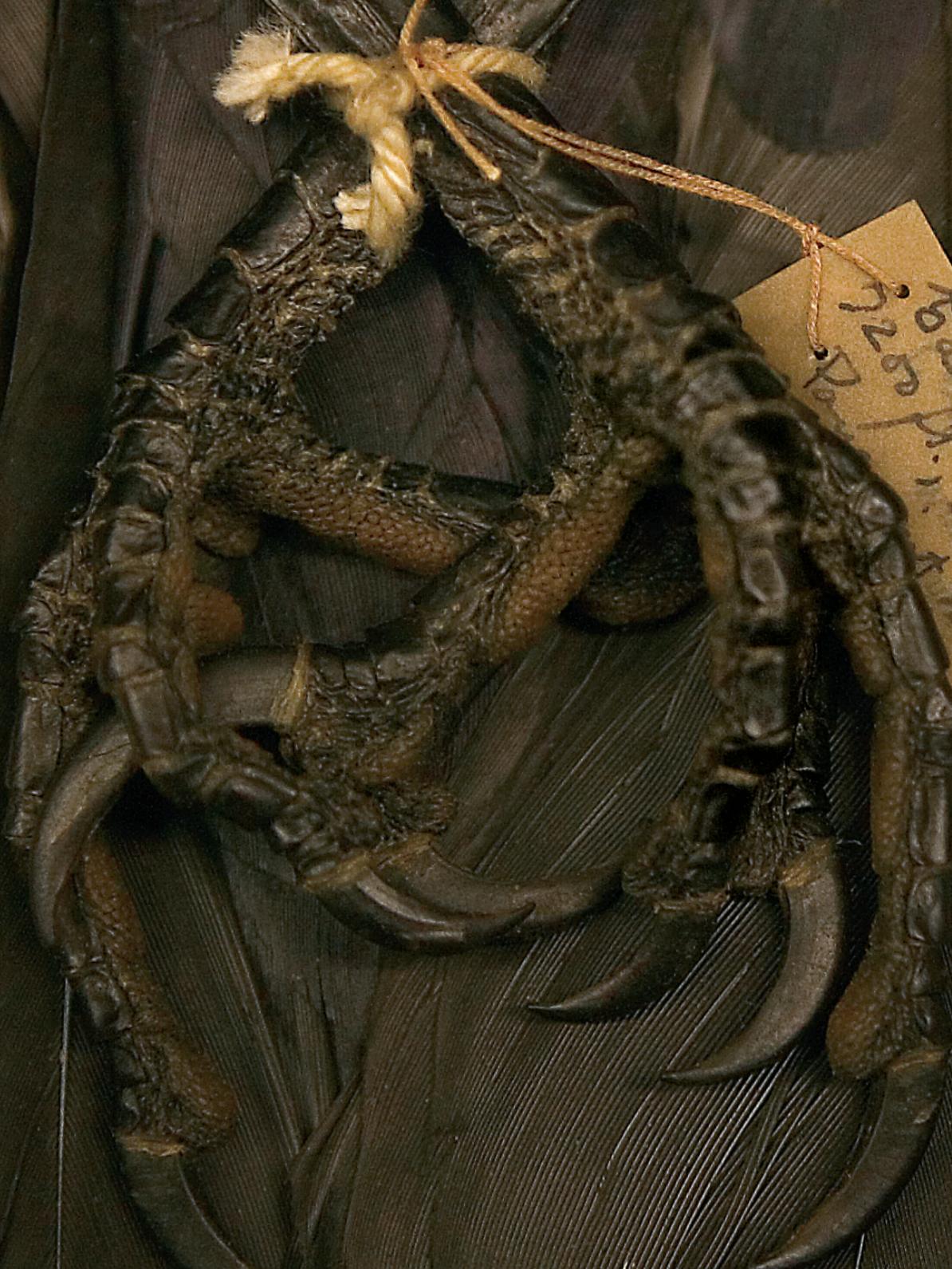


**DEAD**  
OR  
**The Curious Occurrence of  
Taxidermy in Contemporary Art**  
**ANIMALS**



DEAD ANIMALS



4553 J.E. Grimwood. Oct. 3-1917.  
Took Pt. 2 near (to) J. G. ...  
H250

W.C. Calkins  
856-59

*In memory of Tootie, who followed me anywhere,  
after she showed me the way* JAC

**Richard Barnes**

**Maurizio Cattelan**

**Kate Clark**

**Mark Dion**

**Nicholas Galanin**

**Jules Greenberg**

**Thomas Grünfeld**

**Damien Hirst**

**Karen Knorr**

**Snæbjörnsdóttir / Wilson**

**Hiroshi Sugimoto**

**Annette Messenger**

**Sarah Cusimano Miles**

**Polly Morgan**

**Richard Ross**

**Deborah Sengl**

**Angela Singer**

# DEAD OR The Curious Occurrence of Taxidermy in Contemporary Art ANIMALS

**Curated by**

**JO-ANN CONKLIN**

**With contributions by**

**STEVE BAKER**

**RACHEL POLIQUIN**

**MARK DION AND ROBERT MARBURY**

DAVID WINTON **BELL GALLERY** BROWN UNIVERSITY

## Introduction

JO-ANN CONKLIN

I trace my interest in taxidermy to a series of encounters. The first took place in the small Adirondack town of Keene Valley, New York. As children, we often visited my mother's hometown, with the rambling family home that my great uncle turned into an inn, the sugar-works, and the stuffed black bear outside Benny Roy's, the local bar and grill. Complete with a recording of growling, the bear was periodically switched on to frighten tourists and entertain the locals. Years later, on entering an artist's studio outside Paris, I walked over to pet a kitty, cute and curved up in a chair, his head raised in greeting — only to realize that he did not move, and could not, having been cleverly posed by a taxidermist. My interest intensified when I viewed *I'm Dead (Cat)*, David Shrigley's audacious sculpture at the Fifty-fifth Carnegie International in 2008 (FIG. 1). A taxidermied kitten stands upright on its hind legs and holds a sign (as if in protest) saying "I'm Dead." The work engendered a short-circuited mental flip-flopping of readings between I'm cute / I'm dead / I'm cute / I'm dead. Darkly humorous and at the same time deeply thought provoking, the work has remained with me, in memory and in a framed installation photo that has hung in my home ever since.

But it was a visit to North Country Taxidermy and Trading Post, in Keene, New York, that perplexed me, cemented my interest, raised my curiosity, and put me in an adrenaline- and endorphin-fueled high. Surrounded by animals, I was energized by their physical presence and my ability to approach them, look closely at them, touch them. This sense of excitement was oddly disconnected from the knowledge of their deaths, which coexisted with it and broke through only when I encountered a scene of fox cubs playing and, later, a wolf that closely resembled a favorite pet husky. In other words, for me there was a tipping point where the animals moved from generic to specific, from examples of their species to cute kittens and cubs, and to a beloved family pet.

I was intrigued by these enigmatic creatures that are animals and objects (sculpture, cultural artifacts) at the same time; I was intrigued by my own reaction. And I was intrigued by the marked rise in the popularity of taxidermy in Western cultures. *Dead Animals, or the curious occurrence of taxidermy in contemporary art* explores these phenomena and related questions: Why have artists incorporated taxidermy into their artwork? What factors, social or



FIGURE 1

David Shrigley  
*I'm Dead (Cat)*, 2007

Photo courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery  
© the artist

otherwise, have contributed to artists' interests in the "idea of the animal"? What happens when taxidermy moves from natural history museums and trophy rooms into the white cube of the art gallery? And, most important, to what purposes have artists put these evocative and special objects? *Dead Animals* approaches these issues through the works of eighteen artists, some of whom are internationally recognized for creativity in a variety of media, others of whom have become known specifically because of their work with taxidermy.

Exhibitions are created through the collaborative efforts of many individuals. My thanks first to the artists for their innovative and thoughtful works, and to the lenders who agreed to share them with the public. I would like to thank the authors who have studied this topic before me, particularly Rachel Poliquin, whose beautifully written cultural history *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing* was my introduction to the subject. We are most fortunate to include contributions to the catalogue by Poliquin, Steve Baker, and Mark Dion and Robert Marbury. Poliquin's ability to characterize the elusive qualities of taxidermy is unparalleled, as her essay "Taxidermy and the Poetics of Strangeness" attests. In "Beyond Botched Taxidermy," Baker assesses the term "botched taxidermy"—which he coined in 2000—in light of changing attitudes about animal art that have occurred during the ensuing fifteen years. And following on Dion's seminal text, "Some Notes Toward a Manifesto for Artists Working with or about the Living World," also published in 2000, Dion and Robert Marbury posit guidelines for taxidermy art in "Some Notes Toward a Manifesto for Artists Working With or About Taxidermy Animals."

At Brown, the encouragement of Deputy Provost Joseph Meisel was very meaningful, especially during the early stages of the project. My thanks to my curatorial colleagues, including Sandy Heller and Chloé Geary of The Heller Group; Hollye Keister, Rebecca Andrews, and Robin Wright at the Burke Museum, University of Washington; Brian Balfour-Oatts at Archeus/Post-Modern, London; Leslie Nolen and Carole Billy of Marian Goodman Gallery; Kathleen Sichelschmidt at Galerie Deschler, Berlin; Nera Lerner at Danzinger Gallery; JoAnne Northrup and Brian Eyler of the Nevada Museum of Art; Dana Salvo and Joshua Jade of Clark Gallery, Lincoln, MA; and, last but certainly not least, Peter MacGill and Lauren Panzo, of Pace/MacGill Gallery. Special thanks to Eleanor Crabtree of Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, for her dogged (but ultimately unsuccessful) efforts to help secure a David Shrigley work for the exhibition. Brian Waldron of Masterpiece International

accepted my daily calls with good cheer as we awaited the onerous import and export licenses and permits.

As always, the Bell Gallery staff—Terry Abbott, Ian Budish, Naushon Hale, Alexis Lowry and Ian Alden Russell—contributed in innumerable ways and with good humor and aplomb—even when asked to install dead animals. My thanks to Pat Appleton and Cara Buzzell of Malcolm Gear Designers for their attention to detail and their consistently thoughtful and handsome design. Finally, thank you to the readers I respect most. First to my long-time friend Gail Zlatnik, who edited the catalogue; it was great to work together again. And to Dian Kriz, who was my sounding board for two years as I planned, worried, and occasionally ranted: thanks for the friendship and good council.



Angela Singer *Still*, from the *Dead Eyed* series, 2015



Kate Clark *Licking the Plate*, 2014

## Dead Animals

JO-ANN CONKLIN

In June 2000, a *New York Times* article brought attention to the increasing presence of animals (alive and dead) in contemporary art.<sup>1</sup> The headline declared, “Animals Have Taken Over Art and Art Wonders Why.” Cultural critic Sarah Boxer presented a concise selection of artworks and quoted distinguished scholars including Robert Storr and Steve Baker. However, she did little to answer the “why” of the headline and, in fact, concluded by stating, “Even in a museum, sometimes an animal is just an animal.”

