

Antennae



Issue 7 Autumn 2008

ISSN 1756-9575

Botched Taxidermy

Steve Baker Something's Gone Wrong Again Angela Singer Animal Rights and Wrongs Jessica Ullrich The Taxidermic Hybrid Thomas Grünfeld The Misfits Christina Garcia The Ethics of Botched Taxidermy Idiots The Alchemical Vision Emily Mayer Rescuing What Had become a Dying Art Chloë Brown Melancholic Taxidermy Matthew Brower Take Only Photographs Amy Stein Domesticated Daniëlle van Ark The Mounted Life

EDITORIAL

ANTENNAE ISSUE 7

As Steve Baker explained in *The Postmodern Animal*: “A botched taxidermy piece might be defined as referring to the human and to the animal, without itself being either human or animal, and without its being a direct representation of either. It is an attempt to think a new thing...Neither species, nor genus, nor individual, each one is open both to endless interpretation and, more compellingly still, to the refusal of interpretation...They are perhaps things with which to think, rather than themselves being things to be thought about...to prompt a moment of perplexity and non-recognition, of genuine thinking.”

This issue of *Antennae* explores the ‘other side’ of taxidermy, that which is perhaps more challenging to the eye, and that which has more recently become increasingly present in contemporary art practice. From Steve Baker’s opening, an introduction to the very concept of botched taxidermy, this issue of *Antennae* explores the work of a number of artists who, in one way or another, have confronted the relatively uncharted waters of unconventional taxidermy. We are proud to present an interview with Angela Singer, artist and animal rights activist whose ‘fragmented’ creations have helped defining the expressive potentials of botched taxidermy. In an epic and exclusive interview, Singer discusses animal-studies, and the process of ‘de-taxiderming’ which is at the core of her work. Jessica Hullrich reviews a selection of key contemporary artists whose sculptural practice integrates body parts of different animals in order to create a hybrid unity, whilst Thomas Grünfeld’s haunting *Misfits* provide a sleek and elegant counterpart to the theme, leading us to the crafty creations of the *Idiots*. The work of Emily Mayer, a pioneer and trend setter in the field of taxidermy, and Chloë Brown’s experimental and multimedia-based approach, introduce the subject of taxidermic-melancholia to this issue paving the way for a highly original essay by Matthew Brower investigating the use of taxidermy in Victorian wildlife photography. On this sustained note, this issue ends with the disorienting and voyeuristic photographic visions of Daniëlle van Ark and Amy Stein.

Our warmest ‘thank you’ goes to all contributors to this issue, which along with its Spring predecessor constitutes the most comprehensive mapping of taxidermy in contemporary art published to date.

A warm thank you also goes to our ever-growing readership from around the world.

Giovanni Aloï

Editor in Chief of *Antennae* Project

CONTENTS

ANTENNAE ISSUE 7

4 **Something's Gone Wrong Again**

Adapted from a paper given at the Research Centre in Creativity, London Metropolitan University, 'Something's gone wrong again: art, animals, ethics and botched form' explores the challenges and potential of the animal's botched body.

Text by **Steve Baker**

10 **Angela Singer: Animals Rights and Wrongs**

Angela Singer's work calls into question the unnecessary violence humans subject animals to, as well as the notion that people are inherently separate from and superior to other species. For years, her work has blurred the boundaries between decoration and death, altering by using a process she calls 'de-taxidermy', the meaning of the trophy and the Victorian diorama.

Questions and Text by **Giovanni Aloï**

18 **The Taxidermy Hybrid**

Jessica Ullrich, in a review of some key contemporary artists, discusses sculptural practice that integrates body parts of different animals in order to create a hybrid unity.

Text by **Jessica Ullrich**

22 **Thomas Grünfeld: The Misfits**

Thomas Grünfeld's 'Misfits' is a series of taxidermy specimens of multiple species reconfigured according to the artist's imagination. These creatures, raise issues of visual perception or the politics of style and make reference to a popular storytelling tradition from southern Germany. We met with the artists to discuss his creations

Text and Questions by **Eric Frank**

28 **The Ethics of Botched Taxidermy**

Christina Garcia explores the ethics and the aesthetics of botched taxidermy in the work of Michal Rovner.

Text by **Christina Garcia**

40 **Idiots: The Alchemical Vision**

Idiots is a collaborative project by Dutch artists Afke Golsteijn, Ruben Taneja and Floris Bakker. Combining their talents with glass, metal, embroidery, and taxidermy, the artists decorate and adorn real animals, transfiguring them from regular creatures – rabbits, hedgehogs, swans, birds, mice – into the tragic heroes of contemporary fairy tales.

Text by **Rachel Poliquin**

45 **Rescuing What Had Become a Dying Art**

Emily Mayer is the real pioneer of taxidermy contemporary art. Her work, owes more to the modern art gallery than it does to tatty birds posed in Victorian glass cases. Over the past year she has developed a revolutionary taxidermy technique and worked with Damien Hirst. Today, her innovative practice inspires the new wave of contemporary taxidermy in art.

Questions by **Giovanni Aloï**

52 **Melancholic Taxidermy**

Chloë Brown is a multimedia artist whose work has more recently explored the subject of melancholia through the use of taxidermy, sound and fake snow. An underlying menace is, however, scarcely concealed by the thin layers of the picturesque and the snow which covers the carefully posed taxidermy and the sounds of child and animal distress.

Questions by **Eric Frank**

59 **Take Only Photographs**

Matthew Brower examines the paradigmatic set presented by wildlife photography looking at the conventions of Victorian time in order to understand how we should look at animals rather than 'why we should look at them'.

Text by **Matthew Brower**

69 **Domesticated**

Amy Stein's images serve as modern dioramas of our new natural history. Within these scenes, she explores our paradoxical relationship with the "wild" and how our conflicting impulses continue to evolve and alter the behaviour of both humans and animals.

Question by **Giovanni Aloï**

73 **The Mounted Life**

Daniëlle van Ark's photographic exploration takes us to the depths of the Natural History Museum depot.

Text by

Interview by **Shelly Stein**

SOMETHING'S GONE WRONG AGAIN

Adapted from a paper given at the Research Centre in Creativity, London Metropolitan University, 'Something's gone wrong again: art, animals, ethics and botched form' explores the challenges and potential of the animal's botched body.

Text by Steve Baker

Postmodernism's identification with the impure, the fractured, the difficult and the damaged is well known, but why is it that there seems to be a kind of *rightness* about things going wrong, and how does it connect with our thinking about creativity?

In recent years, particularly since writing a book called *The Postmodern Animal*, my own work has been primarily concerned with the ways in which artists stage, or engage with, the idea of the animal in the contemporary world. And in this regard it's relevant to note that the moment just over a quarter of a century ago that saw the rise of postmodernism was also the moment at which the animal rights movement as we now know it became more active and more visible.

The wrongs addressed by that movement, of course, were ones to be put right rather than to be indulged, and this may explain why the animal advocate Carol Adams suggested a couple of years ago that it may be an increasing problem for the animal rights movement that it is, in her words, "a 'modern' movement in a postmodern time". In exploring that tension between the idea of wrongs to be put right, and a sense of the rightness of things going wrong, I want to avoid characterizing it as a clash between ethical and aesthetic perspectives.

My concern in *The Postmodern Animal* was to describe a range of recent artworks in which the image of the animal takes an unconventional and sometimes startling form. It was an attempt, the book said, "to characterize those instances of recent art practice where things ... appear to *have gone wrong* with the animal, as it were, but where it still *holds together*". The collective term I proposed for these works, which I regarded as

both descriptive and provocative, was "botched taxidermy". The term wasn't to be taken too literally: some pieces did use taxidermy, others presented the imperfectly preserved animal body in different ways. But all of them botched the body, or got it "wrong", in one way or another. The problem with art's more straightforwardly realistic, or beautiful, or sentimental representations of animals is that our very familiarity with them renders the depicted animal effectively invisible. Worse still, for much of the twentieth century the animal in art was regarded as the most kitsch of subjects, undeserving of serious attention. In stark contrast, these works of botched taxidermy -- however little else they had in common -- had the great value of rendering the animal "*abrasively visible*".

It was their wrongness that gave them their edge. In botching the body, in calling into question the categories and the boundaries of the human and the nonhuman, the pure, the perfect, the whole, the beautiful and the proper, they held out the promise of an art, to borrow Adam Phillips's tantalizing words, in which "the idea of human completeness disappears", and whose difficult effect might also offer what he calls "good ways of bearing our incompleteness". Botching is a creative procedure precisely because of its openness to getting things wrong. Instead of offering answers, these works of botched taxidermy were, I suggested, "*questioning entities*". Phillips, again, praising "the fluency of disorder, the inspirations of error", argues: "We need a new pantheon of bunglers". I'm not insensitive to the peculiarity of the position I appear to be adopting here. A recent British newspaper headline, quoting Sean Gifford, a member of People for the Ethical Treatment



John Isaacs

Say it isn't so, Arts Council Collection, Hayward Gallery, South Bank Centre, London, 1994 ©

of Animals who's been disrupting Paris fashion shows that have prominently featured furs, read: "There is nothing creative about skinning an animal". I agree with this, but would still want to argue that works of botched taxidermy, some of which prominently feature skinned animals, are indeed creative.

It was not my intention to engage in direct ethical judgements about these sometimes highly contentious works. Some of the pieces, such as Jordan Baseman's sculptural pieces using animal skins and basic taxidermy techniques, seemed to me to be defining

images of the 1990s that help us to think through our inevitably contradictory relation to the other-than-human or more-than-human world. Works by some other artists were undoubtedly more problematic. But it seemed important to defend these works, regardless of what I thought of them individually. I wanted to defend them in order to *observe* them, to allow them space to be, to trust their integrity, to see what they might have in common, and how they might work *beyond* their makers' varied intentions and varied engagements with animals.



Damien Hirst

Away From the Flock, 1994, Steel, glass, lamb, formaldehyde solution, 96 x 149 x 51 cm, Charles Saatchi ©

It hardly needs saying that this is not a culture that trusts art, or trusts artists, to operate with integrity. And that lack of trust shows this culture at its least creative: you can't have an untrusting account of creativity. The difficulty is that this necessary trust has to sit alongside, and somehow to accommodate, the fact that artists have sometimes harmed animals in making their work, whether (to cite three notorious examples) in the construction of devices to zap thousands of flies, or the invitation to gallery-goers to decimate goldfish in kitchen blenders, or the liberties taken with the life of a genetically modified rabbit in the name of art. The seriousness of the work cannot excuse or justify the harm. In that sense, the artist Sue Coe's maxim, "life before art", has to be right.

But that is an argument for another occasion, because the criticisms of botched taxidermy are of a different order. I'm aware of three principal objections that have been raised to this kind of work: first, that critical responses to this art gloss over the contentious fact that many of the works consist of real, damaged, animal bodies; second, that the works are unremittingly ugly; and third, that they're ethically irresponsible. The difficulty is therefore both with the look of this work, and with how the significance of that look is to be

interpreted.

The first objection is plainly put by John Simons, who has written: "When I see a work of 'botched taxidermy' ... I do not see an epistemological problem. I see a dead animal". More than anything else, it was the need to address this uncompromising complaint that in fact prompted the present paper. But it is the third objection -- the accusation of ethical irresponsibility -- to which I need to attend most fully.

It is articulated most forcefully by Anthony Julius, in his recent book *Transgressions: The Offences of Art*. Its central concern is to explore the "transgressive aesthetic" that runs through what Julius calls the "taboo-breaking art" of recent times. Rightly identifying the limitations of a formalist defence of this art, the particular and distinctive strength of the book is its insistence that both the form *and* content of this art should be taken seriously.

As it happens, Julius discusses a few of the pieces I had called botched taxidermy in *The Postmodern Animal*. One is from Damien Hirst's *Natural History* series (the animals preserved in formaldehyde); another is from Thomas Grünfeld's *Misfits* series; and a third is John Isaacs's *Say It Isn't So*, in which the body of the mad scientist is a modified tailor's dummy whose odd



Thomas Grünfeld
Misfit - Gross mit Klein (in 2 parts), taxidermy,
52.5 x 98 x 62.5 cm. 1998 ©



Thomas Grünfeld
Misfit (Cow), taxidermy, 152 x 190 x 90 cm.
1997 ©

farmyard-animal-like head is in fact the wax cast of a frozen chicken.

Julius seems to loathe these works, and is at his least persuasive in his interpretation of them. In them, he laments, “That most fundamental of hierarchies, which places the human above the merely animal, is subverted”. He specifically describes the pieces by Grünfeld and Isaacs as “counter-Enlightenment taunts”: “They present the monsters, the taxidermic aberrations, that a humanity unconstrained by moral scruple, basest when least confined, will produce ... These man-beasts, minatory or comic, deny the divinity of the human form that is the premise of Western art”. This kind of hybrid, taboo-breaking art is an assault on its audience because, he writes, it “can force us into the presence of the ugly, the bestial, the vicious, the menacing. These are all kinds of cruelty”.

Isaacs is the only one of those three artists I’ve had the opportunity to interview in person. His account of the “force” of the life-sized figure in *Say It Isn’t So* is rather different. Its effect, he hoped, would be to “force the viewer from their intelligence” and to take them unawares, prompting a moment of perplexity and non-

recognition, of genuine thinking. More generally, he observed that much of his work “comes from trying to fit together different information sources -- art, science, whatever -- and allowing them to cohabit, coexist, to form more of a question than an answer”.

A comparable point is made in an essay entitled “Lightness” by the late Italo Calvino, in which he noted that for Ovid “everything can be transformed into something else, and knowledge of the world means dissolving the solidity of the world. And also for him there is an essential parity between everything that exists, as opposed to any sort of hierarchy of powers or values”.

This is, one might say, a collage principle. It is interested in things, it accepts things, in all their discontinuity and unevenness and unlikeliness, and this is what it works with, not knowing the outcome in advance. Collage is about putting the wrong things together: to the right effect. In his recent book *Animals in Film*, Jonathan Burt notes the extensive use of “a collage of effects” in the construction of apparently realistic animal imagery in film, adding the useful observation that “the ethical potential of animal films



Angela Singer
Sore, 2002-03 recycled taxidermic support, mixed media
630x480x610mm ©

cannot necessarily be mapped onto their truth value". A similar idea is borne out in Nicky Coutts's striking series *The Inheritors*, where it often takes a moment to figure out what's wrong, until it becomes apparent that those are human eyes collaged on to a variety of animal faces. It reminds me of the American artist Jim Dine's wonderful comment: "I trust objects so much. I trust disparate elements going together".

In the light of these benign botchings, my criticism of Anthony Julius in his book *Transgressions* is not that he complacently assumes the superiority of human over nonhuman life (though he does seem to do that), but rather that *he doesn't trust artists*. He can't do so because he doesn't seem to grasp that positive sense of botching. And his concern with "moral scruple" -- like Suzi Gablik's concern back in the 1980s with what she called "art's moral centre" -- only reinforces my view that the integrity of the artworks I'm describing is not fashioned out of, and is not best expressed through, the language of morals and ethics.

Jacques Derrida's essay "And say the animal

responded?", drawn from a long 1997 lecture and published for the first time earlier this year, opens with this question about the limits of ethics in the field of human-animal relations: "Would an ethics be sufficient ... to remind the subject of its being-subject, its being-guest, host or hostage, that is to say its being-subjected-to-the-other, to the Wholly Other or to every single other?". Derrida answers the question thus: "I don't think so". He continues to be wary, as he's said before, of even a "provisional" morality.

In contemporary art, the integrity I'm talking about might be thought of as a working method, an intuitive way of operating, in which there is often a precarious balance of confidence and not-knowing, or of confidence despite not-knowing. My original account of botched taxidermy itself implied a certain *resilience*, or *integrity*, or even *dignity*, in the way these botched bodies held together, against the odds. But precisely because botched form sails close to, and reconfigures much the same formal vocabulary as the so-called "abject art" of the early 1990s, with its apparent revealing in meat,

baseness, powerlessness, and hierarchies, and awful lot depends on the effectiveness with which those meanings can be turned.

The example I want to begin to explore in relation to this is the turning of the hunting trophy. *The dead animal of botched taxidermy is not the dead animal of the hunting trophy*, though each might be said to haunt the other. It was, I think, Jordan Baseman who first got me thinking about trophies. Talking about the pair of animal skins with modelled heads that comprise his stunning *The Cat and the Dog*, he described the effect of these wall-mounted bodily remains as being “exactly like tiger skins, or bear skins or whatever”. He also referred to them as “empty trophies”.

That sense of an empty or subverted trophy is also explored in the work of the New Zealand-based artist Angela Singer. Since the mid-1990s she has been making a series of works that address the turning of taxidermic meaning even more explicitly. Motivated by a commitment to animal rights, Singer talks of her work as “recycled taxidermy”, and says: “I think using taxidermy is a way for me to honour the animals’ life, because all the taxidermy I use was once a trophy kill. ... The very idea of a trophy animal is sickening to me”.

In a work entitled *Sore*, which is also the Victorian name for a fallow deer, the skin has been removed from the trophy head, taking it back to the supporting taxidermic form, and a new “flesh” created by coating and carving red wax, iron oxide pigments and varnishes. Like many of her works, its look relates to the history of that particular individual animal. As the family that donated the trophy head to Singer had explained, both the hunter who shot it and the deer itself had been drenched in blood, because the antlers act as a blood reservoir and it spurts everywhere when, as happened here, they were sawn off.

Of her practice as a whole, Singer says: “I think some people fear the physicality of art that uses taxidermy. Taxidermy shrinks the animal, and botching taxidermy gives the animal back its presence, making it too big to ignore”. In contrast to the celebratory rhetoric of the hunting trophy, works such as these leave the viewer disconcerted, unconfirmed. And in this, at least, John Berger’s famous claim that “no animal confirms man” seems to be borne out here.

We come now to my rather odd conclusion, such as it is. Tom Robbins’s gloriously politically-incorrect novel, *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates*, opens with a description of an aged parrot that “looked like a human fetus spliced onto a kosher chicken”. The book is full of botched bodies (both animal and human) which, though they include his own, seem in no way at odds with the placid philosophy of the central character, a maverick CIA agent called Switters, who sees true

intelligence as always being “in the service of serenity, beauty, novelty, and mirth”.

His outlook is shaped in no small part by his enthusiasm for a book on meditation called *The Silent Mind*. Curious to read something of the sort, having never done so, I’ve recently been dipping into a collection of talks on meditation by a Japanese Zen master called Shunryu Suzuki. I make no apology for taking some of its ideas wildly out of context, but I’ve been intrigued to find in it echoes of a couple of the ideas I’ve touched on in this paper.

“The best way to control people is to encourage them to be mischievous”, says Suzuki: “first let them do what they want, and watch them. This is the best policy ... to watch them, without trying to control them”. And calling into question the idea of failure, he refers to a Zen maxim he translates as “to succeed wrong with wrong” -- the entirely permissible making of “one continuous mistake”. The striking thing is that this letting go of control, and toleration of operating continuously in the wrong, is explicitly characterized as “right practice”.

I don’t want to draw any firm conclusion from this, but merely to observe with interest this perspective -- far removed from postmodern theory -- that seems able to acknowledge a rightness in the practice of things going wrong. That it does so in terms of encouraging mischief rather than being troubled by transgression is also gratifying: a distant echo, somehow, of the botching that trusts (in Dine’s words) “disparate elements going together”.

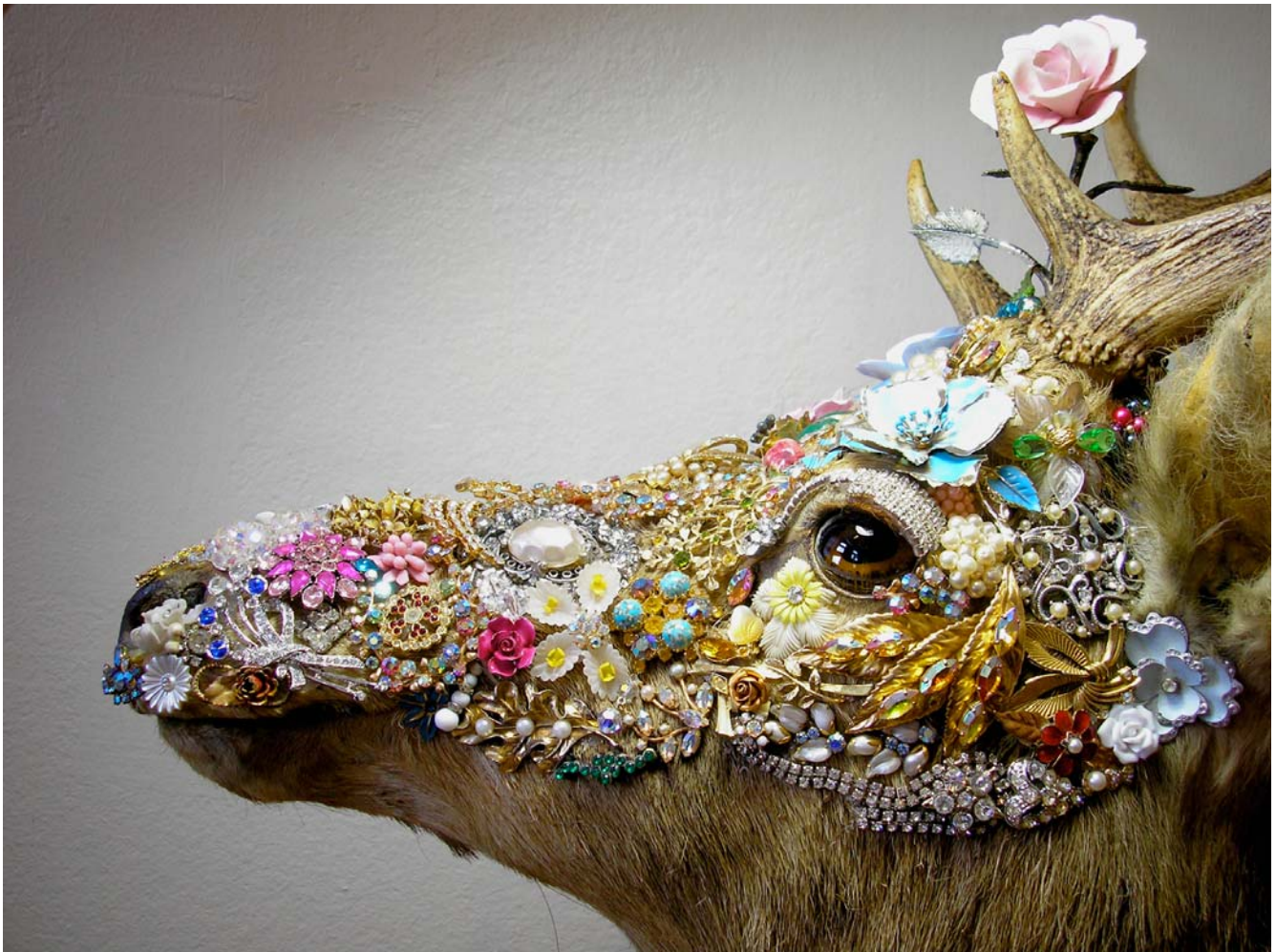
‘Something’s gone wrong again: Art, animals, ethics and botched form’ was originally printed in Animality catalogue, Blue Oyster Art Gallery, Dunedin, New Zealand 2003, is here reprinted with permission of the author and is adapted from a paper given at the Research Centre in Creativity, London Metropolitan University, March 2003.

Steve Baker is Emeritus Professor of Art History at the University of Central Lancashire, and is the author of The Postmodern Animal and of Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity, and Representation. Chapters from those books have recently been reprinted in Routledge’s five-volume collection Animals and Society: Critical Concepts in the Social Sciences, in Berg’s The Animals Reader: The Essential Classic and Contemporary Writings, and in ZOO~, the catalogue of the inaugural exhibition at La Centrale électrique: European Centre for Contemporary Art, in Brussels. Baker is a member of the editorial board of the US journal Society and Animals, and a founding member of the Animal Studies Group. His research on attitudes to animals in 20th and 21st-century art, philosophy and popular culture draws on his interviews and correspondence with contemporary artists in several countries, and his chapter in the Animal Studies Group’s 2006 book Killing Animals was recently described by animal historian Harriet Ritvo as handling with ‘defiant awareness’ the ‘politically charged and often intentionally offensive artwork’ that it analyzed. His forthcoming book, Art Before Ethics: Animal Life in Artists’ Hands, proposes that the integrity of contemporary artists’ engagement with questions of animal life is not fashioned out of and is not best understood through the language of a regulatory or proscriptive ethics.

