodern age period to be ripe with cultural anxiety.<sup>106</sup> Because the digital revolution intensified the prevalence of this postmodern fragmentation, living within the digital age can be anxiety-inducing, causing one to live with a perpetual sense of loss, confusion, and insecurity.<sup>107</sup>

Sociologist Adrian Franklin concurs with Wheeler’s assertions, claiming that individuals living in postmodernity experience a profound sense of ontological insecurity because their social identities are easily fragmented across a number political, social, and economic sites.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, again mirroring the actions of naturalists during the late nineteenth century, people turned to the animal to aid in re-constructing their identity. Individuals coped with a sense of ontological insecurity by embracing their inner animal, thus expanding possible representations of the self.

In *The Postmodern Animal*, Steve Baker notes that postmodern artists saw the fragmentation of their identity and the adoption of an animal persona as liberating rather than stifling:

“many postmodern or poststructuralist artists and writers seem, on one level or another, to adopt or to identify with the animal as metaphor for, or as image of, their own creativity. Whether it connotes a sense of alienation from the human or a sense of bodily freedom and unboundedness, this willing taking-on of animal form casts the fixity of identity as an inhibition of creativity.”<sup>109</sup>

Through the use of taxidermy, whose paradoxical materiality embraces fragmentation, artists can create art that recouples binaries and builds something new from one’s shattered identity.<sup>110</sup> Taxidermy forges meaningful connections between man and animal, nature and culture, the past and present, as well as the self and the collective. Additionally, taxidermy aids in the destabilization and subsequent discovery of the

empowered individual—one bereft of a stable identity—by allowing artists and their audience to undergo processes of undoing, becoming, or self-renewal by confronting them with the animal body.

In their postmodern treatise *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari assert that individuals have the ability to combat conformity and fixed political hierarchies by deconstructing binary logic and favoring “rhizomatic constructions” of the self that forge alliances with animals. “A rhizome,” just like taxidermy, “has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things,” embodying the notion of the liminal and the abject.<sup>111</sup> By employing taxidermy and harnessing its *animal-thing* power, artists can “move between things, establish a logic of the AND, overthrow ontology, do away with foundations, nullify endings and beginnings” and live within a world free of borders.<sup>112</sup> By identifying with animals, artists are able to simultaneously exist in social centers and peripheries, allowing them to break free from traditional value systems.<sup>113</sup> By using taxidermy as a surrogate self, artists can urge their audience to escape threats of conformity by constructing an identity that forges connections with animal worlds.

### **Why Now?: Environmental Issues**

Scientific studies conducted in the late 1980s through the present are making it clear that mankind’s continued manipulation of the planet is causing the demise of innumerable animal species, inciting a sixth age of mass extinction.<sup>114</sup> Building projects have transformed nearly half of the earth’s land surface; global trade and international travel have disrupted ecosystems; chemical waste has altered the makeup of the oceans

and the air, causing our climate to change.<sup>115</sup> For example, on March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1989, the oil tanker known as the *Exxon Valdez* crashed in Alaska's Prince William Sound, spilling 11 million gallons of oil into the water. This event destroyed ecosystems, killed wildlife, and forced us to reevaluate the ways in which we treat the environment. The following year, an international panel of over 2,000 scientists published a report officially recognizing the existence of global warming and McDonald's switched from polystyrene to paper packaging, signaling a rise in corporate environmental responsibility and the need for humanity to urgently alter their behavior in order to protect diminishing natural resources.

Human action is causing animals to be alienated from nature and displaced into culture. "On a scale never before seen," animals are becoming victims of habitat loss, subjects of scientific experiments, and casualties of technology. Animals are exploited by humans, forced to comply with "the practices, habits, and desires of our cultural consciousness."<sup>116</sup> Because we destroy their natural habitats, animals are being relocated to urban landscapes and recontextualized as an extension of human culture. As a result, real animals "belong nowhere."<sup>117</sup> Recognizing that the ecological landscape of the late twenty-first-century mirrored that of the late nineteenth-century, when dioramas were used to depict the beauty of disappearing landscapes, contemporary artists resurrected the medium of taxidermy to demonstrate the parallels between man's past and present environmental circumstances.

Contemporary artists are using taxidermy "as a way of grappling with environmental challenges" and informing a broad audience of these critical issues.<sup>118</sup> Ecocritical theory asserts that artists are responsible for conveying the negative

consequences of humanity's domination of nature by regenerating lost landscapes and encouraging us to overcome our amnesia that we ourselves are animals.<sup>119</sup> By emphasizing our corporeality and making “us remember that we exist in an environment inhabited by others who not only share our space but can affect our disposition,” taxidermy acts as an agentic artistic medium that discloses “the ecosocial ills of the present” while asking us to reevaluate our deeply troubled relationship with the environment and change our behavior.<sup>120</sup>

### **Why Now?: Feminism**

In 1990, *Gender Trouble: Gender and the Subversion of Identity* by Judith Butler was published. This book, which provided academics with the notion of gender performativity, helped marshal in an acceptance of queer theory and a third wave of feminism. Feminist artists not only explored the “viscerality and the language of the body in non-traditional forms and materials” but chose “to blur the boundaries of propriety and social strictures imposed on art, women, and on society as a whole” by using abject materials, such as taxidermy, to shock their audiences into new modes of thinking.<sup>121</sup> That same year, Carol J. Adams authored *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* to examine the correlations between eating meat and virility. In this investigation, Adams draws correlations between the butchering of animals and the objectification of women, seeing the former as a proxy for the latter, and both as markers of patriarchal control.

Adams would not have been able to publish her gender-based investigation of the meat industry without the work of Donna Haraway. In 1984, Haraway published “Teddy

Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936” and revealed the violent misogynist, imperialist, and racist realities behind the creation of the American Museum of Natural History’s dioramas. As a result, she spurred discussion regarding correlations between female and animal bodies while turning taxidermy into a viable tool for third wave Feminists.

Haraway’s scathing critique demonstrates that, despite their apparent peacefulness, dioramas impart a strong sense of humanity’s reign over nature and the white man’s control of animals, women, and minorities. Additionally, while big-game hunters in America and Great Britain were popularizing the diorama through acts of violence, women became active in protecting animals from the threats of hunting, deforestation, and vivisection.<sup>122</sup> By “connecting the degradation of the female human body to that of the bodies of animals,” these late-Victorian animal activists serve as precursors to the Ecofeminist movement. Ecofeminism “is based on the premise that both women and the natural world have suffered from the domination inherent in Western patriarchal civilization.”<sup>123</sup> Therefore, because Victorian women forged a connection between the feminine and the animal while partaking in acts of domestic taxidermy, the stuffed animal body is a suitable surrogate for the female form.

In her article “Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom,” Elizabeth Grosz asserts:

“Feminists have long assumed that, as a coercive form of constraint, it is patriarchy and patriarchal power relations that have limited women’s freedom by not making available to women the full range of ‘choices’ that it affords men. And it is certainly true that the range of ‘choices’ available to women as a group is smaller and more restricted than that available to men as a group. But the question of freedom for women, or for any oppressed social group is never simply a question of expanding the range of available options so much as it is about transforming the quality and activity of the subjects who choose and who make themselves through how and what they do. Freedom is not so much linked to choice (a selection from pre-given options or commodities) as it is to autonomy,



and autonomy is linked to the ability to make (or refuse to make) activities (including language and systems of representation and value) one's own, that is, to integrate the activities one undertakes into one's history, one's becoming."<sup>124</sup>

Therefore, the appropriation of taxidermy—and its associated processes—by female artists enables them to conduct patriarchal interventions. By integrating the product and processes of the male-dominated activity of taxidermy into their work, feminist artists can actively subvert histories of oppression embedded within the *animal-thing*, fashion new models of femininity, and transform existing social hierarchies.

### **Why Now?: Animal Studies & Posthumanism**

Although the digital technologies and environmental degradation are producing a physical gap between human and animal worlds,<sup>125</sup> philosophically they are being brought closer together.<sup>126</sup> With the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859, "the once clear distinction between animal and human became blurred, unstable, and even obsolete in the 'web of complex relations'" made famous by the theory of evolution.<sup>127</sup> This theory marked the beginning of a paradigm shift, spurring scientists and philosophers to redefine man's relationship to animals.

According to cultural anthropologist Margo DeMello:

Ever "since the nineteenth century, the border between human and animal is actually narrowing. Through new discoveries in genetic science, paleoanthropology, neuropsychology, sociobiology, and ethology, we find that we are physically, behaviorally, and emotionally closer to other animals than we have ever been before. Where scientists, theologians, and philosophers of the past spent their time overemphasizing the differences between us and understanding or ignoring similarities, today's scientists have been closing the gap between the species."<sup>128</sup>

For instance, genetic research has established that we share 98% of our genes with chimpanzees; rats, rabbits, and monkeys are used as human surrogates in scientific

experiments to deem cosmetic and medical products safe for human consumption; and, animal behavior is studied to better understand the stages of human development.<sup>129</sup>

The impulse to emphasize the similarities, rather than differences, between humans and animals intensified in the mid-twentieth century when academia began rigorously investigating the roles animals play in human culture, challenging the still dominant opinion of human superiority put forth by institutions of authority, such as the natural history museum.<sup>130</sup> Subsequently, a new academic discipline known as Animal Studies—which models itself on Women’s Studies by investigating and recovering the minimized roles animals have played in various aspects of human cultures<sup>131</sup>—was formed in the eighties and institutionalized in the nineties. Naturally, foundational theories, such as Posthumanism, soon emerged.

Posthumanism, which “names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world,” emphasizes how humans evolved in conjunction with animals and tools.<sup>132</sup> Posthumanism rejects the fantasy of human omniscience with regard to the animal and the machine.<sup>133</sup> It emphasizes the entanglement of man, animal, and machine in order to overcome the prevalent notion of the Great Chain of being, which is built on the notion of human exceptionalism. Because posthumanism decenters the human, it became a prominent theoretical construct in the humanities, social sciences, and visual arts.<sup>134</sup> And, because taxidermy embodies posthumanist thought, it became a popular artistic medium.

As stated by Joanne Northrup, contemporary artists internalize “the shifting dynamics of human-animal relationships” while proposing new ways of understanding these association.<sup>135</sup> By harnessing the *thing-power* of taxidermy, artists are not only

observing but emulating animals by adopting an animal point of view.<sup>136</sup> Artists are presenting us with animals that are not only metaphors for human experience but indicators of animal perspective. Through the presence of taxidermy, artists help us “imagine possible nonhuman states of mind.”<sup>137</sup> By encouraging us to engage with the animal body, taxidermy urges us to understand how animals engage with, interpret, and invent their own worlds.<sup>138</sup>

Furthering this line of thought, in *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art* Ron Broglio argues that through the “exploration of animal phenomenology, we unmoor ourselves from our comfortable, habitual dwelling and set out on a stroll in the worlds of animals and humans.”<sup>139</sup> In a New Materialist sense, the vital materiality of taxidermy conducts ontological reorientations that not only conceive “of matter itself as lively or as exhibiting agency” but combats “human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption.”<sup>140</sup> As an artistic medium, taxidermy embodies the simultaneous parasitic and symbiotic relationship between humans and animals, encouraging us to tip the scale in favor of symbiosis and acknowledge that animals make their own way in the world and aid us in making ours.

## **Chapter Breakdown**

Furthering this investigation of the use of taxidermy in contemporary art, the following four chapters examine the work of Damien Hirst, Mark Dion, Maurizio Cattelan, and Petah Coyne. These four artists, all of whom commenced their artistic careers in the late eighties and rose to prominence in the early nineties, have consistently incorporated taxidermy into their practice, each wielding its paradoxical powers in a

unique way. It will become clear that these four artists serve as progenitors of the taxidermic trend that arose in the world of contemporary art at the turn of the twenty-first century. Because there is no indication that the use of taxidermy as an artistic medium will subside, the study of their work is valuable in creating a methodological blueprint for inquiry into other contemporary artists' practices.

Both Damien Hirst and Mark Dion appropriate the visual language of science to understand our present relationship with animals. By placing animal death at the center of his artistic practice, Hirst uses preserved animal bodies to promote dominant attitudes of anthropocentrism. However, his work also makes visible animal suffering, causing us to question the ethics behind the killing of animals for intellectual and physical consumption. While Hirst's art reflects an anthropocentric mentality, it also encourages us to understand the world from an animal perspective. Through the paradoxical medium of taxidermy, Hirst's work mirrors humanity's conflicted relationship with animals.

Mark Dion contests prevailing timeworn beliefs of human superiority by revealing the contradictions prevalent in the ways institutional systems of authority frame our understanding of the natural world. He appropriates the opposing aesthetics of the *Wunderkammer* and the diorama to emphasize scientific theories that confirm the similarities, rather than differences, between humans and animals. Dion uses taxidermy to confront viewers with physical markers of our mistreatment of nature, making the consequence of our actions visible, tangible, and unavoidable. And, through the presence of taxidermy, Dion emphasizes that truth and illusion coexist and are not polar opposites.

The work of Maurizio Cattelan subverts the prevalent tendency to personify—or interpret what is not human in terms of the human—animals as seen in fairy tales,

Victorian anthropomorphic taxidermy, and animated cartoons. As a result, his work aids in reorganizing the conventional hierarchical relationship between man and animal by demonstrating that anthropomorphizing animals does not have to be detrimental. In fact, this act can be valuable for it highlights “structural parallels between material forms” in natural and cultural domains.<sup>141</sup> Additionally, with the help of taxidermy, Cattelan constructs his identity while revealing parallels between childhood and adulthood.

Finally, Petah Coyne, who works within an Ecofeminist sensibility, creates inescapable sculptural installations populated with taxidermy creatures. Because Coyne’s work puts forth notions of gender fluidity, her stuffed animals blur the boundaries between the masculine, the feminine, and the animal. Although Timothy Morton asserts that Ecofeminism, which “arose out of feminist separatism” and is “grounded on binary difference,” is unhelpful in theorizing multiple differences, it will become clear that Coyne’s work pushes past the dualistic boundaries of essentialism and crosses into the holistic territories of Posthumanism.<sup>142</sup>

Reacting to the cultural realities of the late twentieth century, contemporary artists revived the cultural relevance of taxidermy. They resuscitated this antiquated craft to comment on important social issues, fashion new identities, and revitalize our sense of embodiment. Additionally, the artistic appropriation of taxidermy attempts to reinsert actual animals into our lives, making them present even as the consequences of our actions are making them disappear.

By confronting us with animals that are simultaneously natural and cultural, beautiful and abject, real and imagined, Damien Hirst, Mark Dion, Maurizio Cattelan, and Petah Coyne force us to contemplate what it means to be human as well as what it

means to be animal. Their art makes visible our prevalent desire to forge new bonds with animals and redefine our relationship to the world in which we live. Taxidermy, when placed in an artistic context, has the conversational capacity to inform us of the multilayered relationship humans have forged with animals and the performative ability to demonstrate that we are embedded within our environment, making it clear that we not only shape our world but our world shapes us. The work of these four artists not only demonstrates the versatility of taxidermy as a medium but allows animals to speak, to inform us of the information humans have stuffed into the animal body.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Review*, The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1998, 155.

<sup>2</sup> Giovanni Aloï. "Rescuing what had become a Dying Art," *Antennae* Issue 7 (Autumn 2008): 45-51.

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Z. DeLue, "Art and Science in America," *American Art* (Summer 2009): 3.

<sup>4</sup> Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Dave Madden, *The Authentic Animal: Inside the Odd and Obsessive World of Taxidermy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011), 9.

<sup>6</sup> However, through "the use of sophisticated molding and casting techniques," some "taxidermy—most usually fish, reptiles and amphibians—are often actually casts rather than (to use the professional term) 'skin mounts.'" And, with the innovation of erosion cast molding, taxidermied mammal specimens can lack skin and instead possess a resin-cast impression of the skin embedded with the deceased animal's hairs. Giovanni Aloï. "Rescuing what had become a Dying Art," in *Antennae* (Issue 7 Autumn 2008), 45-51.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen T. Asma, *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads: The Culture and Evolution of Natural History Museums* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 32, 38-41.; Joan B. Landes, Paula Young Lee, and Paul Youngquist, eds., *Gorgeous Beasts: Animal Bodies in Historical Perspective* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Morton, "Coexistence and Coexistents: Ecology without a World," in *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby, eds. (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 169.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Morton, "Here Comes Everything: The Promise of Object-Oriented Ontology," *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, Volume 19 Number 2 (Spring/Summer 2001): 181.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2013), 56, 64.

<sup>11</sup> Timothy Morton, "Guest Column: Queer Ecology," *PMLA* 125.2 (March 2010): 275-276.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Petra Lange-Berndt, "A Parasitic Craft: Taxidermy in the Art of Tessa Farmer," *The Journal of Modern Craft*, Volume 7 Issue 3 (November 2014): 272.

<sup>14</sup> Timothy Morton, "Guest Column: Queer Ecology," 275-276.

<sup>15</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), vii.

<sup>16</sup> Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., "Introduction," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010), 20.

<sup>17</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Petra Lange-Berndt and Dietmar Rübel, eds., *Mark Dion: The Academy of Things* (Hamburg: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2015), 131, 149.

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- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, 149.
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## Chapter One: Damien Hirst

Not one to conform, “Damien Hirst is an artist who manipulates genres and crosses boundaries in life as well as art.”<sup>1</sup> Issues of truth, love, religion, and science mix and mingle in Hirst’s inherently paradoxical oeuvre which seeks to forge connections between the dichotomies of modern life. Artistically, Hirst consistently blurs borders between “life and death, love and desire,” animals and human beings, “beauty and gruesomeness, irony and seriousness, and religion and science.”<sup>2</sup> By producing confrontational art that is rife with contradiction and indecency, Hirst not only investigates popular culture but antagonizes his audience with literal manifestations of anxieties that permeate contemporary existence.<sup>3</sup>

One of the ways in which Hirst expresses his rebellious proclivities is through his choice of ready-made materials. Inspired by the Surrealist art of Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Cornell, the Minimalist work of Donald Judd, the Conceptual pieces of Bruce Nauman, and the installations of the Arte Povera movement, Hirst appropriates and alters familiar concepts, found objects, and animal bodies.<sup>4</sup> For example, much of his notoriety stems from his proclivity for cutting barnyard animals in halves and displaying them in formalin-filled vitrines.<sup>5</sup> These works, all part of the Natural History series, investigate “the fragility of existence and the action of the world on things.”<sup>6</sup> One of the reasons why Hirst puts *animal-things* in large glass tanks filled with formaldehyde is “to hold off the[ir] inevitable decay and corruption.”<sup>7</sup> However, his efforts are not always fruitful for some of Hirst’s actions fail to eternally preserve them.<sup>8</sup>

Despite his efforts to grant the dead immortality, “what Hirst expertly depicts time and again is nothing other than a being on the edge of extinction, delicately

embodied and about to be disembodied.”<sup>9</sup> The liminality of preserved animals aid Hirst in his persistent attempts to stop death in his tracks, or at least dampen his stride. Due to its inherently conflicted materiality, taxidermy feeds into Hirst’s attraction to contradiction. Fashioned from man-made materials and actual animal remnants, taxidermy both honors and defiles an individual animal by turning them into a scientific specimen, a literal symbol, a consumer product and, conversely, an advocate for animal agency. Over the course of his career, Hirst has consistently exhibited “an insistent multilayered approach to his materials and the meaning of each element, so that several, perhaps contradictory, readings are possible within one work.”<sup>10</sup> As a result, his work not only emphasizes how nature is often overtaken by culture but how culture and nature align.

Hirst’s attraction to lifeless animals as an abjectly beautiful artistic medium has proven influential for other artists of his generation. As stated by Jane Eastoe in *The Art of Taxidermy*:

“If taxidermy was out of fashion for the second half of the twentieth century it achieved a dramatic turnaround in the first decade of the new millennium. The runaway success of Damien Hirst’s shark in formaldehyde, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991; Figure 10), and the following works, *Mother and Child (Divided)* (1993; Figure 11) and *Away from the Flock*, (1994; Figure 12), while not taxidermy, seemed to mark a shift in public consciousness. Certainly most taxidermists will cite Hirst’s work as influential in as much as it does not shrink away from death, but embraces it.”<sup>11</sup>

Despite the fact that many of the animals in Hirst’s work cannot be categorized as taxidermy in the traditional sense, he discreetly integrates orthodox forms of taxidermy into his installations.<sup>12</sup> For example, the huge stuffed bear towering over an unmade bed in *Last Night I Dreamt I Didn’t Have A Head* (1997; Figure 13) was created by the English taxidermist Emily Mayer out of a Canadian bear skin.<sup>13</sup> Mayer also prepared “two ‘rotting’ cows heads” to replace the original decomposing specimen in *A Thousand*

*Years* (1990; Figure 14) by using the technique of erosion cast moulding, a technique that offers extraordinarily lifelike results.<sup>14</sup> Hirst's artistic practice therefore relies on taxidermic processes that render the animal body an object of visual wonder, intellectual study, and ethical reflection. As a result, his approval of the dead animal as a viable artistic medium inspired other artists of his generation—and beyond—to explore the uneasy relationship between man and animal. Hirst's appropriation and recontextualization of the preserved animal body made an indelible mark on the fabric of the contemporary art world in the nineties; moreover, it shows no signs of dissipating.

### **Life, Death & Science**

Damien Hirst was born in Bristol, England in 1965, grew up in Leeds and currently lives and works in Devon and London, U.K. As a child, he frequented the Leeds Art Museum and Gallery, which was located on the campus of the local university. The museum “combined art and science—aquariums, animals, tanks, fish, stuffed animals, library, art—all in the same building.”<sup>15</sup> Hirst was enthralled by his visits there because the museum not only exhibited contemporary art but housed the university's natural history and anatomy collections, which included a taxidermied Bengal tiger and live Mexican salamanders.<sup>16</sup> These visits left a deep impression on Hirst. Due to his early exposure to this interdisciplinary institution and idiosyncratic museum collection, Hirst became obsessed with issues of collecting, aesthetics, and “medico-scientific spaces and apparatuses.”<sup>17</sup>

When Hirst was seven years old his grandmother passed away. According to the artist, this devastating personal loss caused him to think incessantly about life, death, and

the existence of God.<sup>18</sup> As a result, he developed an even greater interest in art and an increased desire to visit museums filled with remnants of dead human bodies and taxidermied animals.<sup>19</sup> Hirst's obsession with reconciling "the idea of death in life" continued to grow throughout his adolescent years.<sup>20</sup> For example, as a sixteen year old taking art classes at the Jacob Kramer College (now known as the Leeds College of Art), he made regular visits to the anatomy department of Leeds Medical School in order to render life drawings from cadavers stored in the morgue.<sup>21</sup>

At this point, Hirst started to see that death is "more of a fact than God, religion, or any of those sort of things."<sup>22</sup> Despite this morbid outlook, Hirst also recognized that "in a way, [death] makes life brighter;" since then, all of his artistic endeavors have revolved around this revelation.<sup>23</sup> As stated by the artist, there is nothing better than "to go out go into the darkness and then get the hell back and feel invigorated. I think all art is about that, really. I don't think there's art that isn't about death."<sup>24</sup>

In 1984, Hirst moved to London where he worked in construction before enrolling at Goldsmiths College in 1986. Three years later, he graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Fine Art. While at Goldsmiths, Hirst developed his signature style which was immediately grounded in his childhood preoccupations. "The incorporation of scientific imagery into Hirst's work first occurred in the simple, white, glass fronted cabinets—filled with drug packaging, bottles and other objects related to the medical environment—that he began in his second year at Goldsmiths."<sup>25</sup> The Medicine Cabinet series was conceived under Hirst's assertion that "science is the new religion for many people" because we are constantly praying to the gods of medicine, asking them to preserve our youth and stave off our imminent death.<sup>26</sup>

During his sophomore year, Hirst also organized the independent exhibition *Freeze* as a means to promote his own work as well as that of his fellow classmates. With this exhibition, Hirst flexed his curatorial muscles by arranging the work of individual artists in a provocative way. Hirst also established himself as a visionary, or nonconformist, in the art world by securing funding for *Freeze* from the London Docklands Development Corporation instead of a traditional arts institution. This grant allowed Hirst to turn an abandoned dock in South-East London into a gallery. Once open to the public, *Freeze* was visited by many influential art historians, critics and collectors—including Nicholas Serota, Norman Rosenthal and Charles Saatchi—all of whom deemed the show a huge success due to its “rebelliousness,” “humor,” and “youthful bravado.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, *Freeze* not only launched the career of Hirst but many of the other featured artists, including Sarah Lucas, Angus Fairhurst and Michael Landy, commencing the reign of the Young British Artists (YBA).

### **Emblematic of the 1990s**

Hirst’s bold “examination of the processes of life and death” as well as “the ironies, falsehoods and desires that we mobilize to negotiate our own alienation and mortality” became inescapable during the nineties.<sup>28</sup> In 1992, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991) was unveiled at the Saatchi Gallery’s *Young British Artists I* exhibition. For this piece, Hirst suspended a tiger shark in a monumental glass tank filled with a formaldehyde solution of an eerie, otherworldly green hue. “Once released into the world,” Hirst’s shark soon became “one of the most iconic images of late twentieth-century art.”<sup>29</sup>

Soon after, *Mother and Child Divided* (1993), in which a bisected cow and calf float in four vitrines filled with formaldehyde, was shown to the public at the 1993 Venice Biennale. When in its presence, the work's beholder can walk between the right and left sides of each docile bovine specimen and intimately view their interior anatomy. Meticulously halved with the accuracy of a surgeon, these spliced bodies provide space within which one can witness—and ruminate on—the reality of death.

Moreover, Hirst's "divided animals have clear Biblical references."<sup>30</sup> The Old Testament features numerous tales that include the partitioning of animals. For example, as argued by Hanne Beate Ueland, Hirst's bisected sheep allude to Jeremiah 34 (18-20), in which "we read that when making a pact, a calf would be cut in two, and the 'leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the court officials, the priests and all the people of the land' would walk between the pieces of the calf.' This was done to remind those involved of the destiny awaiting them if they broke the pact."<sup>31</sup> In addition, *Mother and Child Divided* references the relationship between the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ, highlighting issues of maternal love and the devastation caused by being separated, or divided, from your kin.<sup>32</sup> With this piece, and many other works, Hirst explores the realities of death as well as the long-worn tradition of animal sacrifice.

The 1993 Venice Biennale, as argued by American art critic Adam Gopnik, "marked the moment when the cult of violence itself finally became a kind of formal aestheticism."<sup>33</sup> By displaying barnyard animals that are severed down their middles with a chainsaw, *Mother and Child Divided* makes violence visible. Additionally, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*—whose shark was



harvested by an Australian shark hunter specifically for this artwork—caused many to ponder if humans should inflict violence on animals in the name of art.

Hirst's shark, which is "silent, immobile, latently lethal, suspended for eternity in its secure vitrine," became a "kind of logo of the times" due to its iconic, provocative, and abject simplicity.<sup>34</sup> "The shock of the new," Gopnik continues, "which for most of this century could reside as much in a black square as in a slit eyeball, isn't available any longer."<sup>35</sup> Due to the infinite amount of visual stimuli made available to the general public by the internet and digital technologies, not much is considered outrageous. So, Hirst began slicing up cows, suspending sharks in glass vitrines, and confronting the public with actual death, pushing the material boundaries of art into unforged terrains. As a result, Hirst was honored with the Turner Prize in 1995, placing him—and the YBA—on top of the art world.

According to Norman Rosenthal, Hirst and the YBA are comparable to artists working in the late nineteenth-century for both created art that disturbed society's complacency.<sup>36</sup> At the turn of the twentieth-century, British artists were devoted to visualizing the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial society. At the same time, they tried to shock the general public out of their "general malaise," which resulted from their inability to keep up—both emotionally and physically—with the swift pace of cultural change.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, through their exploration of the sublime, or "the phenomenon...whereby we are attracted to what is threatening or terrible, so long as it is safely distanced physically or artistically," British artists found inspiration in the dark, obscure corners of nature, as well as its vast magnificence.<sup>38</sup> This interest in "death, decay and the sublime" was resurrected during the turn of the twenty-first century when

artists were similarly determined to shock an over-stimulated society during the emergence of the digital-age.<sup>39</sup> Assigning themselves the task of offending—and thus healing—the public, artists such as Hirst and the YBA attempted to rehabilitate the general public by rebelling against artistic traditions, engaging in formal experimentations, and creating confrontational situations.

In the fall of 1997, The Royal Academy hosted the exhibition *Sensation*. Culled from the private collection of Charles Saatchi, the exhibition featured 110 works from 44 artists, many of whom were members of the YBA. Eight pieces by Hirst were on view, including five of his Natural History works, such as the notorious shark and *This Little Piggy Went to Market, This Little Piggy Stayed at Home* (1996; Figure 15). After London, the exhibition traveled to the Berlin Hamburger Bahnhof Museum in 1998 and the Brooklyn Museum in 1999. The opening at each venue caused controversy.

Journalists, museum goers and public officials were offended by *Sensation*'s gory imagery, religious themes, and unorthodox materials. In his 1997 review of *Sensation*, John Molyneux assessed why the exhibition, and Hirst's work in particular, was viewed as indecent:

“Much of the provocation and much of the ‘scandal’ attaching to Hirst derives from the materials he uses: the bodies of dead animals. In modern art there is a history to the question of materials. For about 500 years virtually all art was made from the same limited range of materials: tempera, oil paints, watercolors, bronze, marble, etc. Explicitly or implicitly these materials came to be regarded as inherently artistic and other materials as inherently non-artistic (just as certain subjects were regarded as fit for art and other subjects as unfit). The first breach in this convention was made by Picasso in his ‘synthetic cubist’ phase in 1912 when he introduced pieces of oilcloth, newsprint and wallpaper into his paintings. Picasso took the process further in his transformative sculptures like the bull's head made of handlebars and a bicycle seat, and the monkey made of toy cars. So did Duchamp with his bottle rack and urinal ‘ready made’ and his complex *Large Glass* ‘sculpture’. Later came sculptors who used iron, steel, aluminum, plaster, bricks, fluorescent lights and so on, and Rauschenberg who combined

painting with screen printing, photography, and objects found in the streets, including a motor tire and stuffed goat. However, against this ‘anything goes’ background Hirst’s use of a large shark and cut up cows was a dramatic innovation.”<sup>40</sup>

“In general,” John Molyneux further states, “formal innovations occur not just for their own sake but because the artist has something new to say which requires the formal innovation for it to be said. Hirst’s use of real dead animals is an example of this.”<sup>41</sup> Hirst challenged himself to make art provocative enough to jolt a visually-overexposed and digitally-reliant public out of its indifferent stupor. So, he chose to display dead animals “out of the urge to communicate an idea, to make art that’s more real.”<sup>42</sup> Hirst asserts, “I couldn’t say what I wanted to say with a painting or with a photograph of an object.”<sup>43</sup> A representation of death wasn’t enough. He needed “the real thing.”<sup>44</sup> Then, and only then, could he confront “a blasé modern audience for whom images of death are superabundant while its reality [is] ever more removed and hidden” with the actual death.<sup>45</sup> Only by eliciting tranquil yet tragic visions of violent, ethically ambiguous acts toward animals could Hirst test the moral standards of dominant society. “Short of exhibiting an actual [human] corpse,” Molyneux continues, displaying dead animals “was about as far as Hirst could go.”<sup>46</sup>

For Hirst, “Great art is when you just walk round the corner and go, ‘Fucking hell! What’s that!?’ Great art is when you come across an object and you have a fundamental, personal, one-to-one relationship with it, and you understand something you didn’t already understand about what it means to be alive,” what it means to be human.<sup>47</sup> Through the use of taxidermy in his Natural History series, Hirst taps into humanity’s need for knowledge, desire for power, and fear of death. He also makes visible man’s strained relationship with animals by displaying the wild animals we kill

because we fear them as well as those we kill to consume in the comfort of our own homes. By conjuring visions of the natural history museum, the farmyard, and the slaughterhouse, the Natural History series makes us to contemplate the ethical issues that arise when human and animal worlds collide.

More specifically, Hirst's dead, floating animals force us to question why we kill animals for science, for sustenance, and for art's sake. Even though Hirst's oeuvre turns animals into symbols that bring attention to our own mortality, it also confronts us with actual, animal death. While Hirst prioritizes issues of humanity, his material choices make issues of animality inescapable. Therefore, the Natural History series—which bridges life and death, the beautiful and the grotesque, as well as truth and illusion—brings many taboo issues to the forefront of popular cultural conversations.

Moreover, as Hirst advances his career, his choice of material continues to evolve. At first, he was determined to display “real” rotting animals, free of taxidermic manipulations. However, Hirst has slowly become more comfortable employing taxidermists to interact with animal carcasses and create realistic illusions of decay. Therefore, by compelling us to scrutinize the anatomy of animals—and the veracity of his materials—Hirst's oeuvre oscillates between affirmations of human dominance and assertions of animal agency. These *animal-things*, which act as metaphors and conduits for human meaning, also emphasize the impact animal presences enact on our daily lives. Because of the paradoxical nature of taxidermy (and related processes of preservation), the *animal-things* present in the Natural History series coerce us to examine humanity's ever-shifting relationship with the animal world.

## Display as Meaning

In 1991, Hirst resurrected his boyhood love for the natural history museum by quoting popular presentation practices that fashion “three-dimensional windows into the world of ideas.”<sup>48</sup> He began placing animal corpses in large glass tanks filled with formaldehyde, resuscitating traditional scientific acts of making the animal knowable by reducing it to an object of study. *Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purpose of Understanding (Left) and (Right)* (both 1991; Figures 16 and 17) marks the beginning of his Natural History series. These installations feature “individually cased fish arranged on shelves within a glass and painted MDF cabinet,” reminiscent of those fashioned for the Medicine Cabinet series.<sup>49</sup> *Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purpose of Understanding (Left) and (Right)* is inherently paradoxical for it presents “preserved specimens that nevertheless appear to be swimming as a shoal.”<sup>50</sup> What was hidden below the waves is now visible. What is lifeless appears to be alive. What should decay is given new strength.

The liquid-filled vitrines of the Natural History series refer to display tactics of the modern natural history museums, aquariums, and zoos. While it was assumed that Hirst began “using formaldehyde to preserve an artwork for posterity,” he was actually “using it to communicate an idea.”<sup>51</sup> According to Stephen Asma in *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads: The Culture and Evolution of Natural History Museums*, specimens—either living, dead or something in-between—are similar to words because “they don’t mean anything unless they’re in the context of a sentence or a system.”<sup>52</sup> When decontextualized, their meanings are not easily ascertained. “You can’t gain admittance into the meaning of a specimen simply by looking at it harder, or even by anatomizing it.

The significance of the collected object does not inhere to the specimen itself, but is socially and theoretically constructed.”<sup>53</sup> By placing the remnants of archeological digs, exotic hunting excursions, and perilous sea-bound adventures in glass vessels, science-based institutions—and, subsequently, the artwork of Hirst—invite us to intently regard specimens while keeping them at a critical distance, placing them into new human-centered information systems.