To the contrary, the presence of animals represents a significant moment in contemporary art practice, and the contributing factors are quite recognizable.<sup>2</sup> The increased presence of animals in art parallels the rise of a distinct multi- and interdisciplinary field of animal studies in the 1980s and 1990s. Artists have manifested social concerns with global warming (Mark Dion), species protection and conservation (Rachel Berwick), animal rights (Sue Coe), and genetic modification and cloning (Eduardo Kac). Perhaps most significantly, inquiries into animal rights and animal studies have paralleled a reevaluation of the human-animal dichotomy — the question of the existence and placement of a dividing line between human and nonhuman animals — and the stirrings of a movement away from anthropocentrism.

In the realm of fine art, the exhibition in 1991 of Damien Hirst’s tiger shark in formaldehyde, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, stands as the defining moment of public awareness of the aesthetic power of an animal in death. While not technically taxidermy, Hirst’s shark shares a commonality with taxidermy by representing the body of a once-living animal as art. It is true, of course, that taxidermy in art predates Hirst. For example, it is famously found in Rauschenberg’s *Combines* from the late 1950s, those collages of canvas, paint, and animal, which Robert Hughes interpreted as nature caught in culture’s web.<sup>3</sup> Taxidermy appears in surrealist and modernist works by Joan Miró and Joseph Cornell, and in Joseph Beuys’ *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 1965. (Live animals

have also made occasional and memorable appearances: in Beuys' infamous *I Like America and America Likes Me*, 1974; Jannis Kounellis's exhibition of horses, 1969; Carolee Schneemann's *Infinity Kiss*, 1991; and Rosemary Trockel and Carsten Holler's *A House for Pigs and People*, 1997.)

Although Rauschenberg and Hirst are frequently cited as the originators of the use of animals in modern and contemporary art, the contribution of the French artist Annette Messenger has largely been overlooked. In 1971–72, a decade after Rauschenberg and two decades prior to Hirst, Messenger created *Les pensionnaires* (The boarders) (FIG. 2). She clothed dozens of taxidermied sparrows in tiny knitted garments of her own making, then carefully laid them



FIGURE 2  
Annette Messenger  
*Le repos des pensionnaires*  
(The boarders' rest), 1971–72  
Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery  
© Annette Messenger/ARS

out in vitrines, recalling displays in natural history museums. Presented as if they are sleeping, cozy in their woolen wear, the little birds existed in the liminal space between scientific specimen and treasured pet. For Messenger, they were her wards, her children; she cared for them and clothed them and created small machines that they could ride. While Messenger herself eschewed associations with feminism, she nonetheless reclaimed and embraced the feminine arts, and created a darkly sweet and delightful artwork. Messenger's use of birds was a significant step toward a new way of addressing animals in art: unlike Rauschenberg, who used taxidermy as found objects and a support for paint application, Messenger embraced the animals as beings, incorporating their life (and death) into the meaning of the work. Possibly because this work no longer exists, or possibly because of its feminist roots, *The Boarders* and other taxidermied pieces by Messenger are not considered by most scholars in this field. Only Petra Lange-Berndt discusses Messenger, and as a possible

corrective places an image of *The Boarders* on the cover of her book *Animal Art: Präparierte Tiere in der Kunst 1850–2000*.

The contemporary interest in taxidermy in art is manifested not only in exhibitions but also in commerce (advertising, clothing) and the virtual spaces of the internet. A search for “taxidermy” and “art” yields an astonishing number of blogs and image-collection sites that are devoted to the topic.<sup>4</sup> The public and academic interest coincides, ironically, with the decline of the practice of taxidermy in natural history museums. Photography, film, and video documentaries present a detailed view of animal life without the associations of hunting and colonialism that are present in taxidermy, and thus have replaced many museum dioramas as primary educational tools for the general public. The association of nineteenth-century collections with the spoils of colonialism has caused museums to move animal specimens from display to storage, to amend their displays with statements of apology, or in the most radical case — at the Saffron Walden Museum in Essex, England, circa 1960 — to destroy their collections.<sup>5</sup>

Fifteen years after the *New York Times* article, the increasing number of artists working with taxidermy and their varied interests puts a survey of taxidermy in contemporary art beyond the scope of this exhibition. Instead, the exhibition is organized around four prevalent themes that draw particular strength from taxidermy — in which the fact that the animal is *real* and *dead* imparts meaning. The themes are death (both human and animal); hybrids — both animal-and-animal and animal-and-human; animal-human relations (humanity's treatment of and effect upon nonhuman animals); and, within photographic artworks, taxidermy's display in natural history museums. It should be noted that these themes are not mutually exclusive.

\* \* \*

Maurizio Cattelan's *Untitled [dogs and chick]* (p. 64) stands as the symbolic beginning of the exhibition. A simple work by the practiced trickster, it consists of two golden Labrador retrievers, one sitting, one lying down, placed next to a chick so small that it is at first not noticed. A master of the use of taxidermy in art, Cattelan has created squirrel suicides, mythological animal pyramids, and horses that hang from their necks high on a wall, their heads seemingly embedded in the wall. Why would such an inventive artist present a work like *Untitled [dogs and chick]* that could as easily be found in a taxidermy shop? A Duchampian gesture, this work indicates Cattelan's awareness of the power of taxidermy to draw out and play with our emotions.



FIGURE 3  
Polly Morgan  
*Still Life after Death*, 2006

(In a similar vein, he has presented sleeping dogs, curled up and placed outdoors or on fireplace hearths.)

The use of taxidermied domestic animals, those we are most familiar with, differs from that of non-domestic animals — the wild creatures we long to know. We know and love the specific breed, we may approach its representatives, as here, with great affection, followed by sadness for their death. While a viewer *might* fear for Cattelan's chick, one who is familiar with Labs knows them as gentle animals. We are more likely to read their actions as protective, as an example of the cross-species "friendships" often highlighted in popular media (the elephant and dog, Koko and the kitten).

### Death in the Gallery

We cannot ignore the fact that all taxidermied animals are dead. The goal of the traditional taxidermist is to obfuscate this fact, to fool the eye and mind, and to replicate an encounter with a "living, breathing" animal. However, the practice falls short. For the animal is stopped in a moment in time, in an unnatural stillness that belies the goal of taxidermy. This pall of death instills poignancy, an underlying sadness, to even the liveliest depictions of animal life. Recognizing this, some contemporary artists acknowledge the death of the animal as the subject, focusing on empathy (Polly Morgan, Jules Greenberg), activism (Angela Singer, Nicholas Galanin), and dark humor or shock value (Cattelan, Hirst).

*Still Life After Death*, 2006, (FIG. 3) is Polly Morgan's poignant embodiment of death. Installed at Sudeley Castle in Gloucestershire in 2006, the work presented three small birds lying lifeless on a shelf. The seemingly limp head of one bird flops backwards over the edge of the shelf, in an attitude that announces death. The others lie face down, or with wings askew. Morgan followed this work with Victorian reliquaries of dead birds lying on books, in vintage bell jars

with tiny working chandeliers. Explaining her interest, Morgan has said, "I didn't understand why everything [taxidermied] looked alive. . . . I love the way the creatures look when they come to me. . . . As a child, I always wanted to keep the bodies of any animals I had that died; I see my work now as an opportunity to freeze that moment."<sup>6</sup>

In *Gannet* (inside back cover) and *Cormorant*, included in this exhibition, Morgan has adopted a modernist aesthetic. Gone are the nostalgic Victorian references. Morgan's lovely drawings of bird nests are created in ash from bird cremations. The subject of her work — the birds, still dead — fall limply over the top of the frame. Allowing an examination of the beauty of birds at their most vulnerable, Morgan's works invite empathy and grief.

In *Fallen* (pp. 14, 15), Jules Greenberg's photographic series, the death of the animal is signaled not by limp bodies but rather by their lack of eyes. Greenberg photographed bird specimens in a natural history museum, their eye sockets filled with cotton balls. Set against dark backgrounds and poetically posed, the images are strikingly eerie and haunting. She likens them to "corpse meditation," like that practiced by Buddhist monks who sometimes sit with dead bodies, or stare at images of them, for days, pondering the fleetingness of life and the inevitability of death." She expands their meaning as a "lament . . . for these bird specimens which have been bound, categorized, and 'preserved,' stored in the darkness of closed drawers" and for the innumerable "casualties of war that go unseen or unacknowledged."<sup>7</sup>

*Away from the Flock*, 1994 (p. 42), is from Damien Hirst's *Natural History* series, which began with *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, in 1991.<sup>8</sup> Each work in the series presents the viewer with an animal preserved via the wet-specimen preparation of submersion in formaldehyde. Some animals, such as the lamb in *Away from the Flock*, are presented intact; others are bisected horizontally or vertically to expose the inner body. Hirst's use of wet-specimen preparation in combination with the clean white steel and glass cases imparts a sterile look that is strongly associative of animal specimens in science labs. I would argue that Hirst's works are more shocking than many others in the exhibition precisely because of this association with science. While Polly Morgan's dead birds are sad, the manner of their death is ambiguous. Taxidermy retains a quality of naturalism, even in presentations of death, that is stripped away in Hirst's modernist, scientific displays. His gaze is cold and analytical, seemingly lacking emotion or empathy. The animals are displayed as dead (lambs do not live in liquid), and they died at the hands of humans.



Further, unlike taxidermy, in which the outer appearance of the animal is preserved by working only with the skin, wet-specimen preparation treats the entire animal, slowing but not stopping the deterioration of organic material. Denying any interest in preserving the animals, Hirst has explained his use of formaldehyde as conceptual, used to “communicate an idea”—the idea of death. Driving the point home, in his usual bombastic manner, he states, “It’s not a preserved lamb. It’s a fucking dead lamb,” and then adds, “but it has a kind of new life. It looks kind of sprightly and gamboling. . . . There’s a tragedy to it.”<sup>9</sup>

### Hybridity

Taxidermy strives for vivacity and realism through the manipulation of dead subjects. However, the medium can as easily be turned toward other ends. Thomas Grünfeld, Deborah Sengl, and Kate Clark exploit this ability and create stunning, humorous, and thought-provoking animal hybrids. Such hybrids have a long history in religion, myth, literature, and art. They may remind us of eighteenth-century natural history, in which strange and unfamiliar animals were described using references to well-known creatures,<sup>10</sup> or call up contemporary concerns about cloning and genetic engineering. They are, further, the most literal incarnation of what Steve Baker has called “botched taxidermy.” Writing in *The Postmodern Animal*, Baker defines his subject as characterized by “wrongness . . . where things . . . appear to *have gone wrong* with the animal, as it were, but where it still *holds together*.”<sup>11</sup> Baker applied this designation to a wide variety of two- and three-dimensional works, only some of which employ taxidermy. (Baker takes a second look at the term in his essay in this catalogue.)