ANGELA SINGER: ANIMAL RIGHTS AND WRONGS

Angela Singer's work calls into question the unnecessary violence humans subject animals to, as well as the notion that people are inherently separate from and superior to other species. For years, her work has blurred the boundaries between decoration and death, altering by using a process she calls 'de-taxidermy', the meaning of the trophy and the Victorian diorama.

Questions and Text by Giovanni Aloï



Angela Singer
Deofrith, recycled taxidermy, mixed media, ©

Angela Singer is an extremely coherent artist. Over the years she has developed a solid reputation built on a body of work that fearless of aesthetic conventions has challenged us all to look at animals with different eyes. In her continuous attack to our preconceived perception and understanding of animals, Singer does not allow herself to work with living animals, nor have living creatures killed or otherwise harmed for her art. All the animal materials used in her art are old, donated and/or discarded as refuse.

Over her career, the concern with hunting and our moral and ethical approach to animal has clearly played a pivotal role. "Working with the history of each particular animal", she says "I aim to recreate something of its death by hunt."

As a result, her work is difficult but immediate; as abrasive as it is seductive. Her interventions on the taxidermied animal bodies are sometimes subtle, other times brutal, usually unpredictable and often arresting. At times her recycled taxidermy drips blood, at others the original animal skin has been stripped altogether to reveal the taxidermic support underneath it.

A keen animal rights activist, Singer has always effectively used her work, capitalizing on the abrasiveness of its botched forms, in order to raise awareness of animal sufferance as caused by human hands. Her recycling of taxidermy that was once trophy kill, is to Singer a way to 'honor the animals "life."' Ultimately, for Singer, the main purpose of her works to "make the viewer consider the morality of our willingness to use animals for our own purposes."

Recently, Anita Guerrini, Professor of Environmental Studies and History at University of California stirred up a range of reactions in response to a thread she launched on H-Animal (the online-resource website for Animal Studies Scholars). Her question was: "does Animal Studies necessarily imply animal advocacy? The point of Animal Studies seems to be to advocate a certain political point of view, and this influences the kinds of work that have appeared thus far. Is there room in Animal Studies for people who, say, think eating meat is not wrong? Or that experimentation on animals in some circumstances is somehow justified? As someone who has written about animal experimentation quite a lot, but who has not unreservedly condemned it, I am not sure that I have a place in Animal Studies as it is currently defined."

What is your take on this subject?

Angela Singer: As an artist concerned with the ethical and epistemological consequences of humans using non

human life, I look to the field of animal studies to engage in discussion with those open to examining their practice from different perspectives, but discussion alone isn't enough. We live in an era when so many animals are endangered; we all need an urgent wake-up to do what we can to stop the oppression, exploitation, domination and torture of animals. I acknowledge we all have to come to awareness on our own but that doesn't stop me hoping for animal studies academics to call into question the aggressive cruelty with which scientists treat animals.

I followed the Guerrini/H-Animal discussion with interest, in particular the marvellous response from Steve Best (academic and editor of the Journal for Critical Animal Studies):

"Of course theories are crucial for understanding the world, and a politics without reflexivity, study, and theory is no politics I want to advance. But I think it is pretty clear what the evil is, what the forces of destruction are, and what we have to do to fight, struggle, and resist the global juggernaut of capitalist, carnivorism, and speciesist omnicide".

One may argue we are not obliged to give up theory, research, and writing in order to spend all of our time in political meetings, demonstrations, actions, and litigations. But can scholars any longer be as isolated from politics and advocacy as they typically are...It is with such concerns in mind that a growing number of serious scholars and academics are forging a new path within animal studies, a critical animal studies. This is a distinction with a profound difference. Critical animal studies doesn't shy from openly stating normative assumptions and commitments, it doesn't run from the complexities of mediating theory and politics and politics and theory, it doesn't wear rose-colored glasses when looking at the systemic forces of domination and oppression that control life on this planet, it doesn't believe veganism and animal liberation are accidental or superfluous to doing animal studies in good faith, it doesn't seek only to "study" animals but to work toward their emancipation, and it doesn't fear taking controversial positions."

Where does your interest for animals originate and which is to you the most interesting?

The privatized notion of love is very odd to me. I felt love for every animal I ever knew, saw or otherwise encountered from an early age. That adults such as our local butcher, who had a cat that sat on the shop counter, could feel love only for a specific animal, usually an adored pet, was something I found hard to comprehend. I was and am very moved by the injustice of speciesism.



Angela Singer
Caught, 2007, recycled taxidermy, mixed media ©

Is there a specific event that triggered the production of work concerned with the killing of animal?

As I mentioned, from a young age I made the connection between the dog I loved that lived with us as a member of our family and the dead animal flesh on my plate. I felt killing of animals to be as wrong as killing of humans and to my Mother's annoyance subsequently refused to eat meat. It was this family dog that was my first personal experience of killing. My parents decided to emigrate from England to New Zealand, instead of giving the dog to my aunt as was promised my parents had her killed. The dog was not sick, just inconvenient. It was an unnecessary death. In New Zealand we lived rurally, the killing of animals, mostly by hunters, was a weekly occurrence. Witnessing animals being routinely hunted, killed and butchered made me determined to challenge a culture in which hunting is readily accepted.

Have you ever taxidermied an animal yourself?

I am not a taxidermist. I do not taxidermy the animals I work with, I recycle old trophy kill taxidermy that is often donated because it is damaged. The process is what I call 'de-taxidermy', a stripping back, layer by layer of the animal and the taxidermist's work. I have put some effort into learning correct taxidermy practise so I can subvert it. The taxidermist has put effort into making the animal look alive, I often do the reverse.

The process begins with my removing fur, feathers and skin, then the 'stuffing', sometimes the final step is to sculpt a mixed media form and flesh. Depending on the age of the taxidermy the animal may have a form inside; if it is very aged it might contain shredded clothing or sawdust and toxic surprises such as arsenic. Taxidermy is shaped into serene poses; we sentimentalize nature to keep from thinking about the human assault on it. In stripping back the taxidermy and exposing the bullet wounds and scars I make visible evidence of the aggression we inflict on animals.

In 2003 you curated 'Animality', an exhibition addressing questions about morality and our relationship with the natural world. What were the criteria for inclusion of works and how successful do you think the exhibition was in fulfilling its aim?

With the Animality exhibition I set out to explore the connections between our understandings of animals and the cultural conditions in which these understandings have been formed. I invited artists whose works

radicalise the use of animals and animal imagery, whose work might generate debate.

Contemporary artists working with the animal occupy varying ethical positions, to reflect this some of the work in the exhibition was from animal advocates, some wasn't. I didn't want a predictable show nor did I want to be guilty of being dismissive of art that deserves consideration.

There was criticism of my inclusion of Catherine Chalmers; her responsibility for the death of the insects and mice she uses drew very strong emotional reactions. Interestingly I saw a form of speciesism; those that did accept Chalmers' use of insects objected loudly to my use of a (seemingly) dead skinned deer. That Chalmers' art in particular sparked heated discussion around the ethical issues of the show made it for me a very successful exhibition.

What would you answer to John Simons (author of Animal Rights and the Politics of Literary Representation, 2002) claim that "When I see a work of 'botched taxidermy' ... I do not see an epistemological problem. I see a dead animal"?

My answer would be to prefer he saw a question. Why is this animal dead? What am I asked to see other than its dead body? Engaging directly with botched taxidermy should invite the viewer to reflect on the wider cultural and ethical implications of animal art practices.

When I look at the flawed dead animal of botched taxidermy I don't see an animal separate from myself; there is permeability to the boundaries separating other species from us. The body intensifies my emotional engagement with the work. Far from repulsing me, it draws me closer because it's not beautiful, not sentimental, not what animal art is meant to be, not what the animal is meant to look like and I want to question why.

Has your commitment to animal rights changed since your involvement in the mid-1990?

No it hasn't, it remains strong. In the mid 1990's I was very involved in the Animal Liberation, Victoria (Australia) anti-vivisection campaign. When I moved to New Zealand I spread my involvement across a number of animal rights groups. As in Australia I am supportive of direct action especially when it involves freeing animals (I'm not the fearless type, nearly getting caught or arrested gives me the heebs). It was natural that something I am passionate about should become a major theme in my art. I think of my art as inserting dead bodies into art galleries and forcing audiences to engage with unnecessary death.



Angela Singer
Deer-atize, 2002, recycled taxidermy & acrylic, oil on board ©



Angela Singer
Winky 2007 pvc clay, wood, recycled taxidermy bird
200x150x70mm ©

In your recent work 'My Dearest, Dearest Creatures (2006)', you have left behind the subject of trophy in order to focus on the Victorian diorama. What does this shift represent?

The diorama works came out of my concern for the recent rise in the popularity of taxidermy. The last period when taxidermy was fashionable was the Victorian age. It wasn't a good time to be an animal. Unlike traditional taxidermy diorama, where the emphasis is on the serene animal in natural settings, I used botched animals in un-natural settings, frozen in the moment of being killed or having just been killed.

For these works I deliberately turned away from the magnificent trophy animals we have deemed worthy of respect and turned my attention to the animals normally considered unworthy; rats, stoats, sparrows and rabbits, animals we choose not to have in our homes; animals that collectors of taxidermy are not pursuing.

Taxidermy and botched taxidermy have become increasingly popular in contemporary art. Do you think that too much exposure may reduce the shock factor attached to the almost unbearable sense of realism that the early works possessed?

As long as people don't want to question how humans use animals, don't want to think about animals, they will be shocked by the art of those that do because what they see is too real. Botched taxidermy embraces reality; it is not attempting to escape it. By seizing and holding the viewer's attention with art that is often un-beautiful, the viewer is forced to consider animals that look alive but are not, forced to question how and why the animal died. Botched taxidermy will never be easy to ignore as long as the artist expresses their truth and the work remains honest; shock for shocks sake is pointless. The aim should be to create botched works that are transformative, that shock the viewer into a new way of seeing and thinking about the animal.



Angela Singer
Love Bird, 2006, recycled taxidermy, mixed media ©

Your most recent work, Brand New Wilderness (2007) strikes a relatively new balance between the abrasive presence of the dead animal and a certain beauty rooted in the use of colour and composition. Is it part of a new strategy?

Sometimes a soft voice finds more listeners. The element of beauty certainly increases the audience for the work and I've been careful to make sure the animals aren't insipid. Wishy washy art that lacks substance is currently endemic; I see it as escapism from the harsh realities of our time. It's cowardly.

What do you consider to be the most extreme piece of botched taxidermy you have created and why?

Sore, an old trophy head stripped of its skin that has had a new 'flesh' carved by myself from blood red wax. In Sore, reality and taxidermy have been manipulated,

forcing the viewer to do a 'double take' of the artwork. Sore came out of a conversation I had with the hunter who shot the trophy. He explained that after he shot and skinned the stag the antlers were sawn off. Antlers contain a blood reservoir, when cut blood spurts forth drenching hunter and stag. I wanted to achieve an animal form inspired by the way the stag died but never seen before in nature.

Frightening and difficult to look at Sore is a powerful work that asks questions about power. Why do humans need to constantly reassure ourselves of our supremacy over other species through the exclusion of that which is not?

I discovered that stripping back the skin of the trophy the eye becomes prominent and the work becomes about the gaze; who is the subject watching and who the object? Sore appears alive and stares accusingly at us. Can trophy kill protest against us in any other way than by accusatory gaze?



Angela Singer
W Button, 2007, recycled taxidermy, mixed media ©

Taxidermic manipulations are open to a variety of readings. How do you feel about the openness of your work considering that the underlying political message involved is at the core of your practice?

The exploitation of non-human living beings by humans is one of the core issues raised with my work. I do not kill, have killed or taxidermy animals. I recycle old discarded taxidermy in my practice, much of it trophy kill. I subvert the hunting trophy but I can't stop the viewer from subverting my subversion. I resist the temptation to have explanatory information at my exhibitions because I want the audience to come away with questions not obvious answers. I aim to create art that has enough depth to speak to a range of viewers, even those with very different opinions, that's of enough interest to the viewer to think the work through and feel sympathetic toward it.

From what I've seen of political art, work that seeks to persuade viewers to take a specific form of action can be quite awful. It can also be sanctimonious and literal. Trying too hard to show the issue you're addressing can lead to dull passionless art of little interest to anyone except those concerned with the same issues. For me the best art is difficult to 'read'. Returning repeatedly to an artwork that does not give up its meaning easily is a great joy. A great infuriating joy.

Botched taxidermy was the perfect vehicle for messages that art had willingly ignored till the 90's. Do you think it has anything more to say that it hasn't said already?

The time for art offering only sensationalistic one-liners is gone. In our era botched taxidermy has this to say: that the exploitation and destruction of animals and our environment, is in the end all our fault. Until humans stop destroying our planet artists need to keep finding way to express this. For me I see no better vehicle than animals that have been exploited, hunted and discarded.

What do you think of Damien Hirsts' use of animals in his work?

I get the impression from his comments that Hirst isn't interested in the consequences and responsibilities of, and political and ethical issues raised by, taking life for artistic ends. While some of his comments suggest that he likes animals, his actions show he holds the conventional view that all non-human life exists for human needs and desires. He summed up his position with his statement that the, 'idea is more important than the actual piece.'

What will your next work entail?

I was recently donated an ex-museum diorama of full size trophy kill. They have mini steel girders inside requiring a degree of strength to manipulate so I'm exhausted. They are making for unusual, confrontational works.



Angela Singer
Dripsy Dropsy, recycled taxidermy, mixed media
210 x 170 x 170 mm 2006 ©

Angela Singer is an English artist and animal rights activist who now lives in Dunedin, New Zealand. She studied at University of Auckland. In the early/mid 90s Singer worked with the animal rights group Animal Liberation Victoria, Australia (ALV), antivivisection campaign. Her recent projects include "Ghost Sheep" (2001) - a work consisting of a "floating, running" flock of 240 suspended sheep skins - and "Wild-deer-ness" (2002), "Deer-atize" (2002), "Sores" (2003), "Animality" (2003) and "Carnivora" (2003) - recycled taxidermic-based works. She was recently the curator of "Animality" (2003), an exhibition addressing questions about morality and our relationship with the natural world. Most recently Singer showcased work in The Idea of the Animal (2006) and exhibited recent work Troubled-over Phantoms (2007).

For more information about the artist, please visit www.angelasinger.com

Angela Singer was interviewed by Antennae in February 2008 ©

THE TAXIDERMIC HYBRID

Jessica Ullrich, in a review of some key contemporary artists, discusses sculptural practice that integrates body parts of different animals in order to create a hybrid unity.

Text by Jessica Ullrich



Iris Schieferstein
Medusa, mixed media, 2002 ©

Whereas a taxidermist struggles to achieve the most authentic results and any exaggeration or abnormality is frowned upon, some contemporary artists no longer aim at imitation or reproduction of a given natural form. Traditional taxidermy makes an individual specimen a mere exemplar of its species while the artworks I will discuss create unique items. They do so by presenting the scandal of bodily-hybridity.

Iris Schieferstein

For over then ten years now, Iris Schieferstein, has been creating chimaera-like artefacts out of the bodies of animals, precisely in order to demonstrate that what is not, nonetheless may be. After early work consisting predominantly of individual animal-hybrids which she assembled out of fragments of representatives of various species into a new and fantastical totality, there followed 'lettered images' in which the physical bearing of her fabulous beings indicated letters which, when read in succession, formed words or entire sentences. These animal-chimaeras thereby raise the insistent question as to the degree to which something that is fundamentally natural must be manipulated in order for it to generate something artificial. Schieferstein subordinates the individual animal bodies to bizarre composition, imposing her will upon the natural material. Her sculptures and installations make reference in this way to the creative potential of art and not to the natural state in which they previously existed and which itself is basically a construction.

Thomas Grünfeld

Thomas Grünfeld's representations of taxidermic hybridity should be read as three dimensional collages. They strikingly illustrate Max Ernst's definition of collage. Ernst sees the collage as, systematic exploitation of an accidental or artificially provoked encounter of two or more alien realities on a obviously inapt plane and the spark of poetry that jumps across in the approach."¹

Grünfeld, emphasises that his animal hybrids represent a possible and thinkable alternative to God's creation and that they are not horrible fantasies. He dislikes any reading of his art as commentary on the dangers of genetic technology – even though they are quite regularly exhibited in this context. Genetic technology in his view does not produce 'visual design' like an artist does.

I would argue that the visible ruptures in the sculptures bear implications of 'the wounded' and therefore manifest a metaphorical disruption through the alleged distinct identity of the objects. So Grünfeld's objects point also to the fragility of our perception of the world.

Deborah Sengl

Deborah Sengl's hybrids are, in a comical way, unsettling. She stages the phenomenon of disguise, delusion, concealing and cheating. The series of sculptures I want to mention was inspired by a biological example: Camouflage or mimicry: a survival strategy by means of deceit. Most of Sengl's sculptures involve the topic of eating or being eaten, feeding or be fed upon. In the series, the hen disguises itself as worm, the snake as mouse, the wolf as a sheep and so on.

In her early works the dominant motif was dressing up, masquerading and travesty. Masks that were clearly identifiable as such covered the true faces of the animals and thereby paradoxically revealed more than they disguised. In her more recent work it has become almost impossible to distinguish enemy from friend. The symbiosis and metamorphosis is so perfect that the hybrid animals look very natural. In a confusing role play the positions of aggressor and victim are inverted and woven together.

Katharina Moessinger

Berlin artist Katharina Moessinger works with stuffed animals in a completely different way. For her series entitled 'Kuscheltiere' (cuddly toys) she transfers all the proportional deformations of anatomy that are to be found in cuddly toys, the cute faces with exaggerated schema of childlike characteristics and the unnatural body postures of her models onto the life size sculptures.

Because of the proportional distortions of the cuddly toys, it is necessary to use several skins for the configuration of just one object. She needs the bodies of up to five individuals of the same colour and the same fur texture to make one convincing artefact. This multiplication is significant: One single animal is not enough to represent all the things we project into it. Moessinger calls her sculptures "hybrids of the natural manifestation of a living being and the human construction of this living being in a commercial context."²

In a double meaning, physically and formally, her

¹ Max Ernst: *Biographische Notizen (Wahrheitsgewebe und Lügengewebe)*. In: *Kat. Max Ernst und Bonn. Student. Kritiker. Rheinischer Expressionist. Nr. 14, Schriftenreihe August Macke Haus Bonn. Bonn 1994*, p. 20-28.

² Katharina Moessinger, www.katharina-moessinger.de.



Deborah Sengl
Der Wolf, als Räuber - ertarnt sich seine begehrte Beute, 2004 ©

sculptures serve as visual signs for animality that above all demonstrate human beliefs and ideas of the animal and express a critique of human use and misuse of animals.

The sculptures of the four artists can be read as contemporary reflections of recent developments in biotechnology and of changing attitudes towards animals. With their postmodern sampling of scientific and historio-cultural traditions, they also mirror the constructedness of our world.

The animals whose organic material becomes part of sculpture are either substitutes for the human, glamorous memento-mori, symbols for nature destroyed beyond repair or manifestations of hybrid phantasies of power and control.

Taxidermic animals located beyond any 'normality' may perhaps even be understood better as the expression of a complete idea of subjectivity than as a representation of the rational modern subject.

The principle of dismemberment and synthetization by means of fragments coheres into an unmitigated expression of the loss of a unified picture of the world without interruptions and contradictions. This violent fragmentation and recombination into a utopian hybridity reflects the recognition that today, it is no longer possible to represent any generally valid idea of an 'authentic' body, or to generate definite concepts of reality.

Taxidermic hybrids show at the same time the trauma and the allure of bodily deformations. They transform violence, fear and insecurity into something new. The animals that are prepared to be chimaeras not only exhibit the irreparable battery of nature by human intervention, but they also represent the possibility to think out a new, and fantasy-filled way of approaching the natural world.



Katharina Mossinger

Pferd (horse), 2007, horse skin, filling material, metal stand, polyester, h 230 x w 260 x d 80 cm ©

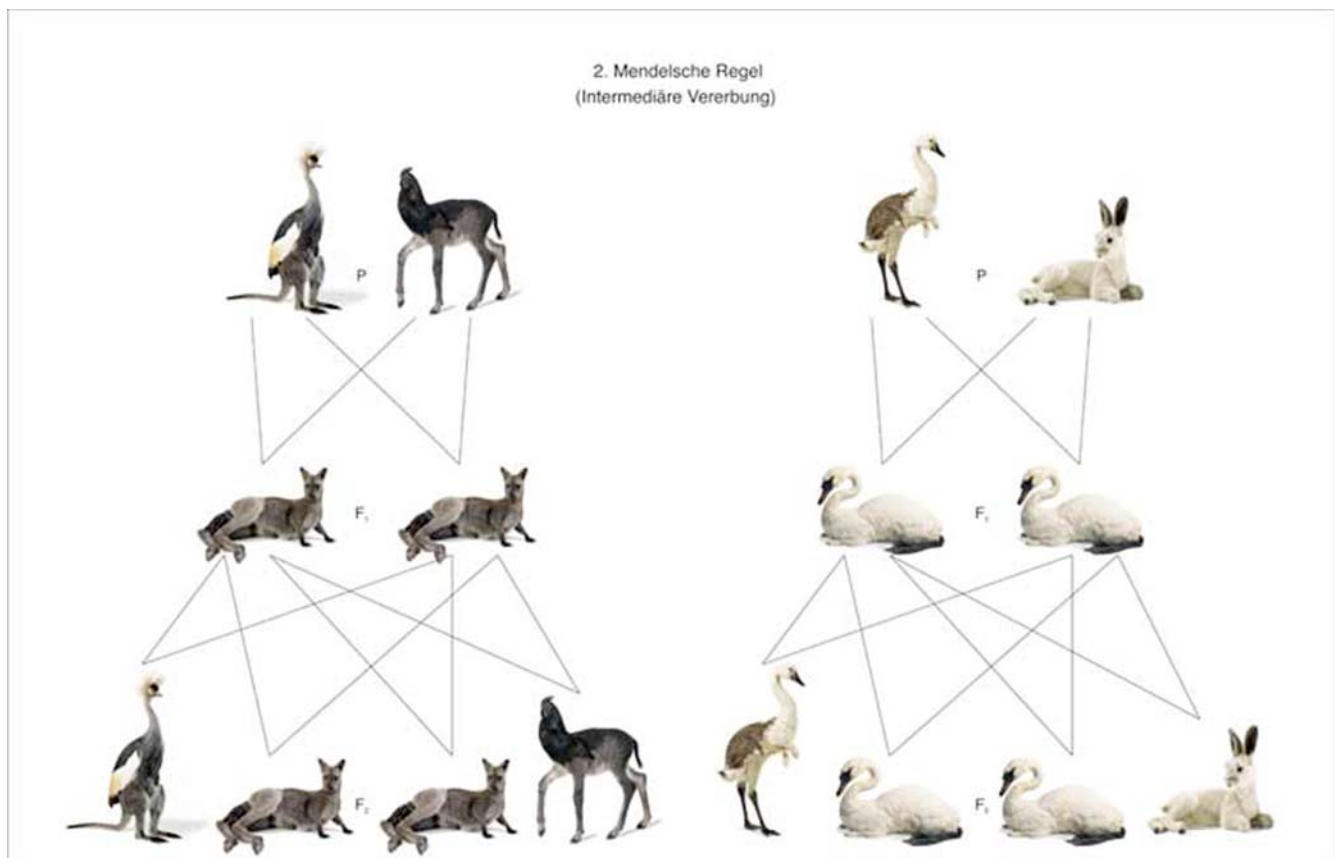
Jessica Ullrich studied Art History, Fine Arts and German Literature in Frankfurt, Germany and Arts Administration in Berlin, Germany. She currently is assistant Professor at the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Arts in Berlin (Art History and Aesthetics department) and is curating a forthcoming exhibition on animals in contemporary art to be held in April-June 2009 at the Georg-Kolbe-Museum, Berlin. Jessica is the founding member of the animal studies research group in Berlin and is the Head of the new media department of kunst-texte.de, an internet journal for art history (special issues on Animals in art).