Steel-framed and glass-lined cabinets incite interest in their contents while keeping them at a safe distance.<sup>54</sup> “With Hirst’s cabinets, we shuttle constantly between immersion in and aesthetic distance from the object of curiosity.”<sup>55</sup> The incongruous nature of glass has always inspired Hirst:

“I love going round aquariums, where you got a jumping reflection so that the things inside the tank move; glass becomes something that holds you back and lets you in at the same time. It’s an amazing material; it’s something solid yet ephemeral. It’s dangerous as well. I just love glass. And it’s a way to separate people but engage them. You can invite them in and keep them away at the same time.”<sup>56</sup>

For Hirst, establishments of looking, which rely on the dichotomy of glass, not only take “your mind off death” but “focus your mind on it.”<sup>57</sup> They represent a desire “to control the world,”<sup>58</sup> make you “feel that you’re being entertained but also educated,” while forcing you to recognize that real encounters with animals are being replaced with constructed ones.<sup>59</sup> As John Berger notes, “public zoos,” and by extension dioramas featuring big-game taxidermy, “were an endorsement of modern colonial power” because “the capturing of the animals was a symbolic representation of the [Western world’s] conquest of all distant and exotic lands.”<sup>60</sup> The resulting observation of these animals further confirmed man’s supremacy while rendering the isolated animal marginal and free of all agency.<sup>61</sup> Concurrently, public zoos and dioramas came into existence just as

live animals were beginning to disappear from daily life.<sup>62</sup> These public displays of exotic wildlife served not only as a means to engage with animals but as monuments “to the impossibility of such encounters.”<sup>63</sup>

Natural history museums, aquariums and zoos, by housing taxidermy and incarcerating animals demonstrate that much of modern man’s experiences with nature are not truthful but “constructed...through social praxis.”<sup>64</sup> The space visible through glass tanks and behind steel bars are “tokens,” theatrical illusions of landscapes or “the bare minimum of an environment in which” animals can exist.<sup>65</sup> Thus, dioramas and vitrines occupied by preserved animals, as well as cages and artificial habitats occupied by live animals, “are meaning-machines,” or “maps of power,” that display man’s authority over and, ironically, admiration for nature.<sup>66</sup>

In order to fill these prison cells, animals must be hunted, killed, preserved, and placed into glass-encased tableau. Animals are forced to become specimens, exemplars of their species. Animals become things to be looked at because they were “selected by a knowledgeable individual and then used to represent a whole classification of type.”<sup>67</sup> Singular animals become universal symbols of imperial conquest and humanity’s desire for knowledge, entertainment, and control.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, in order to create artwork that was “believable,” Hirst aimed to “create emotions scientifically” by adopting the visual language of scientific looking.<sup>69</sup>

“I hate the zoo, and I just thought it would be great to do a zoo of dead animals, instead of having living animals pacing about in misery, I thought that’s what a natural history museum really is,” Hirst once declared.<sup>70</sup> By submerging dead animals in fluid and housing them in vitrines, Hirst attempted to make “a zoo that works,” one that frees

animals from suffering. Moreover, in doing so, he reveals that institutions of scientific authority are marked by a tension between secular entertainment and scientific research as well as killing and conservation.<sup>71</sup>

The display tactic of the vitrine represents Hirst's interest in "trying to understand the world by taking things out of the world," by killing "things to look at them."<sup>72</sup> What began as a practical solution to display dead animals became a signature component of the Hirst's work.<sup>73</sup> By floating animals in formaldehyde and referencing the display strategies of natural history museums, zoos, and aquariums, Hirst turns animals into symbols of imperialism and longing while making death a reality, commenting on complicated issues surrounding the human condition in a simple manner.<sup>74</sup>

### **Death, Abjection & the Complete Other**

Due to advancements in medical procedures and the proliferation of gruesome imagery, "death has become increasingly mediated" by visual culture, mechanical devices, and "technological media, which anonymously reinforce and heighten the illusion that death happen[s] only to others."<sup>75</sup> Respirators, artificial limbs, video games, and movies put "distance between us and our own dying," suggesting that while death is ever-present it is also unnecessary, avoidable, or reversible.<sup>76</sup> Unfortunately, despite this culturally constructed detachment to death, as Hirst elucidates, "we're [all] fucking dying. It's a shambles. Total fucking shambles."<sup>77</sup> However, Hirst also believes that the inescapable fact of death is "so delicious, it's so beautiful, it's so fabulous. You don't have to buy a fucking microscope to see how fabulous it is. The real gear, the stuff we're living in, rots....It's amazing on absolutely every level. And we're dying. It doesn't make



sense. So everything's about celebrating, and about living. It's about living."<sup>78</sup> Death is a fact of life, one that we are presented with on a daily basis for our bodies are in a constant—slow, but steady—state of decay. Rather than being appalled by the physical effects of degeneration or depressed by this unavoidable truth, Hirst finds the process of dying disturbingly beautiful. His attraction to the “the ambiguous” state of hovering between life and death connects to notions of abjection as defined by Julia Kristeva,

“Abjection is ‘what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.’”<sup>79</sup> Additionally, Kristeva’s “theory of abjection draws from two key elements: the blurring of boundaries between self and other” and “the notion of ‘base materialism,’” which encouraged artists of the nineties to break recognized social taboos and challenge “dominant concepts of mind/body dualism” through the use of degraded elements such as excrement, hair, menstrual blood, bodily fluids, rotting food, and dead animals.<sup>80</sup> These elements, according to art historian Hal Foster, are marked by an aura of appeal and anxiety for they are simultaneously seductive and threatening.<sup>81</sup> Their sublime, “compulsive beauty” not only blurs the boundaries between life and death but subject and object by allowing the “breached body,” which has been “turned inside out,” to become indistinguishable from its surrounding space.<sup>82</sup> Abject art, which acknowledges the beauty in the grotesque, “presents reality in the form of trauma.”<sup>83</sup> It allows us to bear witness to the important truth that, despite sensations of vitality, everything is at risk, everything in the process of dying, nothing will last forever.

According to Hirst, “There are two things in an artwork, aren't there? There's a visual thing and there's a cerebral thing; there's a mind thing and an eye thing going on. And the mind thing is always secondary; no matter how great or important conceptual art

is, at the end of the day, it's secondary to the eye thing."<sup>84</sup> When developing his animal works, Hirst was plagued with figuring out how to investigate the troubling "mind thing" of death while displaying an exciting "eye thing" that simultaneously attracts and horrifies its viewer. Hirst is "always looking for a thing to describe a feeling."<sup>85</sup> What thing can immediately connote life while signifying death? What thing is repellent and strangely attractive? What thing forges connections while keeping its distance? Taxidermy. Agentic *animal-things*.

The monumental wet specimens presented in Hirst's Natural History series demonstrate humanity's need to kill in order to know while underscoring "the idea that death is unknowable, impossible to experience except through a confrontation with the death of the other."<sup>86</sup> Philosopher Mary Midgley observes that "our difference from other species may be striking, but comparisons with them have always been, and must be, crucial to our view of ourselves."<sup>87</sup> The animal other provides a counterpoint to man, a means to investigate the boundaries of humanity through a familiar yet unknowable animal alterity. "The fragility of preserved bodies and their possible infestation and decay," as argued by Petra Lange-Berndt, addresses "the mortality of [its] viewers" by confronting them with death once removed.<sup>88</sup> Due to its simultaneous similarity and difference, the animal body not only holds a resemblance to but a critical distance from the human body, therefore enabling it to both reflect and resist the human subject.

Hirst once said: "To think that you can take [a once] live thing—and with formaldehyde it can last for years, it can live longer than you—was unbelievable. It was irresistible to do that."<sup>89</sup> Enthralled by the idea of halting decay, Hirst commenced preserving dead animals to represent death and test man's ability to achieve immortality.

However, although the animal carcasses of the Natural History series are housed in glass boxes and preserved in 10% formaldehyde solutions, the conservation of their flesh is not guaranteed. For example, in 1993, only two years after *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* was fabricated, the body of its suspended tiger shark began to decay (Figure 18).

In order to describe our fear of death, Hirst wanted to tap into society's *Jaws*-induced "fears of oceans, predators, and monsters" by submerging a shark, a literal symbol of these phobias, into one of his glass vitrines.<sup>90</sup>

"A shark is frightening, bigger than you are, in an environment unknown to you. It looks alive when it's dead and dead when it's alive. And it can kill you and eat you, so there's a morbid curiosity in looking at them.... You have to preserve a shark in liquid, which looks very similar to its natural habitat. It has to be that size. You expect it to look back at you. I hope at first glance it will look alive. It could have to do with the obsession of trying to make the dead live or the living live forever."<sup>91</sup>

In order to make this vision a reality, Hirst hired Vic Hislop—the notorious Australian shark hunter—to procure him a shark "big enough to frighten you," one that appeared big enough to "eat you."<sup>92</sup> Hislop set sail to the Pacific Ocean and killed Hirst a fourteen-foot long tiger shark<sup>93</sup> for which he paid "six thousand quid. Four to catch it, and two to ship it."<sup>94</sup> With a simple phone call, Hirst was able to have a shark killed in Australia then preserved in England. Hirst's actions immediately turned a living animal into a dead one, then a commercial object to be bought and sold, and, eventually, a spectacle at which to be looked. He turned a once sentient creature into a thing to be forever caged in a glass tank, restricted from sharing the same space as its viewer. With mouth agape and rows of razor-sharp teeth-exposed, the shark of *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* is eternally halted, never able to seize its intended prey.

Prior to being submerged into its marine mausoleum, the shark's body was injected with formalin.<sup>95</sup> This "inconspicuous but powerful formaldehyde solution is predestined to convert ephemeral corpses into more resistant forms, hardening tissue so that after the treatment the [body seems] to consist of rubber. At this point, the animal can be regarded no longer as an individual entity with a specific history but an object of knowledge," an emblem of man's need for information and longing for immortality.<sup>96</sup> However, due to miscalculations and a weak formaldehyde solution, the shark's body was not fully penetrated.<sup>97</sup> This caused the specimen to rot from the inside out. The once translucent solution that filled the shark's tank became murky, speckled with bits of decomposing flesh.

When informed of the state of the shark's body, Hirst "felt pretty bad about the way that shark was looking."<sup>98</sup> Because the shark looked harmless and dead, rather than threatening and alive, it no longer victimized its viewer by placing them in the path of a predator.<sup>99</sup> It stopped conveying the proper message.<sup>100</sup> It no longer made the "dead live or the living live forever."<sup>101</sup> Instead of eternally preserving the shark's body, Hirst inadvertently rendered it a piece of botched taxidermy.

According to art historian Steve Baker, botched taxidermy results from intentional acts of poor preservation. Deriving from a postmodern identification with fractured, impure, and abject forms, artists will present altered pieces of taxidermy in which things have "gone wrong, but where it," the animal body, "still holds together."<sup>102</sup> Baker further explains that a piece of botched taxidermy simultaneously refers to the human and the animal without being a direct representation of either.<sup>103</sup> By highlighting the ways in which humans identify with and manipulate animal bodies, rendering the animal both

invisible and “abrasively visible,” botched taxidermy asks us to recognize the ways in which humans abuse animals as well as the parallels between human and animal conditions.<sup>104</sup> Although unintentional, Hirst’s failure to properly preserve his shark makes us realize that nothing is safe. Everything will die. Just like this shark, we are made of flesh. We will all decompose.

In order to restore the shark—and the work’s intended function—the piece’s owner, Charles Saatchi removed the shark from its tank and had it gutted, skinned, and stretched over a fiberglass mold.<sup>105</sup> Saatchi deemed taxidermy the appropriate solution to the problem of deterioration. However, Hirst was not satisfied with the resulting specimen. He argued, “You could tell it wasn’t real. It had no weight.”<sup>106</sup> Because the shark was emptied of its organs and its cartilage was replaced with fiberglass, Hirst asserted that “it wasn’t a real shark,” that it started to look completely wrong, that it was no longer frightening.<sup>107</sup> So, Hirst undertook the task of replacing the shark’s body.<sup>108</sup>

Once again, Hirst phoned Vic Hislop and had a freshly harvested thirteen-foot-long tiger shark shipped to an abandoned airplane hangar at the former Royal Air Force Station in Gloucestershire, England.<sup>109</sup> Here, armed with more than 224 gallons of formaldehyde, bright yellow uniforms, black rubber gloves, and protective masks, Hirst and his studio crew gave *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* a second life.<sup>110</sup>

When presenting aquatic life, Hirst is not comfortable with using taxidermy, which requires the body to be opened up and manipulated. For Hirst, the shark’s body has to remain unbreached in order to be gruesome. It has to remain locked in order to safeguard nature’s secrets, to keep humans at a distance.<sup>111</sup> Only by being whole,

mysterious, and unknowable can it be truly frightening. Hirst's reliance on keeping the shark's anatomical integrity intact "creates conditions for thinking the problem of contact between the 'surface' of animal worlds and our own."<sup>112</sup> This mentality dictates the display of sharks in other pieces such as *Two Similar Swimming Forms in Endless Motion (Broken)* (1993), *The Wrath of God* (2005), and *Leviathan* (2006-2013), all of which deny us access into the animal interior. As in *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, man and animal do not merge; borders of humanity and animality are not breached; we remain distanced while "recognizing the centrality of the animal in our own understanding of ourselves."<sup>113</sup>

However, while Hirst reenacts imperialist actions of domination, his captive sharks encourage their beholders to recognize the erroneous nature of these actions. Steve Baker argues:

"Hirst's aphorism 'You kill things to look at them' does at least have the value of recognizing that what is at stake here is an intense and inventive looking, a rigorousness of investigation, which has to be coldly unapologetic in its attitude to the looked-at being. This, arguably, is what any serious art does. And in botched taxidermic trophies, it seems, the killing is addressed by investigating the looking. In this sense, far from being sensationalist, these works do indeed constitute what Lapointe calls 'a place for the spectator to think.'"<sup>114</sup>

Hirst's shark pieces of the Natural History series reflect our anthropocentric mentality, which renders animals as objects of physical and intellectual consumption. However, they also acknowledge that animals are sentient beings filled with mysteries which we can never fully understand. These works not only encourage us to look at the surface of animals but to understand the deeper implications of human/animal interactions. In *Death Explained* (2008; Figure 19), Hirst finally makes the interior realm of the shark body visible. A longitudinally bisected mature tiger shark, contained within two white steel and

glass tanks filled with a vibrantly turquoise formaldehyde solution, abjectly lay bare the inner world of an animal that Hirst kept hidden for over a decade.

### **Meat & the Bifurcated Other**

Francis Bacon once said, “Well of course we are meat, we are potential carcasses. If I go into a butcher’s shop I always think it’s surprising that I wasn’t there instead.”<sup>115</sup> Both the work of Bacon and Hirst remind us that humans and animals are made of flesh and bone—both are decomposing, both will die, both can become meat. *The Physical Impossibility in the Mind of Someone Living* engages us in a predatory-prey relationship in which we are potential victims thus “bypassing the brain’s neocortex,” or site of sensory perception, “to communicate directly to the limbic system that controls the ‘fight or flight’ response.”<sup>116</sup> Being in the presence of a shark—albeit a dead and preserved shark—raises the instinctual reaction to flee, underscoring that “among the earliest forms of human self-awareness was the awareness of being meat.”<sup>117</sup> Thus, Hirst’s animal oeuvre blurs boundaries between human and animal experience, prodding us to understand the world as if we were an animal, as if we were being hunted, as if we were about to be consumed.

The bifurcated creatures of the Natural History series underscore the vulnerability of all flesh. “The material form of dead animal flesh,” as argued by Ron Broglio, “is haunted by the trace of a life transformed into an object through the violence of death. The willful life of an animal becomes an object that shows little ability to resist human understanding, manipulation, and consumption.”<sup>118</sup> However, once sliced open it is hard

to deny that the structure of mammalian bodies, both human and non-human, share many similarities, such as harboring organs as well as a vibrant interior life.

On the outside, cows, pigs and sheep are obviously not human—they walk on four legs, have no opposable thumbs and are covered with coarse skin, spotted black and white hair, or wooly coats. Once their bodies are opened up for inspection, however, it becomes clear that their interior structures are similar to that of humans. Skulls encase brains; skeletons made of bone support muscles; ribs house vital organs; blood runs through networks of veins and arteries. Therefore, the act of cutting open animals not only marks the “moment when the animal is killed for raw material, and human meaning,”<sup>119</sup> but the moment “which reveals both the animality of the human body, and the human-ness of the human.”<sup>120</sup> Once cut open, the animal becomes man’s servant and his surrogate.

*The Black Sheep with Golden Horns (Divided)* (2009; Figure 20) simultaneously emphasizes the differences and similarities between human and animal bodies. A spliced, solitary black sheep with gilded horns stares blankly at its viewer, who is able to intently regard its inner animal space. Idiomatically speaking, a ‘black sheep’ is an odd, disruptive, or disreputable member of a family or group. As part of Hirst’s oeuvre, *The Black Sheep with Golden Horns* can be considered a self-portrait for this lonesome sheep is marked by difference. Due to his black coat, he stands apart from his flock, possibly in a position of power due to the presence of his gilded headwear. Similarly, Hirst stands apart from his fellow artists. Not only is he regularly characterized as a troublemaking hooligan by many of his contemporaries but a leading member of the YBA.

Metaphorically, *The Black Sheep with Golden Horns* embodies its maker’s public



identity and position in the art world. Physically, unlike its human counterpart, the sheep stands on four spindly legs punctuated with black hooves. Being a quadruped, the sheep's torso, which is horizontally oriented, resides close to the ground. However, his bones are entangled with muscles and encased by flesh, just like the human body. Thus, while comparing exteriors emphasizes difference, comparing interiors emphasizes resemblance. Nevertheless, revealing the sheep's interior anatomy also "works in tension with the knowledge that this is...what we eat as food."<sup>121</sup>

Upon observing Hirst's bisected cows, pigs and sheep in white-walled galleries, we are confronted with corporeal reminders of man's self-imposed authority over animals. *The Black Sheep with Golden Horns*, *Mother and Child Divided*, and *This Little Piggy Came to Market*, *This Little Piggy Came Home*, which feature preserved, bisected animals in formaldehyde filled tanks, express man's control over domesticated animals. Just as these animals are routinely displaced from the wild and incorporated into agricultural markets, Hirst relocates them from green pastures to museum galleries. What once grazed upon grass now solemnly floats in a field of formaldehyde. What was once grounded and whole is now hovering and divided, waiting to be consumed.

Making animals into meat transforms them, forces them to transition from living to dead, hidden to revealed, indigestible to edible, sentient to powerless, agent to object. "Certainly, it is the case that meat-eating expresses control over animals and that the distance between the animal and the finished meat as a food reflects an alienation that characterizes a more general structure of exploitation and dominion."<sup>122</sup> Absence, as argued by Carol J. Adams in *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (1990), is "behind every meal" of steak, pork-chops and lamb-loin.<sup>123</sup> "The

‘absent referent’ is that which separates the meat eater from the animal and the animal from the end product,” making it okay for the animal’s flesh to be ingested.<sup>124</sup>

Furthermore, “once the existence of meat is disconnected from the existence of an animal who was killed to become that ‘meat,’ meat becomes...a free-floating image” used to underscore our dominance over the animal world and disconnect from the violence which we inflict upon it.<sup>125</sup>

The free-floating menagerie of Hirst’s Natural History series does indeed make visible the issues of patriarchal control, absence, and removal that permeate the meat industry. However, because Hirst preserves whole or bisected, rather than butchered, animals, he allows the skeletons, organs, and skins of these animals to remain present. Simultaneously revealing animal anatomy and preserving animal skin, pieces such as *Mother and Child (Divided)* acknowledge that while animal flesh is abstracted and “absorbed into a human-centered hierarchy,”<sup>126</sup> animal skin provides us with “a site of productive engagement” upon which we can engage with the animal world.<sup>127</sup>

Although predicated on acts of violence, Hirst’s art returns the absent referent to meat by having animals destined for the slaughterhouse killed and turned into *animal-things* rather than steaks. By preserving their skin, Hirst retains some of their agency. He demonstrates human and animal difference while concurrently establishing similarity. The *animal-things* of the Natural History series therefore allow us to investigate, invade, and occupy the realm of the animal other.

### **“Real” Taxidermy**

The rotting, bisected and preserved animals of Hirst’s Natural History series are “adept at provoking viewers to confuse their attraction and their repulsion” to death.<sup>128</sup> They encourage their viewer’s to consider the various ways in which human and animal worlds clash, intersect, or converge. These animals, who exist in a realm between the living and the dead, also confuse their beholder, asking them to determine whether or not they are un-manipulated corpses or taxidermied *animal-things*. Moreover, due to his relatively new proclivity for taxidermy, issues of truth and illusion permeate Hirst’s animal works more than ever before.

Two years prior to *The Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*’s debut in 1992, Hirst demonstrated his flair for the morose and desire to be provocative by showing *A Thousand Years* (1990), and its partner *A Hundred Years* (1990), in *Gambler*, a group exhibition held at Building One in London. Before Hirst began filling glass vitrines with liquid-bound animals, he created a “life cycle in a box.”<sup>129</sup> Both *A Thousand Years* and *A Hundred Years* are fashioned from six transparent glass walls joined by thick strips of black industrial steel, resulting in two large Minimalist cubes. According to Hal Foster, Minimalist art announced a renewed interest in the body, “not in the form of an anthropomorphic image or in the suggestion of an illusionist space of consciousness, but rather in the presence of its objects...just like people.”<sup>130</sup> Despite Minimalism’s disinterest in anthropomorphic representation or illusionistic space, Hirst appropriated the movement’s architecture to defiantly fill them with animals, or metaphors of human existence.

Rather than keep the vitrines of *A Thousand Years* and *A Hundred Years* empty, Hirst packed them with live flies. Although two separate works, they share an inner wall which is punctured by four large holes. In *A Hundred Years*, flies reproduce in a large white box, reminiscent of a gaming die, from which newly hatched flies emerge. Permitted to fly around the enclosed space, most of these bugs eventually enter *A Thousand Years* through the aforementioned holes. Here, they are pleasantly greeted by a decaying cow's head on which they can feed. However, hanging above the severed head is an Insect-O-Cutor, which promises the flies with imminent death by electrocution. While on exhibition, the corpses of the fried flies are left to accumulate in the vitrine. Within these two simple boxes, Hirst contains the milestone events of birth, life, and death. Through the inclusion of animate flies, Hirst injects a Minimalist work with vitality. However, through the inclusion of a rotting cow's head, a bug zapper and, eventually, insect corpses, Hirst also injects a Minimalist work with death.

Serving as precursors to the Natural History Series, *A Thousand Years* and *A Hundred Years* are simultaneously alluring and revolting. The glimmer of their transparent glass walls and the erratic movements of the flies dancing within are mesmerizingly beautiful. However, the sight of the bloody cow's head and the sound of shudder-inducing loud crackles, resulting from the sudden electrocution of airborne flies, are disturbing indicators of death. At this point in Hirst's career, presenting the public with real death was important to him: "I mean, ideally, as an idealist, I would really love everything to be as real as possible."<sup>131</sup> However, he acknowledges that because "life's real and art's not real" actions have to be taken in order to entice people to engage with the "horrible things" he puts on display.<sup>132</sup> For example, while on view at *Gambler*, Hirst

placed a real cow's head within *A Thousand Years*. As a result, the actively decomposing flesh permeated the pristine white-walled gallery with a putrid stench, causing visitors to avoid the room at all costs. So, Hirst removed the cow's head from the vitrine. After discovering maggots beneath its skin, he burned it in a nearby dustbin.<sup>133</sup> But, rather than disposing of the incinerated head, he put it back in *A Thousand Years* "because he still wanted it to be real."<sup>134</sup>

Unfortunately, the burnt head continued to fill the gallery with an unbearable odor which repelled visitors from the gallery. Although Hirst wanted to draw up a legal document specifying that a real severed cow's head had to be placed within *A Thousand Years*' clear walls, he soon realized that if a putrid, rotting piece of flesh is placed in someone's way, they are not going to go near it, let alone look at it—they are going to do everything in their power to avoid it. So, rather than "stinking everyone out of the gallery," Hirst conceded to public demand and allowed Charles Saatchi, the work's owner, to substitute the head with a fabricated model.<sup>135</sup> Hirst, though, was adamant that the replacement needed to be extremely life-like as to convince its viewers that it was real. "So long as they think it's real. As long as you don't know," Hirst said, "I don't fucking care."<sup>136</sup>

After the fake head was put in place, Hirst recalls being in the gallery

"for hours, with dog food and ketchup and blood and mayonnaise and lard. I had this thing made that was shit, and I was in there and I made it look real. Covered it in stuff that flies would eat. Until you just went, 'What the fuck is that?' Everyone went, 'Is it real or isn't it?' No one knew it wasn't real. I've said it before: I'm into theatre. I'm a theatrical artist. If someone says to me, 'You can make that out of polystyrene and it'll look like steel, I'll do it. I will just definitely do it.'"<sup>137</sup>

Although Hirst was able to revive the appeal of *A Thousand Years* during the *Gamblers* exhibition by dressing a fake skinned cow's head with a multitude of abject materials and

foodstuffs, he ultimately decided this solution was unsatisfactory. So, in 1998 he contacted Emily Mayer, an English taxidermist, to fabricate two believable substitutes. Using an innovative taxidermic process known as erosion cast moulding, Mayer produced two decomposing cow's heads in which "nothing but its hair, horns and teeth are real, let alone rotting."<sup>138</sup>

Unlike traditional methods of taxidermy, in erosion moulding—also known as skin replacement taxidermy—there is no preservation of animal skin, no mannequin, no interior material. Instead the animal's skin is replaced with silicone. Mayer, an animal activist and consummate taxidermist, takes much pride in her work and demands perfect results. Once a corpse is procured,<sup>139</sup> Mayer "painstakingly pin[s] the dead animal into a natural pose, [and then] smears it all over with a viscous solution which sets solid," encasing the deceased animal in a rubber shell.<sup>140</sup> Everything inside this shell, skin included, is left to decompose. As the skin decays, it pulls itself away from the shell, leaving behind only hair, which is now embedded within the rubber.<sup>141</sup> Mayer then coats the hollowed rubber cast "with a thin layer of tough resin before finally dissolving the rubbery covering."<sup>142</sup> In the final product, what looks like animal hair is actual animal hair but what looks like animal skin is actually a resin replica. Finally, after "a careful blow dry and some fluffing and combing of feathers or fur," the animal is resurrected, looking miraculously real.<sup>143</sup>

Because erosion cast moulding removes the need for animal skin, it produces incredibly durable specimens, ones that easily thwart the decaying effects of time. "Hirst likes this method because he can display animals submerged in water rather than toxic formaldehyde, and they won't rot or become tattered, theoretically eliminating the need

for replacement tiger sharks.”<sup>144</sup> This method allows Hirst to engage in acts of theatre for it creates veristic illusions of life as well as degeneration and death. Furthermore, by allowing taxidermy to enter his oeuvre, some of Hirst’s work encourage direct interaction between art and viewer, blurring the borders between human and animal domains.

In *The Promise of Money* (2003; Figure 21), which is unguarded by a vitrine, a “seven-foot-long black-and-white Holstein” cow hangs from the ceiling by a purple noose.<sup>145</sup> Its head droops downward as its tongue tragically sticks out of its mouth, indicating that the cow is freshly dead. Its legs are unnaturally bent at the knees “as if it were genuflecting” or pleading for mercy.<sup>146</sup> The animal’s chest cavity is sliced open, exposing its bloody rib-cage and “glistening milky yellow fat.”<sup>147</sup> Intestines spill out of the cow’s belly onto a square piece of glass which rests upon the floor. Iraqi dinar is sprinkled atop the gory innards. Created in 2003, the same year as the Invasion of Iraq, *The Promise of Money* draws allusions between the battlefield and the slaughterhouse, aligning the bodies of soldiers with the bodies of cattle.

Permitted to live in the open-air rather than behind planes of glass, this abjectly beautiful cow shares space with its viewer. We are forced to directly engage with the “broken boundaries” of the gutted cow’s “violated body,” and, due to the presence of the mirror, with ourselves.<sup>148</sup> Being in the presence of *The Promise of Money*, according to Melissa Milgrom, is concurrently “horrific” and “beautiful.”<sup>149</sup> She characterizes the piece as “the most stunning, and the most terrifying piece of art” she has ever seen.<sup>150</sup> Despite looking like a real, bloody corpse, this Holstein is another example of Mayer’s handiwork. Through erosion moulding, she crafted a taxidermied cow into a superrealistic representation of itself, a thing whose construction and reception

“interweaves rational contemplation and imaginative projection,”<sup>151</sup> for it respects the anatomy of the cow while placing it in an unnatural position.<sup>152</sup>

As with traditional taxidermy, the cow in *The Promise of Money* represents the troubled relationship between man and animal. The presence of the cow’s hair bears the trace of the animal’s existence yet the manipulation of its posture and interior structure represents human dominance. Unlike traditional taxidermy, however, Mayer does not construct an idealized version of life, granting her subject with immortality; instead, she imitates death, imposing eternal suffering onto the magnificently tragic Holstein.

Although “an art of the *trompe-l’oeil*,” Hal Foster argues, “superrealism is more than a tricking of the eye. It is a subterfuge *against* the real.”<sup>153</sup> Mayer’s superrealistic taxidermy not only respects the real but “invites us to rethink” our relationship with animals by reproducing “reality as a fluid surface,” something capable of intervention, something able to be altered.<sup>154</sup> In *The Promise of Money*, the tension “between appearance, concealment, and relatedness” reveals that “all organisms”—whether alive, dead, or something in between—“exist intertwined and in constant interaction with the flesh of the world around them”<sup>155</sup> *The Promise of Money* forces us to acknowledge that we are one with the cow as well as accomplices in the cow’s murder. We are partially responsible for causing its transformation into meat, into taxidermy, into something to be purchased through monetary transactions. And, by bearing witness to the gory exploitation of animals, we are now aware of the truth. We can now change the course of the future.

Blending reality and illusion, *The Promise of Money*’s fabricated yet visceral encounter with death not only highlights the violence inherent to the industrial farming



industry but the beauty of the animal body before it is butchered. Additionally, *The Promise of Money* is denotive of “a missed encounter with the real,” a depiction of the real animals that are killed behind the closed doors of slaughterhouses.<sup>156</sup> The revulsion evoked by *The Promise of Money* is similar to widespread public reaction to “undercover videos of animal abuse,” suggesting “that it is ignorance, rather than indifference to animals, that keeps massive, institutional cruelty to animals in place.”<sup>157</sup> However, with media outlets and visual artists “taking animal issues more seriously, this ignorance is starting to break down.”<sup>158</sup> Through the presence of taxidermy, Hirst makes the everyday violence enacted by the industrial farming industry visible while reconnecting us with farmyard animals. Instead of interacting with abstracted parts of them on our plates, we can interact with abject versions of them in the museum.

### **The Ethical Turn**

Although Hirst personally causes animals to be killed and turned into observable objects, demonstrating humanity’s ongoing subjugation of nature, these resulting objects ask us to question the ethics behind the killing of animals. “Killing animals,” argues Karen Weil, “is good to unthink, to strip us of the rational and metaphysical assumptions by which we have distinguished ourselves from animals.”<sup>159</sup> Moreover, by confronting us with taxidermied animals that function on symbolic as well as literal planes, Hirst entices us to move beyond simplistic, metaphorical understandings of animals.<sup>160</sup>

In Modern art, “even when the animal was visually present, it could be explained away,” or “*made to disappear*,” through critical interpretation.<sup>161</sup> While Hirst works within this modernist mentality, deriving symbolic meaning from “*the look of the animal*

*body*,” he also encourages us to look at and scrutinize literal animals, rendering actual them extremely visible.<sup>162</sup> He sheds light on acts which lurk in the shadows, which hide behind thick walls, which remain unseen to the general public. As a result, works such as *One Thousand Years*, *Mother and Child Divided* and *One Little Went to Market*, *One Little Piggy Went Home* “have touched off a debate in ethics as to whether it is a better fate for an animal to wind up as a work of art when its destiny would otherwise be the dinner table—or, in the case of the magnificent tiger shark...dog food.”<sup>163</sup> Paradoxically, as Hirst investigates issues of humanity, he sheds light on aspects of animality. Despite the dominant anthropocentric wavelength of Hirst’s oeuvre, it is permeated by an undercurrent of animal activism.

In 1975, Peter Singer published *Animal Liberation*, spurring the onset of the modern animal rights movement. In this book, Singer examines the ongoing “tyranny of human over nonhuman animals,” comparing the human-induced suffering of animals to that of other subjugated groups, such as women and black communities.<sup>164</sup> Singer urges his readers to liberate animals by “ending prejudice and discrimination” based on arbitrary characteristics like race, gender, sexual orientation, or species and treating animals “as the independent sentient beings that they are, and not as a means to human ends.”<sup>165</sup> In 1990, *Animal Liberation* was reprinted with a new foreword, demonstrating the impact of the publication on its readers and the field of Animal Studies. In the updated text, Singer notes that his work—and that of other animal activists—sparked “a new consciousness...about the need to extend sympathies for dogs and cats to pigs, chickens, and even laboratory rats.”<sup>166</sup> In response to the issues of animal rights, artists

such as Hirst began considering man's relationship with animals, thus making animal death—and the public's reaction to it—central to their work.

As previously discussed, Hirst puts dead animals on display. He encourages his viewers to look at them, to scrutinize their anatomies, to consider how they transitioned from nature to the vitrine. Although the act of looking played a significant role in the development of the physiological sciences, as well as the implementation of zoos and dioramas, it also plays an important role in “the development of human awareness of animal suffering.”<sup>167</sup> While looking at the taxidermied animals of Hirst's work, we are forced to contemplate the “the troubled relationship between the aesthetics and ethics of taxidermy.”<sup>168</sup> We are compelled to look at the animals and bound “to worry about what made that looking possible.”<sup>169</sup>

In response to the exhibition *Damien Hirst*, a retrospective of the artist's work held at the Tate Modern in late 2012, the public wrote letters to the institution complaining about the “meaninglessness” of the displayed artwork.<sup>170</sup> According to *The Telegraph*, “some of the most heated criticisms referred to the use of animals, which was likened to a ‘real life horror film’ and led to calls for the RSPCA to intervene.”<sup>171</sup> One visitor asked, “I'm not sure how you condone the obvious disrespect for life contained in this exhibit, or do insects just not qualify as life when you can make that much money?”<sup>172</sup> Another wrote, “I am shocked that in England, where the Society for the Protection of Animals originated, such a display is allowed.”<sup>173</sup> Despite characterizing the artworks as “meaningless,” visitors to *Damien Hirst* at the Tate Modern introduced “an element of *ethical* judgment” into what they considered a predominantly aesthetic activity.<sup>174</sup>

The incorporation of animal bodies in contemporary art urges us to ask, “What does art add to the cause of animal rights?” By presenting us with animals that have been killed, removed from nature, turned into taxidermy, and placed on display, Hirst’s Natural History series demonstrates a “belief in the possibility of using art to see animals differently, to see them anew.”<sup>175</sup> Rather than settling on an opinion, making a definitive statement on how humans and animals should coexist, contemporary art featuring taxidermy functions as a means to unsettle existing opinions, to confront people with unseen realities, to make people consider Other perspectives.<sup>176</sup>

The preserved, deteriorating, and opened-up specimens of the Natural History series graphically embody the violence humans inflict on animals. By making these realities visible, even if by means of illusion, Hirst’s oeuvre provides us with “some sort of redemptive, eye-opening exposé about the human animal relationship.”<sup>177</sup> He makes the wrongs we inflict on other species undeniable by making them observable. In defense of artwork that relies on animal death, Randy Malamud argues that “if people see images of what we do to animals, our ethical behavior will appear clearly and self-confidently brutal, and it will become more difficult to keep doing it.”<sup>178</sup> While Hirst purposefully kills and objectifies animals, his works, as evidenced by letters written by visitors to the *Damien Hirst* retrospective, also argue in favor of animal liberation.