What would happen if you bred a cow and an ostrich? A flamingo and a boxer? Or a penguin and a peacock (p. 63)? Thomas Grünfeld’s *Misfits*, 1996–2006, offers a possible answer. Grünfeld designs the hybrids and works with a taxidermist who constructs the works. They are masterfully crafted and seamlessly joined, the head of one species artfully transitioning into the body of another, and sometimes into the legs and feet of a third. Discussing his method, he stresses the importance of scale (where the animals join together), the use of feathers and fur to cover seams, and of color to accentuate or camouflage the combinations—all to create an animal that “looks plausible in its incongruous strangeness.”<sup>12</sup> Denying associations with the monstrous, Grünfeld draws inspiration from German folklore, such as the mythical *wolpertinger* who is said to inhabit the Bavarian forest. (Comprised of various animal parts, *wolpertingers* are most commonly portrayed as horned and winged rabbits. Stuffed *wolpertingers* are often displayed in inns and beer halls or sold to tourists as souvenirs.)



FIGURE 4  
Joan Fontcuberta  
*Cercophitecus Icarocornu*, 1985  
from the *Fauna* series

Grünfeld nods to the influence of genetic engineering in his work, but does not see the work as commentary on the dangers of the practice, referring instead to his hybrids as possible alternative species.<sup>13</sup> In this way, his *Misfits*

recall Joan Fontcuberta’s 1987 photographic series *Fauna*, which “documented” the long-lost archive of a German zoologist, Dr. Peter Ameisenhaufen, and the otherwise unknown specimens he recorded, such as the *Cercophitecus Icarocornu* (FIG. 4).

Like Grünfeld, Deborah Sengl invents new animal species, but with a particular interest in animal predation and the camouflage and mimicry of natural selection. Many of her sculptures involve the hunt and favor the aggressor. Her series of works has taken two forms. The first demonstrates a playful, childlike attempt at camouflage, as evidenced in *Der Fuchs — als Räuber — ertarnt sich seine begehrte Beute* (The fox — as predator — disguises himself as the prey he covets), 2004 (p. 66). In the style of cartoons or fables, a fox attempts to hide himself by donning a sheep’s mask and a duck’s bill, covering his back with a duck. The effect is charming. Other works are vastly

more sinister. These highly naturalistic animals, such as *Die Löwin — als Räuber — ertarnt sich ihre begehrte Beute* (The lioness — as predator — disguises herself as the prey she covets) (FIG. 5), have an uncanny ability to



FIGURE 5  
Deborah Sengl  
*Die Löwin — als Räuber — ertarnt sich ihre begehrte Beute*, (The lioness — as predator — disguises herself as the prey she covets), 2003  
Photo Mischa Nawrata



Kate Clark  
*Licking the Plate* (detail), 2014

confuse, as viewers (or intended prey) attempt to decipher the animal before them — a lion disguised in zebra skin, a wolf in “sheep’s clothing.” We easily recognize the outer skin and struggle to identify the animal beneath. The teeth are often the telling characteristic. Commingling predator and prey, Sengl produces a series of eerie hybrids that speak to both human and nonhuman animal aggression.

Moving beyond animal-to-animal hybrids, Kate Clark’s unsettling sculpture emphasizes the commonality of human and nonhuman animals: her majestic animal sculptures have human faces. The faces are individualized portraits of models, family, and friends, covered with animal skins that have been shaved to more closely emulate human skin, and held in place by rows of small pins (pp. 8, 18). Clark’s human subjects are attractive or, alternately, distinctive looking, and the sculptures retain the characteristic markings and coloration of the animal’s face. This overcomes any reading of the monstrous that might be inferred by her process, particularly the use of pins (think *Frankenstein*). None of the animals bare their teeth, all are presented as dignified and calm, inquisitive and intelligent. The effect is uncanny (we recognize ourselves in the other), intended by Clark as a reminder of our shared physiology and history. “My work uses taxidermy as a stepping-stone to start a conversation, but instead of presenting the ‘hierarchy’ of man over animal, as traditional taxidermy does, the viewer sees a balance between man and animal, causing a primal reaction, and forcing the viewer to reconsider our relationship.”<sup>14</sup> In this, Clark’s intentions coincide with the artists discussed in the following section.

### Art and the Animal Question

The most fertile theme in taxidermy art is perhaps the animal-human relationship. In a broad sense, all works in this exhibition draw meaning from our relationships with nonhuman animals. The artists represented in this section of the exhibition take that relationship as their specific subject, and in most cases the animals do not fare well. With the goal of awakening their audience, and, usually, of initiating social change, they draw our attention to environmental decline and species loss (Dion and Snæbjörnsdóttir / Wilson), cultural practices and companion animals (Snæbjörnsdóttir / Wilson and Messenger), and trophy hunting and the fur industry (Singer, Sengl).

It can be said that the act of creating these artworks extends the human-nonhuman animal relationship after death, and this is perhaps a good place to mention how these artists come by the animals they use. With the notable

exception of Hirst, none of the artists kill animals for their artworks. Some buy from taxidermy shops and online sources. Angela Singer uses only what she calls “recycled vintage” taxidermy — discards, often quite tattered, from taxidermy shops and natural history museums. Polly Morgan’s animals are contributed by veterinarians or pet owners, or have died a natural or accidental death. She maintains a detailed log of all the dead animals she stores in freezers at her studio. Road kill provides material for many artists. And, when the subject is an endangered species, artists like Mark Dion get creative — he used sheepskin to cover his lively representations of polar bears.

Annette Messenger’s contribution to the exhibition *La colonne du petit chien* (The column of the little dog), 2000–12 (p. 21), is the one light note in this otherwise solemn section of the exhibition. It continues the caregiving theme of *The Boarders*, but with a contemporary commentary. (Lest readers think that all of Messenger’s taxidermy works are maternal, I should mention others, such as *The Nameless Ones* from 1993 in which small hybrid creatures — taxidermied animal bodies with stuffed toy heads, and vice versa — are skewed on pikes, long poles historically used to display the guillotined heads of aristocrats during the French Revolution.) In *La colonne*, the “little dog” in question sits upon a column of bundled fabric, which in turn the body of his master — his head and arms splayed at the base. The dog wears a stocking mask over his eyes. Is he a small bandit (stealing our time and affection)? Or is this the sleep mask of a pampered pet? The work reads as a humorous send-up of the overwrought devotion we lavish on our companion animals. Mark Dion, Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, and Angela Singer would like to see us extend that feeling of connection to other animals, beyond those that live with us.

A thoughtful intellectual with a well-wrought respect for humor and play, Mark Dion examines human interactions with nature through “art, philosophy, natural science and popular sentiment.” He defined the “central theme of [his] practice as an attempt to understand the social category of nature today.” “My work has never been ‘about nature,’ but rather has been concerned with ideas about nature.”<sup>15</sup> *Concrete Jungle (Mammalia)*, 1992 (p. 22), is one of a series of works that examine nature, not in forests and the wilderness but in urban settings. During the early 1990s, Dion worked in collaboration with Alexis Rockman, producing joint and individual works titled *Concrete Jungle*. Together they published a highly eclectic book of essays by noted scientists, writers, and artists — part textbook designed in



Annette Messenger *La colonne du petit chien* (The column of the little dog), 2000–12





the style of the 1960s, part art project — by the same title.<sup>16</sup> Positing three categories of animals — destructive/pests, useful/domestic, and useless/wild — they focused on non-domestic animals in urban settings: rats, feral cats, feral dogs, raccoons, and their food source, trash. This symbiotic relationship, whereby non-domestic animals survive off of human-generated waste, is the subject of *Concrete Jungle (Mammalia)*. Dion has described this period in his work as “idealistic. We felt certain that ecological calamity could be avoided by access to knowledge . . . that somehow the information [was] just not getting out. Now I am convinced that knowledge is not the issue and that there is a profound lack of will. I grossly miscalculated the power of ideology, desire, coercion, superstition, and pure greed.”<sup>17</sup>

The collaborative artists Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson share Dion’s concern. Recognizing that their research-based work appeals to the small portion of the public who are interested in art that challenges and critiques culture, they ask, “How can art effectively — or in any way — tax the consciousness of an environmentally aloof and unconcerned majority?”<sup>18</sup> Working together since the late 1990s, Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson have created works that draw attention to the dangers and consequences of anthropocentrism. Viewed by many environmentalists as a systematic bias in Western attitudes against the nonhuman world, anthropocentrism posits humans as the central or most significant species on the planet.

In 2001, Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson set out to photograph every taxidermied polar bear in the British Isles.<sup>19</sup> They identified thirty-four bears and photographed the animals where they found them — in museums and zoos, and in stately homes and private residences. One stands in a residential hallway holding a basket of plastic flowers, and another is hidden in a loft with a bicycle and other toys piled against it (contrary to its appearance, this is a museum display). Certainly the saddest bear (and the oldest and most poorly wrought) stands next to a staircase in Blair Atoll, his face distorted nearly beyond recognition (p. 24). The artists researched the personal history of each animal — the provenance (in museum terminology), or their second lives, after being taken dead or alive from their homeland. Some were shot by famous adventurers, some stuffed by well-known taxidermists. We learn, for instance, that the taxidermied bears in Sheffield and Edinburgh were sisters caught in Canada as cubs and brought to Britain by Captain Koran of the SS Eclipse. They lived together in the Edinburgh Zoo until they died, just months apart. The Edinburgh bear was mistakenly called Jim. The Sheffield bear was Queenie at the zoo; at the City Museum she was renamed



Janie, and most recently Snowy. The accumulation of facts changes our impression significantly. The bears are no longer iconic representations of a ferocious and dangerous species. They are, instead, individual animals. Cleverly entitled *nanog: flat out and bluesome*, the series functions on many levels: as a record of the animals' second lives; as a chronicle of colonial collecting and the history of taxidermy in the UK; as a document of changing attitudes about human superiority; and as a moving reminder of the environmental perils that polar bears face today.

*Inert*, 2009 (p. 56), is a powerfully poignant and disturbing work. Created by Nicholas Galanin, the piece presents a wolf who struggles to move forward: his head and shoulders are taxidermied with an outstretched paw, while his hindquarters lie flat and faced with felt like a wolf-skin rug. Created for a traveling exhibition focusing on environmental decline in the Alaskan polar landscape, *Inert* is open to myriad interpretations, a characteristic shared with many contemporary artworks using taxidermy. As Helen Gregory and Anthony Purdy explain:

Because they are using material that has so much embedded meaning, when artists work with the skins of animals, they produce sculpture that is profoundly polysemous. In addition to any meaning intended by the artists, there are added layers of interpretability that are a consequence of the recycling of real animal skins, which can never be entirely separated from their historical, material, and scientific origins.<sup>20</sup>

*Inert* is emblematic of “struggle,” whether personal, cultural, or political. It is equally representative of our (human and nonhuman) struggle against death and the wolves' specific struggle against ranchers, who hunted them as pests and almost to extinction. For the artist, who is of Tlingit and Unangan descent, “It’s about our inability to culturally progress if we’re contained in a box of somebody’s idea of what our culture is.”<sup>21</sup>

I find *Inert* particularly difficult to look at, due to my fondness for huskies. The artist and animal activist Angela Singer would like us to extend that reaction, that feeling of oneness, to all animals — domestic or wild, pet or pest. “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. . . . I was and am very moved by the injustice of speciesism.”<sup>22</sup> Singer’s early works challenge the culture of hunting and trophy mounts, and challenge the viewer to look at them. Working with discarded trophy mounts, through a process she calls “de-taxidermy,” she undoes the taxidermist’s work to reveal bullet wounds and scars, and makes “visible the evidence of aggression we inflict on animals.”<sup>23</sup>

These early works are grisly and purposely grotesque. If *Inert* is difficult to look at, *Sore* (2002–03) — her image of a mounted and skinned, “blood”-covered deer head — is near to impossible.<sup>24</sup> Singer’s approach has softened in the ensuing years. Recent works incorporate jewels and flowery accouterments that impart a kitschy quality to the work, as can be seen in *Still* (p. 7). The disproportionately large and opaque eyes of the deer tell the story of *Still*. Their darkening is based on the effect of post-mortem clouding, and their size indicates the embryonic age of the animal — stillborn at the hands of a hunter. Singer decorates the deer in ceramic and crystal flowers, making the work more appealing, but no less challenging.