Jessica Ullrich is assistant professor for art history at the University of Arts Berlin, Germany.

THOMAS GRÜNFELD: THE MISFITS

Thomas Grünfeld's 'Misfits' is a series of taxidermy specimens of multiple species reconfigured according to the artist's imagination. These creatures, raise issues of visual perception or the politics of style and make reference to a popular storytelling tradition from southern Germany. We met with the artists to discuss his creations

Text and Questions by Eric Frank



Thomas Grünfeld

Mendelsche Regel (Intermediäre Vererbung), (Mendel's Second Law: Law of independent assortment), Cover design for Netter Art Collection by Thieme Verlag, Stuttgart, 2000 ©

Thomas Grünfeld's pieces are always ambiguous. They provoke in the viewer attraction and uneasiness and cause deep questioning on the nature of art, and on the statute of artistic objects in general. His work started from a reflection on the anti-aestheticism of the '80 and an ironic critique of «Gemütlichkeit» (a typically german kind of coziness), that produced the tradition of the hunt trophies as well of the 18th century cabinets d'amateurs. Both absurd and disconcerting, Grünfeld's universe disturbs us as much by what is shown as by what it suggests. His Misfits are reminiscent of early natural histories in which strange and unfamiliar animals were described according to the bits and pieces of well known creatures. For example, the camelopard, now known as the giraffe, was described having the height and neck of a camel, the head of a stag although somewhat smaller, the teeth and feet of an ox, and a leopard's spots.

Hybridity is a defining characteristic of contemporary existence: the mysteries of identity—both aesthetic and genetic—are increasingly complex and potentially fantastical. Our global village shelters both the human and animal kingdoms, and the boundaries between them may be dissolving, as many of these artworks suggest: animals transform, merge, and mutate, with others, with humans, and with machines, offering both a provocative vision of the future and an incisive examination of human behavior and psychology—what drives, delights, and frightens us—in the new millennium. Cute yet creepy, fun but foreboding: Toward a new mythology.

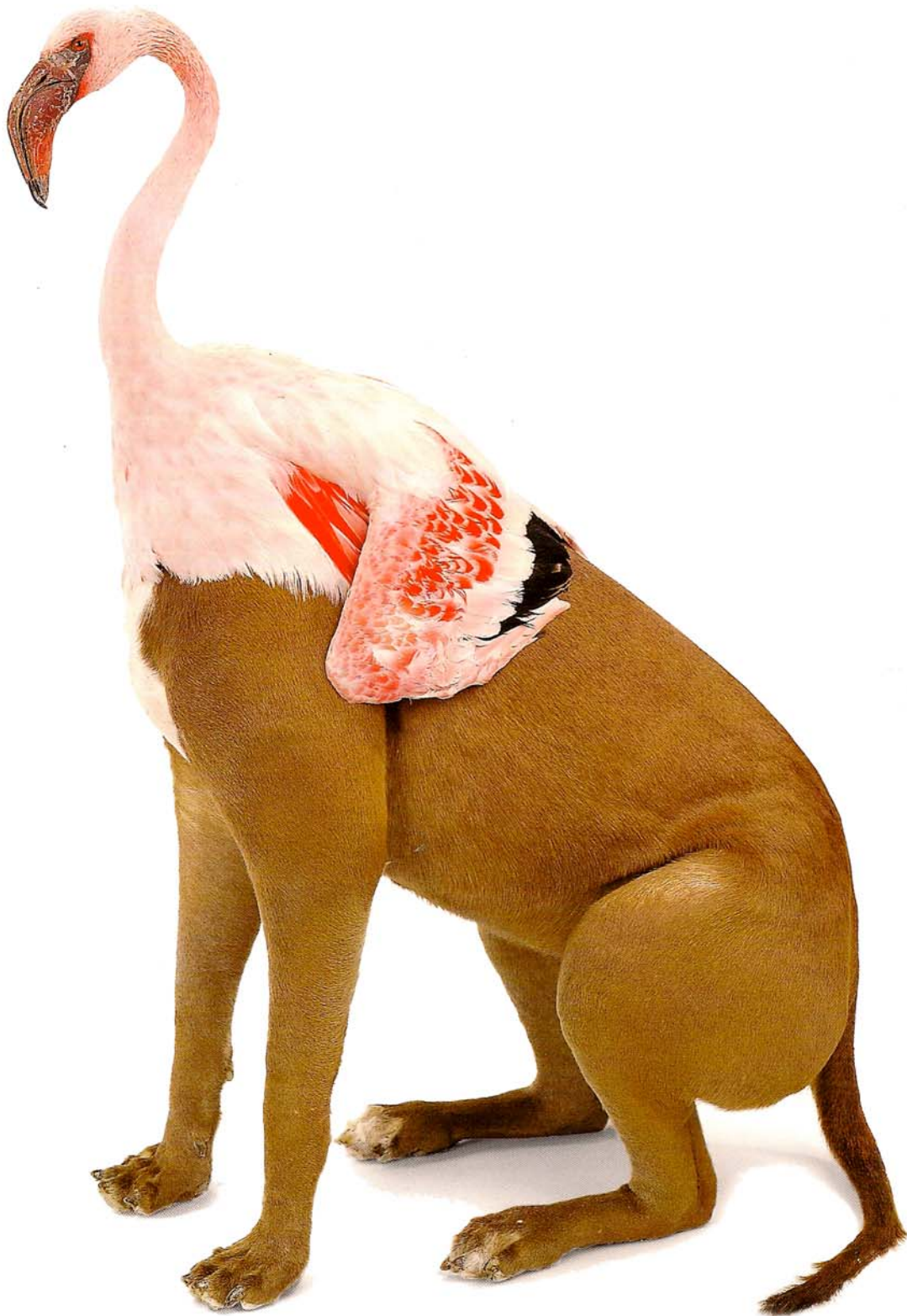
From the beast of the Apocalypse to the Chimera of Greek mythology to the creatures of H.G. Wells's *Island of Doctor Moreau* to memorable characters in recent *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings* movies, hybrids have always inhabited our collective, cultural imagination, and have been rendered in every media. Artists have traditionally employed images of hybrids in response to times of crisis, or to give expression to the uncontrollable dreams of imagination. In the 21st-century, artists are no less imaginative in their expressions of hybridity, but the mythologies suggested in the works here are grounded in fact as well as fiction, and, at times, in as much hopeful anticipation as in admonishing fear. These brave new worlds, where various animal and plant species share homes, habitats, bodies, and even genes with humans and machines are already coming into being: the ever-receding wilderness has brought once disparate populations into close contact (think of the deer feeding on your front lawn), and scientific advances are yielding all manner of genetic engineering and therapy (think of the almost daily news articles about laboratory mice bred to mimic the conditions of various human diseases).



Rainer Zenz
The Wolpertinger, 2005 ©

Perched on the precipice of this present moment, which seems equal parts promise and peril, these artists express a complex, postmodern ambiguity: dismay, even anger, at our disregard for our earthly home, its environment, and its animal populations, delight at the potential for science to address some of these issues, and a fascination—sometimes fearful, sometimes celebratory—with technology. And the forces of nature itself, worshipped in ancient times, subject to humankind's efforts at control in the modern era, exert their own power: laboratory-designed creatures evolve in unpredictable ways, animals assert their perspectives back onto ours, and animals and earth claim the domiciles of the domesticated, meeting us halfway in the new, hybrid world.

In this sense, Grünfeld's Misfits are emblematic pieces, collages of taxidermized animals, challenges to the creation, although hardly more unlikely than the platypus. In the paradox between their familiar appearance and their unsuitability to our lived experience, the Misfits establish a dialectics of the real and the imaginary. They deal with disturbing our certainties on any determination of the reality. It seems assumed that any artifice is as legitimate as what we believe 'natural'. In our time of cloning and genetic manipulations, the Misfits take on a troubling resonance. They are shocks as well as litotes that let us imagine what unknown dangers, what extraordinary desires



Thomas Grünfeld
Misfit (Flamingo), Taxidermied flamingo and canine, h: 82.6 x w: 33 x d: 53.3 cm, 1998 ©



Thomas Grünfeld
Misfit (Sheep/Bouvier), 55 x 125 x 65 cm, 2006 ©

could give birth to a giraffe with swan's neck and head, like the one that stands in its evidence at the entrance of the gallery. As Rachel Poliquin explains: "There are no visible seams on Grünfeld's misfits. The beasts are as incredible and implausible as mermaids, and their most implausible attribute is their organicism – the sense that these wildly mismatched animal parts coalesce with an organic harmony. The Misfits could have seemed jerry-rigged together. They could have looked piecemeal and man-made (which of course they are) but instead the structural integrity of their parts convey a sense that these beasts are anatomically plausible, that they could actually exist, that they could actually function". We discussed the misfits with Grünfeld himself.

When did you start working with taxidermy and why?

I saw a stuffed sparrow on a cricket-ball at the MCC Gentleman's Club in London. The plaque read something

along the line of: this sparrow was killed on this day buy a cricket ball during a game. I did a piece, of three sparrows on three cricket balls, in one vitrine. At the time (1988) I thought it could be working as a nice metaphor of the English mentality.

How did the idea of the 'Misfits' come about?

I passed a shop in Cologne. In the window was a stuffed musquash fucking a chicken from behind. I had to buy it. From that point, my imagination was triggered by the thought of what the product of such union may have look like.

It took me one year to digest the idea. I thought that producing mixed taxidermied animals was rather too eccentric. I then decided to pursue the idea when I focussed on the link with folklore and fantasy that are so central to German tradition and culture. The Wolpertinger, a fictional animal said to inhabit the alpine forests of Bavaria in Germany, also strongly inspired me.



Thomas Grünfeld
Misfit (Esel), Taxidermy, 90 x 100 x 35 cm, 1996 ©

It has body parts of various animals — generally wings, antlers, and fangs, all attached to the body of a small mammal. The most widespread description is that of a horned rabbit or a horned squirrel. The Misfits are also informed by Greek mythology: Minotaurus, Kentaurus, Sphinx etc, whilst part of the inspiration behind the works also lies in the “contemporary” developments of genetic manipulation etc.

The sixteenth-century mathematician Girolamo Cardano claimed that the only way to tell a genuine mermaid from a fake was examine its joints: a fake would inevitably have a seam between the monkey top and fish bottom. But there are no visible seams on your misfits. Do you take care of the taxidermy aspects of the work?

I only design them. They are professionally crafted by an expert taxidermist.

From an artistic standpoint you can clearly associate the Misfits to the technique of collage where, in a way, the repertoire is limited only to animals. I was only able to use non-protected animals. At the same time, scale plays a big role in what can be adjoined to what. It is of paramount importance that the finished animals looks plausible in its incongruous strangeness.

As you work with animals more and more you come to realise that feathers laid over fur will hide the joints better, then you can experiment with the opposite. I thought it would be easy if I stuck to the rule, that the joints should not be seen, to produce only “beautiful” animals. To stress the aspect of collage or sampling I try and do often misfits in which you see (not the joints), but the different parts obviously. I do it with formally obvious divisions (long hair/feather/fur) or huge colour-differences.

It has been said that your work started from a reflection on the anti-aestheticism of the ‘80

and an ironic critique of ‘Gemütlichkeit’ (a typically German kind of coziness), that produced the tradition of the hunt trophies as well of that of the ‘cabinets d’amateurs’. Do you agree?

Yes,... I think that there is some of that in the Misfits too.

How do you source your animals?

The taxidermist I work with supplies me with a list of skins (around 500) he has in his freezer. This is my pretty much my repertoire.

Your Misfits establish a dialectics of the real and the imaginary. In other words, they disturb our certainties on any determination of reality. Are animals our definite certainty?

I am an artist. This body of work is one of around twelve. I see it in the system of art, art-history etc. Let's pretend that art is always about "Eros" and "Death". Taxidermy is always superficially, the inside is full of wire and "wood-wool". The feathers/fur/hair looks nice and enchant us to touch and to stroke. Afterwards the repulsion part is that, after a while we see ourselves looking at a 'thing', which is made out of four parts of different animals, we realise that each had their own lives, and that they are now dead, and stuck together (sometimes with their most dangerous enemy) into a sculpture (super-animal).

The surface is 'real'. The posture I prefer for the animals is usually lying or sitting on a floor in the room, so that they look like 'real' house-animals. Yes, I guess that ultimately, I try to irritate any kind of certainty.

What role does beauty play in the ‘Misfits’ series?

Art is always about beauty. I design them on purpose, some are 'beautiful'(tasteful) some are on purpose 'ugly'. What I try to reach within each sculpture is dignity and (as an overall impact) melancholy. They should rest in themselves.

The encounter with a ‘Misfit’ is purely based on form as the animals do not move: their behaviour is even more mysterious than the combination of their bodies. Have you wondered how a misfit would behave if it were to be alive?

No.

What do you think of Damien Hirts’ use of animals in his work?

Far too sensational.

What are currently working on?

I am currently working on a project involving felt.



Thomas Grünfeld
Misfit (Deer/Giraffe), 2006, Taxidermy, 210 x 150 x 60 cm ©

Thomas Grünfeld is an international renowned artist. Born in Opladen (Germany) in 1956, he studied at Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Stuttgart and has been a visiting lecturer at Goldsmiths College in London since 1997

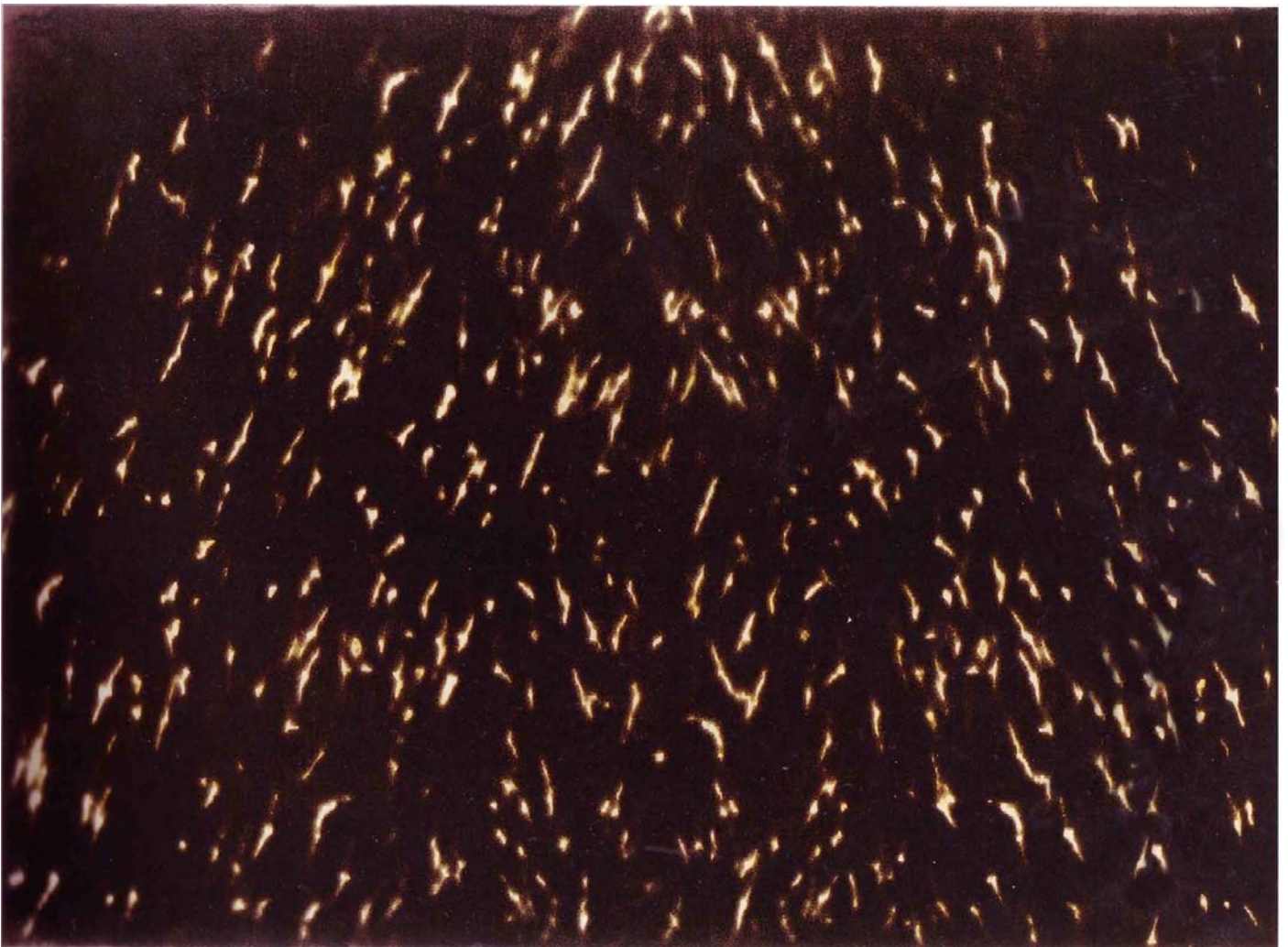
The published article also contains excerpts from Jousse Enterprise's artists archive and extracts from the introduction to Hybridity: The Evolution of Species and spaces in 21st-Century art exhibition.

Many thanks to Jessica Ullrich for providing some the images featured in this piece

Thomas Grünfeld was interviewed by Antennae in January 2008 ©

THE ETHICS OF BOTCHED TAXIDERMISTRY

*Christina Garcia explores the ethics and aesthetics of botched taxidermy in the work of Michal Rovner.
Text by Christina Garcia*



Michal Rovner

Figure 1. Untitled #4 (Athens), 1998. Acrylic on waxed paper, 49.5 x 68.6 cm ©

A photographic image by Michal Rovner, *Untitled #4* from 1998 (fig. 1), printed in acrylic paint over wax paper recalls early experiments in the photographic medium, or heliography, as it was first called (literally sun or light drawing), as positive and negative tones have been inverted and figure and ground merge on a perpendicular plane. Its flat, “all-over” composition—even distribution of forms over the picture surface—reveals what seem to be small fissures of light piercing a dark ground. These luminescent specks descend from a point above the top-center of the picture frame, producing a shower of multitudinous figures that appear as though they could have been painted as quick gestural marks with the tip of a brush or the edge of a palette knife. Upon a closer viewing, however, it becomes clearer that these slithers of light are not the non-objectivist forms of an Abstract-Expressionist painter, but the figures of birds.

This mono-print is one among a large and diverse series of still images produced from film and photographic footage the artist recorded of birds in flight.ⁱ Starting from a documentary media, Rovner’s process of re-photographing photographs, enlarging, modifying color and digitally blurring and reducing details moves her images of birds across genre boundaries to a liminal space where fact and pictorial artifice, the figurative and the abstract converge. In her atmospheric and ambiguous pictures, Rovner retains recognizable figures while resisting an economy of signification that would reduce them to stereotypes. Instead, her images are transmitted through “sensation,” or, to borrow a concept from Gilles Deleuze, through “the nervous system” in contrast to “the cerebral,” as her images act upon the visceral, evading narrative descriptions.ⁱⁱ

Inhabiting this mutable zone, Rovner’s birds exemplify Jonathan Burt’s thesis on the “limits of communicability” in relation to the animal figure in art and the permeable borderline between the animal and the aesthetic.ⁱⁱⁱ Not unlike Picasso’s contradictory statements, which Burt cites in his article, on the significance of the bulls in his *Guernica* painting—first saying, “this Bull is a Bull,” and later attributing allegorical meanings to them^{iv}—Rovner’s birds are literal birds and at the same time may be read, in spite of their ambiguity, as metaphorical stand-ins, as many reviewers of her work have done. In this respect, her work challenges and complicates the ethical task that Steve Baker identifies in *The Postmodern Animal*: rendering animal bodies literally and visibly present. By directly addressing animals through literal representations, Baker hopes to bypass the reduction of animals to metaphoric substitutes for anthropocentric constructs, through which fixed identities and social hierarchal organizations have been produced, not only legitimating the mass exploitation of animals but also homogenizing their

singularities.^v In opposition to the humanist philosophy of the sovereign subject, Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s conception of “becoming-animal” and their rejection of psychological or state and mythological animal archetypes provide Baker with a theoretical paradigm through which to analyze the Postmodern Animal.^{vi} However, as I will illustrate in this paper, the ethical and aesthetic task of representing animals literally, in other words, not as art-objects or iconographic substitutes, comes into conflict with the creative process that Deleuze and Guattari call for in the unworking of the individuated subject or well formed body. Through the work of Michal Rovner and her use of animal forms, I will engage the aesthetics of Steve Baker’s *The Postmodern Animal* and his adoption of becoming-animal, suggesting alternative ways of imagining metamorphous through Rovner’s manipulation of media, while calling into question the notion of a direct address or literal presence in visual representations. The amorphous forms in Rovner’s work not only provide a visual counterpart to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of becoming-animal, her deterritorialized spaces and figures constructed out of luminous dust particles recall Deleuze’s “cinema of the in-between” and invites a reading of her work through Burt’s conception of an “Aesthetics of Livingness,” in which images “of human-animal relations can be understood as a material and integral part of those relations, and not just as a detached image of them.”^{vii}

Steve Baker’s seminal book, *The Postmodern Animal*, provides a comprehensive study of animal images in contemporary art, in which he begins by marking a shift between the apparent absence of animals in Modern art, or their appropriation for purely aesthetic or symbolic purposes, and postmodern art’s direct engagement with animals as singular beings. Whether their engagement with animal forms derives from an immediate concern with animal rights and welfare or a desire to undermine social constructs, postmodern artists, Baker argues, introduce a proximity to animals and an inhabiting of inter-species identities that is in contradistinction to the distance that Modernist artists maintained between themselves and the animal forms they depicted—a distance that was reiterated through the status of art-objects as existing apart from social praxis. Through this proximity, in which objects lose their visual sharpness and definition—a literal and conceptual farsightedness—identity, expertise and hierarchal categories, as Baker lists them, are blurred and undone.^{viii}

Baker’s formulation of “botched taxidermy” allows him to broadly schematize his conception of “the postmodern animal.” In its most basic sense, botched taxidermy refers to the appropriation or recycling of taxidermy animals as way of producing the literal



Michal Rovner

Figure 2. *Me and the Bird*, 1988. Chromogenic color print, 47.6 x 47 cm ©

presence of the animal body within the gallery space, while its “botched” appearance is a reflection of in-expertise, an indication “of something having gone wrong” that prevents the viewer from making easy identifications or relying on ready-made concepts. More generally, botched taxidermy is an artistic process where mixed media and the deliberate use of “wrong” materials “present new baffling whole[s]” and “disruptive formal incoherence[s],” “hybrid forms,” and “messy confrontations” in a final result of imperfection and “tattiness” that stands in opposition to the polished surfaces of high-modernist art.^{ix}

As I will elaborate further on, the work of Michal Rovner problematizes the binary that Baker sets up between modernist and postmodernist animal representations, as her images exhibit a sense of proximity and engagement with animal forms, as well as a sense of distance and preoccupation with formal and aesthetic elements. However, one of her earlier works,

Me and the Bird (fig. 2), from 1988, exemplifies some the main characteristics of Baker’s postmodern animal. In this piece, where the artist photographed herself posing with a taxidermy raven, we see a black bird superimposed over the artist’s body, leaving only her head exposed. The two are positioned in such a way that bird and Rovner are face-to-face, making the confrontation and engagement between artist and animal explicit. The radical juxtaposition of a seemingly disembodied head and the body of a bird may be interpreted as the artist’s identification with the bird or a “taking-on of animal form,” which Baker explains “connotes a sense of freedom and unboundedness” and a casting away of fixed identity.^x In her reading of this image, Silvia Wolf remarks that although it was Rovner’s intention “to make a photograph in which she was one with the bird—a picture that would give form to her urge to be free—the two appear to struggle.”^{xi} Indeed, it is an awkward arrangement whose “failure” to

produce a seamless union between artist and bird reflects a hybrid form and a botched or imperfect result that leaves the relationship between the two figures ambiguous and outside of familiar references. Moreover, its grainy, out-of-focus view reflects the tattiness of “messy confrontations” and a proximity that blurs distinctions.