## Conclusion

“I just want to create things that look real” says Hirst.<sup>179</sup> “I think art is about life. You want things to reflect that—killing things to look at them. For me it’s the love of life to explore it on the fringes. It’s why kids take toys apart. It’s a morbid fascination.”<sup>180</sup>

Due to this morbid fascination, Hirst slices open animals, takes them apart, and puts them on display. He confronts his audience with remnants of life, or markers of death, that urge them to contemplate their individual mortality as well as “a greater narrative behind and beyond us.”<sup>181</sup> Through the use of preserved animal bodies, and the eventual adoption of taxidermy, Hirst’s work blurs the boundaries between humanity and animality. The paradoxical powers of the taxidermied animal allows conflicting meanings to emerge from the same piece of art. On one hand, his animal works blatantly display the ways in which man exploits nature through acts of killing, commodification, and consumption. On the other hand, they highlight the agency of animals and encourage us to look at the world through Othered eyes. Collectively, the Natural History series exists in a liminal state, demonstrating that humans, while convinced of their superior authority, are simply a part of the “cycle of the universe, from which nobody will ever be able to escape.”<sup>182</sup> Although we long for immortality, humans, just like animals, live and die, for all of our bodies are in a constant state of decay.

The *animal-things* of the Natural History series—some eternally trapped in glass tanks, others chemically turned into rubber, and all killed in order to be looked at—speak of the violence humans inflict on animals while providing access into the realm of the animal. Through taxidermic acts of preservation that prioritize the surface of animals, they encourage “us to consider and negotiate the space of the animal other.”<sup>183</sup> Damien Hirst, through his initial distaste for and eventual embracement of taxidermy, demonstrates that humans and animals are not simply polar opposites; rather, they co-exist on a continuum where the domain of one slowly blends into the domain of the other. By drawing correlations between humans and animals and making moments of violent

conflict undeniably seen, Hirst's animals makes us question the transcendent power of humans. They unmoor a variety of ethical perspectives and challenge "intellectual attitudes that leave unquestioned" mankind's authority over animals, making it clear that while ubiquitous, our right to dominion is "not true, but created."<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Grete Årbu, "About the Transition from Science to Art in the Works of Damien Hirst," in *Damien Hirst: Life, Death and Love: Works from the Astrup Fearnley Collection shown at Kunsthuset Kabuso 0.06-09.09.2007*, Grete Årbu, Gunnar B. Kvarn, Hanne Beate Ueland, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, eds. (Oslo: Astrup Fearnley Museet for Moderne Kunst, 2007), 25.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Gunnar B. Kvarn, "Introduction," in *Damien Hirst: Life, Death and Love: Works from the Astrup Fearnley Collection shown at Kunsthuset Kabuso 02.06-09.09.2007*, Grete Årbu, Gunnar B. Kvarn, Hanne Beate Ueland, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, eds. (Oslo: Astrup Fearnley Museet for Moderne Kunst, 2007), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon Burn and Damien Hirst, *On the Way to Work* (New York: Universe, 2002), 12.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ann Gallagher, ed., "Introduction," in *Damien Hirst* (London: Tate Publishing, 2012) 29.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Wilson, "Believer," in *Damien Hirst*, Ann Gallagher, ed. (London: Tate Publishing, 2012), 204.

<sup>11</sup> Jane Eastoe, *The Art of Taxidermy*, 124.

<sup>12</sup> Today, the term can be applied "to any work that attempts to realistically recreate the appearance of animals using the real animal as a starting point." Giovanni Aloï. "Rescuing what had become a Dying Art," in *Antennae* (Issue 7 Autumn 2008), 45-51.

<sup>13</sup> Patrick Barkham, "Can you do me a quick cow's head?: From Damien Hirst to Mark Wallinger, many major artists now rely on legions of helpers. How do they feel about their often uncredited roles?," *The Guardian* (March 4 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Serota, "Nicholas Serota Interviews Damien Hirst, 14 July 2011," in *Damien Hirst*, Ann Gallagher, ed. (London: Tate Publishing, 2012), 96-97.

<sup>16</sup> Ann Gallagher, ed., "Introduction," 12; Damien Hirst, "Mr. Potter, stuffed rats and me," *The Guardian* (September 23, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Ann Gallagher, ed., "Introduction," 12.

<sup>18</sup> Nicholas Serota, "Nicholas Serota Interviews Damien Hirst, 14 July 2011," 95.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> "Damien Hirst Biography: Read more about the artist," Accessed June 4, 2015, <http://www.damienhirst.com/biography/read-more-about-the-artist>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Serota, "Nicholas Serota Interviews Damien Hirst, 14 July 2011," 96.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ann Gallagher, ed., "Introduction," 13.

<sup>26</sup> "Damien Hirst Biography: Read more about the artist," Accessed June 4, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Craig-Martin cited in Brian Sherwin, "Art Space Talk: Michael Craig-Martin," Myartspace>blog (August 2007), Accessed June 4, 2015, <http://myartspace-blog.blogspot.com/2007/08/art-space-talk-michael-craig-martin.html>.

<sup>28</sup> *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* (London: Thames and Hudson in association with the Royal Academy of Arts, 1998), 199.

<sup>29</sup> Ann Gallagher, ed., "Introduction," 15.

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- <sup>30</sup> Hanne Beate Ueland, "I am going to die and I want to live forever: On Religious Symbolism in the Art of Damien Hirst," in *Damien Hirst: Life, Death and Love: Works from the Astrup Fearnley Collection shown at Kunsthuset Kabuso 02.06-09.09.2007*, Grete Årbu, Gunnar B. Kvarn, Hanne Beate Ueland, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, eds. (Oslo: Astrup Fearnley Museet for Moderne Kunst, 2007), 38.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid, 39.
- <sup>33</sup> Adam Gopnik, "Death in Venice," *The New Yorker*, Volume 69 Issues 24-27 (1993) quoted in *I Want to Spend the Rest of My Life Everywhere, With Everyone, One to One, Always and Forever Now*, Damien Hirst (New York: Monacelli Press, 1997), 8.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> Norman Rosenthal, "The Blood Must Continue to Flow," in *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* (London: Thames and Hudson in association with the Royal Academy of Arts, 1998), 10.
- <sup>37</sup> James Gardner, *Art in the Age of Extremism: The Enemies of Compromise in American Politics, Culture, and Race Relations* (Toronto: Birch Lane Press, 1997), x.
- <sup>38</sup> Ann Gallagher, ed., *Damien Hirst*, 25.
- <sup>39</sup> Dean Crawford, *Shark* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 89-90.
- <sup>40</sup> John Molyneux, "State of the Art: A review of the *Sensation* exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, September-December 1997," *International Socialism* 2:79 (July 1998).
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup> Damien Hirst, *I Want to Spend the Rest of My Life Everywhere, With Everyone, One to One, Always and Forever, Now* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1997), 279.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>45</sup> John Molyneux, "State of the Art."
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>47</sup> Gordon Burn and Damien Hirst, *On the Way to Work*, 93.
- <sup>48</sup> Stephen T. Asma, *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads: The Culture and Evolution of Natural History Museums* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), xii.
- <sup>49</sup> Ann Gallagher, ed., "Introduction," in *Damien Hirst*, 15.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>51</sup> Gordon Burn and Damien Hirst, *On the Way to Work*, 219.
- <sup>52</sup> Stephen T. Asma, *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads*, xiii.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>54</sup> Ann Gallagher, ed., "Introduction," 23-24.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>56</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Interview with Damien Hirst, June-September 2006," in *Damien Hirst: Life, Death and Love: Works from the Astrup Fearnley Collection shown at Kunsthuset Kabuso 02.06-09.09.2007*, Grete Årbu, Gunnar B. Kvarn, Hanne Beate Ueland, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, eds. (Oslo: Astrup Fearnley Museet for Moderne Kunst, 2007), 13-14.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid, 15-16.
- <sup>58</sup> Nicholas Serota, "Nicholas Serota Interviews Damien Hirst, 14 July 2011," 97.
- <sup>59</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Interview with Damien Hirst, June-September 2006," 15-16.
- <sup>60</sup> John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," in *About Looking* (New York: Vintage House, 1980/1992 Second Edition), 21.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid, 24.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid, 21.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>64</sup> Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City 1908-1936," *Social Text* No 11 (Winter, 1984-1985): 52.
- <sup>65</sup> John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," 25.
- <sup>66</sup> Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy," 52.
- <sup>67</sup> Anonda Bell, "By Means of Natural Selection," in *Specimen: Representing the Natural World* (Newark: Paul Robeson Galleries and Rutgers University: November 6, 2008 – January 29, 2009), 9.

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- <sup>68</sup> Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 205-206.
- <sup>69</sup> Gordon Burn and Damien Hirst, *On the Way to Work*, 13.
- <sup>70</sup> Melissa Milgrom, *Still Life: Adventures in Taxidermy* (Boston & New York: Mariner Books Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2010), 196.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid, 196; Carla Yanni, "Divine Display or Secular Science: Defining Nature at the Natural History Museum in London," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* Vol. 55, No. 3 (September 1996): 276.
- <sup>72</sup> Steve Baker, "'You Kill Things to Look at Them': Animal Death in Contemporary Art," in *Killing Animals*, The Animal Studies Group, eds., (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 84.
- <sup>73</sup> Ann Gallagher, ed., "Introduction," 15.
- <sup>74</sup> Francesco Bonami, "Supernatural Aid: Hirst's Travels," in *Damien Hirst: Relics*, Francesco Bonami, ed., (Milan: Italy, Skira, 2013), 15.
- <sup>75</sup> Gordon Burn and Damien Hirst, *On the Way to Work*, 13.
- <sup>76</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid, 79.
- <sup>78</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>79</sup> Jack Ben-Levi, Craig Houser, Leslie C. Taylor, and Simon Taylor, *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* (New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 7.
- <sup>80</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>81</sup> Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 133.
- <sup>82</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1996), 149, 165.
- <sup>83</sup> Ibid, 124.
- <sup>84</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Interview with Damien Hirst, June-September 2006," 19.
- <sup>85</sup> Gordon Burn and Damien Hirst, *On the Way to Work*, 114.
- <sup>86</sup> Andrew Wilson, "Believer," in *Damien Hirst*, Ann Gallagher, ed. (London: Tate Publishing, 2012), 207.
- <sup>87</sup> Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), xxvii.
- <sup>88</sup> Petra Lange-Berndt, "A Parasitic Craft: Taxidermy in the Art of Tessa Farmer," *The Journal of Modern Craft*, Volume 7, Issue 3 (November 2014): 281.
- <sup>89</sup> Nicholas Serota, "Nicholas Serota Interviews Damien Hirst, 14 July 2011," 97.
- <sup>90</sup> Nigel Rothfels ed., *Representing Animals* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), vii.
- <sup>91</sup> Damien Hirst, *I Want to Spend the Rest of My Life Everywhere...*, 285.
- <sup>92</sup> Gordon Burn and Damien Hirst, *On the Way to Work*, 19.
- <sup>93</sup> "Hirst had planned to use a great white, which is to sharks what the grizzly is to bears, but found that they had just gone on the endangered species list, so he had ads posted in the fishermen's drinking holes on the coast alongside Australia's Great Barrier Reef and made do with a fourteen-foot tiger shark instead." Anthony Haden-Guest, *True Colors: The Real Life of the Art World*, (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1996), 296.
- <sup>94</sup> Ibid, 47.
- <sup>95</sup> Ron Broglio, *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 16.
- <sup>96</sup> Petra Lange-Berndt, "Replication and Decay in Damien Hirst's *Natural History*," *Tate Papers* (Autumn 2007).
- <sup>97</sup> Ron Broglio, *Surface Encounters*, 16.
- <sup>98</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Interview with Damien Hirst, June-September 2006," 19.
- <sup>99</sup> David Quammen, *Monster of God: The Man-Eating Predator in the Jungles of History and the Mind* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 5.
- <sup>100</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Interview with Damien Hirst, June-September 2006," 19.
- <sup>101</sup> Damien Hirst, *I Want to Spend the Rest of My Life Everywhere...*, 285.
- <sup>102</sup> Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion, 2000), 56.
- <sup>103</sup> Ibid, 75.
- <sup>104</sup> Ibid.



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- <sup>105</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Interview with Damien Hirst, June-September 2006," 19.
- <sup>106</sup> Carol Vogel, "Swimming with Dead Sharks," *The New York Times* (October 1, 2006).
- <sup>107</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Interview with Damien Hirst, June-September 2006," 19.
- <sup>108</sup> "Damien Hirst's company Science Ltd offers to replace any animal that is older than ten years." Petra Lange-Berndt, "A Parasitic Craft: Taxidermy in the Art of Tessa Farmer," in *The Journal of Modern Craft*, Volume 7, Issue 3, November 2014, pp. 267-284.
- <sup>109</sup> Carol Vogel, "Swimming with Dead Sharks."
- <sup>110</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>111</sup> Jed Mayer, "Representing the Experimental Animal: Competing Voices in Victorian Culture," in *Animals and Agency: An Interdisciplinary Exploration*, Ryan Hediger and Sarah E. McFarland, eds. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), 194.
- <sup>112</sup> Ron Broglio, *Surface Encounters*, xvii.
- <sup>113</sup> Erica Fudge, "A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals," in *Representing Animals*. Nigel Rothfels, ed. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), 2002, 11.
- <sup>114</sup> Steve Baker, "'You Kill Things to Look at Them': Animal Death in Contemporary Art," 92.
- <sup>115</sup> Melissa Milgrom, *Still Life*, 198.
- <sup>116</sup> JoAnne Northrup, "Late Harvest," in *Late Harvest*, (Germany: Hirmer Publishers and the Nevada Museum of Art, 2014), 105.
- <sup>117</sup> David Quammen, *Monster of God: The Man-Eating Predator in the Jungles of History and the Mind*, 3.
- <sup>118</sup> Ron Broglio, *Surface Encounters*, 1.
- <sup>119</sup> Ibid, xxviii.
- <sup>120</sup> Erica Fudge, *Perceiving Animals*, 92.
- <sup>121</sup> John Molyneux, "State of the Art."
- <sup>122</sup> Jonathan Burt, "Conflicts around Slaughter in Modernity," in *Killing Animals*, The Animal Studies Group, eds., (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 124
- <sup>123</sup> Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York and London: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 1990/2000, Tenth Anniversary Edition), 14.
- <sup>124</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>125</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>126</sup> Ibid, 53.
- <sup>127</sup> Ron Broglio, *Surface Encounters*, xvi-vii
- <sup>128</sup> Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 87.
- <sup>129</sup> Gordon Burn and Damien Hirst, *On the Way to Work*, 128.
- <sup>130</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 43.
- <sup>131</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>132</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>133</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>134</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>135</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>136</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>137</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>138</sup> Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 87.
- <sup>139</sup> Mayer "refuses to kill an animal only for taxidermy. The Akeley concept of dispatching the perfect specimen in order to make the perfect mount and then try to resurrect it revolts her....She disapproves of fur farms and believes that roadkill is the most ethical meat you can eat." Melissa Milgrom. *Still Life: Adventures in Taxidermy*. Boston & New York: Mariner Books Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2010, 131.
- <sup>140</sup> Rachel Campbell, "Out of Context: An Exhibition of Sculpture by Emily Mayer," *The Times* (October 2007), reprinted in *Emily Mayer: Out of Context* (Gloucestershire, England: Flying Bear and Campden Gallery, 2007), 2.
- <sup>141</sup> Jane Eastoe, *The Art of Taxidermy*, 136.
- <sup>142</sup> Ibid..
- <sup>143</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>144</sup> Melissa Milgrom, *Still Life*, 123.
- <sup>145</sup> Ibid, 201.
- <sup>146</sup> Ibid.

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- <sup>147</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>148</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 152.
- <sup>149</sup> Melissa Milgrom, *Still Life*, 201.
- <sup>150</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>151</sup> Rachel Z. DeLue, "Art and Science in America," *American Art* (Summer 2009): 3.
- <sup>152</sup> Since cow knees don't bend in the same way as human knees, Emily Mayer had to cut the tendons of the cow carcass after which she modeled *The Promise of Money* in order to place it in the desired pose. Melissa Milgrom. *Still Life: Adventures in Taxidermy*. Boston & New York: Mariner Books Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2010, 203.
- <sup>153</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 141.
- <sup>154</sup> Ibid, 136, 142.
- <sup>155</sup> Trevor Norris, "Martin Heidegger, D.H. Lawrence, and Poetic Attention to Being," in *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby, eds. (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 120, 126.
- <sup>156</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 132.
- <sup>157</sup> Peter Singer, "Changing our Thinking about Animals," in *Specimen: Representing the Natural World* (Newark: Paul Robeson Galleries and Rutgers University: November 6, 2008 – January 29, 2009), 15.
- <sup>158</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>159</sup> Karen Weil, *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 125.
- <sup>160</sup> John Molyneux, "State of the Art."
- <sup>161</sup> Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 22.
- <sup>162</sup> Ibid, 20.
- <sup>163</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *Unnatural Wonders: Essays from the Gap between Art and Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 53.
- <sup>164</sup> Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Random House, 1975/1990), i.
- <sup>165</sup> Ibid, ii-iv.
- <sup>166</sup> Ibid, viii.
- <sup>167</sup> Hilda Kean, *Animal Rights: Political and Social Change in Britain since 1800* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998), 100.
- <sup>168</sup> Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing* (University Park, PA.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 50.
- <sup>169</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>170</sup> Ben Riley-Smith, "Damien Hirst Tate retrospective triggered wave of complaints about 'meaningless artwork'," *Telegraph* (August 28 2013).
- <sup>171</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>172</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>173</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>174</sup> Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 61.
- <sup>175</sup> Ibid, 176.
- <sup>176</sup> Ibid, 178.
- <sup>177</sup> Randy Malamud, *An Introduction to Animals and Visual Culture* (New York and Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 130.
- <sup>178</sup> Ibid, 48.
- <sup>179</sup> Melissa Milgrom, *Still Life*, 194.
- <sup>180</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>182</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>184</sup> Erica Fudge, "A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals," 11.

## Chapter 2: Mark Dion

Contemporary artist Mark Dion investigates the history of Natural History by examining how society conceptualizes nature. In his work, Dion adopts scientific methods of collecting, ordering, and presentation in order to subvert the institutional systems that frame our understanding of the natural world. Wielding wit and ironic insight, Dion criticizes ideologies presented by accepted authorities, such as the natural history museum, to dismantle established narratives, revise popular knowledge, and build holistic taxonomies. Dion's postmodern practice strives to destabilize Enlightenment isolationism, dethrone man from Aristotle's Great Chain of Being, and emphasize how scientific theories have come to acknowledge the endless connections between animals and mankind. By implementing both antiquated and modern museum display practices, as well as their associated modes of ordering, Dion interrogates the institutional authority of Natural History while demonstrating the parallels between our past and present relationship with nature.

Dion, who is interested in understanding how "the material leftovers of history are dealt with," appropriates the *things* of science, in particular taxidermy, to comment on issues of evolution, extinction, and ecology.<sup>1</sup> To quote Dion, taxidermy can be used to express "the power of the uncanny aspect of nature, which has strengthened as our everyday contact with wild places and beings has greatly diminished."<sup>2</sup> His installations not only comment "on how institutions perpetuate certain myths" but "challenge preconceived notions of how animals should behave" while revealing "how those biases influence conservation efforts."<sup>3</sup> By appropriating the preserved animal body and popular

methods of its display, Dion taps into prevalent cultural anxieties that surround the concept of nature.<sup>4</sup>

When procuring or commissioning a piece of taxidermy, Dion attempts to know as much as possible about the sourced animal while making sure the resulting mount meets all legal regulations.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes, stuffed specimens, like the ones incorporated into *The Curiosity Shop* (2001; Figure 22), *Portrait of a Collector* (2004; Figure 23), and *The Octagon Room* (2013; Figure 24), are sourced as found objects because they were discovered at an antique store or flea market.<sup>6</sup> Or, as seen in *Scala Naturae* (1994; Figure 25), *Cabinet of Curiosities for the Wexner Center for the Arts* (1997), and *Cabinet of Curiosity for the Weisman Art Museum* (2000; Figure 26), Dion mines museum store rooms and “draws from institutional collections, where taxidermied animals, birds, and fish still reside as historical remnants of earlier practices and research interests,” in order to fashion postmodern cabinets of curiosity.<sup>7</sup>

Dion also contracts taxidermists to create specific animals in certain poses, such as for *The Delirium of Alfred Russell Wallace*, (1994/2003; Figure 27), whose anthropomorphic posture does not comply with the “conventions of traditional taxidermy.”<sup>8</sup> For other work, he commissions taxidermists to make “taxidermy from real animals, or to make one thing from another, such as a [polar] bear from goat skins” to comment on the fabricated nature of the medium and highlight the need to ‘recreate’ animals that are going extinct.<sup>9</sup>

Although Dion is concerned with procuring his mounts in an ethical fashion, on occasion the production of a piece of taxidermy does result from an animal being killed specifically for his art. The artist notes that although a very rare occurrence, it does

happen, and only “for the works about introduced pest species such as rats, pigeons, starlings, grey squirrels, etc.”<sup>10</sup> Dion, however, is no longer actively procuring or commissioning taxidermy for his work.<sup>11</sup> By using artificial rather than taxidermied animals, Dion can easily bypass legal limitations surrounding the buying, selling, and transportation of animal bodies while injecting “another layer of artifice” into his investigation of how society represents nature.<sup>12</sup> Despite the fact that Dion is slowly eliminating taxidermy from his artistic practice, the cultural, historical, and theoretical implications of the medium are fundamental to his oeuvre.

Dion’s practice is similar to that of Damien Hirst for both frequently employ taxidermy while adopting the visual language of science. However, unlike Hirst, who is preoccupied with looking at animals, Dion is not frightened by the prospect of animal and human worlds physically mixing. In fact, his work acknowledges that these two worlds—for better or worse—are already intricately linked. Dion characterizes himself as “the kind of artist who is holding up a mirror to the present and to the kinds of problems that we have right now,” highlighting current environmental concerns and the ever-present entangled relationship between man and animal.<sup>13</sup> This chapter investigates how the historic uses, cultural connotations, and physical properties of taxidermy inform Dion’s artistic practice. Through his varied use of taxidermy, Dion makes visible intangible philosophies, revises conventional scientific assumptions, and subverts the authority of the natural history museum. Overall, Dion encourages mankind to understand its true relationship with the natural world.

## **The Economics of Extinction**

Mark Dion (b. 1961) was born and raised in a small town just outside of New Bedford, Massachusetts, the former whaling capital of New England and currently America's number one fishing port. Growing up in this coastal city, Dion became aware of the delicate bonds between man and nature at an early age, understanding that man relies on nature as a source of beauty, sustenance, and economic stability. He also witnessed the rise and decline of New Bedford's commercial fishing industry.

In the 1980s, New Bedford's fishing industry was booming; however, in the early 1990s, high levels of man-made pollutants were discovered in the harbor's water and these sediments were negatively impacting the health of the local ecosystem and economy.<sup>14</sup> Due to exhausted fish populations, the result of over-fishing, pollution, and habitat loss, "the local industry experienced a dramatic decrease" in business; concurrently, the industry had to comply with "strict federal regulations" aimed "to rebuild the depleted fish stocks."<sup>15</sup> Fears of species loss prompted the local government to take action. With these new fishing laws in place, the once thriving New Bedford fishing industry was devastated.

In recent years, however, New Bedford has reinvigorated their commercial fishing interests by implementing sustainable measures.<sup>16</sup> Previously, the New Bedford whaling industry faced similar legal conditions for the "fear of losing [whale] species prompted the passage of laws from the mid-1940s onward limiting and then banning commercial whaling."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Dion has observed "from a close perspective the intertwining of economics and species deletion."<sup>18</sup> With New Bedford serving as a location reflective of larger behavioral and cultural attitudinal shifts regarding man's dealings with animals,

Dion recognizes that man's relationship with the natural world is not only delicate and intertwined but troubled.

Dion explores notions of commercially induced extinction and “the problems of environmental disruption in relation to colonial history” in The Extinction Series.<sup>19</sup> In *Black Rhino Head* (1989; Figure 28), a mysterious pile of closed wooden crates—marked as fragile, stenciled with the names of foreign lands, and covered with maps and photographic images—sits by a wall. One of these crates, however, is opened, revealing its disturbing contents. A taxidermied rhinoceros head, which Dion borrowed from a collector, is nestled atop a pile of wood chips.<sup>20</sup> The thick gray-black skin and dusty horns of the decapitated animal emerge from the packing material as its beady black eye blankly peers out beyond its viewer.

The black rhinoceros, indigenous to eastern and central Africa, “has long been hunted for its horns,” because in Asian cultures they are believed “to possess magical and medicinal qualities.”<sup>21</sup> Although the market for black rhino horns has existed for centuries, demand increased between the years of 1970 and 1992, over the course of which “96 percent of Africa's remaining black rhinos were killed” and their horns sold on the black market.<sup>22</sup> The persistent and pernicious illegal poaching of these animals has caused the species to become critically endangered and on the brink of extinction. Dion's *Black Rhino Head* makes visible the loss of wildlife caused by the unlawful trafficking of rare animals for financial gain.

The taxidermied rhinoceros head forces its viewer to contemplate the accelerated extinction of endangered species due to contemporary conditions because the presence of the mutilated animal body makes the situation “real.”<sup>23</sup> Dion sees taxidermy as a means

to document the violence humans wage against living animals.<sup>24</sup> Floating bodiless within its pine-wood coffin, the mutilated rhinoceros bears the markings of man's interventions in the natural world. This individual rhinoceros has lost its body and humanity will soon lose the species due to its mistreatment of the animal. However, composed of a manipulated animal exterior and human interior, this taxidermied animal will hinder decay. Therefore, it not only symbolizes the interconnectedness of human and animal worlds but the permanent, irreparable damage mankind inflicts on nature.

### **The Language of the Natural History Museum**

Although issues of economics and extinction permeate Dion's oeuvre, his main target for critique is the natural history museum. As a child, Dion enjoyed visiting his town's local museum. Founded in 1907, the New Bedford Whaling Museum is America's foremost institution on the whaling industry and man's interactions with whales. "He remembers with pleasure 'walking into one room and it was model ships, and in another it was costume, another it was scrimshaw.'"<sup>25</sup> This small institution not only produced a sense of wonder in a young Dion, encouraging a lifelong infatuation with the natural history museum, but introduced him to the ways in which museums order, construct, and present histories of the natural world. As an adult, the American Museum of Natural History has proven an indispensable resource for Dion's artistic development. Dion characterizes the museum's dioramas as "masterworks of art and science."<sup>26</sup> And, he regularly mines the museum's archives for visual information. Over the past several years, he has visited the museum at least once a month, demonstrating that the institution serves as a never-ending source of artistic inspiration.<sup>27</sup>



After earning a BFA from the University of Hartford School of Art in 1986, Dion enrolled in The Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program. Here he studied under conceptual artists Hans Haacke and Joseph Kosuth, both of whom emphasized the importance of critiquing the cultural institutions that construct our knowledge of the world. "Influenced by readings of postmodern theorists and philosophers, particularly Michel Foucault, Dion, like many of his contemporaries in the Whitney program, was challenged by the possibility of using a three-dimensional form didactically to stir critical awareness in the viewer."<sup>28</sup> This challenge prompted Dion to call into question the institutional authority of Natural History by appropriating the materials of the natural history museum—such as fossils, rudimentary man-made tools, and taxidermied animals. Placing them in an art museum, Dion re-contextualizes these artifacts while parodying the ways in which science museums order and impose value on them. Rather than corroborate established narratives, Dion seeks to contest the histories these institutions tell by cajoling familiar objects to induce "a different type of catalyzing narrative," one that criticizes existing structures of authority.<sup>29</sup>

Michel Foucault is known for questioning the processes that aid in constructing public sites of knowledge and power. "In *The Order of Things*," as Carolyn Gray Anderson describes, "Foucault discusses Western science's initial privileging of the eye, of empirical knowledge, and its subsequent replacement by a strictly linguistic knowledge whereby plants, animals, and the rest of the natural world began to be identified by their assigned names, not by direct observation."<sup>30</sup> In this publication, and throughout his larger body of work, Foucault critiques science's dismissal of observation by privileging the importance of objects. With these criticisms, Foucault aims to restore

instability to our falsely stable intellectual ground. By challenging established systems of thought, Foucault creates a space in which a new order of things can emerge.<sup>31</sup>

At the time of their inception in “the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, public natural history museums emerged as colossal storehouses of nature.”<sup>32</sup> Their main goal was to collect, preserve, and order representative specimens of every known species of animal, vegetable and mineral.<sup>33</sup> Taxidermied animals provided the means by which the animal world could be collected, preserved, and ordered. Architecturally, these natural history museums alluded to the designs of religious institutions to assert the legitimacy of the scientific discipline and construct an image of expertise.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, curators were “deliberate in assigning meaning to objects in ways that took into account political, social, and intellectual sensibilities that were both global and local.”<sup>35</sup> By fashioning coherent stories across varied collections, natural history museums solidified their intellectual authority by imposing taxonomies on the natural world. However, despite the museum’s ability to present knowledge in a definitive manner, scientific knowledge is constantly in flux. Although natural history museums are accepted by the public as bastions of truth, these institutions are rife with inconsistencies, fabrications, and fallacies.

According to Foucault, the discipline of “Natural History is a science, that is, a language, but a securely based and well-constructed one: its propositional unfolding is indisputably an articulation; the arrangement of its elements into a linear series patterns representation according to an evident and universal mode.”<sup>36</sup> The natural history museum is thus a physical manifestation of this constructed language. However, just as books can be revised and essays can be edited, the linguistic rules of Natural History can

be rewritten. Its evolving vocabulary consists of natural and cultural artifacts—such as taxidermy—and its sentence structure is dictated by a taxonomic syntax. The stories these institutions tell are not fixed; instead, they are never-ending.

### **Taxidermy & Taxonomy**

Taxonomy, defined as the “orderly classification of plants and animals according to their presumed natural relationships,”<sup>37</sup> only wears “a mask of orderliness” as it demonstrates man’s “quintessential imperialist impulse” to dominate nature.<sup>38</sup>

Taxonomic order varies from museum to museum, from collection to collection, “as some are arranged on the basis of chronology or age of objects, while others” are organized according to “the tastes of the individual responsible for amassing the collection in the first place.”<sup>39</sup> As a result, “taxidermy and taxonomy have remained twin soldiers in the quest for a comprehensive catalogue of nature’s diversity.”<sup>40</sup> By writing a taxonomic tale with taxidermic words, the natural history museum perpetuates our belief in this narrative.

In addition to tracing the scientific downfall of observation in favor of linguistic systems, Foucault explores the notion that taxonomies are fables—systems of limitations and impossibilities—that are superimposed onto things to promote the existence of a non-existing order. Foucault’s postmodern perspective has impacted Dion’s artistic investigations of the natural history museum’s taxonomic structures.<sup>41</sup> Dion acknowledges that people impose order on *things* to make sense of them. Moreover, he is fascinated that these systems of “scientific classification [are] constantly changing as information shifts.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore, the natural history museum, rather than serving as a

repository of unyielding natural truths, is a site whose exhibitions display mankind's dynamic, constantly shifting understanding of nature. Dion appropriates the material language of the natural history museum to re-write existing scientific stories and make visible their associated philosophies. Furthermore, from a vital materialist perspective, Dion turns mute objects into speaking subjects that can participate in this larger conversation by making "statements, objections and proposals" to which we can respond.<sup>43</sup>

Taxonomically speaking, the modern museum was conceived as "a logical extension of the empirical program laid out in Aristotle's biological writings and in the natural histories of his followers," commonly referred to as the Great Chain of Being or *Scala Naturae*.<sup>44</sup> This ancient, yet persistent, visual metaphor remained the reigning narrative skeleton for most natural history museums well into the twentieth-century. The *Scala Naturae* "depicts life as a one-dimensional progression from the simplest forms to the most complex: almost always to humans, who construct the hierarchy, but sometimes even beyond to the invisible realm of angels, archangels," and God.<sup>45</sup> Ultimately, the Great Chain of Being "firmly seat[s] humankind on the throne of the animal kingdom."<sup>46</sup>

However, according to Kynaston McShine in the exhibition catalog *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, "this powerful idea demands particular scrutiny, since the chain of being is a crucial conceptual footprint, which helps retrace the path of where we have been in order to get a better bearing on where we are and where we are going."<sup>47</sup> Since Darwin published *The Origin of Species* in 1859 and challenged established philosophical thought promulgated by the likes of Aristotle, the border between the animal and human worlds has been shrinking. Aristotle and his followers proclaimed that humans—and

humans alone—are capable of possessing intelligence, language, self-awareness, and agency, giving mankind “the basic rights of freedom” and ability to control those who lack these superior abilities.<sup>48</sup> Darwin tore down Aristotle’s philosophical staircase by placing humans on the same evolutionary rung as animals. By forging a connection between humans and animals, taxidermy proves a provocative medium for exploring shifts in evolutionary thinking.

In the installation *Scala Naturae* (1994), Dion challenges established wisdom and subtly subverts Aristotle’s efforts to classify life according to an unyielding hierarchical system. Just like Darwin, who utilized taxidermied specimens to flush out his theories of evolution, Dion takes on the persona of a Victorian naturalist by filling a tall staircase with natural specimens, taxidermied creatures, and manmade artifacts.<sup>49</sup> At first glance, the piece appears to be structurally sound and follow a predictable ordering method. However, upon closer examination, the piece shatters these assumptions.

A wooden wheel, an arrow, and a clock sit at the bottom of the staircase while vegetables, seashells, and butterflies fill the steps above. When looked at from the front, Dion’s *Scala Naturae* appears sturdy; yet, when looked at from the side, it becomes apparent that the staircase teeters on two wooden legs. By crowing the staircase with a bust of Aristotle, Dion amusingly underscores the fact that the progenitor of this hierarchical taxonomy deemed himself organizer of the known world and, essentially, the most superior form of life. However, a stuffed tabby cat and taxidermied duck patiently wait on the second stair for their chance to reign supreme.