*Spurts*, 2015 (p. 52), is part of a series that depicts decapitated deer with pink or green “blood” spurting from their necks. The mount she has chosen is awkward, caught in an odd twisting position as the deer rises from a prone position, her/his hindquarters on the ground, front legs planted firmly, and shoulders in the air. In earlier versions, Singer’s sculptural additions — the spurts — were cartoonish forms that looked vaguely like antlers or splashes of liquid frozen in space. Here they seem to take on a life of their own. Growing larger and sprouting outgrowths, they have become more intricate and abstract. They read simultaneously as intriguing sculptural forms and as monstrous body parts — an explosion of innards, perhaps. A small slash on the deer’s leg is also filled with pink “blood” (wax). Marking a scar, or possibly a tear in the antique taxidermy, Singer reminds us of the large and small abuses the animal has sustained.

### Photography and the Natural History Museum

Annette Messenger provides what could well be an epigraph for this section of the exhibition: “I can see today that the same sort of issues lie behind taxidermy and photography. Taxidermy consists in preserving a bird in full flight. . . . In the same way, photography halts and freezes motion and life.”<sup>25</sup> The connection between taxidermy and photography is dealt with at length in Michelle Henning’s article “Skins of the Real: Taxidermy and Photography.” “Taxidermy . . . is all about surface appearance and is made of the skin of the thing itself. Likewise, photography is concerned with surface appearance, and takes only the skin, the outward appearance, of the real.”<sup>26</sup> They are both, in semiotic terms, indexical, referring back to the thing they represent.

As described by Henning, “realist taxidermy” — the kind undertaken by Carl Akeley in which animal corpses were carefully measured and photographed, and sculptures made to these specifications were cast to form the

basis of a taxidermy piece — grew up with photography in the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup> More recently, photography, video, and film have usurped taxidermy as didactic tools in natural history museums. This final section of this essay touches on the work of five photographers — Hiroshi Sugimoto, Richard Ross, Richard Barnes, Jules Greenberg, and Sarah Cusimano Miles — who have explored natural history museums and their animal specimens as subject matter for their art. In the exhibition, their works are displayed together, in our front gallery, and provide a view of taxidermy before its literal and figurative move into the white space of the art gallery.

Arriving in New York in the early 1970s, Hiroshi Sugimoto visited the American Museum of Natural History and began a series of photographs that would draw the attention of the art world and establish his reputation as an innovative artist within the field of photography. Focusing on the dioramas at the museum (while eliminating their context and shooting in black and white), Sugimoto transformed the collaged scenes of painted backdrops and stuffed animals into seamless two-dimensional images that look as real as if they had been shot in the Kalahari Desert or the Arctic (p. 31).

His photographs questioned photography's truth-claim. As he has said, "However fake the subject, once photographed, it's as good as real."<sup>28</sup> The aesthetic potential of photographing a constructed reality spawned a reconsideration of the medium and a movement of fabricated photographs that continues to this day in the works of James Casebere, Jeff Wall, Thomas Demand, Andreas Gursky, and others.

Whereas Sugimoto obscures the reality of the natural history museum — presenting images of constructed reality as truth — Richard Ross and Richard Barnes explore and expose the truth of the constructions. Working in the 1980s, Ross photographed displays in natural history and art museums, producing a series of images under the title *Museology*. "Essentially my work is about context. I want to look at the surroundings as well as the piece presented."<sup>29</sup> His photographs of the dioramas at the same natural history museum in New York differ slightly but tellingly from Sugimoto's. Small bits of architecture intrude at the edges of the photographs. And his use of color, instead of Sugimoto's black and white, holds his images to an additional level of veracity. Looking at these today, we clearly recognized them for what they are, but in 1989, as Marcia Tucker explains, "People weren't at all clear . . . they *looked* real but had a kind of funky edge to them; something was wrong, but it was hard to know exactly what it was."<sup>30</sup>



Hiroshi Sugimoto *Gemsbok*, from the *Diorama* series, 1982

Other works in the series contrast the clean, precise display methods of American museums, such as the Field Museum in Chicago, with the menagerie of animal displays in European museums, particularly the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris. A particularly poignant image depicts a display of two lions fighting (p. 41). Various animals and a dinosaur skeleton provide a backdrop, but our focus is on the extremely old and tattered taxidermied lions. Their skin thin, leathery, and drooping, the illusion of liveliness gone, they are as clear an image of death as any work by Morgan or Hirst.

On assignment at the California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco, in 2004, Richard Barnes came upon the view he presents in *Academy Animals with Painter*, (p. 39) and took the first image in what would become his series *Animal Logic*. Barnes reveals the creation and upkeep of dioramas, including rather than implying the human presence. Standing nose to horn with a buffalo, a man vacuums the “snow-covered” ground. Another man lies on the ground retouching a painted backdrop as an antelope wrapped in plastic stands to his side. A group of images taken in the storage area of the Smithsonian Museum attest to the animal bodies removed from displays, spending their second lives protected in climate-controlled storage, unseen by the public (p. 33). The images are striking testimonies of the human–animal relationship: isolated against a black background and evocatively lit, the animals are beautiful *and* controlled *and* caged by humankind.

Sarah Cusimano Miles and Jules Greenberg (whose series *Fallen* is discussed above in terms of “Death”), work in the traditions of still life and *memento mori*. Miles's series *Solomon's House* explores the stored collections of the Anniston Museum of Natural History in Anniston, Alabama. Over the course of two years, Miles created images that range from specimen studies to still lifes. Two early images, depicting disembodied animal skins, present a side of the natural history museum that is not often shared with the public and that effects markedly different readings and emotions, at least in this viewer. I am speaking here of *Brown Bear (Ursus arctos)* (p. 59) and *Red Deer (Cervus elaphus) with Specimens* (p. 34) both from 2010. While *Brown Bear's* mouth is open, displaying his potentially deadly teeth, he addresses the viewer with a sidelong glance that seems to acknowledge his peculiar circumstances — his disembodied fur backed with fabric, folded, and resting on his head. *Brown Bear* is strangely cute and humorous, but sadly impotent. In *Red Deer* we witness a



Richard Barnes *Smithsonian Ungulate*, 2005



Sarah Cusimano Miles *Red Deer (Cervus elaphus) with Specimens*, 2010

skin carefully laid on a metal shelf covered with archival paper. Its purpose as a biological specimen is reinforced by the inclusion of other small, unidentifiable organisms in jars, preserved by the wet-preparation method. In contrast to its didactic *raison d'être*, the skin is bathed in a strong chiaroscuro light that accentuates the luscious texture and color of its fur and contrasts with the crumpled paper beneath. The hooves, retaining their three-dimensionality, extend from and contrast with the flaccid skin. And the face, no longer supported by the bones of the skull, hangs over the edge of the shelf, distorted but recognizable. It is this last element that gives the image its punch: this seldom-seen treatment of the animal in death.

\* \* \*

As the artists and works in this exhibition attest, the human relationship with animals and nature is fraught and under scrutiny. Taxidermied animals — rare animal-objects, of nature, but human-made — provide a unique aesthetic medium for addressing the vexed issues of our interaction with other earthly creatures. Karen Knorr's photographs are emblematic of the nature/culture divide. In several of her works — under the titles *Academia*, *Fables*, *Monogatari*, and *India Song* — animals move from their natural environment to the human-built environment. They roam through architectural settings of high style: baroque and rococo museums and castles, Mughal and Rajput palaces and mausoleums, Japanese temples. In *Corridor [Carnavalet]* from *Fables*, a tortoise, a hare, a fox, a pigeon, and a stork have taken up residence in the Musée Carnavalet in Paris, a bastion of high-baroque architecture. Their presence is both surprising and charming. In fables, animals are used to teach children lessons about human folly. Knorr's lesson is clear: her enchanting images are delicate reminders of the clash between culture and nature that the artists in *Dead Animals* strive to counteract.