Although Rovner’s manipulation of color and deliberate use of soft-focus lend this image a painterly quality that is present in all her work, the initial staging of *Me and the Bird*—its Dadaist appropriation of a found object overlapping the artist’s body—reflects what Baker describes as a sense of object-hood, where “the literalism of the thing matters” and, most importantly, the stuffed bird, though botched and out-of-focus, still “holds on to form,” it is recognizably a bird.^{xii} Out of respect for the animal’s irreducible singularity, Baker not only calls for species identities, hierarchies and expertise to be disrupted in the postmodern animal, but the animal’s form should hold-together, it should be recognizable in “dumb solid physical presence” and “obstinate thereness.”^{xiii} Moreover, the animal form should be presented outside of “familiar meaning-laden contexts” so that the viewer is confronted with a body that cannot be analogized or reduced to preexisting categories.^{xiv} Baker writes:

Holding to form is perhaps the clearest way in which the postmodern animal’s unmeaning thereness can be expressed.... Holding to form is the means by which the animal in postmodern art maintains its difference. The artist allowing the animal recognizable form therefore constitutes a kind of respect for the otherness of the animal, its non-human-ness.... It is a matter, rather as Heidegger saw, of leaving something other as it is, of presenting it without manipulating it, without meddling, without assuming an artist who knows best and who, in the certainty of that expert knowledge reduces otherness to sameness, or wonder to familiarity. (Baker’s emphasis)^{xv}

However, Baker continues, “This non-manipulation is never wholly achievable. And recognizability of form...is not aesthetically simplistic.”^{xvi} I want to highlight this last statement, as the tensions between “leaving something other as it is” and the manipulation of form that is implicit in creative processes will become more problematic for Baker when he addresses Deleuze and Guattari’s becoming-animal.

Baker’s phrase “recognizable form,” which he later simplifies to just “form,” seems straightforward; yet its terminology is abstract, having philosophical connotations. On the one hand, *form* can be interpreted here in its classical platonic sense: what “holds together” and is recognizable is the idea or representative archetype of a particular species. In other words, rather

than depicting an undifferentiated mass, what the artist presents is identifiably the body of a particular type of animal. However, this ideational-form is in opposition to Baker’s thesis on the disruption of classifications and species identities that defines the postmodern animal. Through his concept of botched-taxidermy, it seems that what Baker is proposing is the simultaneous representation of an ideational-form, and its calling into question, its undermining through an incomplete or imperfect depiction. On the other hand, within the context of art criticism, the term form strictly refers to the visual components of an image: its compositional structure, shape, quality of line, or stylistic elements. Whereas, what is *recognizable*, implying a relationship with an object or concept outside of the work, is iconographic, it operates as an icon or a sign. I want to suggest that through the phrase “recognizable form” Baker is collapsing (whether intentionally or not) the distinction between form and iconography, or form and content. This should not be confused with the modernist critical theory of Formalism, which aspired to have the artwork completely self-contained, and whose chief concerns were purely aesthetic as opposed to engaging ethical and social issues. The desire to collapse form and content in the postmodern animal is a means of preventing the animal body from being reduced to an icon or an aestheticized form, but rather have the animal directly addressed, as it is.

The literal presence of the animal body and the collapse of form and iconography are best produced, as Baker suggests, in three-dimensional media, such as sculptural assemblage.^{xvii} Citing Michael Fried’s 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood,” Baker considers Fried’s criticism of 1960’s minimalist art for occupying a space where literal object hood and abstract form intersect—“‘the borderline between art and non-art’”—as a positive characteristic of three-dimensional media precisely for its potential to bring the status of a work as art into question.^{xviii} Spatially incorporating the body of the viewer, sculpture or “literalist art,” as Fried calls it, produces an encounter that thwarts passive contemplation, as it collapses the distance between the art-object and the viewer. Quoting Fried, Baker explains, “Whereas in previous art ‘what is to be had from the work is located strictly within [it],’ the experience of literalist art is of an object *in a situation*—one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*” (Baker’s emphasis).^{xix} For this reason, three-dimensional medias and performance art, Baker argues, for the purposes of the Postmodern Animal, “have an edge over” textual and two-dimensional media, such as painting and photography that remain on a level of abstraction and detachment, or, in other words, remain art objects. In contrast, sculptural assemblage or performance art “trespass” into to the viewer’s space, producing a

proximity and particularity between the viewer and the animal body that does not allow for a conceptual distance.^{xx}

Although Baker explains in regards to this three-dimensionality of the postmodern animal, that he does not mean to be prescriptive nor that this spatial confrontation between the viewer and the animal body need to occur literally,^{xxi} he does, however, seem to insist on a confrontation, a disruption of fixed categories and most importantly on a literal address to the animal body. In his introduction he describes the postmodern animal as a “sheer brute presence”^{xxii} and then further on as an “encounter” and a “confrontation...as an embodied thing.”^{xxiii} Jonathan Burt, in his article “The Aesthetics of Livingness,” points out the limitations of Baker’s analysis of animals in art.

He writes, “[Baker] dismisses the significance of pre-postmodern animal in his books...either because it marks the absence of the animal or, when the animal does appear, it is not really addressed as such. In other words, it appears that the agenda of the artwork has nothing to do with animals but uses animal to point towards something else. This does not seem justified.”^{xxiv} And then further on, “The address to the animal that Baker sees as lacking in what he calls modernism is in fact an impossibility in the first place.”^{xxv} Although Burt does not elaborate on this impossibility, based on the passage that follows where he cites the contradictory readings that Picasso offered on the bulls in his *Guernica* painting and Burt’s earlier comments on the inadequacy of language and the imbrication of animals, aesthetics, and communication,^{xxvi} this address is perhaps an impossibility because literality, or representing animals as outside of iconographic references is itself an impossibility.

Burt begins his article on “The Aesthetics of Livingness” by identifying the conundrum that has characterized the reading of animal imagery: as either functioning contextually, that is, having “something to say,” or as an element within a plastic artifice, having “nothing to say.” “A problem which deepens,” Burt explains, “when considering the fact that the question of how we address the animal figure, how we speak to it, from it and of it, parallels the question of how we speak of the artwork. How do we meet the challenge of the inadequacy of language before or in the artwork?”^{xxvii} The question of reading animal images as either icons or formalistic elements is further complicated by the permeability between the animal and the aesthetic, as Burt illustrates how this borderline throughout history has shifted and blurred with artistic movements such as performance art, or art that includes live animals, and the conventional idealization of the animal body as an object for aesthetic contemplation.^{xxviii} For these reasons, animal imagery—even when animal bodies are

literally present—will always simultaneously operate symbolically and aesthetically. In contrast to Baker’s categorical division between modern and postmodern animal art and limiting his attention to those works that reflect a direct engagement with the status of animals, Burt proposes to study representations of animals starting with “the specifics and variability of animal art,” opening up the scope of study and allowing for a consideration of artworks where it is not clear that the artist’s agenda was to address the status of human-animal relations.^{xxix}

However, even for Baker his privileging of artworks that epitomize a confrontation with the animal body or “render the animal abrasively visible” poses a challenge for him when he addresses the question of what becoming-animal looks like. Baker notes that the project of “holding-to-form, holding to visibility *as some kind of animal...is* thrown into serious question by Deleuze and Guattari’s comments on *form* in relations to becoming-animal.”^{xxx} Baker continues:

Not unreasonably, [Deleuze and Guattari] take the view that it is subjects which have forms, and if there is one thing which the becoming-animal works against it is the whole ‘anthropocentric entourage’ of the individuated subject. In Kafka they had proposed that to become animal is ‘to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone’, as do all meanings. This accounts for their fascination with ‘pack modes’ and other forms of animal multiplicity: individual, recognizable animals are ‘still too formed, too significative, too territorialized’.^{xxxi}

Baker explains that one of the key roles in becoming-animal is that “of artistic production and artistic discipline in the creative transformation of experience.” Quoting Deleuze and Guattari’s statement that it is “‘through style that one becomes an animal, and certainly through the force of sobriety,’” Baker contends, “There is at the very least an implicit parallel between the animal’s line of flight, or metamorphosis, and the artist’s creative production.”^{xxxii} Accordingly, Baker comes to associate becoming-animal not with individual works but with a creative and artistic process. Remembering that Baker privileges the objecthood of three-dimensional media and its potential to bring the status of a work as art into question, I want to suggest that to a certain extent he arrives at a problematic situation when he asserts that “what becoming-animal does is close to what art does.”^{xxxiii} On the one hand, Baker would like to keep manipulation and meddling of the animal body to a minimum, in order to respect its otherness. On the other hand, it is that very meddling, the transformation of the body that enacts becoming-animal. Deleuze and Guattari write, the artist “becomes animal at the same time as *the animal becomes what they*



Michal Rovner

Figure 3 & 4. Sinking Dog, Rising Dog, 1987. Chromogenic color print, 71.1 x 70.5 cm ©

willed.... No art is imitative.... Suppose a painter 'represents' a bird; this is in fact a becoming-bird that can occur only to the extent that the bird itself is in the process of becoming something else, *a pure line and pure color*" (my emphasis).^{xxxiv} Interestingly, it is the work of a photographer, Britta Jachiniski, and a painter, Francis Bacon, that Baker analyzes as potential examples of what becoming-animal might look like. Through their two-dimensional images Baker illustrates how recognizability of form, or the physical presence of the animal, may be retained while at the same time resisting the individuated subject. Jachiniski and Bacon's figures reflect bodies in moments of transformation, becoming what Deleuze and Guattari describe as "light and un-body-like form."^{xxxv}

With regard to the body in Deleuze and Guattari, Baker writes:

They seek a way of describing bodies in terms of elements which, rather than having form, 'are distinguished solely by movement and rest, slowness and speed.... To make [the] body a beam of light moving at ever-increasing speed' is something which 'requires all the resources of art'....

This emphasis on movement may already offer a clue that a rethinking of animal form might happen not so much within a particular representation, but rather in a movement across images across species, across the process of viewing—in just the kinds of [traversal] that constitute becoming-animal....

Deleuze and Guattari's examples are suitably unbodylike: 'A degree of heat an intensity of white, are

perfect individualities....a set of nonsubjectified affects.' (Baker's emphasis)^{xxxvi}

In becoming-animal, then, with its deterritorialization, "its participa[tion] in a movement," "stak[ing] out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone"^{xxxvii} there also occurs what Deleuze and Guattari have termed "becoming-imperceptible": a dis-articulation of the body, a "fluidity or insubstantiality of form."^{xxxviii}

Baker's suggestion to rethink the animal form "not so much *within* a particular representation, but rather in a movement *across* images...across the process of viewing"—not unlike the way Burt looks at the various positions of the bull across Picasso's paintings in "The Aesthetics of Livingness" and the way Deleuze and Guattari look at becoming-animal across Kafka's fictions and letters—is the approach I've appropriated in tracing becoming-animal in Michal Rovner's work. In doing so, our reading of her work highlights movement and transformation; it avoids reducing her images of animals to either iconic or formalistic functions, while resisting any attempt to link her images to objects or preconceived notions outside of the work. This is a method that her work lends itself to as most of her images are produced in sets of series. From a single subject she'll produce volumes of images that animate and transform the subject across different frames, as though moving "from one perspective to another,"



Michal Rovner

Figure 5. Flying Lamb, 1988. Chromogenic color print, 43.2 x 44.4 cm ©

suggesting that flight and “path of escape” which Deleuze and Guattari describe as constituting a block of becoming. Moreover, it is across her images that we find “recognizable form”; that is, it is across her images that the presence of a singular animal comes into focus. Although in most of her pictures the animal body is recognizable, in some individual representations the body is barely perceptible and it is only in relation to other images that “form” holds together. As we’ll see, the numerous and diverse images that Rovner produces

from a single subject suggests a sense of temporality as even her viewers are imbricated in a process of movement and time as they walk across the gallery space in order to see the shifts that occur between frames.

The chromogenic color prints, *Sinking Dog* (fig. 3) and *Rising Dog* (fig. 4) from 1987, early in Rovner’s career, exemplify the singularity of her postmodern animal imagery against Baker’s model, as they display what could be considered a modernist preoccupation



Michal Rovner
Figure 6. One Person Game Against Nature, #7, 1992
Chromogenic color print, 73 x 71.4 cm ©



Michal Rovner
Figure 7. One Person Game Against Nature, #45, 1993.
Chromogenic color print, 75 x 72.5 cm ©

with form. Set against a plain background, the figure of a dog in each frame has been reduced to a sculptural form or paper cutout, as a soft focus lens blurs definition and high contrast light removes all shadow, flattening and abstracting the dog's individual traits. It does not appear that these images are addressed to the dog nor do they set a proximity or confrontation with the animal but instead engage its form as an object of aesthetic contemplation. At the same time, the isolation of the dog, which allows for a conceptual distance, removes the figure from any references to the known world, away from "familiar meaning laden contexts," that prevents the image of dog from being reduced to metaphorical constructs.

In contrast to Britta Jaschinski's straight photography^{xxxix} of animals (though her pictures are taken from ambiguous, out of focus viewpoints), in which she takes large black and white pictures without ever adjusting or meddling with the picture after it's been shot,^{xl} Rovner's final images are the product of extensive manipulation—a manipulation that is part and parcel of the creative process of becoming-animal. Tampering with the focus, re-photographing photographs, enlarging pictures, reducing sharpness and details while also adding artificial colors, Rovner imbues her images with an atmospheric and visceral quality that negates the facticity associated with photography. In this process, which Rovner obsessively and almost ritualistically goes through to produce all of her work,^{xli} there is a constant disarticulation of the body. As the image becomes progressively grainier and softer,

less individuated, Rovner enacts a form of becoming-animal not only in the transformation of the animal's body, but also, on the level of media. She is disarticulating photography, im-purifying the media, as she employs elements of painting, creating a hybrid form that reflects the heterogeneity that Deleuze and Guattari privilege in becoming-animal.

Also from early in her career, *Flying Lamb* (fig. 5) is a photograph of a taxidermy lamb. Her tampering with the focus and color may be interpreted as a form of botching. However, unlike the shocking hybrid sculptural assemblage works that Baker presents as examples of botched taxidermy—such as, Thomas Grunfield's 1994 *Misfit*, in which the head of a lamb has been superimposed on the body of dog—Rovner's *Flying Lamb*,^{xlii} rather than confronting us with "something having going wrong" or challenging the viewer, seduces and lures with its ethereal, weightless body that hangs suspended in space. Against an almost colorless, blank background, removed from any recognizable setting, Rovner has deterritorialized this lamb and transformed it into a beam of light, while sweeping its viewers in a "line of flight" through an ambiguous space where forms dematerialize.

A series of human figures titled *One Person Game Against Nature* (figures 6 & 7) from 1992/93 illustrate Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone," a world of "unsubjectified affects" embodying the "individuality of a climate, a wind, a fog." For this series Rovner choreographed swimmers in the Dead Sea,



Michal Rovner

Figure 8. *Mutual Interest #2*, 1998. Chromogenic color print, 86.4 x 124.5 cm ©

photographing them from a distance with no visible horizon line. The water is transformed into fields of solid color and its human figures into glowing bodies of light hovering in space, or ghostly images that appear as stains or imprints on a canvas. Through her process of removing detail the human figures are “becoming-molecular” and “becoming-imperceptible,” as they seem to vibrate and threaten to evaporate or decompose into the tiny grains that make-up a photographic image. These anonymous bodies are faceless with no indication of gender, age, or race. Vague and disarticulated, Rovner has removed all signs of individuality and narrative storyline. In this sense, these images reflect Deleuze’s concept of the Figure in opposition to the Figurative, which he elaborates in his analysis of Francis Bacon’s paintings.^{xliii} Like Rovner, Bacon sets his figures against fields of color, producing a shallow space that merges figure and ground, and disrupts any “figurative, illustrative, and narrative character the Figure would necessarily have if it were not isolated.”^{xliv} Like the “assignifying traits” of a paintings’ non-illustrative “marks or strokes on the canvas,” Rovner’s deliberate blurring

of the human body “introduces traits of animality into the human figure, thereby constituting a ‘zone of indiscernibility’ between the human and the animal.”^{xlv}

Her series *Mutual Interest* (figures 8-11), whose title is a reference to pack behavior,^{xlvi} consists of a video installation and a plethora of still images of birds she filmed and photographed in flight from different geographical locals. In this very process of moving across national borders, it can be said that Rovner herself experiences a form a deterritorialization. As an Israeli, where national borders are constantly being contested and the importance of knowing where certain zones begin and end as a necessary strategy for survival, it is perhaps no surprise that her images consistently reflect liminal spaces nor that she should develop a fascination with migratory animals. In her reading of this series, Wolf suggests that the element of pack behavior takes on a special significance in the context of Zionist ideology where personal desires are suppressed for the good of the community. She claims that Rovner’s images of birds and anonymous human figures express the threat of losing one’s individuality to the mode of the



Michal Rovner

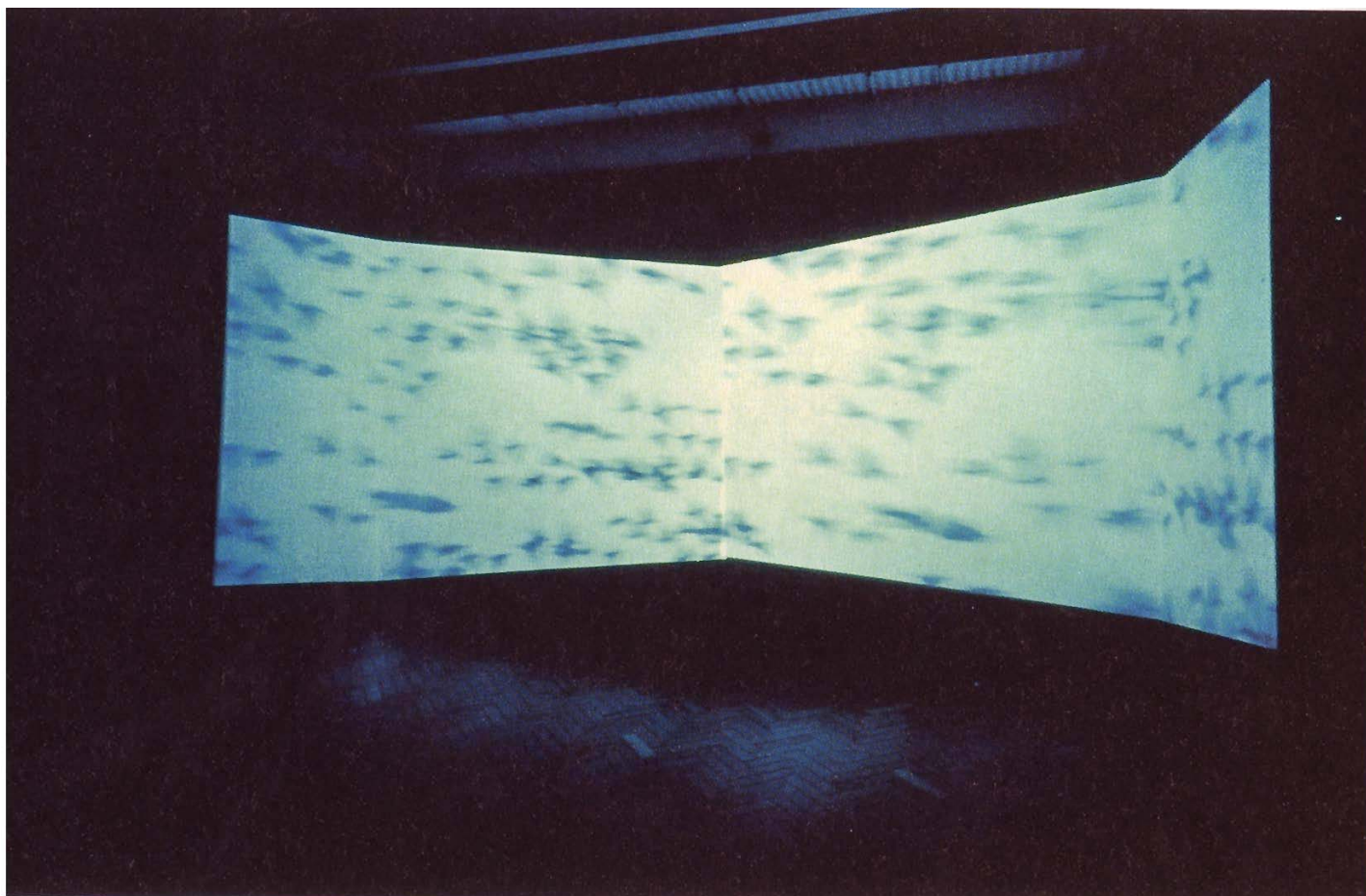
Figure 9 & 10. *Untitled #1* (Athens), 1998 Acrylic on wax paper, 68.6 x 49.5 cm. & *Untitled #8* (Athens), 1998. Acrylic on wax paper, 68.6 x 49.5 cm ©

pack.^{xlvii} In contrast to Wolf, and in the context of becoming-animal, I would suggest that the lack of individuation that Rovner displays in her images may be seen not as a threat but a “line of flight” or escape, from the imposition of an absolute and fixed communal identity.

Printing some of the photos on canvas and others on wax paper, Rovner further bends and intertwines various medias. Although her images do not reflect that sense of interspecies heterogeneity that Deleuze and Guattari call for in becoming-animal, they do, however, evoke a sense of swarming, chaotic, indistinguishable hordes. While some of the still images could pass for non-objectivist gestural paintings and others elegant Japanese prints, others reflect a threatening motley pack, appearing as clouds of insects, predatory birds zooming down for a kill, or bomber planes on the attack.^{xlviii} Moving across all these images, we see a constant metamorphous of the birds, transfigured into blots on a canvas, or tiny crosses, ethereal angles, or fissures of light. They remain, however, recognizably birds. Their holding-on-to-form suggests a sustained engagement with the animal

form that shifts throughout time.

The video installation for *Mutual Interest* (fig. 11) is perhaps the closest Rovner’s work comes to spatially confronting and incorporating the body of the viewer. Rather than acquiring the literal objecthood that Baker attributes to three-dimensional media, or producing the “sheer brute presence” that he admires in postmodern animal art, Rovner subtly envelops her viewers through projected light and sound—two immaterial medias that best lend themselves to the intangibility and ephemeral quality of becoming-animal. In this three-sided installation the viewer’s experience is “driven by repetition and the accumulation of references of sound and images, each as ambiguous as the last,”^{xlix} “affecting the body’s sense of equilibrium within a space.”^l The audio, as described by one reviewer, depicts “the sound of helicopter blades, high altitude turbulence, even perhaps of gunfire, seems to ricochet off the walls as a mass of beating wings cascades across the screen. One sequence of images cuts to another and then another in an unsettling and seemingly random order. A convincing identification of the images on screen remains more or less impossible.”^{li} “The weightless and hypnotic



Michal Rovner

Figure 11. Installation View of *Mutual Interest*, 1997, at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Multi-channel video installation, dimensions variable ©

movement of myriads of birds flying...on chaotic and interlaced routes”ⁱⁱⁱ juxtaposed with an audio, itself a collage of various sound references, creates an assemblage and reflects the heterogeneity of becoming animal. Its lack of narrative framework and hypnotic repetition behaves as “asignifying traits,” unworking substantive form and metaphorical meaning that create a visceral experience, acting upon the sensual as opposed to the cerebral, as Deleuze distinguishes between the two experiences.

Working against an economy of signification, consistently deterritorializing her figures in liminal spaces and blurred perspectives, Rovner’s work reflects a sense of temporality that is intangible. Her vague and luminescent figures, shifting across frames, “reflecting, refracting and projecting light” exhibit an “interplay of images” that Jonathan Burt discusses as “material and integral” to our everyday relations.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ As Silvia Wolf’s title for a catalogue of Rovner’s work indicates, *The Space Between*, Rovner’s work might best be summed up by Deleuze’s theory of “the cinema of the in-between,” as quoted in Burt’s article: “It is the method of BETWEEN, “between two images,” which does away with all cinema

of One. It is the method and AND, “this and then that,” which does away with all the cinema of Being=is...”^{liv}

ⁱ Silvia Wolf, *Michal Rovner: The Space Between*, with an essay by Michael Rush and a conversation between Michal Rovner and Leon Golub (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001), 104

ⁱⁱ Francis Bacon: *The Logic of Sensation*, translated and with an introduction by Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 31, 32.

ⁱⁱⁱ “The Aesthetics of Livingness,” *Antennae*, no. 5 (Spring 2008): 4, 5.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 7.

^v (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2000), *chapt. 1, passim*.

^{vi} Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton, ed., *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought*, (New York: Continuum, 2004, 2007), *chapt. 6, passim*.