In spite of its position of power, the bust of Aristotle that Dion chose to display is not the most enticing object on his *Scala Naturae*. It is diminutive in scale when

compared to the stuffed animals occupying the step below. Visually, these taxidermied creatures pierce Aristotle's space, invading the realm of he who deems them inferior. If placed next to the Greek philosopher, they would rival and exceed the height of the marble bust. These pieces of taxidermy also garner more attention due to their tactility as well as their naturally colored fur and feathers. The rich marled pelt of the cat and slick brown and white feathers of the duck are more inviting to the eye than Aristotle's cold, white visage.

Despite all of these differences, however, the taxidermied animals and sculpted bust share an important similarity. All three objects are representations of nature rather than untouched natural artifacts. All three signify the interactions between natural and cultural worlds. Nevertheless, the taxidermied animals emphasize these interactions on a deeper level than the carved image of Aristotle, for their intact skins hold onto their natural origins with a firmer grip than the molded head. Therefore, Dion's taxidermied tabby cat and mounted duck are silently challenging Aristotle's superior station. By summoning Darwin's theories and emphasizing the shared histories of humans and animals, they subtly assert their right to reign supreme, or at least share the crown, as they aid Dion in revising Aristotle's hierarchy.

### **The *Wunderkammern***

"For Dion, a trip to a natural-history museum, staring at stuffed animals, is not only a pleasant way to spend time, it also provides the opportunity to trace the history of attitudes about nature that scientists, anthropologists, archaeologists, hunters, and collectors have promulgated as fact."<sup>50</sup> These attitudes and opinions were expressed in

carefully designed displays. “If you want to find out about how people thought about nature,” says Dion, just “look at displays, how important the cases are, where the wood came from, how packed things are, what kind of things the didactics emphasize, or the kind of things they don’t say.”<sup>51</sup> In order to understand how the natural history museum developed modern modes of display, Dion looks back on and conjures forth references to practices and tactics prominent in *Wunderkammern* of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries, the site responsible for taxidermy’s first public appearance.

Although taxidermy matured in the Victorian age and grew up in the dioramas of the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth centuries, its roots lead back further in time to the Pre-Enlightenment. During this time, Renaissance kings, princes, popes, and wealthy merchants began exploring far corners of the world. Upon their return home, these elite individuals gathered their collections in spaces dedicated to the display of their souvenirs. These collectors aimed to create an inventory of the world and establish a continuity between *artificialia* and *naturalia*, or “the treasures of art and the wonders of nature.”<sup>52</sup> Rare artifacts, unique animals, and scientific inventions were amassed and haphazardly hung from ceilings, arranged in glass cabinets, and set on shelves of *Wunderkammern*, or Cabinets of Curiosity. These spaces, chaotically filled with interesting objects, wet specimens, and crude taxidermy, not only told the story of an individual’s natural and cultural encounters but functioned as a “value-laden, and highly charged means to activate objects in evocative ways.”<sup>53</sup>

Ferrante Imperato, an Italian apothecary from the early seventeenth-century, amassed “a repository of incomparable rarities,” including a pair of chameleons, a crocodile, a salamander, an armadillo, a miniature walrus, and what appears to be a two-

headed dog, a two-headed snake, and a lizard with two bodies (Figure 29).<sup>54</sup> The actions of men such as Imperato, according to Paula Findlen in *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Modern Italy*, demonstrate that *Wunderkammern* subjected nature to great inquiry and that crude taxidermy made nature collectable, ready to be studied and possessed. By collecting fossils and taxidermied creatures, they generated “new techniques of investigation” and new understandings of nature.<sup>55</sup>

In terms of display, “the assorted contents of *Wunderkammern* were seen in one contiguous space as a holistic group of objects that could be touched and rearranged poetically to produce a kind of awe that could enlighten the mind, delight the sense and encourage conversation (Figures 30 and 31).”<sup>56</sup> Rather than dictate a hierarchy, these cabinets granted their viewer the freedom to produce a personalized order through free association. Today, the display modality of the cabinet of curiosity is being resuscitated because it can “trigger novel patterns of *self-organization* in a thing, species, or being, sometimes allowing something new to emerge from the swirl back and forth between them.”<sup>57</sup> The nonlinearity of *Wunderkammern*, both in presentation and interpretation, enables collectors and viewers to make sense of themselves while re-making the world around them.<sup>58</sup>

Dion embraces this nonlinearity when intervening in museum collections. “The hope is that visitors will be guided by their own preferences...becoming collaborators in the curatorial process and participating in a potential analysis of what is on display.”<sup>59</sup> For example, in projects such as *Oceanomania* (2011; Figure 32), Dion rifled through the permanent collections of the Oceanographic Museum of Monaco, exhuming and re-presenting forgotten taxidermy specimens from their archival graves. As a result, Dion



created a monumental curiosity cabinet that told the story of man's continually evolving fascination with the sea.

Although *Wunderkammern* pre-date the natural history museum, the nonlinear semantics of these Cabinets of Curiosity etymologically serve as the origin of the natural history museum's language. However, with the emergence of academic disciplines during the Enlightenment, idioms of the *Wunderkammern* were "consumed and transformed by the scientific revolution" and used to new, non-inclusive ends in the modern museum.<sup>60</sup> Taxidermy, by being present in both iterations, not only resists strict translation but forges links between humans, animals, and society. The vocabulary of taxidermy thus creates continuity between differing versions of reality.<sup>61</sup>

In *Theatrum Mundi: Armarium* (2001; Figure 33), Dion fills the shelves of two wooden cabinets with a variety of objects, artifacts, and taxidermied specimens that span centuries of human existence. The left cabinet, entitled *Culture*, orders the history of human thought according to the beliefs of Paracelsian physician Robert Fludd. On the right, taking into consideration theories promoted by Franciscan alchemist Raymond Lull, *Nature* chronicles the evolution of man and animals. Between these two representations of the world resides a human skeleton. The skeleton hangs in a glass-doored cupboard, upon which a stuffed magpie sits. Although each cabinet presents two differing condensed versions of the world, both house similar objects, in particular pieces of taxidermy. Because taxidermy is a product of both nature and culture, it defies definitive categorization. Its presence in *Theatrum Mundi* prompts "the viewer to question the certainties which would assign the displayed object to one or another category."<sup>62</sup> It bridges the gap between the two classifications.

Furthermore, as stated by Giovanni Aloï in *Art and Animals*, the taxidermied magpie proudly perched above the head of homo sapien's remains "symbolizes the relentless compulsivity for collecting coupled with the underlying irrationality that pervades such practice. The magpie is notoriously attracted by surface-values like color and shine. The bird's methodology reminds us of the paradoxically arbitrary nature of collecting."<sup>63</sup> The magpie makes another appearance in *Portrait of a Collector* (2004). Here, encased in a glass cloche, a single stuffed bird holds onto a wooden perch while he possessively lords over his collection of trinkets, baubles, and jewels. In both of these works, the bird's presence reminds us that animals are sentient creatures with individual personalities. The magpie's penchant for amassing flashy collections parallels man's urge to accumulate remnants of our own existence,<sup>64</sup> underscoring the fact that humans and animals share behavioral traits, that humans do not live outside of nature, that we, too, are animals.<sup>65</sup>

### **The Diorama**

Just like *Wunderkammern*, dioramas forge connections between art and science. According to Karen Wonders, "from their very first appearance in science museums in the late 1800s, dioramas have been designed to nurture a reverence for nature by creating an illusion of its beauty and grandeur," to "duplicate the wonder of an intimate, personal encounter with a 'real' creature in its habitat," and reveal the interrelationship between the earth and all of its inhabitants.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, Wonders points out that "the habitat diorama originated at about the same time that frontier expansion and human exploitation

of the wilderness were in an accelerated pace,” providing a glimpse of what was being lost to human degradation of the natural environment.<sup>67</sup>

Recognizing that the ecological landscape of the early nineties mirrored the environmental predicaments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Dion adopted the language of the diorama to make visible connections between man’s past and present misuses of the nature. The diorama inspired Dion to resurrect the medium of taxidermy in order to comment on contemporary ecological issues and emphasize that human longing for meaningful encounters with animals has not dissipated.<sup>68</sup> Dion’s updated dioramas serve as windows onto the ways man currently abuses nature and impacts the life of animals.

John Rowley, former Chief of the Department of Taxidermy at the American Museum of Natural History, published *Taxidermy and Museum Exhibition* in 1925. In this book, Rowley discusses how taxidermy should be presented in a museum setting. According to Karen Wonders, Rowley was a pioneer in diorama design. He was the first to conceive of entire museum halls dedicated to staging natural history scenarios, freeing “museum exhibitions from its traditional subservience to architecture, setting a precedent that was followed by museums across the continent.”<sup>69</sup> Rowley disdained the display tactics of the *Wunderkammer*. He asserted that under no circumstances should taxidermy be arranged in rows for this display practice is too aligned with individual collecting habits and “does not itself tell any story” or excite the public.<sup>70</sup> “Whenever possible, different classes of objects should be segregated, or exhibited separately.”<sup>71</sup> Birds should not be near shells, and shells should not be near insects. When an exhibition presents “a

heterogeneous mass of objects, it literally becomes a junk shop,” giving it little educational value, making it forgettable.<sup>72</sup>

Rowley favored narrative presentations of taxidermy. He believed groups of animals should be positioned in front of a painted backdrop and behind a single pane of glass, offering only one adequate viewpoint.<sup>73</sup> These scenes should be modeled after an actual location and include examples of indigenous flora and fauna. All dioramas should be accompanied by succinct explanatory labels that not only provide data about the specimens on view but tells a conclusive story.<sup>74</sup> Without these painted scenes and written explanations, deducing the diorama’s narrative would have “to be left to the imagination of the visitor, and,” as Rowley purports, “they usually fail to even try to imagine what the surroundings might mean.”<sup>75</sup>

Dion simultaneously complies with and subverts Rowley’s prescriptions in his series *Concrete Jungle* (1992-1996). In *Concrete Jungle I* (1993; Figure 34), Dion collaborated with fellow eco-artists Bob Braine and Alexis Rockman to construct and photograph a contemporary diorama depicting what nature “means for those who live in urban environments” such as New York City.<sup>76</sup> In this vignette, a taxidermy cat and a stuffed sea gull sit atop a pile of trash. Dead fish, blocks of broken concrete, old newspapers, discarded fast food containers, plastic bags, and a wooden bird cage physically fill the foreground while a painted scene of a landfill populates the background. Right above the stuffed seagull, a representation of a rat peers out of a dilapidated cement wall while painted cockroaches swarm around both their heads. Further in the distance, a massive pile of garbage sits on desolate ground. A pair of wild beasts—possibly feral dogs—battle at its base. In the smog-ridden sky, multiple sea gulls

hover above the landfill in hopes of finding their next meal while one menacing crow, whose wings are outstretched, gazes down at the apricot-furred feline. Off in the distance, skyscrapers pierce the foggy skyline, reminding us that we are witnessing the effects of urbanization, the contemporary incarnation of the Industrial Revolution.

*Concrete Jungle 1* bears many similarities to the *Cobb's Island, Virginia* diorama in the American Museum of Natural History's Hall of North American Birds (Figure 35). This diorama was fashioned in 1902 under the supervision of Rowley and Frank M. Chapman, the Curator of the Department of Ornithology, and serves as an archetypal example of the museum's display practices. In both dioramas, taxidermied specimens of indigenous animals and actual artifacts from the represented site fill the foreground while a painted backdrop creates the illusion of being on location. In *Cobb's Island, Virginia*, stuffed birds serenely soar over actual sand while a depiction of the island floats behind them. Rowley and Chapman placed their diorama behind glass while Dion photographed his. In effect, both dioramas contain their landscapes, preventing their viewers from approaching them from multiple perspectives.

However, in other works from the *Concrete Jungle* series, Dion enables his dioramas to share the same space as their viewer. For example, the trash heap of *The Birds* (1992; Figure 36) fills a corner with rubber tires, unwanted furniture, and cardboard boxes. At the garbage pyramid's base, a stuffed pigeon pecks at a few discarded French fries. Several other birds populate the piece as they perch themselves on pieces of Styrofoam, wooden crates, and plastic bags. *The Birds* also includes an ominous crow, whose unfolded wings and black feathers are rendered highly visible against the white walls behind. No longer employing a painted backdrop, Dion rids his diorama of

illusionistic context. Instead, *The Birds* infiltrates the art gallery, confronting its viewers with urban reality.

Where Rowley and Chapman show an idyllic scene, one seemingly lacking human intervention, Dion presents a reality where man abused nature. In the Concrete Jungle series, the city's inhabitants amass mounds of rubbish on off-shore locations. Animals, both domesticated and wild, are cast away from civilization and forced to scrounge for food. The peaceful waves and untouched sands of Cobb's Island are replaced with polluted skies and detritus shores. Although sharing the same language of display, Dion's dioramas subvert the story told by Rowley and Chapman. *Concrete Jungle I* demonstrates that human actions heavily impact the lives of animals, even if these actions try to remain unseen. By subverting the original use of that diorama, which was to incite conservationist mentalities by reminding people of the beautiful environments that could be lost due to our actions, Dion makes man's mistreatment of nature visible, tangible, and real. In this series, Dion does not mask our current ecological crisis but confronts viewers with physical markers of our ugly, messy relationship with nature. He re-contextualizes taxidermy to update the narrative of Rowley and Chapman's original diorama for a contemporary audience.

### **R-Related Species**

Typical to Dion's practice, the artist further subverts the language of Natural History by choosing to display taxidermy animals that neither embrace nature's uniqueness (as seen in *Wunderkammern*) nor its perfection (as seen in the diorama). Rather, he presents animals that are representative of nature's ordinariness. Dion's choice

to use taxidermy made of common species alludes to the fact that while few “people have direct contact with animals, other than pets, they remain an important part of our everyday lives. While flesh and blood experience with the animal world is diminishing, we are inundated with surrogates broadcast over every imaginable media, configured in every shape and made out of every imaginable material,” from plastic and fake fur to actual animal skins.<sup>77</sup> Dion’s use of taxidermy in works such as *The Concrete Jungle* series and *Tar and Feathers* (1995) takes into consideration the scientific notion of r-relation. Dion’s stuffed birds, squirrels, rats, cats, and snakes are memento mori, reminders of the grave situation animals currently face due to our ecological missteps.

The most visually arresting piece of taxidermy in *Concrete Jungle I* is that of an orange tabby cat. Cats were “the last of the familiar domestic animals to be domesticated.”<sup>78</sup> They were not driven away from early human settlements for they proved useful. For example, they aided in keeping places clean by efficiently catching vermin and pests while requiring very little oversight and care.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, cats are not only cherished for their practical applications but for their company.

Commonly kept as pets, cats straddle the line between commodity and companion, living in both commercial and domestic worlds. The tabby cat in particular is representative of the species’ domestic lineage. Known for its distinctive mottled coat, and often considered a cat breed itself, the tabby cat is actually a product of mixed breeding. Their unique coloration can be found in litters of almost any cat breed. Therefore, the tabby serves as a marker of man’s connections with, interventions in, and manipulations of the animal world.

As Norman Bryson describes, cats “belong to what are called r-selected species, organisms that live habitually in the abode of other creatures that build ‘nests.’ Environments that have been disrupted by human populations contain few natural predators, and guarantee a dramatically increased food supply to the r-selected species.”<sup>80</sup> These types of creatures spread parental investment across a large number of off-spring while taking advantage of their displacement by thriving in disrupted spaces.<sup>81</sup> By welcoming r-selected animals into our environments, humans caused species such as the cat to adopt accelerated procreation patterns. Because these animals multiply at an abnormal rate, “extinction [of their prey] can be brought about indirectly, through the adaptive success of species that have formed symbiotic pacts with human life.”<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, r-related species prove difficult to eradicate due to their increased fertility, keen adaptability, and reliance on humans.

Animals of this type can cause human suffering through the spread of disease, the destruction of crops, or the loss of biological diversity.<sup>83</sup> According to Dion, “biodiversity functions to indicate the health and stability of an ecosystem. As humans destroy fragile relationships within ecosystems, the aggressive r-selected species replace local plant and animal populations. Responsible for many extinctions already, these species may continue to proliferate and dominate the biological world of the future.”<sup>84</sup> Including the likes of cockroaches, rats, and pigeons, r-related species are detested, understood as “emblems of decay and contamination,” symbols of our inability to control all the facets of nature.<sup>85</sup>

In *Tar and Feathers* (1996; Figure 37), a foreboding tree rises from the wooden floor of a white-walled gallery. The barren tree’s two remaining branches are strewn with



the limp, lifeless corpses of taxidermied animals. A large cat and squirrel, both with nooses tightly cinched around their necks, hang on the left branch while a snake, bullfrog, pigeon, and starling are strung from their feet, or tails, on the right. All of these creatures, as well as the tree, are covered in black tar, its sticky surface sprinkled with a few white feathers.

This macabre installation summons images of hanging trees used by lynching mobs to assault and murder black people after the “destructive years of slavery.”<sup>86</sup> *Tar and Feathers* quotes the brutal ritual of publically hanging a person deemed guilty of a specific crime.<sup>87</sup> Tar-and-feathering the body of the culprit not only shamed them, holding them “up to the derision of the crowd,” but deterred others from committing similar offensive acts.<sup>88</sup> These acts of public murder and humiliation were reserved not only for ‘misbehaved’ African Americans but miscreant animals as well.<sup>89</sup> In *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation*, Steve Baker describes how Parisians in the eighteenth century ritually massacred alley cats.<sup>90</sup> Deeming cats an urban nuisance, printmakers rid the town of feline pests and hung their dead bodies in their shop windows for the amusement of their fellow city dwellers.<sup>91</sup>

In *Tar and Feathers*, Dion revisits these antiquated practices of punishment and ridicule, dangling the corpses of a variety of r-related species from a blackened tree. Dion returns to scenes of our unfortunate past as a means to reflect on our present ecological situation. Hal Foster, an art historian who follows in Foucault’s philosophical footsteps, argues that artists of Dion’s generation have a tendency “to *reconnect* with a lost practice in order to *disconnect* from a present way of working” and make temporal leaps in order

to “open up new sites for work” in which we can be confronted with our true relationship with nature.<sup>92</sup>

The use of taxidermy in *Tar and Feathers* has many implications. Its presence confronts the viewer, making the death of animals at the hands of man visible, palpable, and unavoidable. It aligns the body of historically persecuted black men with those of victimized animals, evidence of the cruelty we have waged against societal Others. It alludes to the entangled histories of humans and animals as well as our shared responsibility for the health of the environment. These tarred-and-feathered animals serve as warnings to others of their kind. They silently proclaim: stay away, for if you venture into human territory your death is imminent. However, *Tar and Feathers* also warns that human behavior can “set into motion chain reactions of incalculable consequence in the natural world.”<sup>93</sup> Ultimately, Dion’s tragic use of taxidermy decrees that animals are not the sole perpetrators of ecological disasters; rather, humans are accomplices in these crimes against nature.

### **Postmodernism & the Art Museum**

Although Dion’s oeuvre admonishes the authority of science and natural history museums by overturning their taxonomies “and by implication the ideologies that underpin them,” he often presents his work in art galleries and museums.<sup>94</sup> Thus, by infiltrating gallery spaces with embodied tales of Natural History, Dion also challenges the language of the art museum. His work argues that philosophies of the art museum and the natural history museum should merge for their separation promotes intellectual isolationism. According to Dion, “lack of crossover between [science] departments and

the art museum...suffocates the possibility of developing a fluid, interconnected concept of knowledge.”<sup>95</sup> With taxidermy bridging the gap between art and science, it serves as an appropriate means to revise the narratives of both institutions.

Artistic interventions in and critiques of the art museum are not novel. In *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, Kynaston McShine notes that in Paris during the early 1900s, the art world “was marked by disdain for the museum as a traditional, antiquated, aristocratic authority, lacking understanding of the art of its time.”<sup>96</sup> Considering pieces such as *In Advance of a Broken Arm* (1915) and *Fountain* (1917), it is clear that Marcel Duchamp “pointed the way in this attitude, poking fun at the museum, puncturing its pomposity, and catalyzing the Dadaists’ and Surrealists’ relative indifference to it. Duchamp and his colleagues were essentially derisive about the kind of history that the museum of that time promoted and constructed,” serving as inspiration for artists of the 1950s, such as Joseph Cornell and Robert Rauschenberg, to infiltrate the art museum with objects of science and real life.<sup>97</sup>

American artist Joseph Cornell, best known for his assemblages, filled shallow boxes with found objects, stuffed birds, and other natural remnants to construct intimate universes—or dioramas—rife with nostalgia for a simpler past. On a much larger scale, Robert Rauschenberg fashioned sculptural installations from garbage, personal artifacts, and items collected on his international travels. Following collecting habits and ordering principles reminiscent of *Wunderkammern*, he forced disparate items, such as a taxidermied Angora goat and rubber tire, to coexist in single works of art. Through his work, Rauschenberg aimed to assert his identity and explore unknown artistic frontiers. Although Cornell’s animals function differently than Rauschenberg’s, both artists longed

to take fragments of the past to create worlds marked with mystery and multiplicity. They aimed to merge the worlds of science, art, and reality. By placing stuffed wildlife within galleries, both artists combatted the authority of the modern art museum by conjuring associations with the street, the wild, and Natural History.

Cornell and Rauschenberg, by featuring taxidermy in their work, helped pave the way for Dion's artistic interventions. Dion sees his adoration of natural history museums as fuel for his animosity toward them.<sup>98</sup> Although he respects their intentions, Dion recognizes that natural history museums construct our understanding of nature while downplaying the interactions between art and science. *Wunderkammern*, however, with their popularity peaking during the Pre-Enlightenment, fashioned versions of reality rife with interdisciplinarity. Because these Cabinets of Curiosity emerged in a world free of academic disciplines, art and science could coexist without controversy.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, this method of display is seeing a resurgence in contemporary museum design.

In 1998, the American Museum of Natural History debuted their Hall of Biodiversity which “stresses the coherence and interdependence of all forms of life on earth and a new willingness to appraise the meaning of that interdependence, not just for humans but for every one of life's component parts.”<sup>100</sup> This innovative installation takes the modern diorama, which they made famous, and infuses it with the postmodern mentality of the *Wunderkammern* (Figure 38).

Instead of looking at a replica of the rainforest, visitors can now walk through an immersive diorama. Instead of viewing vignettes of lone taxidermied specimens, one can peruse the Spectrum of Life, a “100-foot-long installation [that] is arranged into 28 living groups covering 3.5 billion years of evolution.”<sup>101</sup> Against a mint green wall, a swarm of

butterflies resides next to a group of lobsters and Australian mammals while a plethora of sea creatures hang from the ceiling, appearing to swim. This ordered frenzy of animal life blurs Enlightenment boundaries and break modern diorama rules, spurring its viewer to intimately engage with the display and create a personalized chronology of evolution.

Embodied by the liminality of taxidermy, Dion creates art that is between things—between institutions, cities, centuries, philosophies, theories, and practices. In Foucauldian terms, Dion fashions heterotopias—spaces where new orders can form and new relationships can emerge—to inspire art and science museums to converge. Foucault’s investigation of natural history recognizes that the discipline “came surreptitiously into being between the age of the theatre and those of the catalogue [and] was not [conceived simply from] the desire for knowledge, but [as] a new way of connecting things both to the eye and to discourse. A new way of making history.”<sup>102</sup> By summoning taxidermy’s paradoxical powers, Dion questions the taxonomies of natural history while urging the art museum to find a new way of making history. By breaking down established hierarchies and knowledge structures, Dion investigates the relationship between art, science, and history while calling the art museum to action, encouraging it to shed the passé modern shackles of separation and proudly wear postmodern bangles of interdisciplinarity. Furthermore, through the use of taxidermy, Dion encourages us to question established evolutionary borders and strive to understand the ways in which the human and the animal are intimately connected.

## Posthumanism

On the final page of *The Order of Things*, Foucault proffers that “as the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.”<sup>103</sup> Foucault discusses how over the last few centuries, man has built hierarchies to demonstrate the superiority of man over all other living things.

However, he also argues that

“if those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility—without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises—were to cause them to crumble...then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.”<sup>104</sup>

Dion, with the aid of taxidermy, enables the arrangements Foucault mentions to crumble, allowing old conceptions of man to fade away.

According to Cary Wolfe, what Foucault draws our attention to in these final paragraphs “is that humanism is...its *own* dogma, replete with its own prejudices and assumptions,” a language able to be amended, changed, and even erased.<sup>105</sup> By encouraging us to redefine the concept of ‘man,’ Foucault incited the birth of Posthumanist discourse. Although first published in the late 1960s, *The Order of Things* foreshadowed theories and philosophies that would take hold of the spheres of social science, humanities, and contemporary art in the early 1990s and 2000s.<sup>106</sup>

Essentially, Posthumanism insists that we recognize that humans and animals were, are, and continue to be entangled—historically, socially, and individually. This realization will theoretically allow us to overcome human exceptionalism and see the animality within humanity.<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, Posthumanism “has profound implications” concerning “how we think about the human in relation to the animal, about the body, and

embodiment.”<sup>108</sup> Because of these newly acknowledged connections between man and animal, “we can no longer talk of *the* body in a traditional sense.”<sup>109</sup> We need to conceive of new ways to illustrate the true nature of man. Taxidermy, constructed of both human and animal materials, proves itself an appropriate means to do just that. Taxidermy can keenly comment on Posthuman theories by representing man’s entanglements with the natural world. Moreover, with its animal exterior and human interior, taxidermy emphasizes that animals and humans share intrinsic characteristics, aiding in redefining what it means to be human.

## **Conclusion**

Dion acknowledges that “although we can cling to the distinctions that separate us from nature, animals, or beauty, we can alternatively let go, relax, and become something altogether more complex.”<sup>110</sup> Dion undermines “the perception of certainty and inscrutability of the scientific system by” using taxidermy to illustrate “the internal ironies lodged in the practices of natural scientists and museums,” revealing the paradoxical origins of the discipline.<sup>111</sup> Dion’s work not only reminds us that human beings are part of Natural History but that Natural History is written by human beings.<sup>112</sup>

Presently, we live in a world similar to that of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries. Both of these eras mark periods in time when technological advancements caused virtual realities to usurp authentic experiences. Issues of animal extinction, the depletion of natural resources, and human desire to reconnect with animal-populated worlds have not disappeared; instead, they have gained urgency. Dion’s taxidermied animals encourage us to rewrite the story of man’s relationship with nature,

silently asking us to embrace, not ignore, our inner animality. Dion uses taxidermy to give physical presence to Posthuman philosophies, to reflect on our past while holding a mirror up to our present.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Petra Lange-Berndt and Dietmar Rübel, eds., *Mark Dion: The Academy of Things*, (Hamburg: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2015), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Giovanni Aloï, *Art and Animals*, London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 146.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Marbury, *Taxidermy Art: A Rogue's Guide to the Work, the Culture, and How to Do it Yourself*, (New York: Artisan, 2014), 105.

<sup>4</sup> Giovanni Aloï, *Art and Animals*, 146.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 146-147.

<sup>6</sup> Colleen Sheehy, "Taxidermy and Extinction: Considering the Work of Mark Dion," *Constellation* (June, 2010), <http://quodlibetica.com/taxidermy-and-extinction-considering-the-work-of-mark-dion/>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Giovanni Aloï, *Art and Animals*, 147; Mark Dion and Alex Rockman in Conversation with Tom Baione, *Slide Slam: From Archive to Art*, Special Lecture held in honor of the launch of its online database of digital images, American Museum of Natural History, Central Park West at 79<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, New York, April 28, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Marbury, *Taxidermy Art*, 105.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> *Mark Dion*, <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/mark-dion/>. Accessed 5.20.2014.

<sup>14</sup> *New Bedford, MA – Community Profile*, <http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/read/socialsci/pdf/MA/newbedford-ma.pdf>, accessed March 19, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Colleen Sheehy, "Taxidermy and Extinction."

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Norman Bryson, Lisa Graziose Corrin, and Miwon Kwon, *Mark Dion*, (London: Phaidon, 1997), 9.

<sup>20</sup> Sheehy, "Taxidermy and Extinction."

<sup>21</sup> *Black Rhino*, <http://worldwildlife.org/species/black-rhino>. May 18, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Joan B. Landes, Paula Young Lee, and Paul Youngquist, eds., "Conversation with Mark Dion," in *Gorgeous Beasts: Animal Bodies in Historical Perspective*, (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 177.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Javier Pes, "Marking Time," *Museum Practice* (Autumn 2007): 32-33.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Dion and Alex Rockman in Conversation with Tom Baione, *Slide Slam: From Archive to Art*.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Norman Bryson, Lisa Graziose Corrin, and Miwon Kwon, *Mark Dion*, 39.

<sup>29</sup> Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 33.

<sup>30</sup> Carolyn Gray Anderson, "Ignotum per ignotius or The Wunderkammer-Logic of Natural History," *Die Wunderkammer* (Munich: K-raum Daxer, November, 1993).

<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 1966/2002), xxvi.

<sup>32</sup> Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*, (University Park, PA.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 114.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Carla Yanni, *Nature's Museums: Victorian Science and the Architecture of Display*, (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 131.



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- <sup>35</sup> Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, "'Thought in Things': Modernity, History, and North American Museums," *Isis* Vol. 96 No. 4 (December 2005): 591-592.
- <sup>36</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 148.
- <sup>37</sup> Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/taxonomy>, January 13, 2014.
- <sup>38</sup> Anderson, "Ignotum per ignotius or The Wunderkammer-Logic of Natural History."
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>40</sup> Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*, 118.
- <sup>41</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xxii-xxiii.
- <sup>42</sup> Mark Dion, Accessed 5.14.2014, <http://www.art21.org/images/mark-dion/tar-and-feathers-1996>.
- <sup>43</sup> Petra Lange-Berndt and Dietmar Rübel, eds., *Mark Dion: The Academy of Things*, 149
- <sup>44</sup> Paula Findlen. *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Modern Italy*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 59.
- <sup>45</sup> Kynaston McShine, *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999).
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup> Margo DeMello, *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies*, (New York: Columbia University, 2012), 41.
- <sup>49</sup> Alessandro Vincentello, ed., *A Duck for Darwin: Evolutionary Thinking & the Struggle to Exist*, (Gateshead, UK: Baltic, 2009), 9.
- <sup>50</sup> Barbara Pollack, "Animal House: Naturalist-artist Mark Dion gives the wilderness an urban home," *ARTnews*, (January 2003): 108-111.
- <sup>51</sup> Javier Pes, "Marking Time," 34.
- <sup>52</sup> Patrick Mauriès, *Cabinets of Curiosities* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 23, 150.
- <sup>53</sup> Colleen J. Sheehy, ed., *Cabinet of Curiosities: Mark Dion and the University as Installation*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xiii.
- <sup>54</sup> Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*, 17.
- <sup>55</sup> Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, 1.
- <sup>56</sup> Norman Bryson, Lisa Graziose Corrin, and Miwon Kwon, *Mark Dion*, 52.
- <sup>57</sup> William E. Connolly, "Materialities of Experience," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010), 180.
- <sup>58</sup> Paul Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, 43.
- <sup>59</sup> Petra Lange-Berndt and Dietmar Rübel, eds., *Mark Dion: The Academy of Things*, 137.
- <sup>60</sup> Stephen T. Asma, *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads: The Culture and Evolution of Natural History Museums*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 73.
- <sup>61</sup> Patrick Mauriès, *Cabinets of Curiosities*, 34.
- <sup>62</sup> Giovanni Aloï, *Art and Animals*, 31-32.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>64</sup> Contrary to popular belief, magpies are not inherently attracted to shiny objects. Ecologist Time Birkhead, in regards to the results of a recent study, proclaims that "magpies don't steal. There is absolutely no evidence that people have ever found anything silver or shiny in a magpie's nest. However, he says they are very inquisitive birds and do pick up all sorts of things to explore them." "The Truth About Magpies," <http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20150408-the-truth-about-magpies>, accessed 4.17.2015.
- <sup>65</sup> Dion, "Some Notes Towards a Manifesto for Artists Working With or About the Living World," in *Art and Animals*, Giovanni Aloï, (London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 2012),
- <sup>66</sup> Karen Wonders, *Windows on Nature: The Great Habitat Dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002), 8.
- <sup>67</sup> Karen Wonders, *Habitat Dioramas: Illusions of Wilderness in Museums of Natural History*, (Sweden: Upsala, 1993), 10.
- <sup>68</sup> Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*, 6.
- <sup>69</sup> Karen Wonders, *Habitat Dioramas: Illusions of Wilderness in Museums of Natural History*, 140.
- <sup>70</sup> John Rowley, *Taxidermy and Museum Exhibition*, (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1925), 300-301.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid, 316.

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- <sup>72</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid, 304.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid, 316.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid, 305.
- <sup>76</sup> Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman, eds. *Concrete Jungle: A Pop Media Investigation of Death and Survival in Urban Ecosystems* (New York: Juno Books, 1996), 6.
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid, 7-8.
- <sup>78</sup> Katherine M. Rogers, *Cat* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 9.
- <sup>79</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>80</sup> Norman Bryson, Lisa Graziose Corrin, and Miwon Kwon, *Mark Dion*, 92.
- <sup>81</sup> Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman in Conversation with Tom Baione, *Slide Slam*.
- <sup>82</sup> Norman Bryson, Lisa Graziose Corrin, and Miwon Kwon, *Mark Dion*, 92.
- <sup>83</sup> Ibid, 118.
- <sup>84</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>85</sup> Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman, eds., *Concrete Jungle*, 8.
- <sup>86</sup> Phyllis R. Klotman, "Tearing a Hole in History": Lynching as Theme and Motif," *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 19 No. 2 (Summer, 1985): 55.
- <sup>87</sup> Ibid, 56.
- <sup>88</sup> Benjamin H. Irvin, "Tar, Feathers, and the Enemies of American Liberties, 1768-1776," *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 76 No. 2 (Jun., 2003): 206.
- <sup>89</sup> V.A.C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People, 1770-1868*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 283-284.
- <sup>90</sup> Steve Baker, *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation*, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), 7.
- <sup>91</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>92</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1996), 3.
- <sup>93</sup> Norman Bryson, Lisa Graziose Corrin, and Miwon Kwon, *Mark Dion*, 47.
- <sup>94</sup> Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, 35.
- <sup>95</sup> Norman Bryson, Lisa Graziose Corrin, and Miwon Kwon, *Mark Dion*, 80.
- <sup>96</sup> Kynaston McShine, *The Museum as Muse*, 11.
- <sup>97</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>98</sup> Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman in Conversation with Tom Baione, *Slide Slam*.
- <sup>99</sup> Stephen T. Asma, *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads*, xiii.
- <sup>100</sup> "In the Hall of Biodiversity," *The New York Times*, (June 1, 1998), Accessed May 7, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/06/01/opinion/in-the-hall-of-biodiversity.html>.
- <sup>101</sup> "The Spectrum of Life," *The American Museum of Natural History*, Accessed May 7, 2015, <http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent-exhibitions/biodiversity-and-environmental-halls/hall-of-biodiversity/the-spectrum-of-life>.
- <sup>102</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 143.
- <sup>103</sup> Ibid, 422.
- <sup>104</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>105</sup> Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xiv.
- <sup>106</sup> Ibid, xi.
- <sup>107</sup> Karen Weil, *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 147.
- <sup>108</sup> Carey Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, xxii.
- <sup>109</sup> Ibid, xxiii.
- <sup>110</sup> Nato Thompson, *Becoming Animal: Contemporary Art in the Animal Kingdom*, (North Adams, MA: Mass MoCA Publications, 2005), 15.
- <sup>111</sup> Norman Bryson, Lisa Graziose Corrin, and Miwon Kwon, *Mark Dion*, 47.
- <sup>112</sup> Jim Lewis, "The Know-it-All." *T Magazine: New York Time Style Magazine* (March 30 2012), <http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/30/the-know-it-all/>.
- <sup>113</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, ix.