Karen Knorr *Corridor [Carnavalet]*, from the *Fables* series, 2003–08

## Notes

1. Sarah Boxer, "Animals Have Taken Over Art and Art Wonders Why," *New York Times*, June 24, 2000, p. B11.
2. A significant body of writing has emerged since 2000. See Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012); Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion, 2000) and *Artist/Animal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Ron Broglio, *Surface Encounter: Thinking with Animals and Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Petra Lange-Berndt, *Animal Art. Präparierte Tiere in der Kunst, 1850–2000* (Munich: Verlag Silke Schreiber, 2009); Giovanni Aloï, *Art and Animals* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2012); Stephanie Turner, "Relocating 'Stuffed' Animals: Photographic Remediation of Natural History Taxidermy," in *HUMANIMALIA*, vol. 4, no. 2, Spring 2013; Jyl Kelley and Stephanie Turner, *Animal Skins: Visual Surfaces* (Eau Claire, WI: Foster Gallery, University of Wisconsin, 2013).
3. Boxer, p. B11.
4. See, for example, <http://www.taxidermy-in-art.tumblr.com/> and <https://www.pinterest.com/laurelbee/taxidermy-as-art>.
5. Poliquin, pp. 137–138.
6. "Death becomes her: Meet Polly Morgan, Britart's hottest property," *The Independent*, July 15, 2010. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/death-becomes-her-meet-polly-morgan-britarts-hottest-property-2027383.html>.
7. All quotes from the artist's statement on her website, [http://www.julesgreenberg.com/html/fallen\\_text.htm](http://www.julesgreenberg.com/html/fallen_text.htm).
8. *Away from the Flock* exists in three versions, all dating to 1994. The second version is included in this exhibition.
9. Damien Hirst and Gordon Burns, *On the Way to Work* (New York: Universe Publishing, 2002) p. 219.
10. Eric Frank, "Thomas Grünfeld: The Misfits," *Antennae*, no. 7, Autumn 2008, p. 23.
11. Steve Baker, p. 56.
12. Frank, p. 26.
13. Jessica Ullrich, "The Taxidermic Hybrid," in *Antennae*, no. 7, Autumn 2008, p. 19.
14. Ralph Gardner Jr., "Mixing Taxidermy and Art," *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 8, 2014. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/mixing-taxidermy-and-art-1418089251>.
15. All quotes from "Interview with Mark Dion," in Nato Thompson, *Becoming Animal: Contemporary Art in the Animal Kingdom* (North Adams, MA: MASS MoCA, 2005), p. 53.
16. Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman, eds., *Concrete Jungle* (New York: Juno Books, 1996).
17. Thompson, p. 52.
18. Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, "The We of 'We' — Rethinking Back to the Garden," in *Late Harvest* (Reno: Nevada Museum of Art, 2015), p. 129.
19. It is interesting to note that Bryndis's family name translates as snow (snæb) bear's (jörns) daughter (dóttir).
20. Helen Gregory and Anthony Purdy, "Present Signs, Dead Things: Indexical Authenticity and Taxidermy's Nonabsent Animal," in *Configurations* 23, no. 1, Winter 2015, pp. 62–63.
21. Quoted in Ben Histan, "Breaking the Molds," *Anchorage Press*, April 4, 2013. <http://www.anchoragepress.com/news/break-molds>.
22. Quoted in Giovanni Alio, "Angela Singer: Animal Rights and Wrongs," *Antennae*, no. 7, Autumn 2008, p. 11.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
24. An image of *Sore* is on the artist's website: <http://www.angelasinger.com/tear.html>.
25. "Annette Messenger, or the Taxidermy of Desire," interview by Bernard Marcadé, in *Annette Messenger, comédie tragédie, 1971–1989* (Grenoble: Musée de Grenoble, 1989), p. 159.
26. Michelle Henning, "Skins of the Real: Taxidermy and Photography," Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson, *nanog: flat out and bluesome* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006) pp. 137–147, uote p. 138.
27. Henning, pp. 139–140.
28. Artist's statement on his website. <http://www.sugimotohiroshi.com/diorama.html>.
29. Richard Ross, *Museology* (New York: Aperture, 1989), p. 15.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 5.



**Richard Barnes**  
*Academy Animals with  
Painter, 2004*





## Beyond Botched Taxidermy

STEVE BAKER

When Jo-Ann Conklin first invited me to write something for the Bell Gallery's *Dead Animals* exhibition, she suggested I might address the subject of botched taxidermy. Two years earlier, a review had described me as "the theorist of . . . 'botched taxidermy'."<sup>1</sup> My surprise at the continued interest in this topic stems from the fact that it's more than fifteen years since I coined the term in *The Postmodern Animal*.<sup>2</sup> In the intervening years, in addition to being adopted by a few artists to characterize their own work, "botched taxidermy" has cropped up as the theme of an issue of *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture* in 2008 and, more recently, as the title of a digital album of indifferent ambient techno and the title of a PhD thesis. But to my mind, the term has now lost much of its critical purchase. A different way of characterizing contemporary art's engagement with animal bodies may be needed.

What was botched taxidermy? In *The Postmodern Animal* I introduced the term in sharp contrast to the aesthetic epitomized in a 1998 book called *Zoo: Animals in Art*, which presented its examples as "a gorgeous menagerie" of emotionally comforting creatures that were unfailingly visually attractive.<sup>3</sup> The very different look of the postmodern animal, I suggested, "seems more likely to be that of a fractured, awkward, 'wrong' or wronged thing, which it is hard not to read as a means of addressing what it is to be human now." (There was an echo here too, I acknowledged, of Wendy Wheeler's observation that the period from the 1960s to the 1990s was experienced by many people as one of destructive fragmentation.<sup>4</sup>) The preceding pages featured a discussion of Robert Rauschenberg's *Monogram* — "part goat, part goad" — obstinately occupying the gallery floor in all its "gloriously dumb thingness" (53–54). And that work set the tone for the observation that "the term 'botched taxidermy' might be suggested — though it should not always be taken literally — to characterize those instances of recent art practice where things again appear to have *gone wrong* with the animal, but where it still *holds together*" (55–56).

From there, I listed more-recent examples of such artworks under seven loose thematic headings: mixed materials, "stuffed" animals not as taxidermy

but as toys, other uses of “wrong” materials, hybrid forms, messy confrontations, taxidermic forms reworked, and tattiness. What now seems surprising about the fourteen works of botched taxidermy nominated under these headings is that only four of them — including Mark Dion’s *Ursus maritimus* and Thomas Grünfeld’s *Misfit (St. Bernhard/Sheep)* — incorporated any actual taxidermy. Three others, indeed, featured living creatures: Joseph Beuys’ coyote, William Wegman’s Weimaraner (in the guise of a frog), and Hubert Duprat’s caddis fly larvae. Among other examples, Jeff Koons’s 1986 *Rabbit* — a stainless steel rendering of an inflatable toy — made the list as a perverse use of wrong materials. And Damien Hirst’s iconic 1991 tiger shark preserved in formaldehyde was included only as an example of “tattiness,” as it was already beginning visibly to rot.

It now seems that the most likely explanation for the term *botched taxidermy*’s catching the imagination of some readers had little to do with these specific examples. In part, I suspect, it was the claim it staked to a particular philosophical pedigree that contributed to its attraction:

The verb that Deleuze and Guattari use to indicate the dangers of an insufficiently cautious construction of the imaginatively rethought body, which they famously term the “body without organs,” is *rater*: to go wrong, backfire, mess up, spoil, botch or bungle. The translation of *A Thousand Plateaus* gives it as “to botch”: “you can botch it” (*vous pouvez le rater*). (63)

This paved the way for the broader framing of the idea of botching as a particular kind of creative practice or outlook:

Botching is a creative procedure precisely because of its provisional, playful, loosely experimental operation. This point is made forcefully by [Adam] Phillips in his debunking of the arrogance of professional expertise. Praising “the fluency of disorder, the inspirations of error,” he argues: “We need a new pantheon of bunglers.”<sup>5</sup> (64)

Through the introduction of these quotations, of course, the focus shifted from the artwork as botched to the artist as unruly botcher, reshaping both the image and the status of animals in contemporary art. And this had only the most tenuous connection to the actual characteristics of that initial list of botched artworks.

### Why “beyond” botched taxidermy?

A lot has changed since 2000. The aim of *The Postmodern Animal* was to widen the recognition that animals were a serious and legitimate subject — a *relevant*

subject — for the contemporary art of that time. To make that case persuasively when no one else seemed to be doing so, I felt it necessary to include certain high-profile artists such as Hirst, even if their animal imagery betrayed a certain postmodern *distance* from the issues. To that end, the book resisted an explicit engagement with ethical questions, and made this claim:

Across these works, regardless of any ethical stance, *materials count*, materials create knowledge, or at least encourage open and imaginative thought. . . . If tattiness, imperfection and botched form count for anything, it is that they render the animal *abrasively visible*, and that they do so regardless of how the artist thinks about animals. (61–62)

It was a time, as Julia Kristeva acknowledged of the art of the mid-1990s, when “the whole burden of aggressivity” was “borne by the body.”<sup>6</sup>

The situation is different now, in several respects. It’s only in the past ten years that the contribution of contemporary artists to the growing field of “animal studies” in the arts, humanities, and social sciences has gained much direct recognition. The launch of the journal *Antennae* by Giovanni Aloi in 2006 was a key development, as were the two London conferences, *The Animal Gaze* and *The Animal Gaze Returned* in 2008 and 2011, at which most of the speakers were themselves artists. And a string of key exhibitions, from *Becoming Animal* at MASS MoCA in 2005–06 to the huge *Arche Noah* show at the Museum Ostwall in Dortmund in 2014–15, have shown the breadth of artists’ engagement with questions of animal life.

The focus of these artists’ attention has been shifting too, and what I called the “postmodern animal” in 2000 is not the contemporary animal of 2016. In retrospect, my earlier emphasis on the botched and the fractured and the broken seems as characteristic of *modern* art as it does of postmodern art. (A recent exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, for example — the first in its so-called Modern series — had the title *Shatter Rupture Break*.) Thinking back on it, that whole “botched” animal aesthetic looks more like a catching-up strategy, in which the animal body — which had hardly been a prominent subject in Modernist art — was *critically worked over* by artists in much the same way that the human body had been worked over by Modernist art movements.

What’s happening now is something quieter and more complex, and shortly I’ll try to characterize its implications for thinking about the contemporaneity of art’s engagement with taxidermy. But a significant shift

in expectations must also be acknowledged. The London-based curator and writer Daniel C. Blight has stridently expressed his dissatisfaction with the inward-looking art world perspective that still holds to the idea that “the last thing you can do is admit that you want to be taken seriously,” because “direct seriousness is uptight, unattractive.” There is now, he insists, a “need to start taking things seriously.”<sup>7</sup> This echoes the sentiments of Martin Barnes, the senior curator of photographs at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. With reference to aspiring artists’ uses of photography, he proposed that rather than getting “hung up on . . . critical theory,” convincing work “comes from . . . not shying away from the big issues.” And it’s clear that the conditions of animal life, and the relationships of human and nonhuman animals, are increasingly prominent as “big issues”<sup>8</sup> that concern contemporary artists.

Over the past fifteen years, not least through the efforts of *Antennae* and the exhibitions and conferences mentioned earlier (together with a handful of recent academic monographs on contemporary art in this field), there has arisen a community of artists who’ve become increasingly aware of each other’s work. There’s at least the beginning of a *critical mass* of artists for whom the question of the animal is a key issue, a valid and relevant issue. And that changes things. That critical mass *itself* creates possibilities, for established artists as well as those at an earlier stage of their careers. As Mark Dion has commented, “Today I feel remarkably fortunate to find animal studies attaining such heights of scholarly credibility.”<sup>9</sup>

### What is this animal-thing now?

“What is this animal-thing now?” is Rachel Poliquin’s brilliantly framed question about museum taxidermy, posed in the opening pages of *The Breathless Zoo*.<sup>10</sup> But that crucial word “now” has greater urgency when the question is addressed to contemporary artists’ engagement with taxidermy, or with their presentation of animal bodies more generally.