^{vii} “The Aesthetics of Livingness,” 10.

^{viii} Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, *chapt. 1, passim*.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, 54-61.

^x *Ibid.*, 18.

^{xi} Wolf, 31.

^{xii} Baker, 53.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 96

^{xiv} *Ibid.*

^{xv} *Ibid.*

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 97.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 50-53.

- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*, 52.
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*, 53.
- ^{xx} *Ibid.*, 51.
- ^{xxi} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.*, 20.
- ^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, 50.
- ^{xxiv} Burt., 6.
- ^{xxv} *Ibid.*, 7.
- ^{xxvi} *Ibid.*, 4, 7.
- ^{xxvii} *Ibid.*, 4.
- ^{xxviii} *Ibid.*, 5.
- ^{xxix} *Ibid.*, 6.
- ^{xxx} Baker, 136.
- ^{xxxi} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxxii} *Ibid.*, 104.
- ^{xxxiii} *Ibid.*, 138.
- ^{xxxiv} Calarco, Matthew and Peter Atterton, ed., *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought* (New York: Continuum, 2004, 2007) 94.
- ^{xxxv} Baker, "What Does Becoming Animal Look Like?" in *Representing Animals*, ed. Nigel Rothfels, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002) 93-95 and in the *The Postmodern Animal*, 136-150.
- ^{xxxvi} Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 137.
- ^{xxxvii} Calarco, 96.
- ^{xxxviii} Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 143.
- ^{xxxix} "Straight photography" refers to photographic depictions intended to reflect an objective reality with as little manipulation as possible.
- ^{xl} Baker, "What Does Becoming-Animal Look Like?" 95.
- ^{xli} Wolf, 28.
- ^{xlii} *Ibid.*, *The Postmodern Animal*, 58, 59.
- ^{xliii} Francis Bacon: *The Logic of Sensation*, trans. and with an introduction by Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 5-8.
- ^{xliv} *Ibid.*, 6.
- ^{xlvi} *Ibid.* translator's footnote, 154.
- ^{xlvi} Wolf, 102.
- ^{xlvi} *Ibid.*
- ^{xlvi} Michael Rush describes the birds as "dive bombers" in Wolf, 212.
- ^{xlix} Francis Morris, "Michal Rovner," *Art Now* (August 1997), 23.
- ⁱ Wolf, 103.
- ⁱⁱ Morris, 23.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Denegri, Dobrila, "Somethingness," in Michal Rovner (exh. cat.), ed. Federico Motta (Rome: Museo D'Arte Contemporanea, 2003), 38.
- ^{liii} Burt, 10.
- ^{liv} *Ibid.*

Christina Garcia is completing her degree from John W. Draper Interdisciplinary Master's Program in Humanities and Social Thought at New York University. Interested in the relationship between aesthetics and social practice, particularly within the context of culturally heterogeneous zones, she considers twentieth century Caribbean texts and visual art, setting their stylistic and formal structures in conversation with contemporary theories of community. She was recently introduced to the field of Animal Studies and looks forward to integrating the question of animals in her examination of community ethics. Christina received her BA in English and Art History from Florida International University. Currently she resides in Brooklyn, New York and may be reached at cmg377@nyu.edu.

IDIOTS: THE ALCHEMICAL VISION

Idiots is a collaborative project by Dutch artists Afke Golsteijn, Ruben Taneja and Floris Bakker. Combining their talents with glass, metal, embroidery, and taxidermy, the artists decorate and adorn real animals, transfiguring them from regular creatures – rabbits, hedgehogs, swans, birds, mice – into the tragic heroes of contemporary fairy tales.

*Text by **Rachel Poliquin***



Idiots

Ophelia, 235 x 80 x 80 cm, materials: taxidermy lion, ceramics / glass in collection, National Museum Oslo, 2005 ©

On the white floor of the gallery, a lioness is sleeping, her head resting on her crossed paws, her ears softly turned downwards. She is relaxed, at peace, without worry. But there is only half of her, the front half, beautifully taxidermied, which disappears into globules of gold arcing away from her middle section. The work is a collaborative creation by the Dutch artists Afke Golsteijn, Ruben Taneja and Floris Bakker and is evocatively entitled *Ophelia* after the tragic heroine of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

The presence of a real animal in a gallery space, especially half an animal, is disconcerting to say the least. If the lioness wasn't so flawlessly taxidermied and so gently posed, and if she wasn't accompanied by the lumps of gold, *Ophelia* would seem better assigned to "road kill" than "art." But the visual appeal of the work lulls viewers, and the lioness's almost-human pose almost allows us to imagine ourselves in her position. Hiding the seams hides the violence inherent in taxidermy.

Despite the rawness of the work, its meaning hardly seems confined to its materials. Lion: dun-coloured predatorial mammal native to the African savannahs and Indian forests. Gold: atomic number 79, soft, shiny, yellow, malleable, dissolved by mercury. Rather, *Ophelia* seems to exist somewhere between its concrete presence and its allegorical significance: the lioness and the gold, the queen of beasts, the king of metals and money.

The work offers a vision of a world where fantasy and reality merge into infinite possibilities, uncertainty, and wonder. Is the lioness liquefying or coalescing? Has she fallen under some enchantment or is she dreaming herself into existence? Or is this an alchemical vision of matter being transformed into the highest and purest of elements, or a more sinister symbol of humans' transformation of nature's vitality into capital? Is this aesthetic hedonism or brutality? The work brings to mind Stephen Greenblatt's description of wonder as "the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention." A wonder isn't a wonder until it completely bewilders our expectations. A wonder enthralls us with its strangeness. It's magnetic, magically charismatic, and altogether spellbinding. Yet, while a wonder may transport us out of ourselves by evoking strange and unnatural imagining, a wonder always draws us back – binds us so to speak – to its very real, very concrete presence.

In writing about their work, the artists draw attention to the frailty of the line dividing observed reality and poetic imagination. Combining their talents with glass, metal, embroidery, and taxidermy, the artists decorate and adorn real animals, transfiguring them from

regular creatures – rabbits, hedgehogs, swans, birds, mice – into the tragic heroes of contemporary fairy tales. "The basic idea is that various stuffed animals undergo a transformation. It is difficult not to think about death when looking at stuffed animals, but in this case, the morbid is transformed into something beautiful." In one work the ears of a rabbit, its head mounted on a wall as a traditional hunting trophy, are embroidered with intricate looping flowers. In another, a small hedgehog has been soldered on the antique frame of a child's wheeled toy. Sewing pins blend in with its own quills. The works oscillate between brutality and beauty, melancholy and wonder. Ultimately viewers are left to make meaning of the pieces from their own reservoir of images.

Before we get to the animals; could you explain the name of your 'collaborative project': why Idiots?

Idiots has become the name of what we do. It is useful in many ways and questions the original idea about art (there is not really an explanation for the name *Idiots* other than it occurred and evolved in time)

Idiots is Dutch artists Afke Golsteijn, Ruben Taneja and Floris Bakker. Where and when did you meet and how did the idea of using taxidermy come about?

We grew up together as we went to the same school. We managed to work together on different projects.

Who does what in Idiots?

Ruben is more responsible for the digital part of *Idiots* and that is quit important nowadays, while Afke and I are making and developing the sculptures or objects or poetry! Working as we do is rather challenging as at times it is difficult to get all parties to work together. The idea of working with taxidermy just came along our way and we absorb it as a congenial medium.

Your work involves the use of a range of animals. How do you source your animals and what are the ethic and moral considerations at play?

The animals tend to more or less come to us. The early peaces like the Hare and the Swan were dead animals we found in the park. We took the bodies to a taxidermies in order to extract and preserve the skin. After that is done, you can start talking about fixing a pose.



Idiots

Hanjongere, 2007, taxidermy squirrel, hoody in private collection (France) ©



Idiots
No Title, No Status, 2007, 200 x 300 x 70 cm ©

After we became popular and people became familiar with our work we started receiving lots of donations from people who did not want to bury animals. Now a days we also have a good relation with a taxidermist who has his own network and he can inform us when something dies at the zoo, in a park or in farms.

So we do not kill animals to produce our work and using already dead animals clears out moral stand point. The downside to this is that sourcing animals can become more expensive.

What role does beauty play in the work of Idiots?

The horrifying sight of beauty, the lightness in which beauty occurs. The beauty that intrigues and the beauty that can be merciless.

It has been said that in your work animals are transformed into ‘tragic heroes of contemporary fairy tales’. Do you agree with this reading?

Yeah, probably, our work adopt a very open-narrative strategy, so I guess that you can pretty much contextualise them as you like.

In your work Ophelia, a flawlessly taxidermied lioness sleeps, her head resting on her crossed paws, but there is only half of her, for she disappears into globules of gold dripping away from her. Could you explain the idea behind this work?

As many of our works, Ophelia, opens up the doors of imagination. We’d rather not explain the work, but I will give you an angle: Ophelia is about the old power of nature and the new power of money and gold that consumes everything. This was our reading when producing the piece.

How does the audience usually receives your work?

There is a big difference between young and old audiences. The very young, just are overwhelmingly



Idiots

No Comment, 2006, dimensions: 50 x 40 x 12 cm. materials: taxidermy muntjac, crystals ©

enthusiastic, but there are also very shocked teenagers. Because of the open narrative and the presence of animals, people feel comfortable at engaging with the works.

Which do you think is your most successful piece and why?

Ophelia is our first big project, it changed our lives!

Could you tell us something about "Hanjongere" (2007)?

Its about a position in which you can be placed when you not behaving like you where told.

What do you think of Damien Hirst' use of animals in his work?

We think it's great, it opens up new parts of your brain.

How similar or different from Angela Singer's taxidermy do you think your work is?

We do not know her work.

'No Tile, No Status' (2007), seems to involve political issues. Are you interested in the Animal Rights Activism?

Actually, it probably says more about our human rights. We like to handle everything carefully. Human, animal, insects, live and dead. Animal rights activism is more like symptom fighting, the structural industrialisation of animals in our system is amazing and very disturbing.

What are Idiots currently working on?

We are always working on many pieces, it's a very long process to finish a project but the latest that was finished is a protected environment for an iron branch and a bird in a glass cage.

<http://idiots.nl/>

*Rachel Polquin's introduction to the Idiots was originally published in www.ravishingbeasts.com
For more information, please visit <http://idiots.nl/>
Idiots were interviewed by Antennae in March 2008 ©*

RESCUING WHAT HAD BECOME A DYING ART

***Emily Mayer** is the real pioneer of taxidermy in contemporary art; her work, owes more to the modern art gallery than it does to tatty birds posed in Victorian glass cases. Over the past years, she has developed a revolutionary taxidermy technique and worked with Damien Hirst. Today, her innovative practice inspires the new wave of contemporary taxidermy as art.*

*Questions by **Giovanni Aloï***



Emily Mayer

Image from Emily's studio, work in progress for Charles Harvey, 2008. ©

“I wake up to Radio Four at seven and have a quick cup of tea and let in our four dogs. I work in a t-shirt and jeans. I entrench myself in the studio, often forgetting to eat lunch. When this happens I make a peanut butter sandwich around four. John usually cooks the evening meal - we have fish at least once week but sausages feature large. Sometimes we get hare or pheasant off the road. We eat in front of telly in the evenings, then I return to work and potter around. The last thing I do is put the dogs out.” This is the typical day of Emily Mayer, who trained as a taxidermist and sculptor BA (Hons) Fine Art, Norwich School of Art & Design.

Having practiced as a taxidermist since her late teens Emily then studied sculpture with an emphasis on found-objects to create animal forms. Her more recent pioneering work in developing a new style of taxidermy called ‘erosion moulding’ has led her to produce works that bring together both areas of her practice in objects with often ‘edgy’ or humorous narratives.

Writing about Emily in a catalogue for a recent exhibition ‘Out of Context’ Rachel Campbell-Johnston talks of her being “.... less interested in the perfect replica but .. (wanting) her work to explore more uncomfortable ideas ... (that she is) ... seeking a far starker realism. She wants to capture a sense of life - and death - as it really is: to present the facts without flinching and, by focusing on our human relationship with the animals that surround us, to put them to challenging effect.”

We interviewed the artist who is considered to be the pioneer and source of inspiration for taxidermy in contemporary art.

It has been said that you are amongst a new breed of young artists reviving taxidermy. Why is taxidermy back in fashion?

I love that you call me young! I have been doing Taxidermy since the age of 11 and I’m now 47 so I hope I’ve been reviving taxidermy for 36 years. The Guild of Taxidermists was founded in 1976 to rescue what had become a dying art (if you’ll excuse the pun). It has done much to raise the profile and standards of taxidermy in this country so maybe the Guild are to thank for the revival of interest.

What does ‘taxiderming an animal’ mean?

Originally the word Taxidermy derived from the Greek, Taxis – to arrange, and Dermis – the skin. The term is more loosely used now to incorporate any work that attempts to realistically recreate the appearance of animals using the real animal as a starting point. The use of sophisticated moulding and casting techniques means

that some taxidermy – most usually fish, reptiles and amphibians – are often actually casts rather than (to use the professional term) ‘skin mounts’.

You recently appeared on ‘Richard and Judy’ to present your taxidermy work. How did you end up on that sofa?

I can’t remember! It’s likely another Guild member suggested me as the media usually contact the Guild for initial information. I’m often put forward to talk to the media as I’m seen as a good ambassador. Of course in this case they wanted to talk to Taxidermists as Artists so I guess I was the obvious choice.

It has been said that you taxidermied your first animal at the age of 11. What was it and why did you taxidermy it?

My father brought home a baby wild rabbit that one of his work colleagues had given to him, knowing I was interested in taxidermy. I’m not sure if it was my very first attempt but I still have it. Another early piece was a Black headed gull which I retrieved from some boys in the school playground before they slung it in to the allotments. Apparently it just ‘fell out of the sky’. This one ended up being sold to an art student at the local Goldsmiths College. It was pretty bad and I had to make it hang from the ceiling by a piece of fishing line as the leg wires weren’t strong enough to support it. Living in suburban London it wasn’t easy to obtain specimens so I attempted whatever came my way.

I’m not really sure why I got the idea at such a young age that I wanted to be a taxidermist. Maybe because I had a fascination with animals from as far back as I can remember and kept a lot of both domestic and wild animals as pets. I also collected Natural History material and had a veritable museum in my parents garden shed. When my pets died it was a natural progression to want to take them apart to see how they worked and from there, to want to try and put them back together again. From an even earlier age I made soft toys and after a while – having worked my way through the Hamlyn book of soft toys – I started to make my own patterns, attempting to make the animals as realistic as possible, I remember making a mole with little wires in all it’s front toes so that the feet could be shaped. My parents always encouraged my interests and my mother’s only comment when I started skinning birds on the kitchen table was to ‘Please put some newspaper down first darling’ and to make sure I had it all cleared away before suppertime.

You are equally famous in the artistic circles as in the, perhaps less glamorous circles of pet



Emily Mayer

Final Voyage - Precious Cargo Epoxy, resin, hair, suitcase, 46.2 x 46.2 x 46.2 cm ©

owners that decide to taxidermies their beloved deceased dog or cat. In this specific application your taxidermic dexterity clearly reveals itself: these creations appear sound asleep in highly naturalistic postures. Why do pet owners like to have their deceased pet permanently asleep on the sofa and what are the challenges presented by this form of taxidermy?

I can't really answer for pet owners who may have a multitude of reasons, but my understanding is they just can't let go. To be honest, I try and talk potential clients out of it as most of them don't really want a piece of taxidermy, they want their animal back and that's not something I can give them. I would much rather they spent their money on giving another living animal a good home. When I am persuaded to take on the job, the challenge is to try and resurrect both the appearance and the character of the animal. Dog and cats are not

like wild animals, pets are known intimately by their owners and each is an individual. It's not enough to simply do a 'Dog' it has to be Bertie the dog (or whoever). As for sleeping, well that's my suggestion as sleeping animals are much more comforting and believable and it's much easier to get a good likeness using the technique that I do

A good taxidermist is an artist and a naturalist in one, and needs to have a good knowledge of the anatomy of the animal they are preserving. Which one of these do you think is your predominant personality?

I am predominantly a sculptor. I have spent all my life making things. The anatomy of bone structure, musculature and movement is something I have learnt and as a naturalist...well I am certainly more knowledgeable than many but I am a rank amateur



Emily Mayer

The Dog's Bollocks, glass, ceramic, plastic, epoxy resin, hair, specimens in spirit, 36.5 x 55.7 x 22.1 cm ©

compared to some of my taxidermy colleagues!

Every specimen created after 1947 requires paperwork documenting its history and cause of death. It is legal to pick up most animal and bird species that have died naturally in the UK, although there is a list of banned, rare and endangered, species. Where do you draw a line in your taxidermic practice and why?

Obviously I never touch animals that are taken illegally but as most of the animals I deal with these days are either domestic or rodents it's not really something I need to think about. I still get given animals found dead on the road but most are passed on to colleagues. I don't strictly practice as a taxidermist any more but mainly do taxidermy of dogs and rats for my own work and occasionally take on specialist commission work for other artists.

Your taxidermy productions do not anthropomorphise animals nor embrace the Victorian tradition on 'action poses'. Why?

I have a great deal of respect for animals and I find the anthropomorphising of them demeaning and repugnant. I have never been very interested in high action drama poses as I like to create a feeling of doubt in the mind of the viewer, a suspension of belief, a belief that the animal is still breathing, may suddenly move, hence most of my work depicts animals asleep or pausing in such a way as to imply a moment of hesitation. Some of my work depicts animals in death, the ultimate in non-movement.

The animal in death is part of the life of animals and is the most realistic form that taxidermy can take and therefore the most compelling.

You have developed a pioneering new style of



Emily Mayer
Sea Watch, Plastic, rubber steel, wood, stone. 70 x 49 x 38cm ©

taxidermy known as erosion moulding. How does it work?

Erosion moulding is a technique I have been researching and developing for a number of years. In essence, the animal is set up in the desired position, a mould is made which encapsulates the hair and the animal is allowed to decompose until the hair is released from the skin. The entire carcass including the skin is then removed from the mould and pigmented resins replicating the skin tones are cast into the mould. The moulding material is destroyed and you are left with an exact replica of the animal with the real hair 'growing' from a resin cast. It is the ideal technique for doing pets as the owner can see exactly what the finished piece will look like before you start. It is also the best way of doing small rodents; subjects near impossible to make this realistic with conventional taxidermy (or with freeze-drying). There is no shrinkage or discolouration and the resin 'skin' appears more life-like as the colour is within the material

and can be made to appear translucent so light will glow through ears and the like.

I first got interested in the technique when I was practising as a full-time taxidermist and my first attempt was the head of a domestic boar for a farmer (his prize stud boar). Not long after this I pretty much packed in taxidermy and went to Art School. I avoided doing any taxidermy for a few years and came back to it with a renewed interest in the erosion technique as it was something I felt I could use for my own work. I am primarily interested in using animals in my sculptural work that appear dead or in some way challenge or subvert the conventional ideas about taxidermy. For this to really work the animal has to look utterly convincing.

You also make sculptures based on animal forms out of scrap and found materials. How did this idea come about and what does it represent?



Emily Mayer

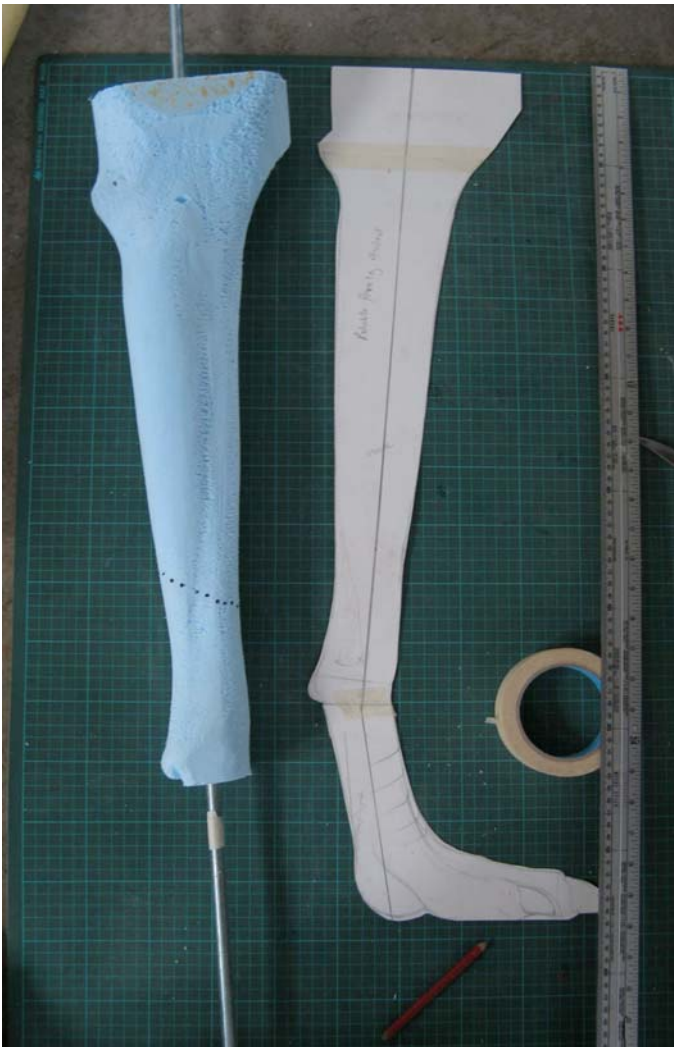
Last Resting Place (Their Death in My Hands), wood, resin, paper, metal, hair, whiskers, ceramic mug with tools & brushes, 33.2 x 83.7 x 60.2 cm ©

I became disillusioned with taxidermy in my mid twenties – partly fed up with some of the clients I had who seemed incapable of recognising good work and partly frustrated that however much time I spent I never felt the work was good enough. I took four years out and went to Art School. As a taxidermist I was familiar with sculpting anatomical models from clay and other malleable materials, working with found materials was a way of challenging myself to sculpt using materials that I couldn't manipulate in the same way. I found a way of working that could suggest the movement and inner tensions of animals rather than their external appearance. The sculptures are about ideas of animals, of anatomical structures, suggestions of animality.

What are you currently working on?

I am always working on my own sculptures – both in found materials and taxidermy - just now a series

entitled 'Sweetmeats', the first of which is a box of 'Sugar' Mice (which of course are real erosion-cast white mice). In between I am also making a mythical dog-like creature for the artist Charles Avery. He wanted a very large beast with the feet of a bird and a coat of matted wool. The starting point was a llama. In order to change it I am re-sculpting the head and will model the skin over it using the cast nose and teeth from a wolf. Whilst it is possible nowadays to buy pre-fabricated polyurethane forms to fit most animal skins, llamas are not available (nor are giant dogs) so I bought a fallow deer form and am drastically changing it – almost to the point where I wonder if I should have started from scratch.



Emily Mayer studied at the Norwich School of Art where she received her B.A. (Hons) in Fine Art Sculpture. Since then, Mayer has been working as both sculptor and taxidermist. Emily's early work concentrated on constructions from found items, such as scrap metals, metal fragments, woods, leather and other redundant items. For the past few years, Emily has been working with Damien Hirst, however, she is now concentrating more on her own work and is currently working on a new collection of sculptures for a series of exhibitions

Emily Mayer
Images from Emily's studio ©

Emily Mayer was interviewed by Antennae in Spring 2008 ©

MELANCHOLIC TAXIDERMY

Chloë Brown is a multimedia artist whose work has more recently explored the subject of melancholia through the use of taxidermy, sound and fake snow. An underlying menace is, however, scarcely concealed by the thin layers of the picturesque and the snow which covers the carefully posed taxidermy and the sounds of child and animal distress.

Questions by Eric Frank

As a kind of modern-day memento mori, Chloë Brown uses film, found objects, meticulously crafted sculptural objects and stuffed animals to create work that is a precarious balance between threat and vulnerability.

Peter Chapman said of her work in *The Independent* (2006), “Chloë Brown is fast establishing a reputation as someone who draws her inspiration from an eclectic range of sources. Brown, combining taxidermy, sound, film and sculpture, presents a series of pieces or tableaux that recreate a child’s sense of enchantment with the world around them, as well as a palpable sense of fear.”

How would you define your take on taxidermy in your work?