### Chapter 3: Maurizio Cattelan

“Maurizio Cattelan has created some of the most unforgettable images in recent contemporary art,” argues curator Nancy Spector.<sup>1</sup> Working in a hyperrealistic style, Cattelan creates veristic sculptures that reflect contradictions prevalent in today’s society.<sup>2</sup> The work is at once bold, irreverent, and “deadly serious in its scathing critique of authority and the abuse of power.”<sup>3</sup> Disregarding traditional understandings of art, Cattelan defies categorization by eschewing mediums such as painting, sculpture, and video.<sup>4</sup> Instead, he favors installation-based practices that incorporate performative elements, photographic image, and unorthodox materials, such as taxidermy.<sup>5</sup> With a flair for the dramatic, Cattelan is known for his theatrical vignettes in which wax-cast school children endure real world travesties (Figure 39), popes are struck by meteorites (Figure 40), and taxidermied animals bear the weight of human emotion. Cattelan’s concern for image and encounter imbues his oeuvre with a corporeality that focuses attention on the physical weight of his artworks as well as their metaphorical mass. Despite the fact that Cattelan’s work is consistently characterized as being all about surface, there is much information hidden within its core.

With his art, Cattelan laughs in the face of authority, conflates the notion of the museum with that of the amusement park, and obsesses over death. Taxidermy not only aids Cattelan in exposing the paradoxes that plague contemporary culture but allows him to engage in acts of disruption and inhabit worlds of morbidity and animality. For Cattelan, the term ‘morbidity’ is a double-edge sword because, as the artist describes, “There is a really great coincidence between Italian and English....The word ‘morbido’, which sounds like the English word ‘morbidity’, means soft and tender. Of course in

English, ‘morbid’ means something creepy and deathly.”<sup>6</sup> This coincidence intrigues Cattelan because if he could situate his “work anywhere, it would be somewhere in that area, between softness and perversity. It should be tender, comforting and seductive, yet corrupted.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Cattelan sees our attitudes toward authority and childhood as being in a perpetual state of conflict. The artist opines that “You can’t really untangle your feelings about childhood, or authority—or death, for that matter. They repel you, yet at the same time you are strangely attracted, too.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the abject medium of taxidermy, which is forever at odds with itself, wields paradoxical powers that both reflect and challenge the realities of living in a world beset with contradiction.

## **Despair**

Maurizio Cattelan (b. 1960) was born in Padua, Italy and raised by a hard-working blue-collar family. His father was a truck driver and his mother worked as a house maid. Throughout most of his adolescence, Cattelan’s mother suffered from lymphatic cancer.<sup>9</sup> Due to her illness, Cattelan’s mother exhibited a fervent religiosity in hopes of alleviating the physical and emotional pain caused by her disease, exposing Cattelan to the strict ritualistic world of Catholicism.<sup>10</sup> Because his parents were firmly rooted in the lower-class, Cattelan endured a poverty-stricken childhood. He was trained to be an electrician at the age of twelve and at the age of seventeen he dropped out of school in order to care for his younger sisters and contribute to the family income.

Throughout his youth, Cattelan was constantly reprimanded for bad behavior. He became intimately familiar with menial tasks having worked as an apprentice gardener, a church-shop sales-boy, a Laundromat attendant, and an assistant medical technician in a

morgue. All of these experiences instilled Cattelan with an awareness of mortality, a distaste for authority, and a fear of failure—especially since he was fired by each of his employers for insubordination.<sup>11</sup> Essentially, Cattelan was deprived of being a kid because his childhood was usurped by adulthood.

Memories of his less-than-ideal childhood provided Cattelan with intense inspiration for his artistic pursuits. Looking back on his time as an amateur mortician, Cattelan remembers dealing with real corpses and being struck by how “they seemed so deaf, distant.”<sup>12</sup> Their stillness haunted Cattelan and eventually dictated his approach to sculpture for, in the artist’s own words, “when I think of a sculpture, I always imagine it like that, far away, in some way already dead.”<sup>13</sup> Coupled with a keen cognizance of his past socio-economic rank, Cattelan’s preoccupation with the reality of death served as a creative force, dictating many of his material choices.

Cattelan’s career as a fine artist officially began in 1989 when he started tinkering with photography, performance, and objects that straddled the line between art and design. For the next few years, Cattelan used his artwork to criticize the gallery scene and interrogate social norms, histories, and hierarchies. He poked fun at authority, dealt with personal anxieties, and attempted to fulfill fantasies of escape. It was not until the late 1990s that Cattelan turned to wax and taxidermy as feasible artistic media.<sup>14</sup> At the same time that Cattelan began creating hyper-realistic figural sculptures—of himself, faceless everymen (such as the homeless or the police), and recognizable individuals (like the Pope, Adolf Hitler, and John F. Kennedy)—to investigate power structures, he began to employ the stuffed animal body as a means to explore emotionally-charged aspects of

contemporary life. Both wax figures and taxidermied animals provided Cattelan with unsettling veristic vessels that he could fill with meaning.<sup>15</sup>

In *Untitled (The Ballad of Trotsky)* (1996; Figure 41)—Cattelan’s first piece featuring taxidermy—a stuffed horse hangs from the ceiling. Suspended from a leather harness encircling its large midsection, this plump chocolate-colored beast gazes helplessly toward the distant ground below. Although he yearns to have his hooves firmly rooted beneath him, his dream will never be achieved. The installation’s original title refers to “popular folk songs composed in Mexico to honor the assassinated Soviet revolutionary, Leon Trotsky,” further imbuing the piece with an undercurrent of failure.<sup>16</sup>

Long associated with the aristocracy, horses are typically depicted as majestic, beautiful, and noble.<sup>17</sup> Equestrian statues, a common type of public monument seen throughout Italy, play with these popular notions by perching an honorable man and his trusty steed on a tall pedestal, causing them to stand high above their viewer. One of Italy’s most celebrated statues, Donatello’s *Gattamelata Monument*, sits “in front of the cathedral in Padua. As a child, Cattelan saw it almost every day as his school was nearby” and memories of passing by this masterpiece inspired him to appropriate the traditional motif of the equine statue.<sup>18</sup>

In the *Gattamelata Monument*, mercenary Erasmo da Narni is depicted as fully armed, capable of controlling his four-legged beast and the city of Padua.<sup>19</sup> Cattelan’s horse, however, has been abandoned by his rider, ripped from his pedestal and forgotten by history. Rather than powerfully presiding over his viewer, the horse pathetically hangs in the air. No longer handled by an accomplished warrior, Cattelan’s stallion has his every movement dictated by the whim of the wind.

Although *Untitled (The Ballad of Trotsky)* conveys an overwhelming sense of helplessness, Cattelan was displeased with the work. Feeling as though the final product was unsuccessful, for it did not produce what the artist deemed an indelible image, Cattelan revisited *Untitled (The Ballad of Trotsky)* in 1997. He replaced the original horse with the stuffed body of Tiramisu, a former racehorse. In this second iteration, the horse's legs are much longer and neck lengthier. His head is positioned closer to the ground. These exaggerated limbs and drooping posture better accentuate the powerlessness of the horse and "the hopelessness of the horse's situation as if it has already resigned to its fate and succumbed to the effects of gravity."<sup>20</sup>

Renamed *Novecento* (1997; Figure 42), Cattelan's title makes reference to a 1970s film about the rise of Italian fascism and a conservative Milanese artistic movement of the 1920s.<sup>21</sup> It also conjures notions of the Nineteenth century, a distant past where horses were relied on for transportation. However, in the twenty-first century these animals were deemed inferior to machines so they were systematically replaced by automobiles, trains, and other mechanical innovations of the Industrial Revolution. Today, yesterday's heroes are hung up and left out to dry.

*Untitled (The Ballad of Trotsky)* and *Novecento*, while poetically embodying tragic moments of despair throughout history, also memorialize Cattelan's personal fear of failure, serving as veritable self-portraits.<sup>22</sup> Although taxidermy inherently blurs the boundaries between life and death, Cattelan exploits the stuffed animal body's power of paradox by allowing it to straddle the line between the human and the animal, the public and the personal, the past and the present, as well as the real and the imagined. Cattelan harnesses the visceral power of taxidermy while bringing the medium's historical,

cultural, and theoretical associations into play. Metaphorically, Cattelan uses taxidermy to explore human foibles—latching onto the centuries-long trend of projecting human emotion onto the animal body—and better know the eccentricities, weaknesses, and imperfections of mankind. Physically, Cattelan uses taxidermy’s corporeality to subvert conventional museum practices and disrupt typical viewing experiences.

### **Disruption**

Cattelan has a penchant for breaking the rules. As a child, Cattelan disobeyed the rules of his employers; as an adult, Cattelan disobeys the rules of the museum. Both *Untitled (The Ballad of Trotsky)* and *Novecento* dangle a horse over our heads, disrupting conventional art viewing conditions. Cattelan’s penchant for disruption—and hanging things—is exemplified by his retrospective exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. In the fall of 2011, Cattelan suspended his entire oeuvre in the center of the Guggenheim’s iconic rotunda for *Maurizio Cattelan: All*, becoming the first artist to completely disregard the museum’s walls (Figure 43).<sup>23</sup> Upon entering the iconic Frank Lloyd Wright designed building—known for its spiraled gallery, ceiling skylight, and naturally illuminated rotunda—one was greeted by dimness, not brightness. Usually airy and open, the entirety of the museum’s open spiral was cluttered with hanging objects, one-hundred and twenty-eight of them to be exact. Normally, art is hung on the walls, each piece carefully placed in a specific bay; Cattelan’s art, however, disrespectfully hung from the oculus like individuals silently suffering their death in the gallows. *All* not only symbolically murdered Cattelan’s entire artistic output, marking the artist’s



retirement and the end of his visual arts career, but attempted to silence the authoritative voice of the Guggenheim.

Conceived as a communal temple, a place for shared yet “private and intimate experience[s],” the Guggenheim strives to provide visitors with a site replete with opportunities for reflection and discussion. The museum strives to design exhibitions that promote “confrontation, experimentation, and debate,” inciting its international audience to understand “the art of our time.”<sup>24</sup> However, *All* sidelined instruction in favor of entertainment. Because no wall labels accompanied the exhibition, the historical, social, and political commentary offered by the art was difficult to harvest. By emphasizing experience over education, *All* disregarded traditional display practices thereby challenging the museum’s authority and disrupting its spatial integrity.

Acts of spatial disruption are not foreign to Cattelan. In fact, much of his art relies on destabilizing the environment in which it is presented. For instance, *Untitled* (1997; Figure 44), a large rectangular hole and pile of removed soil, represents the beginning of the artist’s escape route from the gallery at Le Consortium in Dijon, France. In *Untitled* (2001; Figure 45), a wax mannequin of Cattelan breaks through the ground of a museum. Cattelan’s plasticized doppelgänger grasps the hole’s ragged edge as he peeks out from below the floorboards. This motif of breaking into or out of the gallery continues in *Untitled* (1997; Figure 46), where a stuffed male ostrich thrusts his head into the strips of wood beneath his feet, leaving behind a pile of wood shavings around his scrawny neck. Hiding in plain sight, wishing he were somewhere else, this flightless bird encourages its viewer to experience “a sense of double reality.”<sup>25</sup>

Although the body of the bird has been manipulated and filled with artificial materials, the feathers, skin, and talons of the ostrich are actual remnants of the deceased animal. The external materiality of the taxidermied bird produces a situation “real enough to invite the visitor into its own fiction.”<sup>26</sup> Unencumbered by a pedestal, the sculpture is accessible. The young ostrich is presented in the gallery as if it were in nature. By being allowed to share the same space as its viewer, the ostrich transports them into the space of the artwork.<sup>27</sup> The viewer is invited to directly engage with the animal, even though the bird is not aware of their presence. Due to the paradoxical nature of the taxidermied ostrich, which yields an illusion of life predicated on the reality of death, *Untitled* causes its viewer to momentarily exist in a realm permeated by the real *and* the imagined. Upon witnessing this stuffed ostrich in a museum, which is acting like an ostrich living in the wild, the viewer is not only transported into the ostrich’s world but the ostrich is forced to inhabit the viewer’s terrain. Both are engaged in an act of ‘mutual trespassing,’ where art and observer are caught invading each other’s space.<sup>28</sup>

Of the one-hundred and twenty-eight works that hung from the Guggenheim’s ceiling, and comprise Cattelan’s career, eighteen of them feature taxidermied animals. These works, including the aforementioned reluctant ostrich, set up unavoidable, confrontational situations when placed within the walls of a gallery. Taxidermied animals, when used in an artistic context, not only get in your way but create unsettling experiences. For example, in *Stone Dead* (1997; Figure 47) a dog, with its feet curled up under its chin, sleeps peacefully at the base of a white marble fireplace in a gallery of the Castello di Rivoli Museo d’Arte Contemporanea in Torino, Italy. The mottled fur and rounded contours of the sleeping animal mirror the color scheme and decorative details of

its surroundings; however, the soft texture of the dog's pelt contrasts with the rigidity of the stone underneath its body. At first glance, this appears to be a comfortable napping spot but, with no fire burning, the hearth must be uncomfortably cold. After a bit more deliberation, it becomes clear that the dog is not sleeping but dead, preserved in a pose of eternal slumber.

Although dogs are typically encountered in domestic settings and not commonly seen in museums, it is possible that the curator decided to bring their pet to work that day. The dog's "domesticity functions as a kind of camouflage, delaying and intensifying the moment of comprehension" when one realizes the decontextualized dog is in fact dead.<sup>29</sup> *Stone Dead* acts, according to Michael Fried, like a literalist piece of art for it creates "a situation—one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*."<sup>30</sup> Cattelan's taxidermied animals "*confront* the beholder" by being "placed not just in his space but in his way."<sup>31</sup> Within the museum, the taxidermied animal body fosters a theatrical encounter, demanding to be recognized as an active agent and not a passive object.

According to Steve Baker in *The Postmodern Animal*, works such as *Stone Dead* become obstacles whose function "is not to be something itself, but to do something to the beholder."<sup>32</sup> Cattelan's installation is not self-contained; rather, it is "unable to contain itself" for it needs to be re-animated by the presence its beholder.<sup>33</sup> Cattelan's stuffed animals create situations that not only subvert conventional museum practices but bind together the bodies of the taxidermied animals and its viewer, forming a new, posthuman being.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, these situations are not only awkward but anxiety inducing. They force their beholder to contemplate the essence of life, the reality of death, and the nature of their own existence. When in the company of one of Cattelan's

taxidermied animals, the beholder is prompted to consider their environment as well as their individuality.

## Identity

*Stone Dead*, and other works such as *Good Boy* (1998; Figure 48), place familiar canine bodies in unexpected places. Cattelan's avoidance of traditional exhibition tactics—such as putting sculptures on pedestals or cordoning them off with rope—enables his taxidermied dogs to inhabit the same space as their viewers. Although dogs are typically encountered in domestic spheres, their presence in a gallery is not immediately off-putting. Once the true nature of the dog's state of being is realized, however, its beholder becomes unsettled, feeling either distanced or crowded—and always decentered—by its silent presence.<sup>35</sup>

Because they forge connections between human and animal bodies, Cattelan's creatures decenter their beholders by creating “valuable conceptual space” in which animals can be “shifted out of cultural margins” and recognized as equals to their human counterpart.<sup>36</sup> They allow familiar stereotypes, which work to sustain the illusion of human superiority and animal inferiority, to be questioned.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, in addition to disrupting the landscape of the museum, Cattelan's taxidermied animals have the ability to uproot notions of the self, forcing their beholder to unearth, question, and reshape their identity.

Correlations between animals and human identity are nothing new. Philosopher Mary Midgley observes that “our difference from other species may be striking, but comparisons with them have always been, and must be, crucial to our view of

ourselves.”<sup>38</sup> John Berger, in the famed essay “Why Look at Animals?,” argues that when looking at an animal, man becomes aware of the animal looking back at him and, more importantly, “of himself returning the look.”<sup>39</sup> When looking at an animal, whose inner thoughts are present yet undecipherable, we are forced to contemplate our own self. Thus, animals serve as “mirrors,” for they encourage us to see parts of our character that are “otherwise never reflected.”<sup>40</sup> Jacques Derrida concurs with this assertion. In the essay “The Animal That Therefore I Am,” the philosopher states that sharing a gaze with an animal prods us humans to ruminate on our identity and eventually recognize our true, unencumbered self.<sup>41</sup>

Taxidermied animals also serve as mirrors that prompt their viewers to experience moments of self-reflection. Taxidermy is not only a sign of cross-species intimacy but one of desire and longing.<sup>42</sup> Preserving an animal prolongs a gaze, or an emotional encounter, once shared by a human and an animal. Looking at a taxidermied animal thus mimics the act of looking at a live animal. Although the eyes of a stuffed animal are made of glass rather than rods and cones, they still fill their viewer with a sense of being watched and an awareness of their own mortality.

The centuries-old habit of pet keeping speaks to the ways humans use animals to establish their identity. Pet ownership became extremely popular at the dawn of postmodernity and has continued to persist. With a noted decline of the nuclear family in the 1960s and 70s, people started to own pets in order to fill familial voids.<sup>43</sup> Caring for a pet is a decentering act because it forces an individual to consider the needs and idiosyncrasies of another living creature, not just their own.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, pets can serve as surrogate children or markers of the owner’s sense of self because, as John Berger

argues, the pet *completes* the owner, “offering responses to aspects of his character which would otherwise remain unconfirmed.”<sup>45</sup> Consequently, pets are extensions of their owners. One’s dog, for instance, may not only be a faithful companion but a physical manifestation of one’s inner self, a means to affirm and project one’s identity.

Taxidermied pets therefore mark an attempt to make a deceased loved one immortal, an attempt to preserve a beloved animal’s body and (their owner’s) personality. Acts of pet owning and pet preservation, both signs of cross-species intimacy,<sup>46</sup> signal a desire for humans to equate themselves with animals. Yet, while the taxidermied dogs of *Stone Dead* and *Good Boy* conjure memories of the intimate interactions we share with our pets, it also bridges the gap between humans and animals in another way. According to John Berger, animal life and human life essentially run parallel to one another and “only in death do the two parallel lines converge and after death, perhaps, cross over to become parallel again.”<sup>47</sup> It is in the shared experience of death that both species are truly united, where boundaries are crossed, and when identities are conflated. Taxidermy, of both domestic and wild animals, thus captures this moment of convergence.

Ever since he was a child, Cattelan has identified himself with the donkey.<sup>48</sup> Characterized as the jester of the animal kingdom, donkeys are universal symbols of foolishness. With Cattelan regarding himself as the reigning buffoon of the art world, the donkey seems a fitting surrogate for the self-deprecating artist. In an effort to explore this affiliation, Cattelan fashioned a couple of self-portraits featuring taxidermied donkeys. In *Untitled* (2002; Figure 49), which gives three dimensional form to a popular internet meme that went viral in the 1990s,<sup>49</sup> Cattelan strapped a preserved donkey to an overloaded cart whose extreme weight lifts the imprudent animal off the ground, leaving

the donkey suspended in desperation. Comically seated on his posterior, with back legs spread out in front of him, the stuffed donkey of *Un Asino Tra i Dottori* (*An Ass Among the Doctors*) (2004; Figure 50) looks as if part of a popular cartoon. His amusing posture and big, brown eyes, while inviting us to sympathize with the donkey, also suggest that the animal—or artist—is caught up in a moment of stubborn refusal.<sup>50</sup>

Art historian Ron Broglio, who is interested in animal phenomenology, would argue that both *Untitled* and *Un Asino Tra i Dottori* not only encourage us to understand Cattelan—and ourselves—in animal terms but “negotiate the space of the animal other,” allowing us to contemplate how animals perceive the world.<sup>51</sup> Although these sculptures can be understood as symbols of Cattelan’s character, they should be understood as embodiments of the artist’s clownish identity. Cattelan’s persona metaphorically fills the interior space of the taxidermied donkey. Consequently, the taxidermied animals function as intermediaries. Their preserved skin, a permeable “site of productive engagement,” is a place where human and animal perspectives can unite.<sup>52</sup> As both object and agent, these taxidermied donkeys take on the persona of Cattelan, acting in the world as he would, while influencing these actions, inflecting them with a particular brand of animality.

Both donkeys and humans are sentient creatures that engage with their environment. Although it has been long assumed that animals act in highly predictable and mechanical ways, it is becoming clear that certain animals exhibit higher-level cognitive functions and “many animals...have the intellectual capability and self-awareness necessary to be considered agents in their own lives.”<sup>53</sup> Even though the donkeys of *Untitled* and *Un Asino Tra i Dottori* have anthropomorphic intentions, encouraging us “to view an animal’s actions in terms of our own conscious motives,”

they also prompt us to reconsider these motives because we “may not be as conscious,” or uniquely human, as we think we are.<sup>54</sup>

The taxidermied donkeys of *Untitled* and *Un Asino Tra I Dottori*, which are metaphorically filled with Cattelan’s human identity, embolden us to see the world through animal eyes, to live in the skin of an animal other, to perceive the world as they do. They are paradoxical embodiments of modern anthropocentric perspectives, postmodern artistic intentions, and posthuman objectives. They demonstrate that the animal body can be a conduit for humanist ideas and a channel for animal experience. Taxidermy, by blurring the border between humans, animals, and their shared environment, is thus disruptive. It both centers and decenters its human viewer by prompting moments of self-reflection and empathic recognition. As “questioning entities,”<sup>55</sup> taxidermy not only asks us discover the animal within the human but the human within the animal.

Furthermore, in *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation*, Steve Baker contends that conceptions of human identity is derived from the myriad ways in which animal images are used in popular culture.<sup>56</sup> Baker goes on to say that, “Any understanding of [an] animal...will be informed by and inseparable from our knowledge of its cultural representation. Culture shapes our reading of animals just as much as animals shape our reading of culture” and ourselves.<sup>57</sup> For instance, by sculpturally manifesting the bizarre yet widespread image of a helpless donkey in *Untitled*, Cattelan used a piece of popular culture to give physical form to his identity and, concurrently, his societal role. Therefore, in both *Untitled* and *Un Asino Tra I Dottori*, Cattelan displays



the particulars of his character by referencing cultural representations of a living and tapping into taxidermy's power of convergence.

## Childhood

Taxidermy not only informs Cattelan's investigation of identity but his exploration of childhood. It is during these formative years that humans begin to understand their surroundings as well as their inner selves. And, since childhood, we are trained to impose individual identities and human characteristics onto the animal body because the animal—both the idea of the animal as well as the actual animal—is “directly important in the child's formation of a sense of self.”<sup>58</sup> Peter H. Kahn, professor of Psychology, and Stephen Kellert, professor emeritus of Social Ecology, argue that

“for much of human evolution, the natural world constituted one of the most important contexts children encountered during their critical years of maturation. It would not be too bold to assert that direct and indirect experience of nature has been and may possibly remain a critical component in human physical, emotional, intellectual, and even moral development.”<sup>59</sup>

For children, interactions with animals incite feelings of compassion, aide in the improvement of motor skills, and impact the construction of their developing identity.

In *The Significance of Children and Animals: Social Development and Our Connections with Other Species*, Gene Myers analyzes data culled from a variety of studies he conducted with preschool aged students. His conclusions reason that “the young child's self includes the animal in the sense of caring for it, wanting to continue to interact with it, and finding similarities to it.”<sup>60</sup> Animals are deemed peers by children, individuals with whom they want to socialize and imitate. Myers continues, arguing that

“*The qualities animals potently symbolize for young children are not just arbitrary. They include agency or autonomy, coherence, or wholeness, feeling,*

and continuity. These qualities will become quite familiar to us and are central in the child's own experience of self. Animals represent them because they display them with immediate and compelling vitality."<sup>61</sup>

Animals are therefore positive role models for children because they teach them how to be complete, autonomous individuals.

In the field of Psychology, the mind and bodies of children and animals are, metaphorically speaking, strongly linked.<sup>62</sup> In *Totem and Taboo*, Sigmund Freud argues that

"children show no trace of the arrogance which urges adult civilized men to draw a hard-and-fast line between their own nature and that of all other animals. Children have no scruples over allowing animals to rank as their full equals. Uninhibited as they are in the avowal of their bodily needs, they no doubt feel themselves more akin to animals than to their elders, who may well be a puzzle to them."<sup>63</sup>

This direct correlation between the body of the child and the body of the animal, as Freud suggests, can be extrapolated to incorporate the mind for both act on instinct, tending toward destructive and selfish behavior.<sup>64</sup> Due to the myriad physical and psychological resemblances between children and animals, the boundary between humanity and animality are greatly blurred during childhood, making taxidermy an apt medium for exploring the realities associated with this point in human development.

In *Bidibidobidiboo* (1996; Figure 51), a life-sized taxidermied squirrel has committed suicide. He sits slumped over a cheap yellow Formica table in the middle of a miniaturized kitchen. An empty water glass sits atop the table, just out of reach, while a revolver lies at his feet. In the background, a dingy white ceramic sink is filled with dirty dishes and a stained water heater hangs on the wall. Although there is a second chair at the kitchen table, suggesting that the squirrel at one point had a visitor, it is no longer occupied. He is alone. Rather than continue living in economic despair, the lonesome,

poverty-stricken squirrel chose to end his life. He decided to escape from rather than endure his unfortunate circumstances. Demonstrating agency, this squirrel made sure the conditions of his life were no longer dictated to him but the product of his own doing.

When conceiving of this piece, Cattelan wanted to merge two worlds, that of the real world and cartoons, by placing a squirrel in a kitchen.<sup>65</sup> The kitchen he ended up creating is a replica of his family's kitchen, the kitchen in which he grew up.<sup>66</sup> Because of these autobiographical overtones, the taxidermied squirrel of *Bidibidobidiboo* can be understood as a surrogate for a juvenile Cattelan. Now, instead of a donkey, Cattelan identifies himself with a gray squirrel. Biologically speaking, this species is highly adaptable; yet, despite their evolutionary fortitude, they are frequently exterminated because of their affiliation with rats and other unwanted vermin. Relating the conditions of Cattelan's upbringing and the source of his anxieties to the squirrel's overwhelming associations with failure, a stuffed squirrel proves an admirable surrogate for the artist.

Additionally, because animals are intimately linked with children, this taxidermied squirrel can embody Cattelan's adolescent psychological state. The stuffed squirrel acts out the rebellious desires of the artist's teenaged self, a young boy who was forced to grow up too fast because he was born into a working-class family. In addition, Cattelan's honest depiction of his former surroundings lends authenticity to the piece while serving as a window onto the artist's past. "In this miniature replica, displayed on the floor so that viewers must bend down to examine it, Cattelan produces a tiny alter ego, an alternate story line perhaps," that confronts its kneeling viewers with the aftermath the hardships of childhood can render.<sup>67</sup>

## Anthropomorphism

The vignette Cattelan presents in *Bidibidobidiboo* is unexpectedly melodramatic. It is disturbing due to its macabre narrative and the presence of taxidermy. However, it is simultaneously amusing because the protagonist is a humanized animal. *Bidibidobidiboo* represents “deep, human despair” through the tactic of anthropomorphism as seen in the work of storytellers such as Aesop, The Brothers Grimm, Beatrix Potter, and Walt Disney. Because children are presumed to have a privileged relationship with animals, the literary world consistently conceives of didactic stories centered on the actions of anthropomorphized animals. Since authors began writing stories for a juvenile audience in the mid-nineteenth century, Children’s Literature has continued to employ this traditional narrative device to explore topics such as ecology, natural history, and human-animal interactions.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, these tales were appropriated by taxidermists working in the late-nineteenth century. Both Hermann Ploucquet and Walter Potter constructed three-dimensional tableaux that rendered classic fairy tales and contemporary children’s stories with stuffed animal bodies. Their displays—which were originally intended to delight audiences, depict scenes of everyday life, and provide social commentary—not only represent Victorian perspectives but provide the work of Cattelan with an historical precedent.

In 1851, 145 years before Cattelan created his morose anthropomorphic vignette, the celebrated German taxidermist Hermann Ploucquet filled the Crystal Palace of London’s Great Exhibition with miniature anthropomorphic dramas. With taxidermy, he made two weasels declare their love to one another, hedgehogs go ice skating, kittens serenade a piglet, and Reynard the Fox carry out his mischievous adventures in three-

dimensional form (Figure 52).<sup>69</sup> Ploucquet's creatures were a highlight of the Exhibition.<sup>70</sup> The stall at which Ploucquet's comical creations were exhibited was "'one of the most crowded points of the Exhibition' perpetually surrounded by a 'merry crowd,'" including the likes of Queen Victoria.<sup>71</sup> Ploucquet not only introduced the English to this genre of taxidermy but inspired a sixteen-year old boy named Walter Potter to dabble in anthropomorphic taxidermy.<sup>72</sup>

Walter Potter, who practiced his craft during the late 1800s, is considered the best known British anthropomorphic taxidermist. His career is filled with scenes of cigar-smoking squirrels, kittens getting married, and baby bunnies busy at school. These vignettes, which represent tiny animals in human situations, not only depict what aspects of daily Victorian existence looked like but reference Victorian perspectives on the human-animal relationship.<sup>73</sup> For example, in *Rabbit's Village School* (1888; Figure 53), forty-eight tiny rabbits are enclosed in a glass display case as they sit at long wooden desks, studiously completing their assignments. Four classes are simultaneously being taught in this miniature schoolhouse, reminiscent of those Victorian children—such as Potter—attended.<sup>74</sup> *The Upper Ten* (1880; Figure 54) and *The Lower Five* (c.1880s; Figure 55), respectively, depict a club populated with squirrels and a den filled with rats. Together, these tableaux verge on social commentary, casting the Victorian elite as cigar-smoking, poker-playing red squirrels in a luxuriously decorated lounge and the working class as scruffy rats who gamble in a spartan basement.

Framed in glass boxes, these bunnies, squirrels, and rats are not only separated from their viewer but perpetually put on display, eternally waiting to be visually consumed. "In the attempt to make humans out of animals," Potter "treats them as things

and turns them into grim, ossified commodities.”<sup>75</sup> Although Potter references his personal past—just as Cattelan does by reconstructing his family’s kitchen in *Bidibidobidiboo*—he fails to provide valuable insights into the realities of Victorian society. Instead, he creates scenarios that are violations of nature. Potter’s tableaux strip animals of their intrinsic autonomy, presenting them as puppets, manipulated objects rather than agentic *animal-things*. Conversely, the main character of *Bidibidobidiboo* endlessly flickers between states of autonomy and subservience.<sup>76</sup> Cattelan’s squirrel, although stuffed by human hands, is granted some level of agency because the act of suicide implies personal choice. Cattelan aided the desponded squirrel in breaking free from his unbearable life, from being an animal forced to live according to human-imposed stereotypes.

In 1854, three years after attending the Great Exhibition, Potter commenced his vignette entitled *The Death & Burial of Cock Robin* (1854; Figure 56). This piece, which took him seven years to complete, became his most famous piece and, arguably, the most widely piece of Victorian taxidermy.<sup>77</sup> Inspired by the illustrations in a book of nursery rhymes by Sarah Trimmer, Potter recreated two-dimensional drawings with three-dimensional animal bodies. In a glass box trimmed with cherry wood and topped with a pyramidal lid, stuffed insects, amphibians, and nearly one hundred birds stand frozen in time and space as they surround the casket of Cock Robin (Figure 57). Although Potter took great care to accurately render the story, he failed to promote the author’s intentions. Trimmer inaugurated “a tradition of talking animal stories that use the fable to inculcate kindness to animals and to convey accurate natural historical information.”<sup>78</sup> Through the written word and accompanying illustration, Trimmer aims to educate children and

encourage them to sympathize with animals. Potter's creations, on the other hand, portray animals as man's puppet, not his equal.

In Potter's version of *The Burial of Cock Robin*, as Conor Creaney argues:

"The materials (unburied animal bodies) that make up the piece militate against the moral lesson of the rhyme (the necessity of giving this animal its due burial). It is a curious rendering of a text about mourning, in that Cock Robin's mourners don't get the chance to commemorate him and move on with their lives. Instead, Potter presents them as paralyzed at the moment of the burial, doomed never to get over their loss."<sup>79</sup>

Because Potter fashioned a literary narrative with taxidermy, which innately blurs the boundary between life and death, he disrupted the moral implications of the story. Potter has "killed and mastered animal form, and in the process the animals have become playthings to be looked at by a disconnected, detached observer."<sup>80</sup> Potter stuffed, posed, and placed his taxidermied creatures in a situation that will never come to fruition: Cock Robin will never be buried. The deceased bird will forever lie in his uncovered bright blue coffin. His mourners will never grieve. They will forever wait for a moment that will never come. Based on a nursery rhyme that embraces death, Potter's anthropomorphic tableau prevents death from actually occurring. Furthermore, by engaging in acts of human domination that promote the inferiority of animals, Potter's work does not "point toward a moral or significant truth but rather to the material fact of dead animals."<sup>81</sup> Cattelan's contemporary anthropomorphic tableaux, on the other hand, welcome death in order to underscore the similarities between animals and humans.

Anthropomorphism has received much criticism because it presents animals in human terms, ostensibly preventing us from truly understanding animal behavior. However, anthropomorphism does not have to be a harmful practice. In fact, "a touch of anthropomorphism...can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with

ontologically distinct categories of beings” ontologically similar beings that defy classification.<sup>82</sup> Anthropomorphism can reveal “similarities [that exist] across categorical divides” and lighten “up structural parallels between material forms in ‘nature’ and those in ‘culture,’” by revealing isomorphisms between seemingly disparate beings.<sup>83</sup> Additionally, according to Rachel Poliquin, the power of the anthropomorphic animal tale is in the moment when the reader recognizes “him- or herself in the story.”<sup>84</sup>

In the work of Walter Potter, “death is too bluntly visible,” making it difficult to imagine one’s self as part of the presented narratives.<sup>85</sup> By representing definitively dead animals, Potter’s work perpetuates spatial and species divides rather than a recognition of sameness.<sup>86</sup> In the piece *Bidibidobidiboo*, however, Cattelan uses taxidermy’s morbid associations to good effect. He harnesses taxidermy’s association with death to forge a connection between human and animal worlds.