The problem with some of my initial examples of botched taxidermy — Koons’s *Rabbit* and Hirst’s shark in particular — is that those works feel *ancient* now. We can now afford to say more confidently that those works are not part of the ongoing project — the *contemporary* project — of presenting thinking about animals through art. Hirst and Koons bring little to that thinking. Let’s say that the project is to make work that contributes to a climate of opinion, a critical framework for thinking about animals. It need not necessarily be work that directly lobbies for political change, but it’s work that presents a refusal to be indifferent to animals and to their place in

contemporary life. At the same time, there’s an aesthetic to be established. It’s not enough to be dealing with big issues if the aesthetic isn’t recognizably of its time. *Work that doesn’t feel contemporary simply won’t register.*

Peter Osborne’s *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, from 2013, is particularly helpful on the question of art’s contemporaneity. Osborne contends that “it has only been in the last ten years, with the decisive discrediting of postmodernism as a coherent critical concept, that ‘contemporary’ has begun to emerge into the critical daylight,” so “the very idea of contemporaneity as a *condition* is new.” There is also a vital element of active engagement: “To claim something is contemporary is to make a claim for its significance in participating in the actuality of the present.” Osborne does outline some of the characteristic features of this art, several of them relating to his insistence that “art *lives* only in its incompleteness, as project.” But more telling, noting that “the structure of contemporaneity is itself changing,” he is quite clear that “the contemporary is an *operative* fiction” and even speaks of “the *will* to contemporaneity.”<sup>11</sup> In terms of thinking about art’s manner of presenting animals, this is crucial, because it’s clear that Osborne is not aiming for an all-purpose list of art’s contemporary characteristics. Instead, he proposes the contemporary as something constantly in a state of *being made* — by artists and others — according to their particular needs.

How, then, might whatever lies “beyond botched taxidermy” now give shape to its contemporaneity? And how does this relate to the work on display in the *Dead Animals* exhibition? Given the long and productive relationship between photography and taxidermy, which is also evident in the works selected for this exhibition, it’s appropriate that developments in photography might serve as a starting point for addressing these questions. Years ago, Andreas Gursky famously proposed that photography that neglects to interrogate its relation to reality or truth “is no longer credible.”<sup>12</sup> In a similar spirit, we might ask whether or not taxidermic artworks are still credible. How exactly are they to manifest the contemporaneity that’s essential to any effective critical engagement with its subject matter?

For Osborne, a key aspect of much contemporary practice is the move away from the self-contained image or object, which he sees as aesthetically conservative in its claim to present “an ideal unity” by means of a “false formal coherence” (124, 166). At one level it’s difficult for the taxidermic body *not* to do this, even when — as for example with Grünfeld’s *Misfits* series — each singular body manifestly fuses elements of diverse species (p. 63). But contemporary art projects frequently break “the identification of the work

with any particular material instantiation” of it, Osborne notes, so that the unity of the work — such as it is — typically takes on a “radically *distributive* character” (145, 50).

In the *Dead Animals* exhibition, the clearest example of work that takes this form is perhaps the set of *in situ* archive photographs from Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson’s *nanoq: flat out and bluesome project*, which surveyed and researched all examples of taxidermic polar bears that the artists could locate in British museums and private collections. Elements of this project were first presented twelve years ago, and its lack of a single central focus is part of the reason it remains compelling. Its various instantiations include the photographs in the present exhibition (drawn from a complete set of thirty-three images), an artist monograph, a one-off exhibition in which ten of the actual taxidermic polar bears seen in the photographs were relocated to Spike Island (a contemporary art space in the UK), several installations of the archive photographs in museum settings around the world, as well as a whole set of reconfigured perceptions of polar bears, dead and alive. The intention from the outset was to generate a wider discourse “in which audiences were able to consider their relationship not only to the ‘polar bears’ themselves, but to the history of their collection, presentation and preservation.”

For those of us fortunate enough to see it, the effect of the 2004 Spike Island installation — a unique opportunity to encounter ten taxidermic bears of different ages and states of repair in a single “white cube” space — was to reinforce both the sheer physical presence and the visible fragility of these animal bodies. In contrast, the archive photographs have a kind of push-and-pull effect across time and space, and for me this is especially true of the one showing the specimen from the Castle Museum in Norwich (p. 49). As a resident of Norwich, I often see that bear in the museum’s natural history collection, and it’s now forever colored by its conceptual proximity to the display of the Spike Island bears, despite that particular bear’s never having left its present location.

In stark contrast to the abrasive visibility of botched taxidermy, the modest but effective tactic of quiet relocation that was central to the Spike Island display has also been employed by Mark Dion, for example in his 2014 installation *The Dark Museum*.<sup>14</sup> This was his principal contribution to the ambitious exhibition *Arche Noah: Über Tier und Mensch in der Kunst* at the Museum Ostwall in Dortmund. Dortmund’s museum of natural history was closed for renovation at the time, so Dion arranged to relocate some of its display cases and exhibits (skulls, skeletons, hunting trophies and other



Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir/Mark Wilson *nanoq: flat out and bluesome*, 2001–06



FIGURE 6  
**Julia Schlosser**  
 from the series *Tether*,  
 8/6/2013, 9:31 a.m.

taxidermic specimens) and to mount a special display of them in a completely dark and windowless room within the space of the *Arche Noah* exhibition. It was easy to miss this inconspicuous room altogether, and viewers could see the display only by taking small plastic flashlights (in the shape of toy animals, as I recall) into the black space. There was plenty to see, but only with difficulty.

There's a notable restraint at work in these projects, and it's also found in other contemporary forms of animal representation. In some of the most interesting recent photographic work on animal themes, such as Yvette Watt's *Animal Factories* series, Czekalska+Golec's *Catwalk* photo book, K49814's *Atmen ohne Pause* photo book, and Julia Schlosser's *Tether* series, the animals are too far away, or much too close, or hidden from view, or doing their best to slope off out of the image. In Schlosser's wonderfully elastic compositions, in which she's seen walking her dog Tess around a Los Angeles suburb, the dog is constantly heading off into the margins or the shadows (FIG. 6). The significant

thing that seems to emerge from these photographic examples is that in order even to try to make serious contemporary art about animals, the image of the animal now has to be played down, understated, *almost elided*. Animals are such weighty subjects — weighed down by the



FIGURE 7  
**Angela Singer**  
*Unexplained Recovery*, detail, 2010  
 Courtesy the artist and Weisman Heyman  
 Collection, New York

trappings of human expectation — that the form in which they are presented may not register at all unless it somehow contravenes those expectations. It's as though the image of the animal is so weighty that it gets in its own way, and that the artist's perplexing responsibility is now to get the animal out of its own way.

In terms of taxidermic artworks, the closest equivalent to this elision of the animal might be Angela Singer's *Unexplained Recovery*, or at least its representation in the photograph seen here (FIG. 7). It's one of two details of a piece from her *Dead Eyed* series, and (prior to the inclusion of her new piece *Still* in the present exhibition) those details were the only images in circulation from that series. Like the deer's "dead" eye (based on the effect of post-mortem clouding), the image withholds more than it reveals, and has no secure relation to the body it purports to depict. Here, most unusually, it's the photograph rather than the bejeweled taxidermic body itself that carries (or frees) the weight of the work. And in this respect it marks a fascinating departure in the presentation and operation of Singer's work.

The examples above are indicative of a shifting terrain. Back in 2000, botched taxidermy's confrontational and abrasively visible animal bodies seemed to have interesting work to do, but in many instances they now look too blunt, too emphatic. To begin to understand how this has happened, I'll turn to another contemporary tendency that's becoming evident, and which is not directly anticipated by Osborne. It's a shift, loosely speaking, from the generic to the specific, the contextualized, the grounded. Here's an initial example: In 1997, discussing works such as his *Natural History* series, which includes *Away from the Flock* (p. 42), Damien Hirst stated: "I like ideas of trying to understand the world by taking things out of the world. You kill things to look at them."<sup>15</sup> Only three years later, Mark Dion's immensely influential art text *Some Notes towards a Manifesto for Artists Working with or about the Living World* included the uncompromising assertion that "artists working with living organisms . . . must take responsibility for the plants' and animals' welfare."<sup>16</sup> The contrast I intend here is not between an artist in favor of killing animals and another who opposes such killing, but rather between an artist who works with materials by "taking things out of the world," and another who is highly attentive to local contexts, local communities, and the scope for collaborative endeavor. Dion has said more recently of his tentative manifesto, "I filled the title with qualifiers, to allow it to be clearly open and a work in progress . . . as though to invite others to collaborate on the final draft."<sup>17</sup>

There's no right or wrong way of dealing with questions of context. Since the 1970s, Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Dioramas* series has explored the consequences of



photographing the taxidermic animals in the American Museum of Natural History's elaborate dioramas in a manner that deliberately shears the displays of their immediate museum context (p. 31). But that in itself constitutes an *alertness to context*.

The matter and manner of *locating* animals does seem to be emerging as a more direct concern for a significant number of artists. Angela Singer, in preparing her “recycled taxidermy” exhibits, is actively concerned to learn all she can about the “back story” of individual specimens that are donated to her. This information about the circumstances of a particular animal's death, preservation, and display (prior to her own further work on its remains) is not, however, shown alongside the finished artwork, because Singer's view is that “if I deliver written information with the artwork, then I think that pushes people away.”<sup>18</sup> The works have to carry that unannounced history themselves. In a similar fashion, it's the photographs (rather than the accompanying text) in Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson's sequence of *nanoq* prints that fill in the rich contextual detail that was less visibly evident in the Spike Island installation. As Snæbjörnsdóttir has written, “The task for the *nanoq*: *flat out and bluesome* archive of images was to photograph the specimens and their surroundings and to cement the impression of both having equal importance.”<sup>19</sup>

I've been trying to do something similar in my own recent *Scapeland* series (FIG. 8). The paired images in each piece generally include evidence of the roadkill I encounter while cycling the rural lanes of Norfolk, juxtaposed with

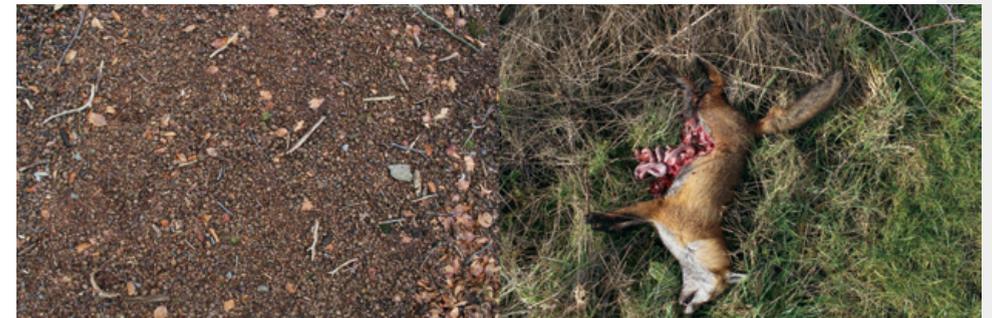


FIGURE 8  
Steve Baker  
*Scapeland XXV*, 2014



FIGURE 9  
Andrew Bruce  
*tender (I)*, 2010

other imagery characteristic of the region. The challenge is to pare back narrative elements and other distractions. I don't need the work itself to allude, for example, to the fact that a particular fox sent hurtling onto a roadside verge by a speeding vehicle then lay, its guts spilling out, only feet away from an airport perimeter fence. The immediate circumstances of this waste of a fox's life are not the subject of the work, which is more concerned with how to represent this animal's place *and fit* in its environment, even in death. In these images, the focus is less on depicting animals or conveying their stories than on registering the material continuity of feathers, flint, earth, guts, leaves, and stone.