Chloë Brown: I find the confrontation with a stuffed animal fascinating. It is, at the same moment a confrontation with and a denial of death. You are looking at a corpse and yet there is a mental shift that takes place, which allows you to suspend your disbelief and imagine that the creature is actually alive. It is this hopeless intention to reanimate death that really touches me. I find it melancholic: a challenge to the mutability of life. I also find it pathetic, this ridiculous idea of suspending death, but that in itself is emotional, poignant. Death is, of course, inevitable, but why not try to trick it and pretend otherwise?

Taxidermy seems to me to be very close to freeze frames in films. I have a great love of freeze frames because they hold on to a moment, almost for

forever, a frozen moment in a narrative that leaves us guessing what comes after. Amongst my favourite freeze frames is the one at the end of François Truffaut’s film “*Les quatre cents coups*” where the boy, Antoine, who is running away from Borstal and his unhappy life, runs into the sea. He realizes he has nowhere to go, he is trapped and his eyes look directly into the lens of the camera and that is the moment when the image is frozen, in order for us, the audience, to contemplate what might happen next. That is the final, enduring image of the film that we take away with us. This is how I see taxidermy – as a freeze frame.

Equally fascinating to me is the way that the dark things of life (violence, cruelty, death, loss, not being loved), are conveyed through narratives in children’s films and books, often using animal characters as metaphors for human experience to distance the audience from the true horror of the meaning. I probably use the stuffed birds and animals as stand-ins for humans but I’m not entirely convinced that this is the case. More convincing is the idea that the creatures are bewitched humans, humans in animal form, who are under a spell. This kind of enchantment occurs in many fairy stories and I find the idea of the trapped human trying to communicate with humankind but being misunderstood or ignored, a most horrible kind of fate. This is also found in films such as “*The Fly*” or in “*The Planet of the Apes*” where the tables are turned on humans and the sense of misunderstanding is horrific.

When did you develop your interest in taxidermy?



Chloë Brown
Detail of pig skin ©

In 1997, I decided to make a piece of work using the idea of the pigskin rug or a squashed pig. I had developed an interest in cartoon imagery, particularly of the kind found in “Tom & Jerry” or the Wylie Coyote cartoons where a character, usually Tom or the coyote, was destroyed in some violent way: dropped from a great height or squashed or pierced. In the next scene, however, they were miraculously rejuvenated without a mark on their bodies and we all went along with this absolutely without thinking for one moment that this was actually possible. It was funny. It still is. I suspect the humour lies in the fact that we know this is a lie but one that we willingly accept and maybe even yearn for.

I found a taxidermist who would skin and preserve a pig. The skin looked less like a pigskin rug and more like a piece of parchment. I have been working on this piece since then and somehow I am never satisfied with it. At the moment I have drawn on it in ink so it has the appearance of a map, a treasure map perhaps, or maybe a map like the ones found in the front of Winnie the Pooh or Tolkien books, that allow the reader to visualise the world contained within the book. I don’t know if it will ever be resolved but maybe I need one piece to be perpetually incomplete.



Chloë Brown
A fragile happiness, 2002 ©

A Fragile Happiness is prominently featured on the front cover of the seminal book Killing Animals. Do you know why it was selected for this purpose and how does the photograph work as an opening to the content of the book?

I’m not sure why the publishers, University of Illinois Press and the Animal Studies Group, who wrote the book, chose this image. I do know that there was some controversy and there was not complete agreement initially that the image should be used. I think it was felt that the image could be seen as quite shocking or maybe it was felt that it could be seen to interpret the title of the book too literally. “A fragile happiness” is a piece that uses a wall-mounted stag’s head, or a trophy. There are nine birds sitting in it’s antlers and the stag is crying tears of glass in profusion. For me this is a piece that touches upon a tragedy of misunderstanding. It is a tale of two halves: the stag is dead and he knows this. He is crying because of this but he is also crying because the birds have mistaken his antlers for branches and are roosting amongst them, happily singing. I see this piece as being “cartoony” in origin. It is a comic tragedy. I do feel that the image when combined with the title “Killing Animals” does begin to address some of the issues raised within the book and I think it was a good decision to use this image, but then I am going to say that aren’t I?

How have you developed your taxidermic skills?

When I first started using taxidermy in my work, I worked with a local taxidermist. He was great and was



Chloë Brown
They Abide and They Endure, 2006 ©

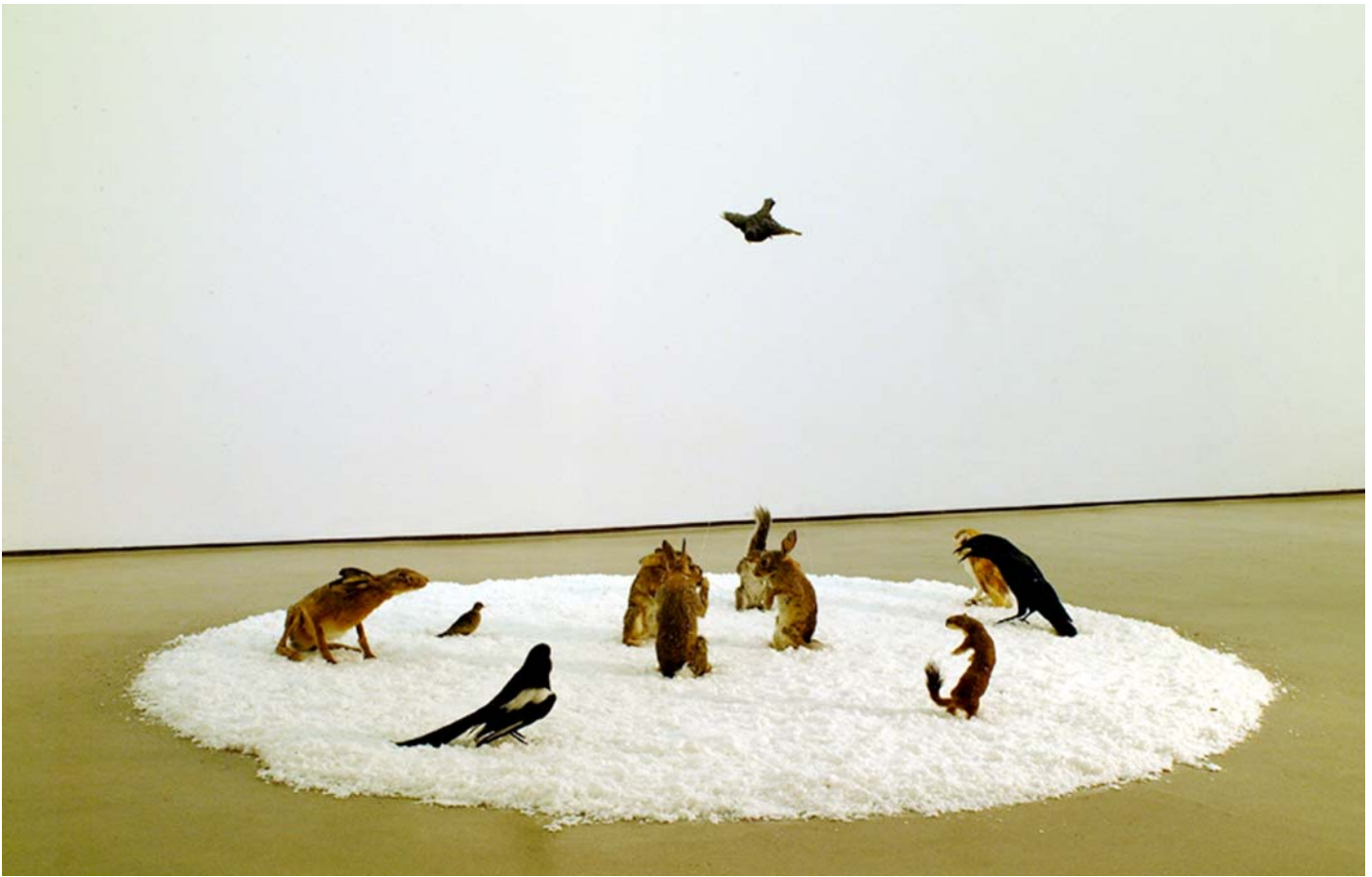
completely open to my suggestions. I would make drawings of what I would like the animals and birds to look like and I would talk to him about the kind of things, often emotions, I was trying to get across. However, in 2006 he decided to retire so he agreed to teach me taxidermy and he also gave me all of the animals he had in his freezer. In 2006, I exhibited my first piece of work that uses animals mounted by me. It is called “*They Abide and They Endure*” (named after the final words uttered by Lillian Gish in the film “*The Night of the Hunter*”) and it includes forty-nine white mice and twelve school desks and chairs. I absolutely loved being in control of the final outcome rather than having to accept someone else’s interpretation, however good this was.

Can you tell us about the work you exhibited in Captive Bred?

I had two pieces of work in this show. “*A fragile happiness*” was one, which I have mentioned before and the other is a piece called “*Things will never be the same again*”. This piece takes the form of a tableau with assorted animals and birds placed within a circle of fake snow on the ground. There is a tension between the

creatures and some of them are crying (both pieces in this exhibition featured animals that weep), whilst others observe the scene intently. The focus seems to fall on the three rabbits at the centre of the circle, all of whom are crying. A hare and a squirrel also have tears in their eyes. Most of the other creatures are predators and there is a sense that the outcome of this scene may not be pleasant. A blackbird swoops above and there are occasional flurries of snow (from a snow machine) lending the whole piece a sort of snow-globe romanticism. The falling snow also destroys any suspension of disbelief that this is a frozen moment in time and the fakery in every sense is revealed.

This piece was influenced by some of the darker stories by Beatrix Potter such as “*Roly-Poly Pudding*”. It was also informed by a story my mum told me when I was a child. We lived in the Peak District and her daily commute took her through some fairly remote landscapes. One day she saw a rabbit, frozen rigid in a field. She noticed that it was being mesmerised by a stoat, which was running round and around it in a circle. The poor rabbit was hypnotised and would soon be preyed upon. So she stopped her car to chase the stoat away. But the rabbit remained in its trance and she could see that the stoat was waiting in the wings so that



Chloë Brown
Things will never be the same again, 2001©

it could continue with its “danse macabre” once she had gone. So she did strange thing and dropped a stone on the rabbits’ head, killing it instantly. I can’t remember if we had it for tea or if she left it for the stoat to eat.

Can you tell us about *Dear One*, your film project?

“Dear One” is a re-invention of a Standard 8 film my parents used to show to my sister and I when we were little. This was before video and occasionally we would set up the projector and the screen and have an afternoon of films. One of my favourites was called “Monkeys Noisy Night”. I had a love/hate relationship with this film because it was both funny and disturbing. A few years ago my parents were clearing out a lot of their stuff and they gave me all of their old Standard 8 equipment and films. I watched “Monkeys Noisy Night” again and was struck by how extraordinary it was. It is a film of chimpanzees acting out the roles of mother, father and baby. The baby will not sleep and the father, cagouled by the mother, tries many different approaches to try to get the baby to sleep. Nothing works and finally, after a failed attempt to lull the baby into a slumber by playing the violin, the father beats the baby repeatedly over the head with the instrument. I edited

the film so that all the comforting and humorous bits of text written in an American slang, probably from the 1950’s, were removed and what were left were the bare bones of a narrative and the true cruelty of the film. This is about failed anthropomorphism where the appropriated “humanness” of the chimps is subverted and the animality wins through. Another reading of it, if you accept the attempt to make these animals human, is quite shocking, with the father beating his baby. However you read it, the thing that keeps reappearing is the idea of looking back on a society that thought such things were entertaining, funny, like the real version of a cartoon, but in this case when the baby gets hit over the head with the violin, it does hurt and the baby isn’t miraculously rejuvenated in the next scene.

Your installations make use of taxidermy within melancholic settings and also employ the use of sound. Can you tell us what the relation is between melancholia and taxidermy in your work? What role does sound play in your installations?

For me, taxidermy and melancholia are totally entwined. Taxidermy is melancholic. As I said before, I find the idea of trying to reanimate a corpse touching, sad and full of



Dear One, 2006 (film still) ©



Chloë Brown
Rabbit Close up ©

pathos. I suppose this is why some of the animals in my pieces cry. But there is another reason for this, which refers back to the idea of the bewitched human in animal form. Crying is a sign of humanity and so if the animal is crying, a bewitchment must have taken place at some point. However, I must stress that I like to tread a very fine line between tragedy and comedy in this work in order to challenge and probably highlight the melancholia. Sound is a medium that I use either alone or to animate a specific site or static object in order to create a narrative. So far, I have not used sound with taxidermy. I don't think it would work. It would be too literal. But I have implied the existence of an animal through the use of sound. For example, in the piece "Oh you cold heart" the sound of a whining dog can be heard coming from beneath a small pile of fake snow.

Your work has been refereed to as a 'kind of modern day memento mori'. What is your take on it?

It was the artist and critic Robert Clark who wrote this about my work in a review for the Guardian in 2006 and it immediately made sense. Memento mori, literally translated, means "Remember you will die" and I feel this is in essence at the heart of what I am trying to convey with my work.

I have a heightened sense of my own mortality largely due, I think, to my upbringing. I am the daughter of a fireman and a radiographer and I was brought up on a narrative diet of horror stories, of the terrible things that can happen to the human body if you do not take care. Stories of drowned pot-holers, horrific glider crashes and people killed by electric blankets acted as fairy tales in our family and I feel that inevitably this has had an impact on my view of the world. This is not a

negative view. It is just a very particular view that sees life as being fairly fragile and not very long. This perhaps explains my liking for cartoons, which in a way are the antithesis of memento mori. The message there is "remember you won't die". And my interest in freeze frames makes sense too, as they are a way of holding onto a moment and of stopping the forward momentum of time, in order to contemplate the moment, which in itself is a form of memento mori.

Your work frequently subverts the traditional context of taxidermied animals to evoke a feeling or response rather than to be anatomically informative. Do you consider you work to be close to the concept of botched taxidermy?

If you take Steve Baker's idea of botched taxidermy as being contemporary work that "botched the animal body, or got it wrong (in contrast to the illusion of life attempted by conventional taxidermy)" then I would have to both agree and disagree that my work is close to this concept. I mainly use taxidermy that looks lifelike but then I subvert this. However, there are some pieces of my work that are closer to the idea of botched taxidermy. For example, the "Longing Song" pieces use the bodies of birds and of foxes (from fox fur stoles) and there is no attempt to make something appear lifelike, but they become reinvented as maps or the imagined imprint of the dreams of the birds. Steve Baker also states that these pieces of botched taxidermy "could be collectively regarded as "questioning entities" and that this sets them aside from traditional taxidermy and of course I am going to agree that this is true of the taxidermy in my work. Their entire role in the work is to act as "questioning entities".



Chloë Brown
The Longing Song – Birds, 2004 ©

Taxidermy and botched taxidermy have become increasingly popular in contemporary art. Do you think that too much exposure may reduce the shock factor attached to the almost unbearable sense of realism that the early works possessed?

I think that taxidermy is endlessly fascinating, whether the shock factor is present or not. I'm not even sure that I value the idea of a shock factor. I like work to be challenging and if it's just shocking, then it is memorable but often for the wrong reasons. For example, I find Jordan Baseman's pieces that use taxidermy challenging and therefore thought provoking, but not shocking. His piece "Surrender" which uses a skinned domestic cat, shows me things I am not usually able to see and it makes me think. You could argue that there is little dignity shown to the animals he uses but it is that sense of cruelty that lends the work its edge.

What do you think of Angela Singer's use of botched taxidermy?

I am not familiar with a lot of Angela Singer's work but I have seen images of her 'trophy' pieces 'deer-atize' and 'sore', which are made from recycled taxidermy. They seem to me to be very direct in their message. This is work that makes a statement. Of course there's a contradiction in this work, which uses the dead bodies of animals to critique the killing of these animals but that is the thing that I find compelling about it. Again I don't find her work shocking but rather thoughtful and contemplative.

What do you think of Damien Hirst's use of taxidermy?

I've always liked Damien Hirst's work ever since I was first aware of his piece "In and Out of Love" which was installed at the ICA in 1991, in which he used the life cycle of hundreds of butterflies that lived their brief lives in the gallery and then their dead bodies were incorporated into paintings. His work talks about life and death in a raw, even brutal way that I find uplifting and often beautiful. His use of taxidermy is entirely different from the way I use it. The dead bodies of the animals are



Chloë Brown
Work in progress, *Some Things That Fell*, 2008 ©

presented as just that. There is no attempt to imitate life and they are closer to natural history specimens. Their role is to represent death, not suggest a narrative as in my work.

You are currently working on a project for the BLOC space in Sheffield, what is the work about?

I am making an installation that is entitled “Some Things That Fell” which developed from an artists book of the same name that I made. In the book many things fall on a rabbit, from a feather, to an apple, to a one-ton weight, to a plane, to finally a big black cloud. The installation will consist of three elements sited in the space at BLOC in Sheffield, which has the appearance of a small warehouse. There will be a tiny white mounted mouse, which will be confronting a huge roller (the machines that flatten tarmac) and hovering in the space there will also be an enormous inflatable black cloud, like some harbinger of doom. When I was developing the piece, the image of the lone student standing in front of the

tank in Tiananmen Square kept reoccurring to me. I want to create something of the tension between the tiny vulnerable being and the huge unstoppable machine. The cloud is there as the embodiment of doom but there is also a sculptural reason for it’s presence. I wanted the heavy weightiness of the roller to be counterbalanced by the impossibly lightness of the cloud.

Chloë Brown received a B.A. in Fine Art from Reading University and an M.A. in Sculpture from Chelsea College of Art and Design. She has shown her work nationally and internationally and is a founder member of the international artist group Flasch exhibiting in Salzburg, Leicester, London and Stockholm. Forthcoming exhibitions include: “This Moment Here” at BLOCspace, Sheffield in October 2008 and “Tier-Perspektiven” at Georg-Kolbe-Museum, Berlin in April 2009.

Chloë lives in Sheffield and is a senior lecturer in Fine Art at Sheffield Hallam University. She is a member of The Research Group for Artists Publications (RGAP) and helps to organise the annual Small Publishers Fair in London.

“Some Things That Fell” is at BLOCspace, Sheffield from October 4th to 19th 2008. See <http://blocprojects.co.uk> for further details.

Chloë Brown was interviewed by Antennae in July 2008 ©

TAKE ONLY PHOTOGRAPHS

Matthew Brower examines the paradigmatic set presented by wildlife photography looking at the conventions of Victorian time in order to understand how we should look at animals rather than 'why we should look at them'.

Text by Matthew Brower

Contemporary woodlore suggests that to properly respect nature we should “take only photographs and leave only footprints” when we enter the wilderness. This expression takes photography as a model of non-interventionist right practice and offers a vision of nature as a non-human space in which humans do not belong.¹ In this schema photography appears as a non-intrusive, environmentally friendly activity that shows proper respect for the fragility of nature. This rhetoric positions nature photography as maintaining a separation between humans and nature.² It assures us that photography keeps us at an appropriate distance from nature. Thus, nature photography is the figure of an ideal relation to nature; it provides access to nature while leaving it untouched. Nature photography offers us an image of nature that it at the same time forbids us to occupy.

It is this relation to nature that is at work in wildlife photography. In his essay, “Why look at Animals?”, John Berger argues that wildlife photography presents an image of the animal as fundamentally separate from the human.³ He further suggests that nature photography is not simply a convenient rhetorical figure for humanity’s separation from nature but is central to the operation of this ideology. Wildlife photography shows images marked by their “normal invisibility” positioning the animals depicted in a realm outside the human.⁴ The photographs show us animals we could not normally see. The wildlife photograph erases its taking, offering its viewer transparent access to nature. But, by erasing its taking, it leaves no space within the image’s economy for the viewer to occupy. Thus, the images provide their viewer with access to a

deep nature from which they are fundamentally excluded.

The “invisibility” in these images functions as evidence for Berger’s argument that late-capitalist westerners can no longer really be in nature. It is no longer possible for us to have an ‘authentic’ encounter with an animal. Because of our alienation we can no longer engage with animals except as figures of nostalgia. “The image of a wild animal becomes the starting-point of a daydream: a point from which the day-dreamer departs with his back turned.”⁵ Wildlife photographs function as a substitute for a real nature that the images themselves assert is impossible for modern humans to occupy.⁶ We are offered images of wild animals as compensation for our complete domestication. Berger argues that capitalism’s reorganization of society has separated us from the animals with whom we used to live and offers us instead images of animals that compensate for this disconnection by functioning as an ideal figure of freedom.

While Berger’s image of wildlife photography is seductive (like the images it describes), it too is a compensatory fantasy haunted by a desire for an unmediated relation with animals. As Donna Haraway has taught us, the desire for an innocent relation to nature does not provide us with a secure ground for politics but rather leaves us in a double bind between an innocence that must remain passive and victimized and a guilty teleology culminating in apocalypse.⁷ This logic leaves us longing for an unrealizable relation to animals or denying the possibility of any appropriate relation with animals. It is for this reason that Jonathan Burt insists that Berger’s position represents a “flight from

the animal.”⁸ As Burt notes, “The idea that the animal as a natural non-human object is always automatically corrupted or falsified as soon as it is visually troped” denies the possibility of any appropriate human-animal relation.⁹ More importantly, he notes that this logic “reinforces at a conceptual level the effacement of the animal that is perceived to have taken place at the level of reality even whilst criticizing that process.”¹⁰ Thus, the criticism of wildlife photography offered by Berger retains the ideological construction of nature – as fundamentally separate from humanity – that is at work in the wildlife image.

However, it should also be noted that this separation only occurs within the logic of the images, not in their production. As Bill McKibben has argued, the production of wildlife photography can be enormously disruptive to the lives of animals.¹¹ McKibben describes wildlife photographers chasing animals with helicopters to photograph them. James Elkins observed “a man with a camera” in Yellowstone Park “running full-tilt after a bison.”¹² More seriously, he notes “Some national parks have problems with tourists who lure bears with food in order to take their pictures.”¹³ This behavior not only endangers the tourists but ultimately threatens the life of the bear. While these behaviors may stem from a love of animals they do not maintain an ideal distance from the animal.¹⁴ These examples highlight the work involved in the production of the animal image that the wildlife photograph generally obscures. McKibben’s and Elkins’ allegations suggest that in seeing nature photography as a model for being in nature we fail to understand animal photography and in particular that we fail to appreciate its mode of production. Correcting this misunderstanding calls for an analysis that de-naturalizes wildlife photography.

This paper is part of an ongoing project to denaturalize wildlife photography and its construction of the animal. While I agree with Berger that the image of the wild animal is deeply ideological in its positing of an essential separation of human and animal, I argue against Berger’s conclusion that it is no longer possible for contemporary humans to have an “authentic” unmediated encounter with animals. I suggest that we need to understand how we look at animals, not why. To this end, I examine two animal images from the 1850s that pose questions to the model of photography as the ideal relation between nature and viewer. The analysis of these photographs makes clear that the image of the animal in photography is produced in relation to its social conditions and is not simply found in or extracted from nature. This analysis also opens up the possibility of thinking and reading animal photography differently. I foreground the social production of the wild animal in wildlife photography to argue that we must understand wildlife photography as producing a social

relation with animals.

Section I. A Read Heron

The Photographic Exchange Club’s Photographic Album of 1857 contains a photograph of a heron titled *Piscator No. II*. [Fig. 1] The photograph is accompanied by an epigram that reads, “And in the weedy moat, the heron fond of solitude alighted. The moping heron motionless and stiff, that on a stone as silently and stilly stood, an apparent sentinel, as if to guard the water-lily.”¹⁵ John Dillwyn Llewelyn (1810-1882) took the photograph in 1856. Llewelyn, a cousin of photographic inventor Fox Talbot, was a pioneering Welsh photographer.¹⁶ He specialized in images of nature taken from around his family’s estate, Penllergare.¹⁷

The image is a rectangle taller than it is wide (24.2 x 18.9 cm). At first glance, the image appears to be of a common type; it reads as a genre photograph — specifically, a nature, or wildlife, photograph. As such, it appears to be immediately legible, presenting us with an image of deep nature: a wild animal in its natural environment. It depicts a heron standing in a pool of water in front a rock wall. The heron is centered about one third of the way up in the image and its reflection extends almost to the edge of the image. The water is dark, almost black, and against it the bright white of the heron stands out in marked contrast.