Unlike the animated creatures of Potter’s *Burial of Cock Robin*, Cattelan’s squirrel is clearly deceased, limply draped over his kitchen table. With his tail unfurled, eyes barely open and feet grazing the ground, the squirrel is devoid of vitality. And, because his right hand remains slightly curled as it hangs above the pistol below, it is implied that the squirrel once held the fallen gun and chose to commit suicide. In contrast to the doll-like fowl of *Cock Robin*, who are trapped within a glass case, the deceased squirrel of *Bidibidobidiboo* shares the same space as his viewer and is bestowed with agency. By subverting Potter’s taxidermic endeavors, Cattelan’s anthropomorphic vignette makes Trimmer’s didactic desires a reality: he portrays a despondent squirrel as our equal, reveling in, rather than denying, an act of animal choice.



Cattelan further explores the world of fairy tales and animal agency in *Love Saves Life* (1995; Figure 58) and *Love Lasts Forever* (1997; Figure 59), both of which depict the Bremen Town Musicians, a band of four farm animals made famous by the Brothers Grimm. Although considered a fable, “The Bremen Town Musicians” is indeed a children’s fairy tale because it does not exhibit allegory; instead, it has an “underlying didactic thrust, but one that is not readily apparent.”<sup>87</sup>

In this story, a donkey, a dog, a cat, and a rooster befriend one another after each has been deemed useless by their respective owner. To escape the promise of being murdered by their master, each animal flees their respective home and together they set out on a journey to become musicians in the town of Bremen, “which is less of a real geographical location than a utopian dream.”<sup>88</sup> While traveling through the forest, the unwanted barnyard beasts happen upon a house occupied by thieves. Banding together, the animals stack themselves on top of each other, invade the house, and sing in unison, frightening the robbers away. The animals then move into the house, achieving their ultimate goal of attaining freedom. From its onset, the tale sets up a master-slave dichotomy, “with the masters exploiting the labor of the good-natured domesticated beasts.”<sup>89</sup> Although the narrative initially appears hopeless, the protagonists rise victorious over their oppressors.<sup>90</sup> Overall, the tale underscores the appeal of solidarity while encouraging us to see animals as worthy of our respect.

*Love Saves Life* features a pyramidal stack of taxidermied animals: a donkey is topped by a dog, a cat, and a rooster, all of whom are baring their teeth as if caught in mid-song. Serving as social commentary, the piece can be understood “as a utopian vision of a socialist community” for it argues that ever-lasting happiness can be attained

through friendship and shared commitment.<sup>91</sup> It thus presents the animals as models of exemplary behavior, citizens to which we should measure ourselves against.

Two years later, Cattelan imagined that the barnyard creatures of *Love Saves Life* remain united while being reduced to skeletons, forever frozen in a silent scream.<sup>92</sup> While *Love Saves Life* exhibits the animals as dynamic and full of life, *Love Lasts Forever* explicitly depicts the reality of death. When considered together, the four animals of *Love Saves Life* and *Love Lasts Forever* fluctuate between life and death, marking the moment of human-animal convergence. We are urged to recognize the humanity in these animals, to follow in their footprints because even though “their experiment in freedom seems to have been tragically short...their bonds have lasted through death.”<sup>93</sup> By conceiving a new end to “The Bremen Town Musicians”, Cattelan broke down the classic fairy tale’s narrative structure and imposed it with a new temporality, one that constantly shifts between the past and the present. *Love Saves Life* and *Love Lasts Forever* simultaneously portray the Bremen Town Musicians as eternally singing in unison and immobile stark-white skeletons. Together, these works embrace paradox. And, unlike their Victorian taxidermic predecessors, they tell a story where humanity and animality are positively entangled.<sup>94</sup>

### **The Anti-Walt Disney**

In the article “Anthropomorphic Taxidermy and the Death of Nature,” author Michelle Henning argues that Potter’s work speaks to a variety of Victorian obsessions, including the miniature, natural history, folk culture, and childhood.<sup>95</sup> She categorizes the Victorian age as “a microcosm of an era in which the accelerated destruction of the old

social order and of nature was accompanied by an increasing obsession with preservation and memory.<sup>96</sup> Henning believes that Potter's work not only provides us with evidence of the fragile relationship between the English and wildlife during the late nineteenth century but exemplifies a practice "only possible in a narrow historical moment."<sup>97</sup>

Moreover, with a similar historical moment presenting itself in the 1990s, the practice of taxidermy regained cultural relevance. Cattelan's appropriation of taxidermy reveals a resurgent desire to not only explore man's relationship with the natural world but how animals were—and are—used to entertain and instruct children. Instead of anthropomorphic taxidermy and children's literature, however, most of today's children are amused and taught by the wonderful world of Walt Disney.

The anthropomorphic products of Hermann Ploucquet and Walter Potter prophesied "the marginalization of animals, which was then beginning."<sup>98</sup> The animated productions of Walt Disney mark an end to this prophesy.<sup>99</sup> In addition to evoking the work of Ploucquet and Potter, Cattelan appropriates the visual language of Walt Disney productions. Chip 'n' Dale, "Donald Duck's mischievous chipmunk foes in Disney cartoons of the 1950s," for example, inspired Cattelan to fashion *Bidibidobidiboo*.<sup>100</sup> However, rather than portraying the determination and ingenuity of these spunky cartoon characters, Cattelan created their antithesis. Instead of outsmarting Donald Duck and commandeering the contents of his bank account, Cattelan's poor squirrel decided to escape poverty by committing suicide.<sup>101</sup>

In the hands of Disney, animals become cute and cuddly bastardizations of their actual counterparts. Disney productions "create false, sanitized, and sweetened images of nature" that impose animals with a "façade of innocence," presenting a perversion of

their animality.<sup>102</sup> In *Picturing the Beast*, Steve Baker describes the rampant problem of Disnification. “When the animal is put into visual form,” he argues, “it seems somehow to incline towards the stereotypical and the stupid.”<sup>103</sup> Cattelan, however, challenges this process, or need for cute-ness, in several of his works.

In *Untitled* (1996; Figure 60), a taxidermied white rabbit with monstrously elongated ears hangs suspended in mid-air. In *Untitled* (1996; Figure 61), two stuffed brown hares sit on a small white shelf as they gaze at their onlookers with enormous amber eyes. According to Disney, furry animals with exaggerated features should be endearing; however, Cattelan’s bunnies either appear overly excited or extremely frightened as they stare at us “with an alien intensity.”<sup>104</sup> Their stretched out ears and enlarged eyes defy notions of cuteness. In fact, they suggest that human attempts to genetically modify animals can go very wrong.<sup>105</sup>

*Bidibidobidiboo* further challenges the culturally accepted practice of Disnification by ridding its animal protagonist of any hyperbolic characteristics. Cattelan’s squirrel does not have big round eyes, a button nose, or a toothy grin. Instead, he looks like and is made from a real squirrel. Although the depiction of the squirrel’s suicide has been sanitized—there is no blood sprayed on the wall or pooled on the table—the depiction of the squirrel has not. In *Untitled* (1996), *Untitled* (1996), and *Bidibidobidiboo*, Cattelan rescues all three of his rabbits, and in particular his squirrel, from the animated world of Walt Disney and returns them to the realm of the real. By employing the material reality of taxidermy, Cattelan honors the integrity of animal otherness that is so often denied by society’s desire to manipulate nature.<sup>106</sup>

In the 1990s, artists, advertisers, and activists demonstrated a widespread contempt for Disney's misogynistic representations of women as well as their anthropocentric depictions of animals.<sup>107</sup> The appropriation of cute anthropomorphic images enabled these groups to subvert its traditional message of human superiority.<sup>108</sup> Cattelan's taxidermic installations give animated animals back their agency while telling stories that "avoid centering the human subject."<sup>109</sup> Through the medium of taxidermy, Cattelan deconstructs familiar narratives and reconstructs them into new, postmodern fairy tales that self-reflexively expose and upset the promises and "paradigms of authority" presented in the texts they appropriate.<sup>110</sup>

For example, the title of *Bidibidobidiboo* conjures forth the enchanting spell sung by the fairy godmother in *Cinderella*, the 1950 Disney animated film, when she transforms the unassuming maid into a graceful princess.<sup>111</sup> Yet, instead of witnessing a scene of hopeful transformation, we are confronted with a pathetic scene of death that "belies the promise of progress and redemption" made to us by Disney movies.<sup>112</sup> No fairy godmother, prince charming, or magic spell could allow Cattelan's squirrel to escape his destitute existence. Only certain death could supply him with a happy ending.

## Conclusion

According to Jack Zipes, folk tales, fables, and fairy tales are historically contingent to the moment of their creation because they encapsulate normative behavior while indicating the aspirations, dreams, and needs of a particular society.<sup>113</sup> These stories "either affirm the dominant social values and norms or reveal the necessity to change them."<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, these tales are not set in stone. No matter the historical

era, communities always alter time-worn narratives, rewriting them to promote or subvert prevalent social norms.<sup>115</sup>

Additionally, “As literature for children, fairy tales offer symbolically powerful scenarios and oppositions, in which seemingly unpromising heroes succeed in solving some problems for modern children. These narratives set the socially acceptable boundaries for such scenarios and options, thus serving, more often than not, the civilizing aspirations of adults.”<sup>116</sup> By presenting familiar stories in novel ways, Cattelan transforms the fairy tale for a new historical moment. As artwork for adults, Cattelan’s renditions of traditional anthropomorphic narratives redraw socially accepted boundaries, constructing a paradigm of contemporary adulthood.

“There is a genre of contemporary taxidermy,” states Rachel Poliquin, “that offers what might be called postmodern beast fables.”<sup>117</sup> In these works, artists employ taxidermy to break down conventional narrative structures and write stories that are ambiguous and troubling for they tell tales that blur the borders between humanity and animality.<sup>118</sup> If the original tales “explore the regions where human and animal overlap and where it becomes almost counterintuitive to separate them, these next-generation beast fables force viewers to confront the deeper significance of human-animal encounters.”<sup>119</sup> Fairy tales have always had a penchant for exploiting the parallels between animals and children; however, Cattelan’s taxidermic creations encourage adults to recognize that these similarities do not end once adulthood begins. Instead, Cattelan encourages his adult viewers to recognize that the realities of adulthood do not differ very much from the realities of childhood.

Both adulthood and childhood are infused with moments of happiness and hardship; both are punctuated with times of stability and stress. Where classic children's stories use images of animals to mold children into individuals that are properly behaved and submissive to their elders, Cattelan's postmodern beast fables use actual animals to mold adults into ideal individuals, or those that recognize the inherent similarities between themselves, children, and animals.<sup>120</sup>

In other words, Cattelan employs taxidermy to not only fashion postmodern beast fables but posthuman fairy tales. Cattelan quotes the vocabulary of children's literature to encourage adults to release their inner child and recognize their intimate connection with animals. Harnessing the subversive capabilities of taxidermy to both disrupt physical and metaphorical spaces of authority, Cattelan confronts us with animal bodies that have been filled with man-made materials. He demonstrates that although exterior differences persist, the interior lives of humans and animals are incredibly similar. Through the use of taxidermy, Cattelan forces us to better know our relationship with animals and, thereby, better know ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, "Maurizio Cattelan: All," Accessed November 16, 2011, <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/on-view/maurizio-cattelan-all>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Franklin Sirmans, *Maurizio Cattelan: Is There Life Before Death?* (Houston and New Haven: The Menil Collection & Yale University Press, 2010), 18; Thomas Krens, "Foreword," *The Hugo Boss Prize 2000: Guggenheim Museum* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Francesco Bonami, Massimiliano Gioni, Nancy Spector, and Barbara Venderlinden, eds., *Maurizio Cattelan* (New York: Phaidon, 2003), 156.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Spector, *Maurizio Cattelan: All*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> All of the taxidermy featured in Maurizio Cattelan's oeuvre is accompanied by a certificate guaranteeing the legality of each mount and that the animal was not killed for his artwork. Cattelan only uses ethical

taxidermy, which is fashioned from animals that died of natural causes, which he purchases from licensed taxidermists. Curator-led Overview with Katherine Brinson. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. November 18, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Katherine Brinson, Associate Curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, in discussion with the author, July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Nancy Spector, *Maurizio Cattelan: All*, 206.

<sup>17</sup> Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 23.

<sup>18</sup> Norman Rosenthal, ed., *Apocalypse: Beauty and Horror in Contemporary Art* (London: Royal Academy of the Arts, 2000), 89.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Nancy Spector, *Maurizio Cattelan: All*, 206.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Bob Nickas, "Maurizio Cattelan Interview," *Interview Magazine* (1999), Accessed June 16, 2014, [http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/maurizio\\_cattelan.shtml](http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/maurizio_cattelan.shtml).

<sup>23</sup> Curator-led Overview with Katherine Brinson. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, November 18, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Cameron, Duncan F., "The Museum, a Temple or the Forum," in *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*. Gail Anderson, ed. (New York: AltaMira Press, 2004); "Mission Statement,," Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Accessed November 14, 2011, <http://www.guggenheim.org/guggenheim-foundation/mission-statement>.

<sup>25</sup> Nancy Spector, *Maurizio Cattelan: All*, 213.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 214.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaction Books, 2000), 53.

<sup>29</sup> Nancy Spector, *Maurizio Cattelan: All*, 212.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 153.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 154.

<sup>32</sup> Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 53.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 155; Clare Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 11.

<sup>36</sup> Steve Baker, *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), 26.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), xxvii.

<sup>39</sup> John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," in *About Looking*, (New York: Vintage House, 1980/1992 Second Edition), 5.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>41</sup> Jacques Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am," in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Marie-Louise Mallet, ed., David Wills, trans. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 50-51.

<sup>42</sup> Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing* (University Park, PA.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 199.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>45</sup> John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," 14.

<sup>46</sup> Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*, 199.

<sup>47</sup> John Berger, "Why Look at Animals," 6.

<sup>48</sup> Francesco Bonami, Massimiliano Gioni, Nancy Spector, and Barbara Venderlinden, eds., *Maurizio Cattelan* (New York: Phaidon, 2003), 78.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Nancy Spector, *Maurizio Cattelan: All*, 198.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, xvii.



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- <sup>52</sup> Ron Broglio, *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xvi-vii.
- <sup>53</sup> Sarah E. McFarland and Ryan Hediger, "Approaching the Agency of Other Animals: An Introduction," in *Animals and Agency: An Interdisciplinary Exploration*, Ryan Hediger and Sarah E. McFarland, eds. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), 1-2.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid, 3-4.
- <sup>55</sup> Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 74.
- <sup>56</sup> Steve Baker, *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation*, 4.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>58</sup> Gene Myers, *The Significance of Children and Animals: Social, Development and Our Connections to Other Species*, Second Revised Edition (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1998/2007), 8.
- <sup>59</sup> Peter H. Kahn, Jr. and Stephen R. Kellert, eds., *Children and Nature: Psychological, Sociocultural, and Evolutionary Investigations* (Cambridge and London: MIT University Press, 2002), viii.
- <sup>60</sup> Gene Myers, *The Significance of Children and Animals*, 7.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid, 60-61.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid, 37.
- <sup>63</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, Trans. James Strachey (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 147.
- <sup>64</sup> Gene Myers, *The Significance of Children and Animals*, 37.
- <sup>65</sup> Francesco Bonami, Massimiliano Gioni, Nancy Spector, and Barbara Venderlinden, eds. *Maurizio Cattelan*, 25.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>67</sup> Nancy Spector, *Maurizio Cattelan: All*, 204.
- <sup>68</sup> Sidney I. Dorbin and Kenneth B. Kidd, eds., *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 4.
- <sup>69</sup> Rachel Poliquin, "Hermann Ploucquet & The Great Exhibition," Accessed September 28, 2014. <http://www.ravishingbeasts.com/life-as-normal-or-not/2007/12/26/hermann-ploucquet-the-great-exhibition.html>.
- <sup>70</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>72</sup> Pat Morris with Joanna Ebenstein, *Walter Potter's Curious World of Taxidermy* (New York: Blue Rider Press, 2014), 8.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid, 13.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid, 57.
- <sup>75</sup> Conor Creaney, "Paralytic Animation: The Anthropomorphic Taxidermy of Walter Potter," in *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 53 No. 1 (Autumn 2010), 9.
- <sup>76</sup> Ibid, 17.
- <sup>77</sup> Pat Morris with Joanna Ebenstein, *Walter Potter's Curious World of Taxidermy*, 5.
- <sup>78</sup> Tess Cosslett, *Talking Animals in British Children's Fiction, 1786-1914* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), 4-5.
- <sup>79</sup> Conor Creaney, "Paralytic Animation: The Anthropomorphic Taxidermy of Walter Potter," in *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 53 No. 1 (Autumn 2010), 27.
- <sup>80</sup> Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*, 181.
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>82</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 99.
- <sup>83</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>84</sup> Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*, 181.
- <sup>85</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>86</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>87</sup> Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, Edited and Translated by Maria Tatar (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 150.
- <sup>88</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>89</sup> Ibid, 151.
- <sup>90</sup> Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1979/2002), 9.

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- <sup>91</sup> Nancy Spector, *Maurizio Cattelan: All*, 201.
- <sup>92</sup> Ibid, 201-202.
- <sup>93</sup> Ibid, 202.
- <sup>94</sup> Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*, 193.
- <sup>95</sup> Michelle Henning, "Anthropomorphic Taxidermy and the Death of Nature: The Curious Art of Hermann Ploucquet, Walter Potter, and Charles Waterton," in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 35 2 (2007), 671.
- <sup>96</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>97</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>98</sup> Ibid, 667.
- <sup>99</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>100</sup> Nancy Spector, *Maurizio Cattelan: All*, 204.
- <sup>101</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>102</sup> David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney: From Snow White to Wall•E*, Second Edition (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2008/2012), 5; Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* (Hungary: I.G. Editions, 1975, 1984, 1991), 41, 42.
- <sup>103</sup> Steve Baker, *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation*, 175.
- <sup>104</sup> Nancy Spector, *Maurizio Cattelan: All*, 205.
- <sup>105</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>106</sup> David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney*, 150.
- <sup>107</sup> Steve Baker, *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation*, 227-232.
- <sup>108</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>109</sup> Ibid, 232.
- <sup>110</sup> Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 23, 141.
- <sup>111</sup> Nancy Spector, *Maurizio Cattelan: All*, 77.
- <sup>112</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>113</sup> Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell*, 6-7.
- <sup>114</sup> Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell*, 6-7.
- <sup>115</sup> Ibid, 8.
- <sup>116</sup> Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, 5.
- <sup>117</sup> Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*, 193.
- <sup>118</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>119</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>120</sup> Joseph L. Zornado, *Inventing the Child: Culture, Ideology, and the Story of Childhood* (New York: Garand Publishing, 2001), 74, 77.

## Chapter 4: Petah Coyne

Known for her elegantly composed, physically substantial, and metaphorically elusive installations, Petah Coyne creates sculptures that are tenuous despite their stability. They are at once vulnerable and forceful, beautiful and bizarre, life-affirming and morbid. By inviting dichotomies into her work, Coyne not only acknowledges but embraces the fact that contradictions permeate all aspects of modern existence.

Furthermore, due to her attraction to the decadent and morose, Coyne allows Romantic and Victorian undercurrents to infiltrate her art and influence her material choices.

Particularly, Coyne features taxidermy, a product associated with antiquated mentalities of the nineteenth-century, in many of her sculptures.

For some feminist artists, the female body is a battlefield on which personal dilemmas, cultural polemics, and religious wars about contraception, abortion, and power are waged. For others, such as Coyne, the female form is abject, a surface on which Cartesian dualism can be challenged. According to Hal Foster, “the abject touches on the fragility of our boundaries, the fragility of the spatial distinction between our insides and outsides,” disrupting established social orders.<sup>1</sup> The abject body is where the spiritual and the corporeal, the emotional and the rational, or the natural and the cultural can reconnect. Taxidermy, being made from both a dead animal and artificial materials, is not only abject but symbolically functions like the female form because it, too, is a site of collision. Therefore, taxidermy proves a provocative medium through which Coyne can assert a feminine perspective, transcend the limits of the physical human frame, and challenge power structures that aim to regulate the female—and the animal—body.

By forming a union between the feminine and the animal, Coyne's oeuvre transcends conventional representations of the female while challenging patriarchal dogma. Where Maurizio Cattelan references popular fables and anthropomorphizes taxidermied animals by placing them in human situations, Coyne allows her stuffed creatures to infiltrate restricted territories while retaining their animality. However, both Cattelan and Coyne share a rebellious mentality. It will become apparent that Coyne's taste for taxidermy is nourished by her feminist desire to challenge established belief systems and empower that which has been systematically disempowered.

### **Empowerment & the Environment**

Born in Oklahoma City, OK to a mother with a Master's Degree in Ikebana (the art of Japanese flower arranging) and a father in the military, Coyne moved approximately fifteen times over the course of her childhood. Although they eventually settled in Dayton, Ohio, Coyne spent most of her youth in the Hawaiian tropics. As a result, she was exposed to a variety of cultures, landscapes, and attitudes toward nature.<sup>2</sup> While living in tropical environments (the family spent several years in Hawaii), Coyne engaged with nature on a very personal level. Her family tended to a Japanese garden that was always filled with exotic birdlife, and she once helped save a beached whale.<sup>3</sup> Coupled with fond memories of visits to natural history museums, these formative experiences inspired Coyne's lifelong interest in nature, fostered a deep regard for all of its inhabitants, and were foundational for her artistic endeavors.

Coyne enrolled at Kent State University in 1972, later transferring to the Art Academy of Cincinnati, where she studied until 1977. Afterward, she moved to New

York City. As a young artist making her way in New York, Coyne sought stimulation in her immediate surroundings. Inspired by the actions of Robert Rauschenberg, who saw “the world as a supermarket” and believed that junk, or “things rejected by society, can be re-used” and given a new life, Coyne rifled through the trash bins of Brooklyn to discover potential artistic fodder.<sup>4</sup> No longer surrounded by crystal-clear oceans, uninterrupted blue skies, and exotic wildlife, she trolled the streets around her SoHo neighborhood and elsewhere in the city. Most interesting to her were Chinatown, where she was taken by the many vendors selling produce and seafood, and Brooklyn, where she found in waste bins discarded taxidermied specimens (presumably discarded by museums and private collectors). Appalled that beautiful animal bodies were either being sold to passersby or buried in the trash, Coyne sought to remedy the situation. She purchased the dead fish and exhumed the stuffed animals from their dumpster graves and placed them in her artwork, giving them a proper burial and a new life. Coyne had found the material—both intellectual and physical—from which to create.

During an interview with the artist, Coyne reminisced about how she was always taught that “you’re supposed to take what is thrown away and make something good from it, to make something beautiful.”<sup>5</sup> When she found taxidermy in dumpsters she set out to do just that, to create something beautiful from someone else’s rubbish. Encountering these rejected animal bodies also deeply upset the artist on a personal level. “I felt so bad that [their previous owners] thought they were of no value” so “I was going to make them valuable.”<sup>6</sup> The inclination to bestow worth on pounds of dead fish and numerous pieces of unwanted taxidermy was fed not only by environmentalist inclinations but feminist

ideologies. According to Coyne, the disregard she saw for these animals mirrored her generation's sentiments toward women.

While attending studying at the Art Academy of Cincinnati in the late 1970s, Coyne experienced this prejudice first-hand. She sensed that her male colleagues didn't take her art seriously because of her gender. Deemed inferior by her male classmates, Coyne decided to dedicate her career to proving them wrong. Now, as a feminist artist, she strives to give value to that which has been deemed valueless, specifically women and animals. Furthermore, she accomplishes her goals by "tying things together and making strong bonds between all of us," emphasizing the intrinsic worth of all living things.<sup>7</sup>

### **Romanticism & Ecofeminism**

In the 1980s, upon moving to New York, Coyne commenced her artistic career by filling her SoHo apartment with the taxidermy she discovered on her neighborhood dumpster crawls as well as carcasses of dead fish she purchased in Chinatown.<sup>8</sup> After preserving the fish by dipping them in resin, she strung them up throughout her living quarters and on the roof of her apartment. When neighbors started to complain about the stench, she was urged to tackle new projects in which she could honor and preserve animal bodies.<sup>9</sup> Encouraged to expand her material repertoire, it was at this point that her artwork began to evolve. She used wax to combine her findings—besides taxidermied animals, chicken wire, horsehair, silk flowers, ribbons, and old car parts are only a sampling of the found objects that Coyne shrouded in wax.

*Untitled #850 (Three Peacocks)* (1996; Figure 62), features animal figurines, a lavish mass of curled satin ribbons, manipulated wire, and iridescent bows that have all been dipped in candlewax, shaped around a steel understructure, and hung from the ceiling. Perched on top of this chandelier-like object are three fabricated miniature peacocks, their feathers dripping deceptively with hardened wax. Fashioned in black and white, from both delicate and strong objects, *Three Peacocks* acknowledges that opposing binaries—such as the masculine and the feminine, the sturdy and the fragile—can come together to make a harmonious whole.

In the early 1990s, Coyne began to free her sculptures—and her animals—from their wax tombs, allowing them to directly engage with the world around them. A wax-less bobcat and a large game bird peer out from within a dark mass of flowers in *Untitled #1205 (Virgil)* (1997-2008; Figure 63). In *Untitled #1180 (Beatrice)* (2003-08; Figure 64), a flock of taxidermy ducks tumble in and out of a conical cloud-like pile of ruched black velvet and purple silk flowers while inky-furred stuffed squirrels burrow down into its driftwood core. Fragments of animal bodies—downy white bellies, webbed orange feet, striated brown feathers—are concurrently concealed and revealed by dark matter; meaning is simultaneously hidden and exposed; life and death are conflated; reality and fantasy become indistinguishable.

The parenthetical titles of these pieces refer to Dante Alighieri's fourteenth-century masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*, in which the characters of Virgil and Beatrice act as two of the author's guides through Purgatory, Heaven, and Hell, while he searches for Paradise.<sup>10</sup> However, rather than portraying these characters in human form, Coyne represents them as animals. Virgil is now an attentive stuffed bobcat and Dante is a

cautious bird of prey. Beatrice, traditionally portrayed as a beautiful woman, is represented here as a piece of cast-wax statuary. Dante's female guide inconspicuously peers out from the apex of *Untitled #1180 (Beatrice)* while a prominent group of taxidermied creatures attempt to successfully navigate through the surrounding darkness.

Furthermore, Coyne often associates certain birds with certain people. In pieces dedicated to specific individuals, she allows taxidermied avian bodies to stand in for loved ones. The peacocks of *Untitled# 1336 (Scalapino Nu Shu)* (2009-20; Figure 65) and *Untitled #1375 (No Reason Except Love)* (2011-12; Figure 66) carry the memory of Coyne's cherished confidant, the late poet Leslie Scalapino. The peacock reappears in *Untitled #1242 (Black Snowflake)* (2007-12; Figure 67) to commemorate the life of Coyne's father. Mallard ducks stand-in for Coyne and her older brother in *Untitled #927 (BZ+CD+Put-Put)* (1997-98; Figure 68).

By unabashedly associating the individual with the animal in works like *Untitled #1205 (Virgil)* and *Untitled #1180 (Beatrice)*, Coyne repackages Romantic ideals of organicism. In the late eighteenth century, Romanticism emerged as a means for creative minds to rebel, to change the world. Artists worked under the auspices of Romanticism to emphasize their uniqueness, foster an antagonistic relationship with society, and offer "an antidote intended to repair social shortcomings" by inciting moral actions.<sup>11</sup> Romantic artists prided themselves on being social outsiders with a disdain for the ordinary.<sup>12</sup> They rejected Enlightenment thinking by highlighting "the symbolic unity of the universe, in spite of all its apparent diversity."<sup>13</sup> By reconnecting with nature, Romantics aimed to construct a distinctive identity for themselves by discovering the animal within. Ultimately, their desire to interact with animals and re-establish links with the natural



world provided them with a means to assert their difference from dominant social norms.<sup>14</sup> Coyne exemplifies this ‘ecological sensibility’ by forging a union between nature and culture. In many of her large scale installations, like *Untitled #1176 (Elisabeth, Elizabeth)* (2007-10; Figure 69), where the human figure is absent while the animal body is fully present, Coyne undoes distinctions that separate human from animal. Coyne’s use of taxidermy acknowledges difference, bringing awareness to the animal otherness within humans.

With Romantic allusions abounding in her work, Coyne’s use of taxidermy updates these organic ideals by contextualizing them within the contemporary perspective of Ecofeminism. In the 1960s, feminist philosophies began extrapolating themselves to encompass issues of the environment and animals because, just like women, both have historically been valued for their physical rather than intellectual assets.<sup>15</sup> Feminist artists—including Kiki Smith, Carolee Schneemann, and Ana Mendieta—have artistically associated the female body with the animal body. Smith’s *Lilith* (1994), alluding to medieval Jewish folklore, depicts Adam’s first wife as an animalistic woman. Brutally rendered in bronze, Smith perches Lilith upside down on the wall in an active crouching position. Looking as if ready to pounce, Lilith’s stiff left arm morphs into a horse’s hoof. Schneemann intimately interacts with her cat in the photographic series *Infinity Kisses* (1981–88), where the artist documents mornings spent embracing her beloved pet. In *Untitled (Silueta Series, Mexico, L02836)* (1974), Mendieta fills an impression of her silhouette that she has dug into the earth with animal blood purchased from the butcher, connecting herself to nature in multiple ways.

Ecofeminist Karen Warren claims that there are undeniable correlations between the cultural treatment of women, animals, and the environment. She asserts that as ‘othered’ minorities, they are systematically controlled and oppressed by male-biased patriarchal authorities. Ecofeminism “theorizes the interrelations among self, societies, and nature,” striving to integrate dualisms in order to produce a holistic society built on mutual respect.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1960s and 1970s, first generation feminist artists began incorporating the body—especially their own—into their work. Body art is largely seen as a “form of self-assertion that doesn’t *end* with the corporeal body, but actually *begins* there. Many of the artistic processes that have incorporated the artist’s body are really about transcending it, getting outside of the corporeal limitations of the human frame.”<sup>17</sup> According to Arthur W. Frank in his article “Bringing Bodies Back In: A Decade in Review,” Feminism teaches us to consider the body as a source of information for bodies provide us with grounded, yet guarded, truths.<sup>18</sup>

Second- and third- generation feminist artists, such as Coyne, are less inclined to incorporate their own bodies into their work and tend to use “surrogate models.”<sup>19</sup> Coyne, who holds great reverence for skin, sees her work as extension of herself, an intermediary between her inner being and the outer world.<sup>20</sup> By extrapolating the concept of the feminine body to that of the taxidermied animal, whose physical skin remains intact, Coyne discovered a suitable corporeal surface on which conflict could attempt to achieve resolution.

According to Carolyn Merchant in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, women have been associated with nature for centuries. This

association is argued to be one of the many reasons why the subordination of women is accepted in Western patriarchal societies. In multiple mythologies, the earth is portrayed as a caring wife and mother and whose primary role is to “comfort, nurture, and provide for the well-being of the male” while her non-human inhabitants are regarded as mere commodities.<sup>21</sup> In the 1960s, a renewed interest in conservation and animal rights simultaneously emerged with the birth of the modern women’s liberation movement.<sup>22</sup>

Merchant notes that “the conjunction of conservation and ecology movements with women’s rights and liberation has moved in the direction of reversing both the subjugation of nature and women” promoted by these traditional origin stories and contemporary cultural constructs.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, taxidermy serves as an interesting medium for the ecofeminist artist for it offers a way to transcend the physical borders of the human body, enter the realm of the animal, and comment on contemporary ecological and political issues.

Ecofeminist discourse aims to destabilize patriarchal hierarchies while asserting the value of subjugated minorities. As argued by Robert McKay, postmodern feminist interest in the body extrapolates itself to the animal for both parties are deemed valueless when compared to their white male or human counterparts.<sup>24</sup> This notion serves as the cornerstone of Ecofeminism’s argument that women and animals are bound together by shared histories of patriarchal oppression. Moreover, understandings of ‘the female’ and ‘the animal’ are biologically and socially constructed, causing both to serve as a place of passage where nature confronts culture.<sup>25</sup> Both malleable constructs, ‘the female’ and ‘the animal’ are, as Donna Haraway would say, “bonded by significant otherness” and able to define difference in postmodern society.<sup>26</sup>

The taxidermy in Coyne's work, particularly her peacocks, silently speak of animal subjugation by referencing the imperialist practice of bird collecting. For example, the motionless peacocks in *Untitled #1336 (Scalapino Nu Shu)* are majestically perched on a tree symbolic of their history of displacement. The roots of the Japanese apple tree sit on top of a mound of blackened earth. Refusing to root themselves in this familiar soil, the roots try to penetrate the wooden floorboards beneath. However, the roots are unable to break through the hardwood floor. Despite their stiffness, they are incapable of permanently fixing themselves in their environment. They now live between landscapes, between the local and the foreign, looking to both for sustenance. This quality of being un-fixed mirrors the colonial past and multicultural associations of taxidermied birds.

The peacock has an identity crisis. As indigenous to India and Southeast Asia, it is emblematic of Hinduism and enduring love. However, the bird also serves as a symbol of Hera, the Greek goddess of marriage, orthodox Christian notions of resurrection, and general notions of beauty, royalty, and vanity. When fully unfurled, their luxurious hemispherical tail feathers do not lift the bird off the ground. Instead, they assert the bird's identity and grandly span a vast distance, just as the peacock's symbolic import spans across a vast amount of cultures. Due to the fact that peacocks cannot fly, they are easily caught and transported to new locations. For example, Alexander the Great, who was fond of their beautiful feathers, captured and displaced them to Greece, allowing peacocks to enter the symbolic vocabulary of both Pagan and Christian religions.<sup>27</sup> Centuries later, peacock feathers became treasured by British colonists and their image entered European artistic and literary traditions as a signifier of inauspiciousness.<sup>28</sup>

Because the peacock has been embraced by a multitude of cultures and forced to connote a myriad of concepts, its metaphorical connotations remain un-fixed. The symbolic meaning of the peacock hovers above the ground of multiple nations, trying to take root. Though it periodically connects with new ground long enough to gain new significance, it never truly becomes implanted. The cultural meaning of the peacock is therefore itinerant, varied, and veiled.

In *The Postmodern Animal*, Steve Baker notes that:

“many postmodern or poststructuralist artists and writers seem, on one level or another, to adopt or to identify with the animal as metaphor for, or as image of, their own creativity. Whether it connotes a sense of alienation from the human or a sense of bodily freedom and unboundedness, this willing taking-on of animal form casts the fixity of identity as an inhibition of creativity.”<sup>29</sup>

Taxidermy, as an artistic medium, thus assists artists in asserting their alienated, free, or unbounded identity. Taxidermy signifies an individual’s desire to be seen as distanced from typical notions of humankind, as an ‘othered’ yet creatively empowered individual.