I'd like to consider one further example of roadkill imagery in contemporary art. Andrew Bruce's *tender (I)*, from 2010, shows the artist holding a dead fox he found on the road (FIG. 9). For me, the photograph evokes two other very different images of the caring, protective holding of animals. The first is the famous photograph of the artist Eduardo Kac in a French laboratory in 2000, cradling the then still-living rabbit Alba in his arms prior to this transgenic animal's eventual death in the lab as an unintended consequence of her inclusion in Kac's *GFP Bunny* project. The second is a widely circulated image from 2011 showing a protest in Madrid by the organization Igualdad Animal on the International Day for Animal Rights. Four hundred protestors filled a large square in the city, each one standing in dignified silence and cradling a dead farmed animal in his or her arms.<sup>20</sup>

In Bruce's photograph, the stance of the (human) body and the positioning of the arms is everything. It's not just a simple cradling of the fox. There's a visibly awkward *heft* to it, and that's the real work of the image, the work that enables it somehow to "hold" the considerable ethical expanse between those two other images. The very idea of an attentive holding has an important place

in contemporary art's serious engagement with animal imagery. In 2004 Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson described their Spike Island installation as an attempt to generate "an idea or a thought that captures the imagination," offering their audience the opportunity to "hold the thought for a little while and travel with it in their own way."<sup>21</sup> And at an animal studies symposium in 2008, Rikke Hansen memorably observed, "One thing that contemporary art is really good at is holding complexity."<sup>22</sup>

### Contemporaneity and beauty

Does beauty have a place in art that employs taxidermy? Giovanni Aloï doesn't think so. A short section of his book *Art and Animals* is titled "Botched Taxidermy: The Problem with Beauty," and in it he quotes my observation (in 2003) that our familiarity with the conventions of "straightforwardly . . . beautiful" animal imagery tends to render the depicted animals "effectively invisible." From there he moves swiftly to the wider claim that beauty has become "an obstacle to late-modern and postmodern thought." These ideas are expanded in an *Antennae* editorial from 2015 in which he states that "contemporary art has . . . renounced beauty almost entirely," as it has become "that which hinders serious thinking and critical analysis."<sup>23</sup>

This is, broadly speaking, the orthodox art-critical view, but despite Aloï's consistent championing of art's importance to animal studies, I can't go along with his support for this orthodox perspective. If we're prepared to use the term beauty to characterize some aspects of our personal experience of animals, we're certainly not going to be told that contemporary art cannot and *must not* engage with that. As we've seen, Osborne offers a view of the contemporaneity of art that is open to change, adaptation, reconstruction — an artist's view, if you like. Let's have the confidence to take advantage of that. It may be that the version of contemporaneity that we shape in presenting the contemporary animal does indeed choose to address beauty. A few years ago Jeff Wall observed of contemporary photography that "the beauty of an image derives in part from the fact that we never know exactly what we are feeling when we look at it."<sup>24</sup> And that's really not so far removed from Hansen's recognition of art's ability to "hold" complexity.

In a short but vital book called *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry calls the disregard or *disavowal* of beauty an act of "failed generosity."<sup>25</sup> And if our concern for animals suggests a broadly generous outlook on the world, it seems all the more counterproductive to deny beauty a legitimate place in art that reflects that concern. This is not necessarily a matter of

Nicholas Galanin *Inert*, 2009



identifying particular works as visually beautiful (though there's nothing wrong with doing so, and the *Dead Animals* exhibition includes some credible contenders for that description). It's about shedding a defensiveness that is far from creative in its outlook on creative practice, and its outlook on the wider world. Scarry names the alternative to that defensiveness a "capacious regard for the world."<sup>26</sup>

Instances of that capacious regard are not difficult to find in the vicinity of artists' and others' dealings with dead animals. Rachel Poliquin repeatedly insists on pointing back to the individual lives from which museum specimens derive, noting that "these beasts deserve more respect because despite the death, despite the taxidermy, they remain pieces of the creaturely existence that all animals share."<sup>27</sup> Barry Lopez, known for his environmental concerns, has written of the roadkill he encounters on his travels: "I carry each one away from the pavement into a cover of grass or brush out of decency, I think."<sup>28</sup> And Angela Singer is acutely aware of "the problems in handling an animal's body . . . with respect but still being able to make the artwork I want to make. Just because there's so much pulling apart and destroying in order to create."<sup>29</sup>

This perspective is not universally shared, of course, even among artists. One artist in the *Dead Animals* show, whom there's no need to name, has been quoted as saying that "respecting the dead body of an animal is silly and hysterical." This defensively abrasive sentiment is itself a timely reminder that beauty, in Scarry's sense, seems more likely to be found in work that's made with confidence and respect, and *that's* the work that needs to be sought out and celebrated. Dion calls such work "progressive."<sup>30</sup> My initial elaboration of "botched taxidermy" in 2000 didn't identify the phenomenon as a purposeful project with its own dynamic and momentum, but that's how the work that lies *beyond* botched taxidermy calls to be understood. Wendy Wheeler notes that "with that strange forward directedness of life itself" that characterizes any creative outlook on the world, artists tend to go about their work with "a general confidence."<sup>31</sup> Scarry makes a similar point more concisely: "Beautiful things have a forward momentum."<sup>32</sup>

## Notes

1. Una Chaudhuri, book review: "Artist/Animal by Steve Baker," *Animal Studies Journal*, 2, no. 2 (2013), p. 99.
2. See Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), p. 54.
3. Edward Lucie-Smith, *Zoo: Animals in Art* (London: Aurum Press, 1998).
4. Wendy Wheeler, *A New Modernity?: Change in Science, Literature and Politics* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1999), p. 87.
5. Adam Phillips, *Terrors and Experts* (London and Boston: Faber, 1995), p. 32.
6. Julia Kristeva, "Of word and flesh," in *Rites of Passage: Art for the End of the Century*, ed. Stuart Morgan and Frances Morris (London: Tate Gallery, 1996), p. 26.
7. Daniel C. Blight, "Normal world // art world," Facebook post, November 25, 2015.
8. Martin Barnes, "Industry profile," *Professional Photographer*, August 20, 2009: <http://www.professionalphotographer.co.uk/Features/industry-profiles/martin-barnes>.
9. Mark Dion, "A Conversation with the Artist Mark Dion," in *Gorgeous Beasts: Animal Bodies in Historical Perspective*, ed. Joan B. Landes, Paula Young Lee, and Paul Youngquist (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), p. 173.
10. Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), p. 7.
11. Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), pp. 17, 2, 169, 16, 23, 27.
12. Andreas Gursky, quoted in Alix Ohlin, "Andreas Gursky and the contemporary sublime," *Art Journal* 61, no. 4 (2002), p. 29.
13. Snæbjörnsdóttir / Wilson, *nanoq: flat out and bluesome: A Cultural Life of Polar Bears* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006), p. 14.
14. Kurt Wettengl's "The dark museum," a short essay (in German) on this installation, is included in the exhibition catalogue *Arche Noah: Über Tier und Mensch in der Kunst*, ed. Katja Knicker and Kurt Wettengl (Dortmund: Museum Ostwall im Dortmunder U, 2014), pp. 74–77.
15. Damien Hirst, *I want to spend the rest of my life everywhere, with everyone, one to one, always, forever, now* (London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 1997), p. 285.
16. Mark Dion, handwritten exhibition text reproduced in *The Greenhouse Effect*, ed. Ralph Rugoff and Lisa G. Corrin (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2000), pp. 66–67.
17. Mark Dion, quoted in Giovanni Aloï, *Art and Animals* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2012), p. 142.
18. "Angela Singer: Artist interview," YouTube video, uploaded May 26, 2011.
19. Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir, *Spaces of Encounter: Art and Revision in Human-Animal Relations* (Gothenburg: ArtMonitor, 2009), p. 91.
20. The photograph of Kac and Alba can be found at <http://www.ekac.org/gfpbunny.html#gfpbunnyanchor>.
21. Images of the Iqualdad Animal protest can be found at <http://www.kimstallwood.com/2011/12/20/2011-animal-rights-image-of-the-year/>.
22. Snæbjörnsdóttir / Wilson, unpublished interview with the author, Bristol, UK, 2004.
23. Rikke Hansen, speaking at the symposium *Animal Ecologies in Visual Culture*, University College, London, October 8, 2011.
24. Giovanni Aloï, *Art and Animals*, p. 41; and "Animal studies and art: Elephants in the room," free-standing special editorial, *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture* (2015), pp. 22–23.
25. Jeff Wall, quoted in Craig Burnett, *Jeff Wall* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), p. 74.
26. Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2006), p. 14.
27. Scarry, p. 46.
28. Poliquin, p. 303.
29. Barry Lopez, *About This Life: Journeys on the Threshold of Memory* (London: Harvill Press, 1999), p. 113.
30. Angela Singer, unpublished interview with the author, Wellington, New Zealand, April 2010.
31. Mark Dion, quoted in Aloï, *Art and Animals*, p. 151.
32. Wendy Wheeler, *The Whole Creature: Complexity, Biosemiotics, and the Evolution of Culture* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2006), p. 147.
33. Scarry, p. 46.

Sarah Cusimano Miles *Brown Bear (Ursus arctos)*, 2010



Polly Morgan *Systemic Inflammation*, 2010

## Taxidermy and the Poetics of Strangeness

RACHEL POLIQUIN

Taxidermy is inherently uncanny. This darkly beguiling art is laced with an eeriness that lingers for as long as the dead animal retains some recognizable flicker of its former vitality. Taxidermy has an intrinsic power to disorient, provoke, and excite. It unsettles the steady boundaries between living and dead, between art, science and nature, and, perhaps most surreptitiously, between corporality and allegory.

Taxidermy is more than animal preservation. It is the art of setting up animal skins as if they were still alive, as if the animals might yet go about their business. But neither is taxidermy a fancy species of *trompe-l'œil*. Taxidermy is not just the artistic interpretation of an animal but also — and crucially — the physical presentation of a unique member of creaturely life.

A poetics of strangeness surrounds taxidermy, for at its heart is an encounter between you and something that does not quite exist: a thing which is no longer an animal but which could never be mistaken for anything but an animal. Dead, skinned, stuffed, and sewn together with glass eyes, this animal-thing has been utterly rebuilt with human intention and desire. But for all the seams and stitches, the creature lingers. The dead skin retains a lively charisma that no dead thing should be able to convey. Taxidermy engenders a tingling experience of going back and forth between what reason tells us cannot be so and what our eyes cannot deny is so. And that is taxidermy's magnetism: it confronts viewers with both an animal's vital presence and the physical proof of the same animal's death. Neither animal presence nor animal death is ever irrelevant.

By a poetics of strangeness, I mean that peculiar intensity that arises while looking at taxidermy. Some things have an innate ability to fascinate and disorient. They resonate deeply within us. They cannot be ignored. They haunt us. Yet for all the bewilderment or uneasiness, taxidermy evokes a deep recognition, a knowing animal connection. This knowing might be called a visceral knowledge: a bodily knowing that occurs during contact with physical things. It is a knowing that blends emotion with materiality and usually

defies reason and explanatory language. We have all experienced a powerful reaction to an unexpected or unidentified object. Within a poetics of strangeness, the thing simultaneously fascinates, looms, provokes, defies, attracts, and repels. The meaning is there; you can sense an understanding, but you cannot easily translate that understanding into clear thought or precise words.