The right side of the photograph is a lighter band of gray composed of two separate elements. In the upper right corner the light illuminates a bulge in the rock wall. In the lower right corner the light illuminates a grassy bank topped by a mound of stones. The bank in the foreground situates the viewer and provides an entry point to the image by giving a sense of scale and distance with which to read the image. By contrast, the overgrowth along the back wall suggests a space of human absence. The heron falls on the non-human side of this divide.

There is a large clump of bulrushes directly behind the group of stones. The bulrushes are echoed on the other side of the pool by another clump of rushes that together frame the heron. This framing provides a strong diagonal line to the composition. The sharp contrast of the heron with its background, its compositional framing by the other elements of the image, its central positioning in combination with the image’s title (*piscator* meaning fisher) and the attached epigram from Thomas Hood suggest that the image is focused on the heron. The structure of the image announces that the heron is its center (subject); this is a photograph of a heron.

Like any wildlife photograph, the image has a timeless quality that makes it appear contemporary.¹⁸ There are no markers within the image restricting it to a



Llewelyn, John Dillwyn
 Piscator, No. 2, June, 1856, albumen print, 24.2 x 18.9 cm. Museum Purchase: ex-collection A.E. Marshall ©

particular historical period. The heron, the rocks and the rushes are not marked by historical traces. Within the visual rhetoric of the wildlife photograph there is no meaningful difference between a contemporary heron and one from 1856. While the image is labelled with a particular date, as a wildlife photograph the elements it presents are not determined by that date. Although the image of the heron was taken in 1856, the meaning of the heron as it appears to us is not confined to that historical moment.

What I am appealing to is the notion that wildlife photography operates within a semiotic in which nature as non-human is ahistorical. Estelle Jussim and Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock argue “the inclusion of a human figure, clothed in the appropriate fashions of the day and

season, removes the photograph of Nature from the generalizing, abstracting experience which would place the contents of the photograph in some iconic eternity.”¹⁹ Jussim and Lindquist’s argument implies that, given that the wildlife photograph is predicated on the absence of the human, the wildlife photograph presents an image of ahistorical eternal nature. The image gives us access to deep nature -- an essentially unchanging nature untouched by human hands. Although since Darwin we understand that nature changes, those changes are thought to occupy a deep time accessible only through science.²⁰ Evolution’s timeframe is vast and inhuman, positing changes over millions of years.²¹ The evolutionary temporality of nature positions nature as an eternal and unchanging base outside of human affairs.²²

Thus, in presenting us with an image of deep nature, the image detaches itself from the moment of its taking adhering instead to a deeper chronology.²³ It is in this sense that the image remains contemporary. The nature that the image depicts continues “essentially unchanged.” If there is any particular interest in the date of the image, it is that we could be looking at one of the earliest examples of a wildlife photograph: a heron in its natural environment. Read as a wildlife photograph there would be no significant change to the image’s meaning if the date attached to the image was 1840 or 1890.²⁴ The date would only acquire an additional meaning if an ecological catastrophe had intervened in the time since the image’s taking. If there were no more herons, or, at a minimum, no more herons in Wales, the image’s date would be charged with significance. For example, the pictures of the last Quagga from the London zoo are difficult to view without experiencing a haunting sense of loss.

Section 2. The Ready-Made Heron

Yet perhaps the image is not so easily deciphered. Our contemporary ways of seeing may cause us to assimilate the image too quickly to familiar categories of interpretation. What if, despite all appearances to the contrary, the image is not a wildlife photograph? How then could we read the image? More to the point, given the image’s structural homology with a wildlife photograph what would convince us that the image is not a wildlife photograph?

The image is reproduced in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination* in a photo essay, “Images of Nature” by Charles Millard.²⁵ Millard suggests that in Victorian nature photography “animal and human figures were used for compositional accent and emotional overtone.”²⁶ While briefly discussing the image, Millard mentions in passing that the heron we see here is probably stuffed. According to Millard, “The heron — presumably stuffed — in J.D. Llewelyn’s *Piscator* ... acts merely to focus the composition.”²⁷ Millard inserts Llewelyn’s image into a series of nature images of which animal images are only one kind. This is a tradition in which human and animal figures have a structural equivalence. Yet this equivalence is difficult for a contemporary viewer to comprehend; if it were a human figure standing in Llewelyn’s pond we would read the image rather differently. Thus Millard’s assertion presents us with two questions. One, why this assurance, what guarantees that the heron we see here is, or rather was, a dead heron and not a live one?²⁸ Two, what is this merely, as in, merely to focus? What might it mean to “merely focus a composition?”

The state of photographic technology at the time of the image’s taking assures us that the heron is

stuffed. According to the caption in the *Photographic Album*, this particular image required a 20-minute exposure. Thus, this photograph, as with all photographs from this period, was posed. Photography had yet to become instantaneous; we had not yet reached the technology of the snapshot. As Edmund White has noted, this is the reason that “In the earlier decades the chief subject of nature photography was scenery, mostly because it didn’t move. The long exposures required ... gave the nature photographer little choice.”²⁹ In other words, the length of the exposure time determined the available subjects. To be photographed, animals had to be rendered as stationary as the landscape they inhabited. Thus, the time required for the image’s taking confronted Llewelyn with the problem faced by all depicors of animals; the less domesticated the animal, the less tame the animal, the more difficult it is to have it remain motionless long enough to depict without first killing it.

The depiction of live animals was a problem.³⁰ Most animal paintings from this period and before were modelled from dead animals.³¹ This was true of both artistic and scientific images. As Nicholas Hammond assures us “All the nineteenth-century illustrations of animals were based on dead specimens.”³² This practice continued in animal photography as well. As common practice the use of a stuffed animal would not have concerned either Llewelyn or his audience. They would not have understood the emphasis contemporary viewers put on the distinction between an image of a live or dead animal.³³

In 1856, photographing a stuffed bird was a perfectly reasonable solution to the problem of getting a heron to pose for twenty minutes. It strikes us as odd because we no longer accept a stuffed animal as an adequate substitute for a live animal. Realizing that the heron is stuffed changes how we see the image. By definition a photograph of a stuffed animal cannot be read as a wildlife photograph. How then are we to read the image?

Deciphering the image requires addressing the Victorian conception of nature. The Victorians viewed nature primarily through the lens of the picturesque. Although scientific discoveries were altering the understanding of nature, the romantic conception of nature continued to influence the Victorian experience. Nature functioned as “a repository of feeling” a healing space outside the confines of civilization.³⁴ Although this vision of nature still shapes our contemporary one, the type of sanctuary that nature provided the Victorian was different. For the Victorian, the ideal landscape was an improved one and the nostalgic dream it embodied was Arcadia and not the pre-human landscape of the fifth day of creation.³⁵



Llewelyn, John Dillwyn
Deer Parking, 1856, Oxymer process (variant of the dry collodion process) ©

U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson argue that the composition of early Victorian nature photographs is both indicative of and determined by the Victorian conception of nature. The lengthy exposures required by early photography ensured that these images were carefully crafted and composed. This attention to the detail of the images made “the choice of subject and the arrangement of objects in themselves indicative of the Victorian attitude to nature.”³⁶ Knoepfelmacher and Tennyson thus read “the setting, the placement, and the tones of the photographs” as revealing “Victorian Nature as it was perceived by contemporaries.”³⁷ It is precisely because these photographs are composed and artificial that they reveal to us how Victorians wanted to see nature. Knoepfelmacher and Tennyson provide us with a program for reading Llewelyn’s image, seeing the elements of Victorian nature photography as overdetermined by the romantic conception of the

landscape. Millard concurs, noting that it was a common Victorian practice to increase the picturesque qualities of the landscape by adding props.

Millard sees the Victorian nature photograph as a textual image coming out of an “essentially literary tradition.”³⁸ The imagery is determined by a conceptual ideal exemplified by Wordsworth’s depictions of the Lake District.³⁹ It is also shaped by the pictorial tradition of landscape art. Ultimately, Millard argues, “For the Victorians, Nature photography becomes a species of portraiture, inevitably revealing the spirit of place, an inviolable atmosphere.”⁴⁰ The Victorian nature photograph is thus about the mood evoked by the picturesque more than it is about any particular element within it.

The heron is a prop added to create, or increase, the picturesque quality of the image.⁴¹ Reading the image through the lens of the picturesque makes

plausible Millard's claim that the heron is not the focus of the composition that rather it "acts merely to focus the composition."⁴² Although we might see the heron as the focus of image, Millard indicates that, Victorians would have seen an aura of place (of the place), and the heron would have appeared as merely a compositional object. The Victorian viewer would have been led from seeing the heron to the contemplation of the picturesque. The heron thus appears as an adjunct to the spirit of the pond and not that which proclaimed the pond's authenticity as a natural space. Thus in "merely focusing the composition" the heron acts as a vehicle for the apprehension of the picturesque.

Section 3. Staging

Analyzing an earlier photograph by Llewelyn of a deer in forest taken around 1852 makes the staging of his animal images more apparent. [Fig. 2].⁴³ The photograph, *Deer Parking*, is a calotype measuring 20 x 25 cm.⁴⁴ The image presents a stag in a clearing surrounded by oaks and ferns. Large trees flank both sides of the image. The tree on the left sits on a slight hill giving a diagonal thrust to the composition. A raking light from the left side of the image produces sharp contrasts of light and dark. The stag stands mid-image with its head cocked. The stag's head is highlighted while its body is in deep shadow emphasizing its look of noble alertness. The stag's head occupies the focal point of the diagonal formed by the two trees positioning it and its antlers as the focus of the composition.

Yet, a closer look at the conjunction of the stag's head and body reveals that something is not quite right. The deer's pose seems at odds with its surroundings. The angle of the neck is wrong. The stiff front legs and square chest betray the deer's status as a stuffed animal. Rather than merging with the natural background the deer stands out as a human intervention. The deer is "abrasively visible" appearing as what Steve Baker has called "botched taxidermy."⁴⁵ According to Baker, the botched taxidermy used in post-modern art opens a space for thinking the animal outside of the already known. Similarly, the botched taxidermy in Llewelyn's photograph undoes the temporal logic of the wildlife genre.

The marked difference between the deer and its surroundings leads to one of the most striking differences between the photograph of the deer and that of the heron -- how dated the image of the deer seems in comparison. Unlike the image of the heron that appears contemporary in its timelessness, the photograph of the deer appears antiquated and historically distant. As a stuffed animal, the deer falls on the culture side of the nature-culture divide. The deer appears as a cultural artifact embedded in the time of its

making rather than as a natural object participating in an evolutionary temporality.

While the heron offered itself to us as an immediately legible image, the image of the deer resists our interpretation, initially becoming legible only as a fake or a fraud. Although Millard cautions us to read the animals inserted into Victorian nature photography as accent pieces, to not read the photographs as animal or wildlife photographs, it is difficult to resist seeing the deer, standing out as it does, as the focus of the image. Yet, because the deer appears to a contemporary viewer as a foreign object in a natural setting, it is difficult to read the image as anything other than a failed or faked attempt at a photograph of a deer. The image does not read as a photograph of a stuffed deer precisely because of its use of a 'natural' setting. The "deer" in this photograph is obviously "fake," a crudely stuffed specimen that appears to be masquerading as a live deer -- and failing. This failure is double. There is a taxidermic failure to achieve life-likeness and there is the failure of the photographed deer to merge with its surroundings. It is only due to this second failure that the first failure seems so marked. A photograph of a stuffed animal in a different setting would not read as a failed wildlife photograph. Ironically, while the forest is the natural setting of a deer, it is an unnatural setting for a stuffed animal whose natural habitat includes trophy cases, game lodges, and natural history museums.

Section 4. Stuffed Animal Pictures

To reiterate, the image of the deer was not intended to be a wildlife photograph. Taking it as such misreads the image, presuming as it does an ideal towards which the image is not striving. What was absent from the Victorian experience of nature was the very concept of wildlife. Although Victorians often spoke of wild animals and savage beasts, the notion of "authentic" animals existing outside the realm of the human was not significantly present in a culture that celebrated the discovery and capture of exotic species as tangible evidence of their civilization's triumph.⁴⁶ As such, we cannot read the image of deer according to our own familiar categories of authenticity or naturalness. As Miles Orvell reminds us "Our contemporary conception of photography is in many ways narrower than [a nineteenth-century viewer's], shaped as it has been by our predilection for 'straight photography,' which we think of as an 'honest' use of the medium."⁴⁷ Pointing to this gap between contemporary and Victorian viewers, Orvell cautions us on the temptation to misread nineteenth-century photographs. Our sense that we know photography and understand its meanings makes it difficult for us to see early photography as anything other than a prefiguration of present practices.⁴⁸

But while the image of the deer is not a wildlife photograph, it is not clear that it belongs simply to the picturesque. The image appears to be strongly influenced by a different image-making tradition. The deer's pose resembles the stag in Landseer's *Monarch of the Glen*. Landseer's image was painted in 1851 a year before the photograph was taken. This similarity of pose suggests the influence of the tradition of sporting art exemplified by Landseer.⁴⁹ This would further suggest that the photograph attempts to portray the nobility of the deer by having it stand erect with its head held high displaying its "crown" of antlers.⁵⁰

However, while the poses are similar, the images' effects are different. Rather than expressing nobility the photograph of the deer appears bathetic. In animal photography the encounter with the animal necessarily registers itself in the image. This registration interferes with the practice in the sporting art tradition of deploying the animal as a site for projection: Llewelyn's deer cannot do what Landseer's does. The biological specificity of the photographed animal's behavior interferes with the process of cultural construction; the deer fails as an evocation of idealized nature.⁵¹

The erect pose of the deer is a response to a potential threat. It is a momentary pose held while the deer evaluates the threat. This pose implies an engagement with the image's off-stage. Head up, the deer's gaze appears fixed on the camera and through it the viewer. The viewer is assigned a position within the internal economy of the image. Our space becomes enfolded into that of the image. We come to occupy the position of the camera. In other words, the deer's pose positions us as an outside threat to which it responds.

Yet, as a taxidermic object the deer has already been appropriated and serves as a cultural artifact. The viewer is placed in the position of appropriating an already appropriated object. How then does the viewer come to experience the photograph's appropriation of nature? Does the double sense of appropriation increase the viewer's implied control over nature, or do these acts of appropriation conflict with one another and, as a result, remove the image from the realm of the natural? For a contemporary viewer the answer is the latter. The awkwardness of the taxidermy exposes the limitations of the nineteenth-century's attempts to assert its domination over nature. The poor quality of the stuffed animal betrays an incomplete knowledge of animal anatomy and its deployment in a photograph "reveals" the inability of the photographer to capture an image of a live animal. Both the taxidermist and the photographer fall short of the contemporary vision of the wild animal – a vision predicated on the further development of wildlife photography.⁵² By violating the logic of this vision the deer appears unnatural.

However, James Ryan argues that for a nineteenth century British viewer the two appropriations would have been mutually reinforcing. According to Ryan, "Photographs of stuffed animals ...represent a kind of double mimesis, and reinforce the shared ways in which photography and taxidermy are manifestations of a desire to possess and control nature."⁵³ Ryan differs from Millard in seeing Victorian animal photography not simply as an evocation of the spirit of nature but as an attempt to possess and control that spirit. Images of nature assert power over place. Although Ryan acknowledges that photography ultimately supplants taxidermy, he maintains "as modes of representation the two practices are closely related."⁵⁴ In arguing for this connection Ryan is influenced by the work of Kitty Hauser. In her discussion of the use of taxidermy in contemporary photography, Hauser argues for a strong conceptual link between photography and taxidermy. For Hauser, both photography and taxidermy are based on their isolation of a surface from the world as "both peel a layer from the world which they then present as truth."⁵⁵ It is their shared indexical quality as representations that permits "their social function as trophies and souvenirs" by functioning as "the visible proof of experience."⁵⁶ Hauser argues this indexical appropriation of the world links both forms of representation conceptually and structures their social reception as evidence. Ryan takes up this conceptual relation identified by Hauser and grounds it in the historical interplay between early photography and taxidermy. As Ryan notes,

Early photographers employed taxidermy in order to capture portraits of animal in a seemingly live pose and outdoor setting. In the 1850s J.D. Llewelyn took photographs of stuffed deer, badgers, otters, rabbits and pheasants posed as if photographed in the wild. Just as photographers drew on the skill of the taxidermist to overcome their cameras' technical shortcomings, taxidermists drew in turn on the photographer to provide them with an appropriate model of realism for their displays.⁵⁷

Ryan situates Llewelyn's work photographing stuffed animals within a larger movement in which photography and taxidermy progressively sharpened each other's appropriation of nature.⁵⁸ Thus according to Ryan the image of the deer would have been unproblematic because the taxidermic deer would have been the model used to validate the success of the image.

Ryan situates the interplay of photography and taxidermy within the larger context of the Imperial British appropriation of nature.⁵⁹ Focusing on African colonial photography, Ryan argues that animal photography functions as part of the Imperial politics of display. ⁶⁰ The wild animals appropriated by colonial

photography and taxidermy became objects for the display of white Anglo Saxon male power. This emphasis on the creation of object for the display of prowess leads Ryan to argue that the interplay between stuffed animals and photography was such that the photograph of the stuffed animal is the paradigmatic example of early nature photography. "Stuffed animals," he writes, were "the ideal photographic target: a re-creation of nature as apparently authentic, yet utterly docile."⁶¹ Ryan suggests that it is in the photograph of a stuffed animal that the logic of British colonial nature photography is at its most apparent.

Ryan's argument indicates that, as an image of a dead animal, the deer photograph is in part a trophy shot. Yet rather than appearing on the walls of a hunting lodge or an aristocratic shooting club, Llewelyn has placed his trophy in a picturesque 'natural' setting. An image that initially appeared as a wildlife photograph becomes a form of still life; a Nature Morte, literally dead nature, in which a dead animal is re-presented as a live one. It is a substitution in which dead nature is re-added to nature as a supplement intended to bring out the qualities of untamed nature.

Conclusion

The difficulty in reading Llewelyn's photographs highlights two points: the strangeness of early photography and the instability of the concept of the animal. It is this second point that challenges any thinking of human-animal relations based on a conception of the animal as an unchanging given outside of history. The image of the animal body connects to a network of practices relating to the conceptualization of nature, the human and technology. The analysis of Llewelyn's heron shows that local contexts and practices shape the function of the animal image.⁶² What seemed obvious on first reading, that the image of the animal was a wildlife photograph, quickly became impossible to sustain. The image of a stuffed animal is, by definition, not a wildlife photograph and this shift in genres entails a concomitant shift in the perceived temporality of the image. This shift in temporality highlights the role of photography in producing an image of the animal as timeless and ahistorical. The reading of the deer photograph brings out the relation of animal photography to taxidermy and to trophies.⁶³ More importantly, it shows how the realism of the photograph, while undercutting traditional animal symbolism, inscribes different cultural values onto the animal image.

As the analysis of the two images by Llewelyn demonstrates, the production of the photographic image

of the animal occurs in a complex reciprocal relation with the broader cultural understanding of nature. Photography is not one site among many in the construction of the animal but rather a privileged site in the constitution and maintenance of the contemporary conception of the animal. Analyzing how we see animals in photography is the first stage in denaturalizing the image of the animal presented in wildlife photography. While wildlife photography's image of deep nature is seductive, it fundamentally obscures both its own production and our social relations with animals. Escaping from its logic of human-animal separation, implicated as it is in the myth of the Garden and the Fall, this analysis opens up the possibility of understanding that our relations to animals are necessarily mediated. The illusion of an unmediated encounter is fostered by a nature photography that both offers us transparent access to the animal while denying us any appropriate relation to it. As Donna Haraway has argued, accepting the necessity of mediation requires abandoning the innocence of nature and opens up the possibility of new forms of nature love.

1. *The conception of nature as a space from which humans must be excluded is influenced by the myth of the Garden of Eden. The myth positions nature as innocent and humans as guilty and fallen. Thus their entry into nature is corrupting. On the political implications of this myth see Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," in The Haraway Reader (New York: Routledge, 2004), 7-45.*

2. *For an argument against this contemporary understanding of nature, which also acknowledges its seductive appeal, see William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1995), 69-90.*

3. *John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" in About Looking (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 1-26.*

4. *Berger, 14.*

5. *Berger, 15.*

6. *The logic of animal imagery discussed by Berger parallels the logic of the spectacle articulated by Guy Debord in The Society of the Spectacle. The spectacle offers a commodified image in the place of a now inaccessible real relation. Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle (Detroit: Red and Black Books, 1977).*

7. *Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto."*

8. *Jonathan Burt. Animals in Film. (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 30.*

9. *Burt, 188.*

10. *Burt, 29.*

11. *Bill McKibben, "Curbing Nature's Paparazzi," Harper's,*

295.1770 Nov. 1997, 19-24. See also *Nature Photography: A Focus on the Issues*, ed. Peter Friederici (Jamestown, NY: Roger Tory Peterson Institute of Natural History, 1993).

12. James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1996), 33.

13. Elkins, 33.

14. Derek Bousé has suggested that such behavior stems from the inappropriate conception of animals promulgated by wildlife representations. Derek Bousé, "False Intimacy: Close-ups and Viewer Involvement in Wildlife Film," *Visual Studies*, 18.2, 2003, 123-132.

15. The epigram is by Thomas Hood.

16. On Llewelyn's family history see David Painting "J. D. Llewelyn and his Family Circle," *History of Photography*, 15.3 autumn 1991, 180-185. On Llewelyn's photography see Richard Morris John Dillwyn Llewelyn, 1810-1882: *The First Photographer in Wales* (Cardiff: Welsh Arts Council, 1980).

17. On the history of the estate see Richard Morris, *Penllergare - A Victorian Paradise* (Friends of Penllergare, 1999).

18. On the temporality of the wildlife photograph see Berger, "Why Look at Animals?"

19. Estelle Jussim and Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock, *Landscape as Photograph* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 31. Jussim and Lindquist-Cock also suggest that this reading may be the result of "some intense human desire typical of the alienated, overcrowded twentieth century," implying that, at the very least, a particular kind of historical consciousness is necessary for such a reading.

20. On deep time and its relation to visual representation see Martin J. Rudwick, *Scenes from Deep Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

21. On the inhuman quality of scientific time scales see Jean-Francois Lyotard *The Inhuman*, trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1992).

22. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

23. On the concept of deep nature and its predication on human absence see Peter van Wyck, *Primitives in the Wilderness: Deep Ecology and the Absent Human Subject* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994).

24. It should be noted that the materiality of the photograph will provide some historicity. For example, the use of sepia tone provides a dated quality to the image regardless of what it represents.

25. Charles Millard, "Images of Nature: A Photo Essay," in U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson (eds.), *Nature and the Victorian Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 14-31.

26. Millard, "Images of Nature," 25.

27. Millard, "Images of Nature," 25.

28. Live, that is, at the time of the photo, the heron being certainly dead now. On the relation between the temporality of the photograph

and death see Roland Barthes *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, R. Howard (trans.) (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

29. Edmund White, "Animals, Vegetables and Minerals: the Lure and Lore of Nature Photography," in *Photographing Nature* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1971), 13.

30. The depiction of live animals continues to be a problem for wildlife artists. See my "Robert Bateman's Natural Worlds," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 33.2 (Summer 1998): 98-128.

31. See Nicholas Hammond, *Twentieth Century Wildlife Art* (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1986), 18 and Christopher Hume, *From the Wild* (Toronto: Summerhill Press, 1986), 15.

32. Hammond, *Twentieth Century Wildlife*, 14. Audubon was simply the most programmatic example of this phenomenon. He killed his subjects, wired them to grids for accurate depiction, and then would often eat them when done Hammond, *Twentieth Century Wildlife*, 19. See also Hume, *From the Wild*, 15.

33. It is only post ecology that the live animal comes to be a marker for the health (reality) of nature. We might position Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* as the origin of a North American mass consciousness of the animal as the marker of ecological health. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002).

34. U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson, "Introduction," in U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson (eds.), *Nature and the Victorian Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), xvii-xxiii, xxi.

35. On the conceptual role played by pre-human nature in contemporary ecological thought see van Wyck, *Primitives in the Wilderness*.

36. Knoepfelmacher and Tennyson, "Introduction," xxi.

37. Knoepfelmacher and Tennyson, "Introduction," xxi.

38. Millard, "Images of Nature," 24.

39. Bill Readings discusses the manner in which Wordsworth's inscription of meaning into the landscape underwrote its capitalistic exploitation through tourism. Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 96. I discuss the implications of Readings' argument for thinking animal imagery's charging of the wild animal with symbolic meaning in Matthew Brower, "Robert Bateman's Natural Worlds," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 33.2 (Summer 1998): 66-77.