*Untitled #1336 (Scalapino Nu Shu)* (2009-2010) embodies the instability of human existence, enabling the dualities of growth and decay, order and chaos, strength and fragility to coexist.<sup>30</sup> The grand installation features a fruitless Japanese apple tree, whose trunk has been artificially blackened with colored sand. It tries to root itself in the surrounding wooden floorboards but is only met with opposition. Seventeen melanistic pheasants, most likely victims of a woodland hunt, limply hang upside down from the dead tree’s spindly lower branches. Their wings are fully spread out, caught in motionless flight, as gravity causes them to descend toward the ground. Despite the perceived weight of the pheasants, the weakened tree also supports ten robust taxidermied peacocks who delicately sit atop its branches. With furred tails cascading behind them, the birds

gracefully gaze downward at their unfortunate brethren. Their iridescent jewel-toned plumage shines bright in contrast to their somber surroundings.

The Japanese tree that serves as *Untitled #1336 (Scalapino Nu Shu)*'s support system has had its bark stripped away and replaced with blackened sand, a delicate material unable to protect the vulnerable wood beneath. Although dead, with no apparent hopes of being resuscitated, the tree remains strong enough to bear the weight of the twenty-seven taxidermied birds. The horizontality of the tree's branches counteracts the verticality of the stuffed birds' bodies, resulting in a jagged composition that urges the viewer's gaze to follow a sinuous rhythm similar to the visual recording of a heartbeat. All of the elements of *Untitled #1336 (Scalapino Nu Shu)* are lifeless, nevertheless, Coyne has gifted her installation a pulse.

Although the exteriors of these peacocks and pheasants are delicate, their interiors are sturdy. Their external fragility is balanced by an internal toughness. Their outer beauty hides their inner strength. According to Coyne, this is how women are forced to present themselves in our male-dominated society.<sup>31</sup> In *Untitled #1336 (Scalapino Nu Shu)*, Ecofeminist subtext rises with the peacocks, for their "menacing bodies" demand "recognition. The politic of confrontation is writ into their skin."<sup>32</sup> Through the materiality of taxidermy, Coyne enables femininity to transgress established patriarchal opinion. Although society threatens to kill feminine and animal difference in favor of male superiority, Coyne's taxidermied peacocks are not subservient. They emphasize that difference is powerful.

## **Taxidermy & the Decorative Arts**

Despite Coyne's desire to explore internal impulses, exterior beauty is also of great concern. The aesthetic beauty of the animal body is paramount to her work. We are drawn into her dark narratives because of the beckoning gleam of perfect plumage, the alluring possibility of touching feathers or fur, and the calming presence of idealized nature. Furthermore, Coyne conflates notions of beauty with notions of the decorative.

Discussing female resourcefulness, Coyne asserts that women have turned domestic activities into art forms. "We do our homes in such a way that creates beauty and that's comfort," says Coyne.<sup>33</sup> "That's what I'm trying so hard to do," to create something pleasing to the eye and reassuring to the soul.<sup>34</sup> However, her work is also unsettling and disruptive. Despite its aesthetic charms, Coyne's art is intellectually engaging and physically challenging. The simultaneous presence of these paradoxical attributes alludes to the subversive history of the decorative arts, and by extension, taxidermy.

Often, the decorative arts are understood to encompass leisurely, passive activities with aesthetic rather than intellectual applications. However, the decorative arts can be understood as a means for women to transgress culturally imposed boundaries, to work within a sphere where men are absent, to turn limitations into possibilities. Publications such as *Women and Things, 1750-1950: Gendered Material Strategies* edited by Beth Fowkes Tobin and Maureen Daly Goggin and Richard Sennett's *The Craftsman* aim to understand "the overlooked and often despised categories of women's decorative arts and homecraft activities as sites of important cultural and social work," demonstrating that these activities are actually forms of intellectual engagement and knowledge production

because “making is thinking,” where information is embodied, “gained in the hand through touch and movement.”<sup>35</sup>

Crafting, sewing, and nature fancywork, all of which fall under the heading of the decorative arts, were popular feminine pastimes during the late nineteenth century. Taxidermy, which is considered a form of nature fancywork, was one of the era’s most popular domestic activities. For instance, the *Ladies’ Manual of Art, for Profit and Pastime. A Self-Teacher in All Branches of Decorative Art, embracing every variety of Painting and Drawing on china, glass, velvet, canvas, paper and wood. The Secret of All Glass Transparencies, Sketching from Nature, Pastel and Crayon Drawing, Taxidermy, Etc.*, published in 1887, dedicates 91 pages to the art of taxidermy. This home journal urged educated and refined women to see art and all of its incarnations as a “source of profit as well as pleasure,” a means by which they could “earn a good livelihood and famous name” while “disseminating its beauties everywhere.”<sup>36</sup>

During the Victorian age, the bodies of dead animals were regarded as valuable raw material and used to construct decorative objects.<sup>37</sup> Taxidermy, when displayed in a domestic interior, was often placed in a conspicuous location for it served as ornamentation and a source of aesthetic pleasure.<sup>38</sup> In the eighteenth century, stuffed birds elegantly posed on twigs, surrounded by faux vegetation, and placed under glass domes “graced many a bourgeois parlor and aristocratic cabinet.”<sup>39</sup> Often, these theatrical displays featured multiple specimens, such as William Bullock’s famous hummingbird cabinet, in chaotic yet pleasing arrangements (Figure 70). Nearly one hundred small stuffed birds populate the dead tree in former curator of the London Natural History Museum’s display case. Behind the pane of glass, emerald, sapphire, and ruby hued



feathers shimmer and swirl in a cacophonous arrangement. This theatrical mode of presentation is enchanting. It not only denotes a collector mentality but encourages close looking. “Such attentive, engaged study could not help but highlight the aesthetic appeal of the display,” with the taxidermied birds’ beauty awakening the senses and calming the mind.<sup>40</sup>

Coyne appropriates the Victorian tropes of the twig-perched bird and bird-encrusted tree as well as their aesthetic implications. Numerous peacocks and pheasants adorn the craggy apple tree of *Untitled #1336 (Scalapino Nu Shu)*. Canadian geese and other waterfowl rise from a bevy of blackened roses, velvet, and branches in *Untitled #1240 (Black Cloud)* (2007-2008; Figure 71). White peacocks, doves, and geese—along with other woodland creatures—cavort amongst the deep indigo blooms of the suspended shrub. The frenzied swarms of these birds call for close inspection, urging spectators to glimpse the pieces from all possible perspectives. Upon examination, it becomes clear that despite each piece’s perceived hyperactivity, every animal body is pristinely preserved, each silk flower is deliberately placed, and not one detail is out of place. The presented situations do not represent reality. Instead, they are imagined situations, idealized and meticulously constructed.

Victorian taxidermy was fashioned not only to display nature, but nature improved upon. As described by Andrea Kolasinski Marcinkus, the nineteenth century woman took great care in preserving animal skins. She removed all blemishes, assembled them into “fashionable forms and compositions,” and, on occasion, presented them in fantastical ways “never seen in the natural world,” evoking the fleeting in bodily form.<sup>41</sup> These taxidermic tableaux “not only embraced an ephemeral aesthetic,” for they are

made from materials susceptible to decay, “but utilized this quality to establish permanence to memory, relationships, and life events.”<sup>42</sup> Taxidermy allowed these women to arrest time, control nature, and, paradoxically, give corporeal form to their memories.

Coyne also employs taxidermy to this end. Coyne’s work is founded on the “bedrock belief that you are what you make and that what you make reflects your life experiences: books read, multiple memories, travels to foreign places,” and “relationships with family, friends, and humanity.”<sup>43</sup> For example, although Coyne has settled on the East Coast, she has not truly rebelled against the migratory behavior of her youth; rather, she has embraced it. Now, she frequently travels to distant lands for both business and pleasure, immersing herself in the culture of her chosen destination. Upon returning home, Coyne incorporates remnants of these trips into her practice. France gave Coyne femininity; from Italy she took home wax candles; Japan gifted her whiteness and darkness; and, from Hawaii and Mexico she left with birds and color.<sup>44</sup>

Therefore, the stuffed fauna of Coyne’s installations not only embody memories of her physical and symbolic encounters but serve as public forums in which Coyne can display remnants of her personal identity. Furthermore, both Coyne and the domestic Victorian housewife use the animal body to create something beautiful that concurrently creates knowledge. Their taxidermic imaginings incite aesthetic responses to the beauty of nature while inciting contemplation on notions of memory, death, and impermanence.<sup>45</sup>

As a practice, taxidermy requires one to possess a keen understanding of animal anatomy and the ability to integrate aesthetics, craftsmanship, and memory.<sup>46</sup> Due to its

emphasis on observation and the natural sciences, taxidermy constructs “social meanings that operate in the world beyond traditionally prescribed (and circumscribed) boundaries occupied by women.”<sup>47</sup> In the Victorian era, the emerging discipline of natural history was a male dominated sphere. However, women were able to transgress social boundaries and engage in the natural sciences through taxidermy. For instance, women needed to be educated in animal anatomy to fashion believable mounts.

“Taxidermy, as a word, first appeared in 1820 as the title of a book published by Sarah Lee, who had been the wife of the African explorer Thomas Bowdich.”<sup>48</sup> After Bowdich’s premature death, Lee edited and published his unfinished treatise on taxidermy and its display. Additionally, the aforementioned *Ladies’ Manual of Art, for Profit and Pastime*.... usurps pages from popular natural history texts intended for a male audience, as evidenced by sentences such as: “We much again recommend the stuffer to see that *he* has sufficiently applied the preservative soap” appearing in the text (italics added).<sup>49</sup> Studying, fashioning, and writing about taxidermy allowed the Victorian woman to step “outside the boundaries of domestic womanhood” and invade “the masculine world of specimen hunters and professional taxidermy.”<sup>50</sup> Coyne, by making taxidermy a vital element in her sculpture, associates herself with both the female Victorian housewife and the male Victorian naturalist. The presence of taxidermy therefore allows Coyne to break-free from prescriptions of feminine propriety and conduct patriarchal interventions.

### **Petah Coyne's Catholic Imagination**

Patriarchy, or the systematic institutional domination of women by men, has long served as an oppressive conceptual framework in society, producing a widespread male-biased mentality.<sup>51</sup> Historically, the Catholic Church has been understood as a misogynist edifice.<sup>52</sup> A religious institution that adheres to strict masculine-driven hierarchies, Catholicism systematically diminishes the importance of women and animals in the faith's mythology. A religious institution that adheres to strict masculine-driven hierarchies, Catholicism embraces an "archaic attitude toward women."<sup>53</sup> By defining Mary, the mother of Christ and the Queen of Heaven, as an eternal virgin, Catholic mythology denies her a sexual identity. As argued by art historian Eleanor Heartney, there is widespread belief that this perspective gives the Catholic Church "doctrinal justification for its refusal to deal honestly with female equality and human sexuality."<sup>54</sup> Through her art, Coyne—who is a lapsed Catholic—aims to destabilize the patriarchal beliefs Catholicism promotes by tapping into the Catholic Imagination and appropriating its imagery to subversive ends. Coyne aims to religiously empower both the female and the animal by usurping long-held Catholic beliefs.

According to Eleanor Heartney in *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art*, the Catholic Imagination "is not simply a matter of official church doctrine...but [an imagination that] brings together the pomp and beauty of Catholic ritual and the seductiveness of traditional Catholic art" in order re-connect Catholics with the supernatural world of Early Christianity through representations of the physical body.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, notions of the body and images of the Madonna have long fed Coyne's conception of feminine perfection.

As a young Catholic schoolgirl, Coyne was taught that the Virgin Mary is the epitome of beauty and womanhood.<sup>56</sup> Coyne grew up believing that all women would grow into this ideal. As she aged, however, she was only met with disappointment because she was never able to equal the Virgin's faultlessness. Heartney acknowledges that Coyne's appropriation of the Madonna figure, as seen in pieces such as *Untitled #1093 (Buddha Boy)* (2001-03; Figure 71), rebels against Catholic ideals of female perfection.<sup>57</sup>

In this piece, a statue of the Virgin Mary is encrusted with bows, ribbons, feathers, and silk flowers. More are strewn about the surrounding floor. The virgin's arms serve as candlestick holders. Beads are meticulously draped over her now undistinguishable form. The statue, as well as these frivolous markers of femininity, are encased in white wax. All of these disparate objects are unified under a protective casing. *Buddha Boy* simultaneously embraces purity and extravagance. Coyne's version of the Virgin Mary, who is both sterile and fecund,<sup>58</sup> criticizes Catholic perceptions of femininity by insinuating that the religion's tenants force women to be burdened—or weighed down—by their sexuality. However, Heartney does not fully investigate how Coyne's Catholic respect for the body also feeds her attraction to taxidermy.

As discussed in *Postmodern Heretics*, Heartney reveals that stories concerning the body are integral to the Christian faith. "Christ's Incarnation in human form, his physical death and his bodily Resurrection, the Immaculate Conception and the Transubstantiation of the Eucharist in the Mass" are all central to the "drama of Christian history" which "hinges on the moment when 'the Word was made Flesh,' and God became man in order to assume mankind's guilt and absolve its sins."<sup>59</sup> Additionally, Catholicism holds an

intrinsic morbidity—a predilection for fetishizing dead body parts and fixating on the body at the time of death—for death is the ultimate border, the moment of one’s passing and rebirth.<sup>60</sup> Taxidermy, which is made from the dead body of a once living animal, allows Coyne to investigate Catholicism’s obsession with death, the body, and resurrection while re-asserting the importance of animals in the drama of Christian history.

The need to preserve is embodied by the practice of taxidermy. Anxiety surrounding losing something fragile to decay drives one to protect it from imminent deterioration. Historically, the preservation of bodies is associated with religious ceremony and mystical ritual.<sup>61</sup> Bodies that are cared for after death are believed to provide the deceased with a means for peaceful passage into the afterlife.<sup>62</sup> Christian tradition prided itself on collecting preserved body fragments of divine leaders, believing that the worship of these corporeal relics could “alleviate suffering” within their beholder and “transport worshippers to a higher spiritual plane.”<sup>63</sup> Being taxidermied, the stuffed animals in Coyne’s work embody paradox. They “beautifully capture the tension...between our fear and fascination with death” by revering the corporeal and metaphorically straddling the border between the living and the dead.<sup>64</sup>

Although there is no evidence suggesting that animal bodies were revered as Catholic relics, Laura Hobgood-Oster, a professor of religion, argues that animals were once highly regarded in Christianity. Although many Biblical stories present animals as subordinate to man, such as Genesis 1:26: “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that

creepeth upon the earth,”<sup>65</sup> Hobgood-Oster asserts that many early Christian parables place much importance on animals while celebrating them as agents of Christian divinity, not simply its objects.<sup>66</sup> “As the history of Christianity became intertwined with that of patriarchal and imperialistic Mediterranean and European powers,” in medieval times, however, “the dominant forms of Christianity became increasingly anthropocentric,” animal-centric tales were left untold, and the integral role of animals in the religion was diminished.<sup>67</sup>

Hobgood-Oster argues that animals were once portrayed as martyrs, spiritual guides, and exemplars of piety in alternative liturgies such as visual art, legends, and hagiographies.<sup>68</sup> For instance, Saint Francis of Assisi not only recognized the ability of animals to worship the almighty but acknowledged the special talent of birds to preach the word of God. Paul the Hermit, who lived in a cave for sixty years, was befriended by a plethora of animals that did God’s bidding by providing him with food, safety, and camaraderie. Saint Jerome’s best companion was a great lion and the Holy Ghost, or the spirit of God, took bodily shape as a dove at the baptism of Jesus Christ. As a young girl in Catholic school, Coyne was influenced by stories such as these because she was taught that birds are intercessors, or agents of God, that possess the power to pass between the realms of the living and the dead as they usher souls to the afterlife.

Despite early Christian theology promoting the divine capabilities of animals, the religion was deeply impacted by theories of Cartesian dualism during the Enlightenment and again during the Second Vatican Council (which took place in the 1960s). At these critical points in the religion’s history, Catholic leadership strived to suppress the religion’s sacramentality, or belief that God is present in all creation.<sup>69</sup> By defining

Christianity as “a religion centered on the idea of God becoming a male human being,” it not only disempowers women and animals by bolstering the argument that men are superior to all other living creatures.<sup>70</sup>

Coyne, through the use of taxidermy, encourages us to look at animals from a Romantic and Early Christian perspective. For example, while on sojourn in Italy to visit a friend, Coyne spent one “weekend visiting dozens of churches and lighting candles,” spurring her friend to gift her a box of candles in honor of her ritualistic weekend.<sup>71</sup> The wax from these candles gradually worked its way into Coyne’s art, serving as a means to encase “fragile birds in wax prisons,” seen in works such as the aforementioned *Untitled #850 (Three Peacocks)* and *Untitled #810 (Filipino Hat)* (1995; Figure 73).<sup>72</sup> In later work such as *Untitled #1336 (Scalapino Nu Shu)*, Coyne’s birds are no longer entombed in wax. Instead, her peacocks are taxidermied, released from their wax mausoleums, and allowed to act as divine chaperons who can lead us toward the afterlife. Thus, by featuring pristine animals in her work, Coyne feeds off of a Catholic fondness for death and the body while asserting animal sacramentality. She makes visible animal presences which Catholicism once revered but has since deemed trivial.

Additionally, Coyne’s saintly peacocks speak to her personal interest in the life and literature of the American Southern Gothic author Flannery O’Connor. The title of Coyne’s 2010 Mass MOCA exhibition *Everything that Rises Must Converge* is borrowed from the title of a collection of the author’s short stories. O’Connor, a devout Catholic, titled her collection after the work of philosopher and Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin SD. He asserted that “the universe is in a continuous process upward,” moving from a realm of plurality towards a location of convergence and “human self-



awareness.”<sup>73</sup> In her short stories, O’Connor finds beauty in the grotesque. She conceives of characters that are bigoted and deeply flawed but otherwise serve as prophets and “agents of grace.”<sup>74</sup> When not writing, O’Connor raised peacocks, pheasants, Muscovy ducks, and Chinese geese on her Georgian farm.<sup>75</sup> Although she cared for a variety of birds, she had particular affection for her peacocks because they are simultaneously attractive and repulsive. Their plumage is alluring while their talons threatening and shrill call repelling. Additionally, the male peacock, who sheds his tail feathers in the summer and regrows them in the New Year, signifies the resurrection and incorruptibility of Jesus Christ.

Of both earthly and spiritual worlds, the peacocks of *Untitled #1336 (Scalapino Nu Shu)* wait, god-like, in the protective braches of their apple tree. They do not flaunt their luxurious tails, emit a piercing shout, or parade their uniqueness. Though bereft of life, their preserved beauty beckons us to follow them on their eventual ascendance toward heaven. They promise to alleviate our anxieties as they guide us toward the afterlife, to a more hopeful future. The peacocks demonstrate that although women and animals have, for centuries, been deemed inferior by dominant belief, their importance can be recovered. Their otherness can transcend patriarchal restraints. Thus, by featuring taxidermy in her work, Coyne feeds off of a Catholic fondness for death and the body while asserting animal sacramentality and a new vision of feminine perfection. She makes visible presences which Catholicism once revered but has since deemed insignificant.

## Mourning & Healing

For Coyne, art-making is not only a means to reflect on her spiritual beliefs and intervene in Catholic systems of oppressions, but a means to mourn the loss of loved ones. Incorporating taxidermied birds—for they usher the soul to the afterlife—into her work provides Coyne with a way to cope with death, investigate transitional states of being, and offer departed friends and family peaceful passages. For example, *Untitled #1336 (Scalapino Nu Shu)* and *Untitled #1375 (No Reason Except Love)* (2011-12) were created in effigy of the revered poet, and Coyne’s cherished confidant, Leslie Scalapino. The recently completed *Untitled #1242 (Black Snowflake)* (2007-12) was fashioned in memoriam of Coyne’s father.<sup>76</sup> And, the earlier *Untitled #927 (BZ-CD-Put-Put)* (1997-1998), featuring a pair stuffed mallard ducks, commemorates the beautiful, chaotic, and too-short life of the artist’s older brother.

After her older brother lost his long battle with cancer, Coyne immediately made this piece. “It was the only thing to give me solace,” says the artist.<sup>77</sup> Mounted to the wall, two birds face opposing directions. They spread their wings as they try to free themselves from a synaptic tangle of black horsehair. Thick braids and delicate tendrils intertwine loosely at the work’s core and tighten up as they near the entrapped avian bodies. Creating a lace-like neurological map from which the birds cannot free themselves, this seemingly diseased “two-dimensional mind projection” symbolically hovers between heaven and earth, offering the deceased a plan by which to reach the afterlife or the living a path by which to reconnect with the departed.<sup>78</sup> However, these plans are unclear. They propose routes that are convoluted, mirroring the emotional and physical turmoil Coyne and her brother experienced during the course of his illness.

Nevertheless, while the thickest serpentine braids trace a tumultuous journey, they also propose that the birds will one day be able to reunite.

Stuffed birds also abound in *Untitled #1388 (The Unconsoled)* (2013-2014; Figure 74), where a Silver Pied peacock, a pair of snow geese, and a sulphur-crested cockatoo swoop in and out of a lush garden filled with red and white silk chrysanthemums. These blooms, reminiscent of those used in funerary arrangements, are suspended in four large gray freestanding frames. Clusters of silk flowers are ominously punctuated by lightning-like silver branches. The flowers conceal what is behind them while the negative space surrounding the branches provides a glimpse behind the installation. One of the large frames is disconnected from the other three, creating a doorway into the unknown. A white peacock sits upon the corner of this break, enticing visitors to enter for they might be consoled in the world located behind *The Unconsoled's* facade.

All of these works allude to Coyne's conflicted emotions regarding death and the afterlife. They also conjure associations with contemporary literature. Flannery O'Connor's work always permeates Coyne's pieces. In addition, *The Unconsoled* is also inspired by the work of Japanese authors Kazuo Ishiguro, Haruki Murakami, and Kōbō Abe. These wordsmiths weave narratives that investigate dark spaces—both emotional and physical—one can enter and not easily escape, dark spaces that both console and confound their inhabitants, dark spaces that do not offer easy passage.<sup>79</sup> However, these dark spaces are punctuated by the reassuring presence of taxidermied birds. Although dead, they remain life-like. They have successfully traversed the paths we are urged to embark upon.

Although taxidermy is largely understood as morbid, Coyne sees it as hopeful. No longer using vintage taxidermy in her work, Coyne now purchases mounted birds that are ethically harvested from government-supported pen-raised programs. As described by the artist, these programs, which are run by humanitarians and hunters, rehabilitate injured birds that were wounded in the wild. If their injuries fully heal, they are released back into the wild to replenish depleted ecosystems. If they do not make a full recovery, they are left to live the rest of their days on protected grounds. And, according to Coyne, the administrators of these programs are given permission to use 1 percent of their birds as a source of food or income, making taxidermy a viable revenue stream.<sup>80</sup> These programs, which demonstrate respect for animals by providing them with a second chance at life, also “feed wildlife systems in America,” Coyne says.<sup>81</sup> “And I think that’s a beautiful thing.”<sup>82</sup>

In her work, taxidermy not only serves as a site of passage but one of healing. Coyne’s animals acknowledge that “rebirth grows out of experiences of things gone wrong.” The feminine and the animal find solace in the stuffed animal body. Rifts between the physical and the mental, life and death, as well as love and loss can be metaphorically mended with its material presence. Coyne’s taxidermied animals recognize that “paradise” or better yet, “the future can be better than the present.”<sup>83</sup> They bear witness to our struggles, leading us not into temptation but delivering us from evil, toward “a more livable place.”<sup>84</sup> Although our journey to the future, or the afterlife, may be dark, marked with hardship, and burdened with unforeseen obstacles, we will end up in a place where man, woman, and animal earn equal respect. Taxidermy, in Ecofeminist terms, therefore “help[s] heal the wounds of patriarchy where cognitive and behavioral

strategies alone are not enough” by challenging binarism, embodying truths, and helping us “re-find cohesion in a shattered world.”<sup>85</sup>

## Conclusion

*In A New Modernity?: Change in Science, Literature and Politics*, Wendy

Wheeler asserts that “we are now moving toward a much more nuanced sense of what it means to be a human,” embracing the fact that “human creatures and the world in which they live are in a state of constant and developing interaction: the world makes us, and we make and remake the world.”<sup>86</sup> This Postmodern, Ecofeminist, and Posthuman understanding of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-centuries realities can be rendered visible through beautiful animal presences such as those seen in the work of Coyne.

Modern artists were, according to Jean Francois Lyotard, social shamans “assigned the task of healing.”<sup>87</sup> Realism was their remedy for social disorder. Postmodern artists, on the other hand, “must refuse to lend themselves to such therapeutic uses. They must question the rules” and use them “as a means to deceive, to seduce, and to reassure.”<sup>88</sup> They should “testify to difference” and put forth “the unrepresentable in presentation itself” by breaking free from the past and denying “the solace of good forms.”<sup>89</sup> However, Wendy Wheeler notes that:

“What we call the postmodern seems to consist in the struggle between melancholia and mourning – between, on one hand, nostalgic turn to the past and a masochistic sense of social fragmentations, and, on the other, the attempt to imagine differently reconstituted communities and selves; we might therefore say that the outcome of postmodernity, seen as the attempt to live with loss and uncertainty as a permanent condition, would be the discovery or invention of ways of being in the world which move beyond the harsh individualism of utilitarian modernity, and towards a different way of accounting for and valuing human needs. It is this problem, the problem of inventing aesthetic form capable

of telling us something about the invention of new cultural, social and political forms—a ‘new modernity’ or ‘second Enlightenment—’”

that Coyne attempts to solve. By featuring the taxidermied animals in her work, entities caught between modern symbolism and postmodern literalness, Coyne embraces otherness in order to forth a new conception of social cohesion. She couples abjectness and beauty, causing anxiety and providing comfort.<sup>90</sup> She merges the female and the animal while respecting their differences. She presents a version of reality, herself, and society that is holistic while rife with multiplicity. She intervenes in patriarchal belief systems, encouraging “movement toward healthy, life-enhancing, nourishing, and restorative values, beliefs, practices, and systems.”<sup>91</sup> She creates an Ecofeminist reality by undoing histories of oppression and finding holism in a world rife with multiplicity.

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<sup>1</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1996), 153-156.

<sup>2</sup> Carrie Przybilla and Terrie Sultan, *Petah Coyne: black/white/black* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1996), 28.

<sup>3</sup> Petah Coyne, “Sculpting Myth and Metaphor,” Presentation at the Art + Environment Conference, Nevada Museum of Art, Reno, Nevada, Oct. 10, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Saltonstall Mattison, *Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking Boundaries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 42.

<sup>5</sup> Petah Coyne, in conversation with the author, October 17, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Alison Wilson Lloyd, “Petah Coyne's Waxworks: Petals on a Black Bough,” *New York Times* (January 16, 2005), Accessed April 27, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/16/arts/design/16lloy.html?\\_r=2&](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/16/arts/design/16lloy.html?_r=2&).

<sup>9</sup> Petah Coyne, “Sculpting Myth and Metaphor.”

<sup>10</sup> Suzaan Boettger, “Petah Coyne: Not Afraid of the Dark,” *Art in America* 98 No. 8 (Sept. 2010): 122-27, accessed October 11, 2012, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/petah-coyne/>.

<sup>11</sup> David Pagel, “Romanticism’s Aftermath: No Illusions, A Little Desperation, Lots of Imagination,” in *Damaged Romanticism: A Mirror of Modern Emotion*, Colin Gardner, et. al, ed. (Houston: The Art Museum of the University of Houston, 2008), 36-37.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 36-37.

<sup>13</sup> Wendy Wheeler, *A New Modernity?: Change in Science, Literature and Politics* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1999), 12.

<sup>14</sup> Adrian Franklin, *Animals and Modern Cultures: A Sociology of Human-Animals Relations in Modernity* (London: Sage, 1999), 27.

<sup>15</sup> Robert McKay, “‘Identifying with Animals’: Language, Subjectivity, and the Animal Politics of Margaret Arwood’s *Surfacing*,” in *Figuring Animals: Essays on Animal Images in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Popular Culture*, Mary Sanders Pollock and Catherine Rainwater, eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 207.

<sup>16</sup> Janis Birkeland, “Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practice,” in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*. Greta Gaard, ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 18.

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- <sup>17</sup> Laura Cottingham, *Seeing Through the Seventies: Essays on Feminism and Art*, (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 2000), 121.
- <sup>18</sup> Arthur W. Frank, "Bringing Bodies Back In: A Decade in Review," *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought* No. 3-4 (Autumn 1989): 132.
- <sup>19</sup> Douglas Dreishpoon, "The Still Point of Time," in *Petah Coyne: Above and Beneath the Skin* (Buffalo, NY: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 2005), 22.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.
- <sup>21</sup> Carolyn Mercchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 9.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.
- <sup>24</sup> Robert McKay, "Identifying with Animals," 207.
- <sup>25</sup> Jack Ben-Levi, Craig Houser, Leslie C. Taylor, and Simon Taylor, *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* (New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 34.
- <sup>26</sup> Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 15-16.
- <sup>27</sup> Joseph Domjan, *Pavologia: A Celebration of Peacocks Past* (Tuxedo Park, NY: Domjan Studio, 1984), 27.
- <sup>28</sup> P. Thankappan Nair, "The Peacock Cult in Asia," *Asian Folklore Studies* 33 (1974): 167.
- <sup>29</sup> Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion, 2000), 18.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.
- <sup>31</sup> Petah Coyne, in conversation with the author, October 17, 2013.
- <sup>32</sup> Douglas Dreishpoon, "The Still Point of Time," 22.
- <sup>33</sup> Petah Coyne, in conversation with the author, October 17, 2013.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup> Beth Fowkes Tobin and Maureen Daly Goggin, eds., *Women and Things, 1750-1950: Gendered Material Strategies* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 1; Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 7-10.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ladies' Manual of Art, or Profit and Pastime. A Self-Teacher in All Branches of Decorative Art, embracing every variety of Painting and Drawing on china, glass, velvet, canvas, paper and wood. The Secret of All Glass Transparencies, Sketching from Nature, Pastel and Crayon Drawing, Taxidermy, Etc.* (American Mutual Library Association: Philadelphia and Chicago, 1887), 3.
- <sup>37</sup> Beth Fowkes Tobin, "Women, Decorative Arts, and Taxidermy," in *Women and the Material Culture of Death*, Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin, eds. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013), 315.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.
- <sup>40</sup> Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 69.
- <sup>41</sup> Andrea Kolasinski Marcinkus, "Preservation and Permanence: American Women and Nature Fancywork in the Nineteenth Century," in *Women and Things, 1750-1950: Gendered Material Strategies*, Beth Fowkes Tobin and Maureen Daly Goggin, eds. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 129.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.
- <sup>43</sup> Douglas Dreishpoon, "The Still Point of Time," 47.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*; Petah Coyne, in conversation with the author, October 17, 2013.
- <sup>45</sup> Beth Fowkes Tobin, "Women, Decorative Arts, and Taxidermy," 328.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>47</sup> Beth Fowkes Tobin and Maureen Daly Goggin, eds., "Introduction," in *Women and Things, 1750-1950: Gendered Material Strategies* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 2.
- <sup>48</sup> Beth Fowkes Tobin, "Women, Decorative Arts, and Taxidermy," 315.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ladies' Manual of Art, or Profit and Pastime. A Self-Teacher in All Branches of Decorative Art, embracing every variety of Painting and Drawing on china, glass, velvet, canvas, paper and wood. The Secret of All Glass Transparencies, Sketching from Nature, Pastel and Crayon Drawing, Taxidermy, Etc.*, 210.
- <sup>50</sup> Beth Fowkes Tobin, "Women, Decorative Arts, and Taxidermy," 322.

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- <sup>51</sup> Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 46, 195.
- <sup>52</sup> Janis Birkeland, "Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practice," 34.
- <sup>53</sup> Eleanor Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2004), 134.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>55</sup> Alison Knowles, Eleanor Heartney, Meredith Monk, Linda Montano, Erik Ehn and Bonnie Marranca. "Art as Spiritual Practice," in *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, Vol. 24 No. 3 (September 2002): 20-21.
- <sup>56</sup> Petah Coyne, in conversation with the author, October 17, 2013.
- <sup>57</sup> Eleanor Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, 168.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid, 136.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid, 6.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid, 106-107, 121.
- <sup>61</sup> Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*, 23.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>64</sup> Eleanor Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, 107.
- <sup>65</sup> *The Official King James Bible*, Genesis 1:26, Accessed January 19, 2015, <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Genesis-1-26/>.
- <sup>66</sup> Laura Hobgood-Oster, 'Holy Gods and Sacred Bunnies: Animals in Art and Religion,' in *What Are Animals to Us?: Approaches from Science, Religion, Folklore, Literature, and Art*, Dave Aftandilian, ed. (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 2007), 189-90.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid, 191, 198.
- <sup>69</sup> Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 24.
- <sup>70</sup> Laura Hobgood-Oster, *The Friends We Keep*, 162.
- <sup>71</sup> Carrie Przybilla and Terrie Sultan, *Petah Coyne: black/white/black*, 36.
- <sup>72</sup> Ann Wilson Lloyd, *Petah Coyne: Vermilion Fog* (Milan: Magna Charta, 2008), 14-15.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid, xi; Suzaan Boettger, "Petah Coyne: Not Afraid of the Dark," 126.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid, x.
- <sup>75</sup> Hermione Lee, "Introduction," in *Everything that Rises Must Converge*, Flannery O'Connor (London & Boston: Faber and Faber, 1980), ix-xiii.
- <sup>76</sup> Petah Coyne, in conversation with the author, October 17, 2013.
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>78</sup> Douglas Dreishpoon, "The Still Point of Time," in *Petah Coyne: Above and Beneath the Skin* (Buffalo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 2005), 40.
- <sup>79</sup> *The Unconsoled*, <http://www.broadwayworld.com/bwwart/article/Galerie-Lelong-Presents-Petah-Coyne-THE-UNCONSOLED-FOR-The-Art-Show-2014-20140228#.U2JnwvldWQw>.
- <sup>80</sup> Petah Coyne, in conversation with the author, October 17, 2013.
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>82</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>83</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>84</sup> Paraphrased from "The Our Father" Prayer; Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.
- <sup>85</sup> Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 211; Wendy Wheeler, *A New Modernity?: Change in Science, Literature and Politics* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1999), 133.
- <sup>86</sup> Wendy Wheeler, *A New Modernity?*, 140-142.
- <sup>87</sup> Jean Francois Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 73.
- <sup>88</sup> Jean Francois Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 74.
- <sup>89</sup> Ibid, 80-81.
- <sup>90</sup> Petah Coyne, in conversation with the author, October 17, 2013.
- <sup>91</sup> Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 198.



## Conclusion: Taxidermy, Contemporary Art & the 2000s

During the latter half of 2014, Damien Hirst, in partnership with the world renowned French taxidermy and natural science boutique Deyrolle, fashioned *Signification (Hope, Immortality and Death in Paris, Now and Then)* (2014; Figure 75), a contemporary *Wunderkammer*.<sup>1</sup> In order to fill this wall-mounted, glass-fronted, steel-framed cabinet—reminiscent of those seen in his *Medicine Cabinet* and *Instrument Cabinet* series—Hirst chose items from Deyrolle’s extensive collection of natural specimens and scientific artifacts.