40. Millard, "Images of Nature," 24.

41. On the use of animals as elements of the picturesque see also Basil Taylor, *Animal Painting in England: From Barlow to Landseer* (Hammondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1955).

42. Millard, "Images of Nature," 25.

43. The image is reproduced in Lanyon, "Frontispiece: Deer Parking," 168.

44. The calotype is the photographic process invented by Fox Talbot in 1839.

45. Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 62.

46. Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 205-288.

47. Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1989), 77.

48. Orvell's caution in many ways parallels John Tagg's arguments on the historically constructed nature of photographic meaning. John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

49. Among Llewelyn's images is a photograph of a sporting print that may be by Landseer.
http://www.swanseaheritage.net/article/gat.asp?ARTICLE_ID=1174

50. The aim of emphasizing the deer's nobility could also be ascribed to the taxidermist. However, Llewelyn's composition of the photograph with its emphasis on the deer's head and antlers indicates his complicity in this construction.

51. The difference in function between Landseer's and Llewelyn's deer could also be because Llewelyn's deer is dead. However, what is decisive is the shift in the image's function. The deer fails as an evocation of idealized nature. Treating this failure as productive I argue that the image presents a different conception of the animal and of nature. I would further argue that it is due to the change in the conception of the animal brought on by photography that Landseer's deer now seem overly sentimental and anthropomorphized.

52. Berger, "Why Look at Animals?"

53. James R. Ryan "Hunting with the Camera: Photography, Wildlife and Colonialism in Africa," in Chris Wilbert and Chris Philo (eds.), *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places* (London: Routledge, 2000), 203-221, 214.

54. Ryan, "Hunting with a Camera," 206.

55. Kitty Hauser, "Coming Apart at the Seams: Taxidermy and Contemporary Photography," *Make: The Magazine of Women's Art* 82 (Dec. 98-Jan. 99): 8-11.

56. Hauser, "Coming apart at the Seams," 9.

57. Ryan, "Hunting with a Camera," 206-7.

58. In locating the relationship between photography and taxidermy as being between animal photography and taxidermy, Ryan backs off from Hauser's larger claims. Hauser's arguments operate on the level of photography and taxidermy's structure of representation -- that both are "non-consensual" appropriations of surfaces from the world intimately related to death. "Coming apart at the Seams".

59. John MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation and British Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

60. On the depiction of landscape as an Imperial form see W. J. T. Mitchell, "Landscape and Imperial Power," in W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 5-34.

61. Ryan, "Hunting with a Camera," 214.

62. Millard suggests that picturesque photography was localized in England and ended by the mid 1880s as the development of

photographic technology brought made the practice of photography widespread.

63. I analyze the relation between photography and hunting trophies in Matthew Brower, "Trophy Shots: Early American Non-Human animal Photography and the Display of Masculine Prowess," *Society and Animals* 13.1, (2005): 13-32.

Matthew Brower is a sessional assistant professor at York University. He has published on early animal photography and wildlife art. He is currently researching the conflicts between the use of animal imagery in activist discourse and contemporary art. He can be reached at mbrower@yorku.ca.

DOMESTICATED

Amy Stein's images serve as modern dioramas of our new natural history. Within these scenes, she explores our paradoxical relationship with the "wild" and how our conflicting impulses continue to evolve and alter the behavior of both humans and animals.

Question by Giovanni Aloï



Amy Stein
Watering Hole, from the Domesticated series ©

Amy Stein is a photographer and teacher based in New York City. Her work explores our evolving isolation from community, culture and the environment. She has been exhibited nationally and internationally and her photographs are featured in many private and public collections such as the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Museum of Contemporary Photography, the Nevada Museum of Art, SMOCA and the West Collection.

We met with Amy to discuss *Domesticated*. Of the series she has said: "My photographs serve as modern dioramas of our new natural history. Within these scenes, I explore our paradoxical relationship with the "wild" and how our conflicting impulses continue to evolve and alter the behaviour of both humans and animals. We at once seek connection with the mystery and freedom of the natural world, yet we continually strive to tame the wild around us and compulsively control the wild within our own nature. Within my work I examine the primal issues of comfort and fear, dependence and determination, submission and dominance that play out in the physical and psychological encounters between man and the natural world. Increasingly, these encounters take place within the artificial eco-tones we have constructed that act as both passage and barrier between domestic space and the wild."

The photographs in 'Domesticated' are constructed on real stories from local newspapers and oral histories of intentional and random interactions between humans and animals. The narratives are set in and around Matamoras, a small town in Northeast Pennsylvania that borders a state forest. Why this setting?

I was at a very curious stage with my photography, exploring a variety of paths from my Women and Guns series. The interest in hunting culture led me to discover the world of taxidermy. I became really interested in the people who lived with it and the people who created it and the psychology behind their pursuit. I knew I wanted to do a project that explored this world, but it had to move beyond the typical images of a deer head hanging in a living room.

Why did you want the stories to be factual rather than fictional?

Through my process of discovery I met with a lot of taxidermists and visited quite a few taxidermy schools, most of which happen to be in more rural environments. As a consequence I came in contact with a wealth of stories about these small and wonderful moments of

human and animal interaction. Most taxidermied animals are posed to recreate a false moment of life or death drama between hunter and hunted when in reality the animal was probably shot from distance as she was going about her day. I become obsessed with these real stories that in my mind were far more tense and painted a much truer picture of the connection we share with the wild.

Your images bear the unmistakable freshness typical of the snapshot combined to a glossy and more staged approach that brings to mind the artistic language of Jeff Wall. Has his photographic approach influenced yours in any way? Which other artists have informed your practice?

Jeff Wall's work is largely based on art historical references. My work is based on everyday moments in a small semi-rural town. The strange part is that the paintings referenced by Wall represent mostly banal, everyday moments and domestic scenes. In referencing them he would seem to be commenting more on the painter than the scenes depicted. I like to think I am more in the tradition of the painters who tried to capture those original moments.

Having said that, I must mention I love Jeff Wall's work. I also find inspiration in the work of Gregory Crewdson and Alec Soth.

In accordance with the stylistic balance between snapshot and staged photography achieved by your images; the animals featured in your work are real but taxidermied. Why?

Not all of the images in the *Domesticated* series use taxidermied images, but I find taxidermy adds a layer of artifice that I am interested in exploring. The space where these encounters take place is a kind of artificial boundary between the domestic and the wild. In staging these images I want the viewer to recognize the scene and react to the surface before they slowly uncover the many "unnatural" layers and elements that make up this space.

Are you interested in taxidermy in itself, or is it more of a practical tool that allows you to capture wild animals in 'easier to photograph' conditions?

Both. I am interested in the psychology behind taxidermy and use it as both tool and statement in my work.



Amy Stein
Howl, from the Domesticated series ©

Where do the animals featured in Domesticated come from?

They are all local to the area surrounding Matamoras. I think it is important that the image create a level of realism and try to stay as true to the original story as possible.

How did you choose which animals were going to be featured in the series?

The individual stories drove the narratives in the images. I would be making a completely different statement if I showed two polar bears digging through garbage cans in Pennsylvania.

What precautions did you take to make these animals look as alive as they do in your images?

Most of the credit goes to the taxidermist. There is a huge difference between great taxidermy and bad taxidermy. Dave, the taxidermist I work with, is an amazing artist in his own right.

Is taxidermy back in fashion?

I don't seem to remember a time when it was in fashion. Certainly, a rural and naturalistic aesthetic is does seem to be in fashion now. Taxidermy is a prop that helps convey that aesthetic and because of that I think you are seeing more of it these days.



Amy Stein
In Between, from the Domesticated series ©

What do you think of Damien Hirst's use of taxidermy?

I love Damien Hirst's work. I think he is a really brave artist that takes a much more direct approach to confronting the human versus wild dynamic. I think his work is more about human dominance and control than my work.

How have you technically produced the images included in Domesticated?

Everything I shoot is in front of the camera. There is no Photoshop trickery involved. I shoot with a medium format camera and mostly use available light.

Do you scout for locations?

Sometimes the scouting can be the longest part of the process. My husband and I drove block by block over many weeks looking for just the right house for "Trasheaters." The process can be very involved or it can happen right away.

In 'Backyard', we see a man aiming a shotgun at a turkey and in 'Watering Hole', a bear surprising a little girl standing on the trampoline of her swimming pool; in both images humans seem to be on the 'wrong side of the enclosure'. Is this a coincidence?

I am very much exploring a transition space between the domestic and the wild and encounters like this happen all the time. I find it interesting that humans choose to live on this border to experience that connection, but



Amy Stein
Backyard, from the Domesticated series ©

then practicality demands they build barriers to keep the wild away. In building these barriers and fences they do keep the animals out, but they also pen themselves in. I am definitely trying to show this in my work.

You have studied political science. How much does your background inform your work?

There is a political layer to everything I do because I am motivated by the issues that matter to me. What I love most is starting with a hard and fast conviction about an issue and then using photography to explore and challenge my belief system.

What are currently working on?

I still have a few more Domesticated images in me and

my Stranded project is ongoing. I plan on creating several limited run photography books based on a few ideas I have in my head. After that I am going to start on my next big project on migration.

In 2006, Amy Stein was a winner of the Saatchi Gallery/Guardian Prize for her Domesticated series. In 2007, she was named one of the top fifteen emerging photographers in the world by American Photo magazine and she won the Critical Mass Book Award. A monograph of her series Domesticated will be published in fall 2008. This forthcoming book won the best book award at the 2008 New York Photo Festival.

Amy was raised in Washington, DC, and Karachi, Pakistan. She holds a BSc in Political Science from James Madison University and a MSc in Political Science from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. In 2006, Amy received her MFA in photography from the School of Visual Arts in New York. Currently, Amy teaches photography at Parsons The New School for Design and the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

For more information please visit www.amysteinhphoto.com

Amy Stein was interviewed by Antenna in Spring 2008 ©

THE MOUNTED LIFE

Daniëlle van Ark's photographic exploration takes us to the depths of the Natural History Museum depot.

Text by



Daniëlle van Ark
Untitled (Baby Deer 01) From the Mounted Life series, photography ©



Daniëlle van Ark
Untitled (Chimp 01) From the Mounted Life series,
photography ©



Daniëlle van Ark
Untitled (Donkey 01) From the Mounted Life series,
photography ©

Daniëlle van Ark uses photography as an explorative tool. Her interest for what goes on 'behind the scene' is clearly prominent in a number of her works, including 'After the Lights Go Out' a project featuring portraits of known musicians just before they go on stage to perform. We met Daniëlle van Ark to discuss the Mounted Life, a project that takes us to the silent space of the Natural History Museum depot.

In 'Untitled-Chimp 01', a taxidermied chimp sits on a chair whilst examining its palms. What aura does your taxidermied animals acquire as captured in the Natural History Museum depot?

From a rather poetic perspective, it can refer to daily life, loneliness, angst, unhappiness etc, it is just how the viewer reflects his/her own perspective and emotions on these images. There is a rather melancholic aspect to the work as you can imagine that these mounted animals will be there till the end of days because museums won't get 'rid' of these archived items. Mounted animals don't have any value for research or science and are stored in depots for future opportunities, when they may become

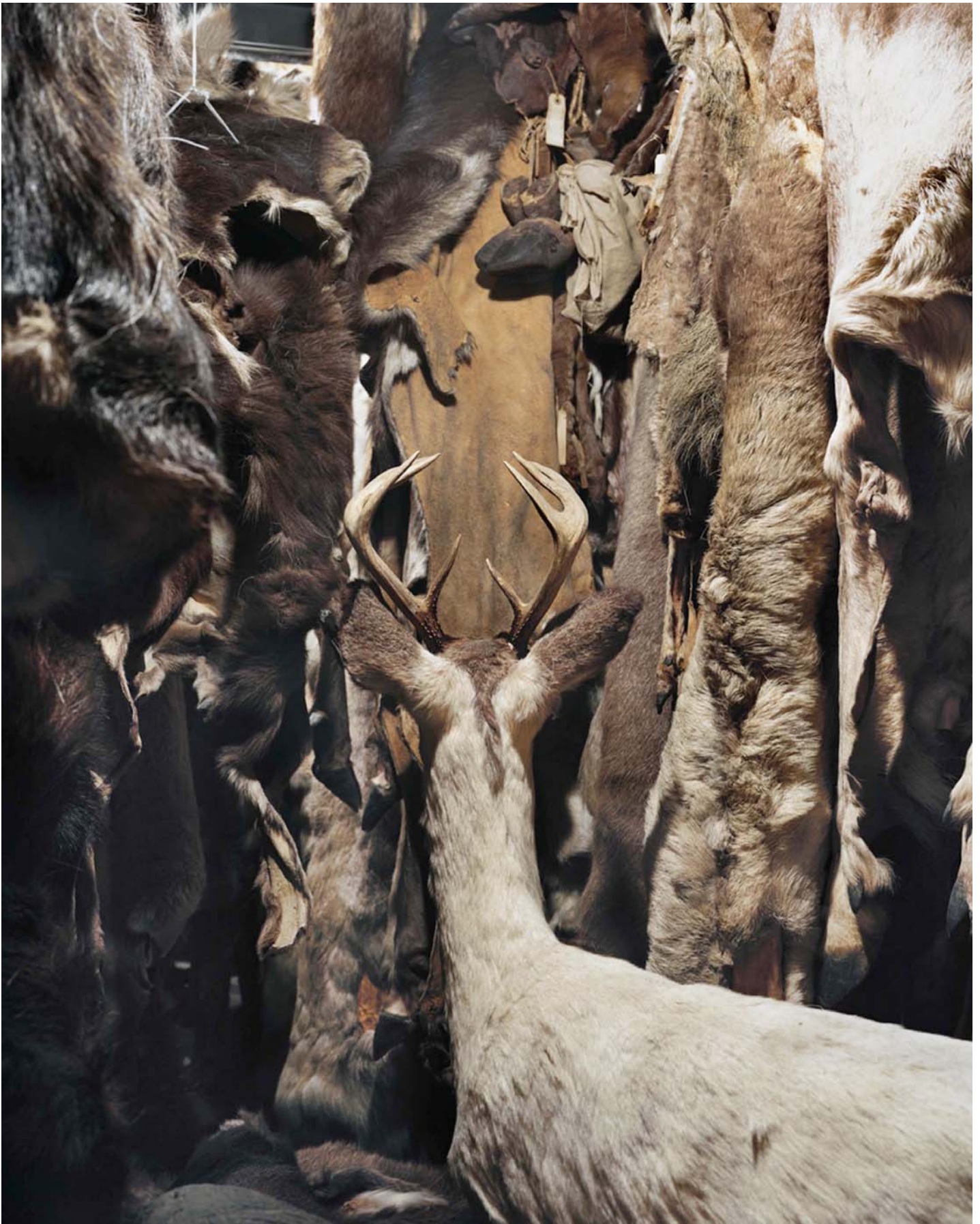
useful again. It is a little sad and at the same time it isn't, These animals share a kind of sadness typical of toys or books that are stored in a box at your parents attic for twenty years, sometimes they may become useful again, or not...

Which is your favourite image in the series?

There are many favourites. The donkey staring at the door is the image that got this series started in the way it is, so therefore I will say that one. I found him standing there in the weirdest place, he was right in the way and you could only pass him by moving your body around him. I accessed the depot through a different door so it took me until much later to notice it.

Could you talk about the technical processes involved in photographing these animals?

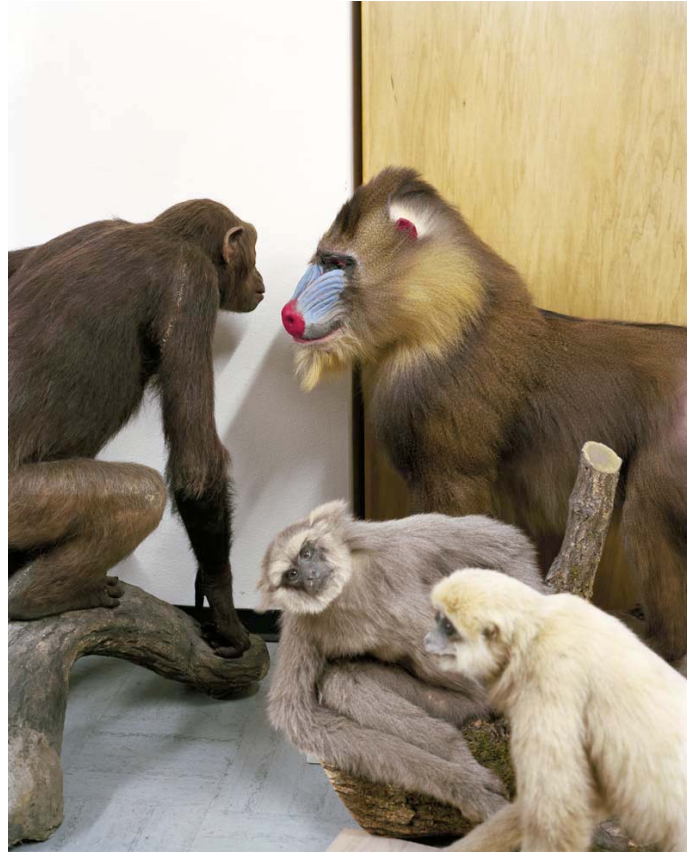
I started with a 6 x 7 medium format camera but since about since then I only take images of these animals on 4 x 5 large format cameras. It is necessary that you can see all the hairs and stitches and imperfections that make it perfect. I shoot on film and take Polaroids for light tests.



Daniëlle van Ark
Untitled (Deer and Skins 01) From the Mounted Life
series, photography ©



Daniëlle van Ark
Untitled (Crane 01) From the Mounted Life series,
photography ©



Daniëlle van Ark
Untitled (Monkeys 01) From the Mounted Life series,
photography ©

I use the lighting that is available in the storage rooms, that can be daylight or just a light-bulb. I think film is still the most beautiful way to go, the whole process of working is very different from digital too.

‘Mounted Life’ is an unusual photographic project. How did the idea come about?

I started taking pictures at a large taxidermy business where they also rent out mounted animals for stores etc. I wanted to do something with taxidermy but wasn't really certain about my approach. I had photographed in museums and galleries for other series before and now it felt like I had to do something with taxidermy in a way that it would be serene, moving and different from anything I had seen before. It had to do with something hidden, which is a constant in my work; a world you can only enter if you work there. I noticed a deer looking at a window around the case he was stored in, same kind of scenery. They were there all day and I passed it ten times before I really saw it. Fourteen Natural History Museums followed and still counting.

‘Mounted Life’ presents the viewer with a challenging paradox where animals that were

once alive have been prepared to become visual material, which is in turn re-visualised by your photographs? What is left of the live animal and what is acquired?

Not much of course if you think about it, you can go crazy over it. A dead piece of skin with hair and glass eyes that trick you, a simulacrum of the real deal. But the interesting part here is that it is a piece of nature that was really alive one time, it was an animal with real skin and instinct and feelings (unlike Madame Tussauds' wax museum where something simulacrum is going on; there you are fully aware that the whole 'person' is built out of wax and therefore there is no emotional involvement).

My photographs tell a new story to whoever is sympathetic towards animals. You know you are looking at something 'fake' but you are still capable of reflecting your emotions on these dead things, you start to feel for these animals. That is what I find so challenging in working on this series, to make something that really moves the viewer and makes us think about why these animals are there in the first place. It is just insane to think about what it was, what it is, and how it is now preserved. In an unnatural environment, surrounded by



Daniëlle van Ark
 Untitled (Rhino 01) From the Mounted Life series,
 photography, 2007 ©

animals from different continents that normally would feed on each other, they wait for someone to find a new purpose for them.

How easy was it to access the Natural History Museums depots, and where there any restrictions imposed on what you could take pictures of?

Sometimes it amazes me how much time I put in the work on beforehand. The actual photograph-taking is the least time consuming aspect of the whole process. In a museum there are so many people working and it isn't always easy to find the right person. Obtaining permission to photograph specimens can be lengthy as

museum staff are busy with other priorities. So far the only museum that I couldn't photograph is the Natural History Museum in London, and that really made me sad because I think they have a treasure that needs to be captured. (oh and also the museum in New York but I've worked my way around the 'legal' way). Once I am in, I usually can do whatever I want, and walk around all by myself. I want to keep total control over my on-field work and don't have to worry too much about what I can or can't do with the material.

The rest of your body of work does not focus on animals. Why is taxidermy at the centre of 'Mounted Life'?

I am not planning to focus on one main subject in my artistic career, there are a lot of subjects that interest me. I am a big fan of people who can work for years around the same subject like Charlotte Dumas (who photographs wild animals in captivity) but it is just not for me. In my personal work I focus a lot on the artworld and the concept of status in a broad way. I wanted to do something with animals for a long time and combined these two worlds together somehow.

In the still imagery of 'Mounted Life' the return of the gaze by the taxidermised animal plays a pivotal role in the understanding of the images. How did you handle this?

I can walk around for hours before I see something. I know what I am looking for when I walk into a depot, it can be that I won't find anything because a museum has everything so organized that the animals stand in a way that I just can't find an interesting angle or situation.

I need to find that emotion in an animal or its interaction with another animal to make this work. Otherwise it will be just a registration of a setting. It is also very important to me to not touch anything, I won't interfere in how the collection manager placed the animals away because that would make it too easy to make something staged or funny and I am not looking for that either.

Are you personally interested in taxidermy?

Oh yes! I started with having my dead hamster stuffed about eleven years ago. I think, it turned out that the taxidermist had a different way of mounting in mind than I had: the hamster became a predator instead of a cute pet, it didn't come out at all what I expected. He is standing next to the other ones in my collection that is growing steadily.

I started out photographing a taxidermist when I was in school but that was more in a reportage/documentary style. I didn't find the right angle at that time but learned how a taxidermist works. I wish I have the courage to try it out myself, but I really can't, as a strict vegetarian and also someone who can't handle the sight of flesh and blood, I am too weak to practise it. Maybe I should have the skin prepared for me, in that way I could deal with it, I think...But yes, in my collection there are a couple of mice, a groundhog, deer heads, an owl, other birds etc.

Is your work inspired by any artist or movement in the specific?

No I haven't been able to track down a specific movement that I am particularly fascinated by, I am not really inspired by artists in general. I take my inspiration

from what happens around me in the world and music, I am a punk rocker! There are a lot of artists that I admire or maybe even envy but I wouldn't take their work as an inspiration for mine.

What do you think of Damien Hirst's use of taxidermy?

I couldn't say I have a great interest of what the man is doing. I feel that he is in his own discipline of 'art'. He is a businessman that creates pieces of work that you can put in a museum or buy if you are a multi millionaire. I really don't have an opinion about his work. If you would have asked me what I think of Maurizio Cattelan's use of taxidermy, I could go on and on about that, I love that work.

What do you think of Maurizio Cattelan's use of taxidermy then?

I would said it is very smart and funny and moving. I love his work because he seems like a truthful person who makes simple works whilst incorporating a lot of humour and along with meaning. In the artworld there is a lack of humour, I think. Art people take themselves and their opinions way too seriously.

'Bidibidobidiboo' for example is a very small installation but the impact of it is huge. At first sight you'll see a funny scenery of a squirrel that shot himself in a miniature kitchen. The piece looks innocent and playful, but it goes much further than that. It's showing a tragic human deed, that of ending one's life, where shooting yourself seems the only way out of misery or problems. By projecting this on a dead piece of skin made to look like a squirrel again, he closes the circle of life and death.

What are you currently working on?

Details of museum offices, mostly Dutch modern art museums but hopefully it will expand also to other countries, everything is too organized over here. I am also planning on going to at least 5 new museums this year so if anyone has a great tip for me please let me know!

Daniëlle van Ark studied photography at the Royal College of Art in the Hague and graduated with a BFA in 2005. Since 2005 van Ark has been busy as a professional photographer, working on a number of different projects. In 2007 and 2008 van Ark received two grants from the Netherlands Foundation for the Visual arts to continue to work on her projects.

For more information please visit www.daniellevanark.com

Daniëlle van Ark was interviewed by Antennae in June 2008 ©



Maurizio Cattelan
'Bidibidobidiboo', mixed media, 1996 ©

Antennae.org.uk

Issue eight will be online on the 21st of
December
2008