Working in a vein similar to that of Mark Dion, Hirst uses *Signification* to comment on the history of Natural History and the habit of collecting by displaying his discoveries alongside items appropriated from popular culture and his own personal collections. Human skulls, animal skeletons, boxes of *Bio-Tex* detergent, and spray cans of *Raid* insecticide sit next to fossilized starfish, calcified coral, bottles of *Dettol* antiseptic hand soap, shadow boxes filled with dead butterflies, and taxidermied animals. On top of the cabinet sit two mounted pigeons. Inside, a pair of foxes wrestle playfully, baby chicks stand in a row, a variety of birds sit on wooden perches, and a gray long-nosed potoroo inquisitively peers out from behind the glass.<sup>2</sup>

*Signification* explores a variety of topics familiar to Hirst, such as the complex relationship between nature and science, myth and reality, as well as life and death. As Hirst explained to *The Art Newspaper* in a recent interview, the items in *Signification* “seem to say that we can achieve immortality through cleanliness, that we can somehow make the bad things in the world go away, which of course we can’t.”<sup>3</sup>

In *Signification*, beautifully preserved animal bodies share space with medical cleaning solutions, inorganic pesticides, and bleached bones. Through these ironic pairings, it becomes clear that just as we long to immortalize animals, in hopes of eternally preserving their beauty, we also long to exterminate them, in hopes of purifying the environment, ridding our world of insects and ‘unclean’ mammalian pests. The inclusion of taxidermied specimens in *Signification*’s exploration of contradiction and cleanliness supports Hirst’s claims regarding mankind’s troubled relationship with animals and the environment.

Furthermore, Hirst’s blatant incorporation of stuffed animal specimens into *Signification* marks a fundamental shift in his artistic relationship with taxidermy. Instead of having his audience question whether or not the animal corpses featured in his art are the products of taxidermic interventions, Hirst openly divulges the true nature of his materials. Although Hirst refrains from disclosing the true amount of taxidermy featured throughout his oeuvre, with *Signification* he no longer denies his use of taxidermy. Finally, Hirst has publically declared traditional taxidermy an acceptable artistic medium.

Even though Hirst rejected using—or admitting to using—taxidermy in the beginning of his career, he can be considered the progenitor of the contemporary art world’s preoccupation with the stuffed animal body. Throughout the nineties, Hirst suspended dead animals in formaldehyde-filled vitrines and cut their bodies open to reveal their inner anatomy. Today, Hirst sustains these modernist sensibilities by forcing animals to become consumable objects rather than remain sentient individuals. He makes visible the violence we inflict on animals to turn them into edible pieces of meat or digestible cultural ideas. In both scenarios, Hirst reflects the ways in which animals are

absorbed—either physically or psychologically—by dominant society. Nevertheless, while Hirst enforces a strict divide between human and animal domains, his animals coerce people into taking on their alien perspectives. In turn, their viewers are encouraged to become animal activists and see the benefits of cohabitation.

Moreover, the work of Mark Dion, Maurizio Cattelan, and Petah Coyne also made it acceptable for stuffed animals to inhabit museum galleries at the turn of the twenty-first century. Their work demonstrates how taxidermy can comment on issues of ecology, technology, authority, identity, and equality. Through his use of taxidermy, Dion attempts to rewrite the history of Natural History. He subverts the intellectual authority of empirical disciplines by harnessing the paradoxical powers of the taxidermied body. By conjuring forth taxidermy's dichotomous associations, he underscores that our knowledge of nature is culturally constructed. He demonstrates that scientific knowledge is not based on pure fact but is instead a blend of fact and fiction.

The taxidermied animals in Cattelan's oeuvre help him combat institutional authority, reveal that childhood is filled with moments of pleasure as well as pain, and underscores that animals are powerful tools in the process of establishing a sense of self. His work encourages us to contemplate how animals help fashion our individual identities while respecting animal difference. Although critical of the prevalent trend to Disneyfy animals, Cattelan productively anthropomorphizes animals to "catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations."<sup>4</sup> His taxidermied animals not only reflect our need to turn animals into metaphors but reveals isomorphisms between humanity and animality.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Coyne's Ecofeminist interventions into the masculine-driven history of Victorian taxidermy assert the power of women and proclaim the dignity of animals. For Coyne, taxidermy functions as a vehicle that allows her to metaphorically migrate across the globe and conduct patriarchal interventions, seamlessly bridging masculine domains, feminine territories, and animal realms. Her work acknowledges that humans and animals are historically, physically, and spiritually connected and argues that instead of trying to break these connections, we should embrace them.

The combined efforts of these four artists demonstrate the thought-provoking and potentially behavior-changing agentic *thing-power* of taxidermy. Their work has provided a plethora of young artists with the foundation on which to further explore man's relationship with animals by not only including taxidermy in their work but, on occasion, producing it themselves. The enduring appeal of taxidermy as an artistic medium makes it clear that "the seeds of the current art world were sown during the 1990s, and that many of the sociopolitical and artistic issues that first crystalized during that decade remain very much in question today."<sup>6</sup> Because taxidermy can comment on a variety of topics, or be 'molded' to fit into a variety of cultural conversations, it has endured as a stimulating artistic medium.

### **The Next Generation: A Sampling**

Netherlandish artists Afke Golstijn & Floris Bakker, otherwise known as The Idiots, fashion open-ended posthuman fairy tales, similar to those constructed by Cattelan, in which animals enact fables and illustrate moral lessons.<sup>7</sup> Like Hirst, The Idiots are concerned with the interplay between life, death, beauty, greed, and restriction.

Through a juxtaposition of materials, *The Idiots* belie the perceived stability of taxidermy and fashion animal-things that are in a constant state of flux.

Culturally speaking, peacocks are understood as symbols of beauty and pride. In *Vanity Comes to Fall* (2014; Figure 76), *The Idiots* play into this timeworn metaphor by enhancing the extravagant tail of a stuffed peacock with pieces of opulent fabrics, rich textiles, and delicate lace. “According to the artists, the sculpture is intended as a critique of the human desire for physical perfection.”<sup>8</sup> By exaggerating the already enticing qualities of the bird’s plumage with synthetic materials, *The Idiots* mock the selfish and invasive processes, such as plastic surgery, we subject ourselves to in order to attain culturally-constructed ideals of beauty. Furthermore, they note that the added weight of the fabric prevents the peacock from ever leaving the ground.<sup>9</sup> Because of its narcissism, the bird, and thus humanity, loses its freedom.

In *Ophelia* (2005; Figure 77), a taxidermied lioness lies on the floor. With her head nestled atop her crossed paws, she appears to be lost in peaceful slumber. However, *Ophelia* seems unaware that the lower half of her body is dissolving into a series of golden globules. While sleeping, her natural form is being abstracted. Is she in the process of dissolving, of being dethroned from her post as ‘Queen of the Jungle’? Or, is she in the process of becoming, of dreaming herself into existence?<sup>10</sup> Either way, *Ophelia* is being absorbed into the human dominated realms of art and literature.

Named after the tragic heroine of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, *Ophelia* is simultaneously confrontational and inviting, repulsive yet beautiful, morbid but nevertheless enchanting. Positioned in a familiar pose, *Ophelia* invites her viewers to imagine themselves in her place. Even though the lion’s body has been botched—animal

material is replaced with ceramic glass made to look like molten gold—it remains beautifully taxidermied. By hiding the seams, The Idiots hide the violence inherent to the history and processes of taxidermy.<sup>11</sup> The Idiots feature the dead bodies of beautiful animals in their art to “conjure powerful emotions of awe and inspiration before giving way to our morbid curiosity surrounding death, which leads us ultimately to think of our own mortality.”<sup>12</sup> Harnessing the paradoxical powers of taxidermy, The Idiots create sculpture that blend fantasy and reality, ask unanswerable questions, and blur the arbitrarily drawn borders between humanity and animality.

London-based artist Tessa Farmer, who couples the scientific sensibility of Dion with the narrativity of Cattelan, subverts the history of the diorama by questioning the authority of the natural history museum and revealing that the concept of nature is culturally constructed. In three-dimensions, as seen in *The Little Savages* (2007; Figure 78), Farmer crafts tales of alternate realities populated by taxidermied animals, preserved birds, and humanoid fairies—which are assembled from plant roots, bee wings, and other insect parts.<sup>13</sup> Farmer’s surrealist landscapes are nightmarishly realistic and dreamily illusionistic. In many of her works, airborne creatures appear to frantically swarm around and violently peck at helpless, disintegrating stuffed animal bodies. The fairies slowly reveal what lies beneath taxidermied animals’ preserved skins, opening the specimens up for inspection. The destructive actions of these fairies are intended to reflect the ways in which humans engage with nature.<sup>14</sup>

Farmer critiques traditional understandings of taxidermy by presenting mounted animals as “caught in the act of dissolution” rather than eternally fixed in a static state of perfection.<sup>15</sup> She investigates stories of invasion and loss rather than conservation and

preservation. By underscoring that taxidermy shares, rather than negates, the malleability of literature, Farmer demonstrates “that the trophies of the Natural History Museum will not last forever.”<sup>16</sup> Farmer’s fairies not only break down animal bodies but annihilate “the memory of colonial victory,” over-turning the power of Teddy-Bear Patriarchy.<sup>17</sup>

British artist Angela Singer, who commenced her career as a visual artist in the late 1990s, also explores the complicated nature of the human-animal relationship. According to the artist, “she is concerned with the ethical and epistemological consequences of humans using nonhuman life and the role that humans play in the exploitation and destruction of animals and our environment.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, she artistically manipulates vintage taxidermy to question why humans insist on inflicting harm on animals.<sup>19</sup>

Singer engages in processes of “de-taxidermy” by encrusting unwanted pieces of antique taxidermy with ceramic roses, gilded beads, and rhinestone brooches, as seen in *Hedge Row* (2010; Figure 79), or stripping them of their skins, exposing bullet wounds and scars, and drenching them in blood-like paint, exemplified by *Sore I* (2002-2003; Figure 80).<sup>20</sup> She botches vintage mounts to make visible the aggression we inflict on animals, to enhance their beauty, and to give “the animal back its presence,” making “it too big to ignore.”<sup>21</sup>

Combining the violence of Hirst and with the respectfulness of Coyne, Singer negates the patriarchal histories written by hunting trophies and natural history specimens, which are filled with tales of masculine bravado, by injecting them with Victorian femininity. As a result, she couples the shock of abjection with the comfort of beauty because “sometimes a soft voice finds more listeners.”<sup>22</sup> She resurrects the dead

by granting discarded animal bodies with new life. She restores forgotten animals with their dignity. She discourages us from causing animals to suffer.

The animals of Singer's oeuvre confront their audience with animal deaths that typically go unnoticed. They ask us to emotionally engage with animals, to empathize with their distress, and acknowledge their worth. They encourage us to recognize the faults of our past and create a better future by suggesting we change our behavior. By underscoring that "the boundaries separating other species from humans as permeable," Singer's art incites us to revise the ways in which we see and think about animals.<sup>23</sup> Singer and her menagerie want us to recognize that we all feel pain. We all deserve respect. Every *thing* is beautiful. Every *thing* matters.

When describing her practice, Singer always notes that she is not a taxidermist and has never had an animal killed, harmed, or taxidermied for her art. As an animal activist, she will never use live animals in her work or inflict harm on a living creature. However, other artists—activists, vegetarians, and vegans included—personally engage in acts of taxidermy.

Julia DeVille, who lives and works in Australia, is obsessed with death. In the same vein as Hirst, she uses taxidermy to force us to physically and emotionally confront death by celebrating its "unexpected beauty."<sup>24</sup> Similar to the work of Singer, DeVille ornaments taxidermied animals with beads, places them on shiny silver platters, and embellishes them with strings of pearls, as seen in *Silence* (2013; Figure 81), "to challenge our disregard for and consumption of both wild and domesticated fauna."<sup>25</sup> However, unlike Singer, DeVille personally preserves all of the animals in her art.



Trained as a jeweler, DeVille is comfortable with handicraft techniques. While searching for new methods of creation, she became obsessed with taxidermy despite her “strong commitment to animal rights.”<sup>26</sup> As a devout vegan, DeVille only “works with animals that died of natural causes. She often uses lambs, pigs, and calves in her mounts to protest industrialized farming and the treatment of animals as a commodity.”<sup>27</sup> By manipulating dead animal bodies with her own hands, DeVille fashions contemporary memento mori while taking part in the paradoxical process of taxidermy. She resurrects dead animals and turns them into allegories that beg us to reflect “on our symbiotic but decidedly unequal relationship with the animal world” and confront “our cavalier disregard for mortality.”<sup>28</sup> Although she refrains from having animals killed for consumption, she recognizes that the taxidermied animal body is unrivaled in its ability to repulse, antagonize, and mollify our fear of death.

Brooklyn-based sculptor Kate Clark, following in the footsteps of Dion, fashions large-scale dioramas that subvert the patriarchal histories of natural history museums and explore the overlap that exists across human and animal cultures, histories, and emotions.<sup>29</sup> However, unlike Dion who procures vintage or commissioned pieces of taxidermy to fill his postmodern dioramas, Clark populates her vignettes with taxidermy crafted with her own hands. Further deviating from the naturalistic prescriptions of the diorama, these mounts synthesize human faces with the bodies of wild animals.

To construct her work, Clark purchases clean hides and pins them over animal forms she sculpted from clay.<sup>30</sup> The faces of her fused creatures, while shaped from animal pelts that have been shaved to reveal porous and oily skin, are molded after the visages of human models. In *Licking the Plate* (2014; Figure 82), for example, Clark

merges a delicately-featured female face with the majestic body of an African kudu, a woodland antelope native to eastern and southern Africa. Placed in front of a backdrop reminiscent of an eighteenth-century European painting, the kudu, whose face is decorated with tribal beadwork, regally stands atop a rocky platform.<sup>31</sup> With no glass separating taxidermy from viewer, the viewer is able to intimately examine the hybrid animal's body. Across the kudu's midsection are hairless scratches, indicating that the antelope evaded a predator's attack before being successfully harvested by a human hunter. However, once the hunter noticed the imperfections of the kudu's hide, he rejected the specimen, making it available for Clark to purchase and—just like Coyne—repurpose.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the creature's hybridity forces viewers to decide whether they identify more with its human aspects or animal features. No matter their conclusion, Clark employs taxidermy to physically manifest the animal instincts inherent to the human condition.

Clark believes that “our current lifestyle does not necessitate physical interaction with wild animals. Yet we revere the natural world and are seduced by characteristics we no longer see in ourselves, such as fierceness, instinctiveness, purity.”<sup>33</sup> Recognizing that taxidermy represents “our endless curiosity to see animals, and our desire to celebrate their unique features,” Clark pushes the productive anthropomorphization of Cattelan's critters into new Posthuman ground by creating hybrid beings that seamlessly blend man and animal.

British artist Polly Morgan, although an English Literature major, became acquainted with several fine artists while attending university. These interactions inspired her to learn the art of taxidermy. In 2004, after honing her skills under the training of

Scottish taxidermist George Jamieson, Morgan commenced her artistic career and started using her training to challenge taxidermic traditions. Morgan's art subverts the traditional function of taxidermy. Rather than using taxidermy to fashion an illusion of life, Morgan uses taxidermy to fashion images of death.<sup>34</sup> In doing this, she challenges her audience to contemplate the reality of death.<sup>35</sup> For example, in the Surrealistic *Still Birth (Purple)* (2010; Figure 83), an undeniably dead duckling floats in the air, dangling from a string tied to a single purple balloon. Despite being dead, the baby bird is promised flight. However, this promise is shattered by the presence of a Victorian glass cloche. Rather than reaching great heights, the bird is encased, trapped in an eternal hover.

Morgan only preserves animals that died of natural or accidental causes or were donated to her by veterinarians or pet owners after unpreventable deaths.<sup>36</sup> She believes that this type of taxidermy is "a form of recycling" and in no way disrespects the animal.<sup>37</sup> Through her practice, which harkens back to the Ecofeminist sensibilities of Coyne, Morgan respects living animals by allowing them their freedom and dead ones by turning them into beautifully sculpted pieces of taxidermy. "This way, Morgan argues, "we can enjoy them once they've finished with their bodies rather than cage them while they're still inhabited."<sup>38</sup>

At the same time Morgan was studying the antiquated techniques of taxidermy, American artists Sarina Brewer, Scott Bibus, and Robert Marbury established the Minnesota Association of Rogue Taxidermists. Rouge taxidermy is "a genre of pop-surrealist art characterized by mixed-media sculptures containing traditional taxidermy materials used in an unconventional manner."<sup>39</sup> Artists working within the genre of Rogue Taxidermy create sculptures using a variety of materials, such as: glass, metal,

paper, ceramics, stone, and found objects. “They then combine these materials with elements borrowed from the world of conventional taxidermy,” producing work that is either reminiscent of an animal or completely abstract.<sup>40</sup> According to Marbury, since 2004, “the community of Rogue Taxidermists and taxidermy artists has expanded considerably. Do-it-yourself workshops have popped up in cities from Los Angeles to London, as well as in oddities shops in between. Not since the Victorian era has taxidermy been so popular.”<sup>41</sup> Moreover, this surge in popularity Marbury describes has surged beyond the art world and into the realm of popular culture.

## **Conclusion**

The influential work of Damien Hirst, Mark Dion, Maurizio Cattelan, and Petah Coyne demonstrate that the tension of taxidermy’s materiality, its “play between appearance, concealment, and relatedness,” has the ability to “lead us toward a more profound understanding of our being,” prompting us to rethink what it means to be human.<sup>42</sup> While merging man-made and authentic animal material, taxidermy demonstrates that humans, and all other living organism, exist “in a chiasmic embrace with the surrounding world.”<sup>43</sup> Taxidermied animals encourage us to sustain, and strengthen this embrace. Its paradoxical materiality makes visible histories of animal exploitation, underscoring the consequences of our continuous efforts to dominate nature.<sup>44</sup> Taxidermy, by embodying paradox, reminds us that we live amongst other beings “who not only share our space but can affect our disposition,” and argues in favor of peaceful coexistence.<sup>45</sup>

While a product of mankind's control over nature, taxidermy also reminds us of the "alien" quality of our own flesh" and the affinity between humans and nonhumans by emphasizing that our bodies are not explicitly human because skin is porous.<sup>46</sup> It exchanges molecules with its environment; it becomes one with its surroundings. Furthermore, because taxidermy provides "no absolute distance between subject and object,"<sup>47</sup> it encourages us to start thinking beyond the life-matter binary.<sup>48</sup> Taxidermy also provides us with a possible end point at which we accept that all *things*—whether human, animal, or something in-between—are filled with agency.<sup>49</sup>

Taxidermy, which was once seen as a source of pure knowledge, is now understood to be steeped in contradiction. Scientists, naturalists, and environmentalists once fashioned taxidermy to archive animals and argue in favor of mankind preserving—and dominating—nature. Now, artists are now using taxidermy to not only reveal the ironic history of man's historical relationship with nature but, hopefully, mend old wounds. Moreover, considering the rising theories of New Materialism, taxidermy goes beyond issues of dichotomy by acting as a bridge, something that forges connections rather than sustains separation. By embodying paradox, taxidermy asks us to step down from our self-granted throne on the *Scala Natura* and seat ourselves next to animals, not above them.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hirst's contemporary cabinet of curiosities was donated to and auctioned off to benefit Deyrolle's education and conservation efforts as well as Victim, the UK charity founded by Hirst. Hirst's charity supports a wide variety of philanthropic organizations. The cabinet was on display at the Deyrolle emporium from September 23<sup>rd</sup> to October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014. *Exhibitions: Signification (Hope, Immortality and Death in Paris, Now and Then)*, Accessed July 12, 2015, <http://www.damienhirst.com/exhibitions/solo/2014/deyrolle>.

<sup>2</sup> A potoroo is a kangaroo-like marsupial. Typically, potoroos grow to be the size of a rabbit. Today, all three of the remaining potoroo species are endangered.

<sup>3</sup> "Damien Hirst's Take on the Wunderkammer," *The Art Newspaper*, Accessed October 5, 2014, <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Damien-Hirsts-take-on-the-wunderkammer/35862>.

<sup>4</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 99.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Alexandra Schwartz, "1998-2001," in *Come As You Are: Art of the 1990s* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), 176.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Marbury, *Taxidermy Art: A Rogue's Guide to the Work, the Culture, and How to Do it Yourself* (New York: Artisan, 2014), 159.

<sup>8</sup> Wall Text for *Vanity Comes to Fall*, in the exhibition *Late Harvest*, October 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*. (University Park, PA.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 194.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 193.

<sup>12</sup> "About Idiots," Accessed July 14, 2015, <http://idiots.nl/news/#ABOUT>.

<sup>13</sup> Giovanni Aloï, *Art and Animals* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2012), 34.

<sup>14</sup> Petra Lange-Berndt, "A Parasitic Craft: Taxidermy in the Art of Tessa Farmer," *The Journal of Modern Craft*, Volume 7, Issue 3 (November 2014): 268.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 271.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 272.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> "About Angela Singer," Accessed July 14, 2015, <http://www.angelasinger.com/about.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Giovanni Aloï, "Angela Singer: Animal Rights and Wrongs," *Antennae*, Issue 7 (Autumn 2008): 10.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Steve Baker, "Something's Gone Wrong Again," *Antennae*, Issue 7 (Autumn 2008): 9.

<sup>22</sup> Giovanni Aloï, "Angela Singer: Animal Rights and Wrongs," 15.

<sup>23</sup> "About Angela Singer," Accessed July 14, 2015, <http://www.angelasinger.com/about.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Marbury, *Taxidermy Art: A Rogue's Guide to the Work, the Culture, and How to Do it Yourself* (New York: Artisan, 2014), 137.

<sup>25</sup> "Julie DeVille: Profile + CV," Accessed July 14, 2015, <http://www.janmurphygallery.com.au/artist/julia-deville/>.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Marbury, *Taxidermy Art*, 137.

<sup>28</sup> "Julie DeVille: Profile + CV," Accessed July 14, 2015, <http://www.janmurphygallery.com.au/artist/julia-deville/>.

<sup>29</sup> "Kate Clark Studio: Bio," Accessed July 23, 2015, <http://www.kateclark.com/about/>.

<sup>30</sup> Ralph Gardner Junior, "Mixing Taxidermy and Art: Robert Marbury's 'Taxidermy Art' features 'Rogue' Taxidermists," *The Wall Street Journal* (December 8 2014), Accessed July 23, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/mixing-taxidermy-and-art-1418089251>.

<sup>31</sup> Wall Text for *Licking the Plate*, in the exhibition *Late Harvest*, October 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> "Kate Clark Studio: Artist Bio," Accessed July 23, 2015, <http://www.kateclark.com/about/>.

<sup>34</sup> Giovanni Aloï, *Art and Animals*, 34.

<sup>35</sup> Jane Eastoe, *The Art of Taxidermy* 126.

<sup>36</sup> Wall Text for *Systemic Inflammation*, in the exhibition *Late Harvest*, October 2014.

<sup>37</sup> Jane Eastoe, *The Art of Taxidermy*, 126.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Marbury, *Taxidermy Art*, 12.

<sup>40</sup> "What is Rogue Taxidermy?," Accessed July 16, 2015, <http://www.roguetaxidermy.com/index.php>.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Marbury, *Taxidermy Art*, 7.

<sup>42</sup> Trevor Norris, "Martin Heidegger, D.H. Lawrence, and Poetic Attention to Being," in *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby, eds. (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 120.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 126.

<sup>44</sup> Kate Rigby, "Gernot Böhme's Ecological Aesthetics of Atmosphere," in *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby, eds. (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 144-145.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>46</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 112.

<sup>47</sup> Timothy Morton, "Here Comes Everything: The Promise of Object-Oriented Ontology," *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, Volume 19 Number 2 (Spring/Summer 2001): 176.

<sup>48</sup> Jane Bennett. *Vibrant Matter*, 20.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Erica Fudge, "A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals," in *Representing Animals*. Nigel Rothfels, ed. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), 2002, 11.

### **Epilogue: The Popular Resurrection of Taxidermy**

The renewed cultural popularity of taxidermy is undeniable. Not only is it infiltrating the work of contemporary art but contemporary media. Recently, well-known newspapers, journals, and magazines have published a plethora of articles concerning the stuffed animal body. In the short story “Understanding Owls: What does a gift say about the giver?,” first published in the October 2012 issue of *The New Yorker* and later as a chapter in *Let’s Explore Diabetes with Owls* (2013), humorist David Sedaris reflects on his search for the perfect Valentine’s Day gift. After determining that the only gift he could purchase Hugh, his long-time partner, is a stuffed owl, Sedaris trolls Paris and the United Kingdom for a suitable mount, finally purchasing a specimen housed in a London taxidermy shop. After embarking on this little adventure, Sedaris wonders if his interest in buying a stuffed owl served as a reflection of his “superficiality,” “juvenile fascination with the abnormal,” and “willingness to accept and sometimes even celebrate evil.”<sup>1</sup> Although he procured a quirky gift for his boyfriend, the actual trophy of Sedaris’ hunt for the perfect taxidermied owl proved an embodiment of his identity.

In 2010, journalist Melissa Milgrom published *Still Life: Adventures in Taxidermy*, marking the beginning of a surge in popular, non-academic literature concerned with taxidermy.<sup>2</sup> Based on a series of interviews with taxidermists and accounts of personal experiences, Milgrom’s editorial project traces the convoluted history of taxidermy in order to understand her initial aversion toward and eventual love for the medium. A year later, in 2011, professional artist Dave Madden authored *The Authentic Animal: Inside the Odd and Obsessive World of Taxidermy Art and Animals* after infiltrating the strange sub-culture of professional and amateur taxidermists.<sup>3</sup> In



2012, journalist Jane Eastoe wrote *The Art of Taxidermy*, a breezy look into historical, cultural, and artistic infatuations with taxidermy.<sup>4</sup> In 2013, Alexis Turner published the beautifully illustrated coffee-table book *Taxidermy*, which is particularly concerned with the aesthetic value of the stuffed animal in fields such as fashion and interior design.<sup>5</sup> And, in 2014, Robert Marbury, co-founder of the Minnesota Association of Rogue Taxidermists, authored *Taxidermy Art: A Rogue's Guide to the Work, the Culture, and How to Do it Yourself*, which provides a brief history of famous taxidermists, short biographies of contemporary artists employing taxidermy, and a guide on how to create taxidermy at home, highlighting the twenty-first century's renewed interest in taxidermy as a domestic hobby.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, magazines and newspapers published stories about taxidermy. In 2014, *The New York Times* ran an article announcing the opening of the Morbid Anatomy Museum in Brooklyn, New York.<sup>7</sup> Not only does the institution mount exhibitions concerned with histories and ideas that fall between the cracks of life and death but offers a plethora of classes on how to taxidermy small woodland creatures.<sup>8</sup> In early 2015, National Public Radio published a feature on how people flocked to the American Museum of Natural History to see the taxidermied body of Lonesome George, whose death in 2012 marked the extinction of the Galapagos tortoise and whose body now serves as “an important symbol in the fight to protect endangered animals.”<sup>9</sup> During the summer of 2015, articles concerned with The World Taxidermy and Fish Carving Championships, which was founded in 1983 and takes place annually in Springfield, Missouri, were inescapable. That year, 500 people registered for the competition, including the most female participants in the program's history.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the people

have spoken: taxidermy is, once again, alive. And, more recently, *National Geographic* printed “Still Life,” a brief history of taxidermy and rumination on its recent resurgence, in its August 2015 issue.

### **The Academic Acceptance of Taxidermy**

With the popularity of taxidermy as an occupation, leisure activity, and artistic medium on the rise, art historians are finally giving the medium critical consideration. With the publication of *The Postmodern Animal* in 2000 and *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity, and Representation* in 2001, Steve Baker spurred immense academic interest in the animal’s role as a creator of human identity and artistic creativity, dramatically impacting the fields of Animal Studies and Art History.<sup>11</sup> Baker’s discussion of botched taxidermy in *The Postmodern Animal* has been of particular intrigue.

The early twenty-first century experienced a rise in interdisciplinary publications that merged the disciplines of Animal Studies and Art History. *Representing Animals*, edited by Nigel Rothfels and published in 2002, brings together a variety of contributors—ranging from the disciplines of history, literature, art history, and anthropology—to examine the ways we talk, write, photograph, imagine, and otherwise represent animals.<sup>12</sup> The edited collection *Figuring Animals: Essays on Animal Images in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Popular Culture*, printed in 2004, reveals and reassesses the representation of animals in literature, the visual arts, philosophy, and cultural practice.<sup>13</sup> In 2007, Baker joined the Editorial Board of *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, “a quarterly journal that invites participation in the animal studies debate by reframing mainstream perspectives on animals and humanism.”<sup>14</sup> Petra Lange-

Brendt's *Animal Art: Präparierte Tiere in der Kunst 1850-2000*, released in 2010, investigates the ways in which artists use the animal body to confound gender constructs while fashioning a preliminary history of preserved animals in modern and contemporary art.<sup>15</sup> Art Historian Ron Broglio tackles issues of animal phenomenology in 2011's *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art*.<sup>16</sup>

In 2012, academics began rigorously exploring the entangled relationship of art, culture, and animals. Giovanni Aloï, art critic and Editor-in-Chief of *Antennae*, published *Art and Animals*, producing a survey of contemporary artists who are turning to the animal for inspiration.<sup>17</sup> A chapter of the book is dedicated to their use of taxidermy. That same year, Penn State University Press published *Gorgeous Beasts: Animal Bodies in Historical Perspective* and *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and Cultures of Longing*. *Gorgeous Beasts* comprises a series of essays that consider the varied roles animal bodies play in human culture.<sup>18</sup> Authors consider how animals were used from the pre-Enlightenment age to the present. *The Breathless Zoo* reflects on the reasons why we began preserving animal bodies, connecting the history of taxidermy to issues of wonder, beauty, spectacle, order, narrative, allegory, and remembrance.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, after recognizing that the revival of taxidermy in popular culture and fine art was not a fleeting fad but a continuing trend, museums started investigating its artistic relevance. In 2005, MASS MoCA mounted *Becoming Animal: Contemporary Art in the Animal Kingdom* to display how contemporary artists demonstrate that “the separation between human and animal has diminished from an absolute biological distinction to an increasingly delicate web of ecological, social, and personal relationships.”<sup>20</sup> Although not exclusively concerned with taxidermy, the exhibition

featured artists—such as Mark Dion—who are interested in exploring mankind’s entangled relationship with animals.

It was not until the Fall of 2014 that taxidermy became the prime focus of a major exhibition. With *Late Harvest*, the Nevada Museum of Art juxtaposed “historically significant wildlife painting with contemporary art that employs taxidermy” to “provoke viewers to consider our complex relationship with animals” and survey “a theme gaining increasing significance in contemporary art.”<sup>21</sup> The exhibition, which featured works by Petah Coyne, Mark Dion, Damien Hirst, Polly Morgan, and The Idiots, drew out intriguing parallels and startling aesthetic contrasts between the art of the past and the present. It also prompted viewers to recognize the important roles animals played, and continue to play, throughout human history.

With *Embodied Paradox: Taxidermy and Contemporary Art, 1990-Present*, I aim to provide the fields of Art History and Animals Studies with focused case studies that not only investigates the history and materiality of taxidermy but demonstrates how contemporary artists are using the medium to mine the past in order to understand our present relationship with animals and provide incentive for creating a new future in which timeworn hierarchies can be re-ordered. By revealing the ironic histories, exposing the paradoxical physical properties, and harnessing the agentic *thing-power* of taxidermy, artists such as Damien Hirst, Mark Dion, Maurizio Cattelan, and Petah Coyne provide us with “new way[s] of thinking about and living with animals.”<sup>22</sup> Their work encourages new generations of artists—and their audiences—to redraw the borders that have historically separated human territories from animal domains.

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<sup>1</sup> David Sedaris, “Understanding Owls: What does a gift say about the giver?,” *The New Yorker*, October 12, 2012, Accessed July 16, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/10/22/understanding-owls>.

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- <sup>2</sup> Melissa Milgrom, *Still Life: Adventures in Taxidermy* (Boston & New York: Mariner Books Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2010).
- <sup>3</sup> Dave Madden, *The Authentic Animal: Inside the Odd and Obsessive World of Taxidermy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011).
- <sup>4</sup> Jane Eastoe, *The Art of Taxidermy* (London: Pavilion, 2012).
- <sup>5</sup> Alexis Turner, *Taxidermy* (New York: Rizzoli, 2013).
- <sup>6</sup> Robert Marbury, *Taxidermy Art: A Rogue's Guide to the Work, the Culture, and How to Do it Yourself* (New York: Artisan, 2014).
- <sup>7</sup> Jennifer Schuessler, "The Dark Side Gets Its Due: The Morbid Anatomy Museum Opens in Brooklyn," *The New York Times* (June 26, 2014), Accessed June 26, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/27/nyregion/the-morbid-anatomy-museum-opens-in-brooklyn.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/27/nyregion/the-morbid-anatomy-museum-opens-in-brooklyn.html?_r=0).
- <sup>8</sup> Stuart Miller, "Morbid Anatomy Museum's Taxidermy Classes Offer a Slice of Life (and Death)," in *The New York Times* (April 12, 2015), Accessed April 18, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/13/nyregion/morbid-anatomy-museums-taxidermy-classes-offer-a-slice-of-life-and-death.html>.
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- <sup>10</sup> Brent McDonald, "Masters of Taxidermy Seek to Replicate More Than an Animal's Appearance," *The New York Times* (June 1, 2015), Accessed June 1, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/02/us/taxidermy-championship-springfield.html>.
- <sup>11</sup> Steve Baker, *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993); Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion, 2000).
- <sup>12</sup> Nigel Rothfels, ed., *Representing Animals* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002).
- <sup>13</sup> Mary Sanders Pollock and Catherine Rainwater, eds. *Figuring Animals: Essays on Animal Images in Art, Literature, Philosophy and Popular Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
- <sup>14</sup> "Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture: About," Facebook, Accessed July 16, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Antennae-The-Journal-of-Nature-in-Visual-Culture/168701325727>.
- <sup>15</sup> Petra Lange-Berndt, *Animal Art: Präparierte Tiere in der Kunst 1850-2000* (Munich: Verlag Silke Schreiber 2009).
- <sup>16</sup> Ron Broglio, *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
- <sup>17</sup> Giovanni Aloï, *Art and Animals* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2012).
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- <sup>20</sup> Nato Thompson, *Becoming Animal: Contemporary Art in the Animal Kingdom* (North Adams, MA: Mass MoCA Publications, 2005), 8.
- <sup>21</sup> David B. Walker, "Executive Director's Message," in *Late Harvest* (Germany: Hirmer Publishers and the Nevada Museum of Art, 2014), 7.
- <sup>22</sup> Erica Fudge, "A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals," in *Representing Animals*. Nigel Rothfels, ed. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), 11.

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