A taxidermied animal stands before you in physical space and offers, or perhaps forces, an intimacy. The experience is oddly voyeuristic, as most living creatures would prefer not to be seen, or at least not seen so closely. But with taxidermy, you can approach this animal, consider its size, contemplate the shag of its fur or the sharpness of its claws. The lion will never attack; the hummingbird will remain eternally motionless, always available for lingering inspection. The nature of any encounter with taxidermy is shaped by the species on view, how it has been crafted, posed and re-created, and myriad cultural, political and aesthetic forces shaping how animal death is understood. But whatever the genre or level of craftsmanship, all taxidermy is united by a simple truth: it is always more than the sum of its parts. Something beyond animal materiality is captured by the process.

Taxidermy's uncanniness is most overt in two very different genres of preserved creatures: stuffed pets and a genre of contemporary art that combines parts of animals to create altogether different creatures. Both preserved pets and fraudulent beasts unsettle any and all expectations for animal encounters: the familiar grows strange and the illusory is made disturbingly real.

Mythological beasts are likely as ancient as the human imagination, but such animal reveries take on new potency when crafted with taxidermy. The sheer presence of creaturely life within a gallery's white space can be disorienting. When the dead parts and pieces of various animals are disassembled and recombined with fearsome realism, the encounter can be wildly unnerving.

The series of *Misfits* crafted by Thomas Grünfeld includes a peacock's head on a penguin and a fawn with a goat's face (p. 63). Because such creatures do not actually exist in nature, they call attention to the implausible liveliness carried by all taxidermied animals. Grünfeld's *Misfits* could easily have looked like disjointed beasts hodgepoded together. But yet, extraordinarily, their incongruous parts coalesce into believable organisms. Their structural integrity conveys a sense that these beasts could actually survive in the world. They possess that uncanny spark of animation which suggests the animal might just reanimate. And in the uneasy hovering between what our gut

**Thomas Grünfeld**

*Misfit (penguin/peacock), 2005*

*Misfit (fawn/goat), 2001*





acknowledges as a genuine animal encounter and what our brain knows cannot possibly be so, an unsettled fear begins to grow. Their plausible organicism makes us believe — even for just a second — that anything is possible, and in doing so, they provoke primordial fears of unfamiliarity and aberrance. As with all taxidermy, fraudulent creatures eliminate any divide between truth and fiction. An artist's hallucinations take on life through animal skin, and corporeality blurs into allegorical warnings of miscegenation.

In contrast, preserved pets are all too familiar. We know precisely how a stuffed dog would shake itself awake from its immortal sleep. And, oddly, our familiarity with domesticated species only heightens the pervasive unreality of all taxidermy. The experiential strangeness of an immortalized pet necessarily evokes a visceral realization that this thing on view is not just a human-made artifact no different from any other sort of product made from animal skins. A taxidermist's materials are never without significance — particularly when dead cats and dogs are involved.

Rebuilding dead pets to possess their afterlives is an intemperate example of the human longing entangled in the making of all taxidermy. Such longing always leaves idiosyncratic traces in the resulting animal-things. After all, taxidermy does not deal in generics. Every lion and zebra on view in a museum, every deer head on a hunter's wall, every preserved pet — was once a distinct individual. And every preserved animal was distinctly chosen for its quasi-immortality. But why were these particular animals chosen and what sort of sentiment do they now embody? Was a creature preserved to record its strangeness or to showcase its beauty? Are these animals being used for political commentary? Or have they been remade into dark souvenirs of human desire? Taxidermy rebuilds animals with human meaning so that we might possess them and look upon them, forever. It is never irrelevant why death is undone.



**Deborah Sengl**  
*Der Fuchs — als Räuber — ertarnt sich seine begehrte Beute*  
(The fox — as predator — disguises himself as the prey he covets), 2004



**Deborah Sengl** *Killed to Be Dressed*, 2010

# Some Notes Toward a Manifesto for Artists Working With and About Taxidermy Animals

MARK DION AND ROBERT MARBURY, 2015

The following are guidelines for artists who wish to make or use taxidermy in their practice. Our hope is to highlight some of the ethical, practical, and social implications of working with the bodies of dead, preserved animals.

**1** Artists should follow and respect local, national, and international laws designed to protect and foster wildlife. There should be no trafficking in protected species. Abiding by these laws promotes wildlife conservation and breaking these laws can result in the promotion of poaching or stiff fines, and even jail time.

**2** It is the responsibility of the artist to know the respective laws pertaining to animals, not just where the artist lives but wherever the artwork may subsequently be shown. This obligation is not superseded by the gallery, art broker, or art buyer.

**3** A death is a terrible thing to waste. Whenever possible (and legal) use animal bodies that are already dead—from roadkill incidents or farm deaths, or from euthanization at animal shelters. Needless to say, the use of antique taxidermy is preferable if it serves the artist's aesthetic goals.

**4** Art, as a practice, can be a wasteful endeavor. When working with dead animals, strive to use or find use for all parts of the animal. Since taxidermy refers strictly to the preservation of an animal's skin, the carcass, organs and bones are often discarded. Look for creative uses for these parts, and handle and dispose of any toxic or nonorganic material with care.

**5** Find creative solutions to producing animals that are unavailable because of their protected status. Goat skins make excellent polar bears and alpaca skin can substitute for grizzly bear skin, for example.

**6** Preserved specimens, particularly those improperly prepared, are often subject to infestation by insect pests. Be careful not to spread infestation to the institutions and individuals hosting exhibitions. When preparing specimens or treating infested mounts, parasites and pests can often be dealt with by freezing the specimens.

**7** Nothing is permanent. Taxidermy has a list of talented enemies (fire, sunlight, insects, improper care, and time). Understand the limitations of preservation, and work with individuals and institutions to develop maintenance guidelines.

**8** There are health concerns when working with dead animals and antique taxidermy. Stay informed about these issues and protect yourself. Take precautions such as wearing gloves and a mask when necessary, and stay up-to-date on your immunizations. Vintage taxidermy was often prepared with arsenic and other poisons, and must be handled with care.

**9** Although we are making art, the material we use remains a dead animal. People have very strong reactions to seeing dead animals, no matter how they are presented. Understand that people might have recently lost a pet or chosen to abstain from industrialized farming for the welfare of the animals, or simply are sensitive to thoughts of death. Acknowledge that this artwork will be upsetting to some people.

**10** Become knowledgeable about the materials that you are using: animals. Be curious and inquisitive about their classification, habitat, and biology. The audience should assume that you have chosen to use a specific animal and all that goes along with that animal in the context of the artwork: for example, a whitetail deer brings very different meaning to a piece than does a kudu (North American vs. African, hunting season vs. safari, etc.).

**11** Because every taxidermy animal was once alive and an individual, recognize the oneness of each specimen. The process of learning about that specific animal, its injuries, symmetry or asymmetry, loss of fur, and unique characteristics give clues to how the animal can be used in art, informing the creation of flow, line, and lifelike qualities. Even if the goal is not mimesis, the process of skinning and fleshing an animal is an intimate act and deserves respect.

**12** Ethics are constantly evolving. It is not enough to say either that an artwork is created in an ethical manner, or that no animals were killed in the making of an artwork. Artists working with dead animals need to be able to speak about the death of the animal and must be willing to struggle regularly with the ethical choices we make.

**13** Participate in and encourage a dialogue about animals—not limited to animal-human relations, conservation, species protection, animals as pets, animals as food, and greater understanding of the nonhuman world. This is especially important when the dialogue is challenging or even hostile.

## Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches, unless otherwise noted. Height precedes width and depth.

### Richard Barnes

*Animal Logic* series

- p. 33 *Smithsonian Ungulate*, 2005  
 p. 34 *Academy Animals with Painter*, 2004  
*Giraffe, Academy of Sciences*, 2005  
 Archival pigment prints  
 40 x 50 each  
 Lent by the artist

### Maurizio Cattelan

- p. 64 *Untitled*, 2007  
 Two taxidermied dogs and one chick  
 Life-size  
 Private collection  
 Photo courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery

### Kate Clark

- p. 8 *Licking the Plate*, 2014  
 p. 18 Kudu hide and horns, foam, clay, thread, pins, rubber eyes, wood, plaster, paint, and painted backdrop  
 10' x 10' x 4'  
 Lent by the artist

### Mark Dion

- p. 22 *Concrete Jungle (Mammalia)*, 1992  
 Taxidermied animals, trash cans, trash bags, newspapers, bottles, wood, cardboard boxes, ironing boards, crates, umbrella, assorted trash  
 59 x 165 x 51  
 The Hort Family Collection  
 Photo courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

### Nicholas Galanin

- p. 56 *Inert*, 2009  
 Wolf pelts and felt  
 29 3/4 x 65 x 72  
 Lent by the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, University of Washington, Seattle

### Jules Greenberg

- p. 14 *Fallen*, 2005  
 p. 15 Archival pigment prints (9)  
 7 x 7 each  
 Lent by the artist

### Thomas Grünfeld

- p. 63 *Misfit (penguin/peacock)*, 2005  
 Taxidermied penguin and peacock  
 23 3/8 x 9 7/8 x 11 7/8  
 Lent by Jan Peter Kern, Germany  
 Photo Lothar Schnepf, Cologne  
 © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

### Thomas Grünfeld

- p. 63 *Misfit (fawn/goat)*, 2001  
 Taxidermied fawn and goat  
 8 x 10 1/2 x 12 1/2  
 Collection of A. M. Homes, NY  
 Photo Lothar Schnepf, Cologne  
 © 2015 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

### Damien Hirst

- p. 42 *Away from the Flock*, 1994  
 Glass, painted steel, silicone, acrylic, plastic, lamb in formaldehyde solution  
 37 3/4 x 55 5/8 x 20  
 Private collection  
 Photo Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd.

### Karen Knorr

- p. 36 *Fable* series, 2003–08  
*Corridor [Carnavalet]*  
*Ledoux's Reception [Carnavalet]*  
 Pigment prints  
 26 x 35 each  
 Lent by the artist

### Annette Messenger

- p. 21 *La colonne du petit chien* (The column of the little dog), 2000–12  
 Taxidermied dog, various fabrics  
 29 1/2 x 31 1/2 x 13 3/4  
 Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery ©Annette Messenger/ARS

### Sarah Cusimano Miles

*Solomon's House* series

- p. 34 *Red Deer (Cervus elaphus) with Specimens*, 2010  
 p. 59 *Brown Bear (Ursus arctos)*, 2010  
*Herring Gull (Larus argentatus) with Artichoke*, 2010  
 Pigmented ink prints  
 24 x 30 each  
 Lent by the artist

### Polly Morgan

- p. 73 *Gannet*, 2014  
 Taxidermied gannet, cremated bird remains  
 50 1/2 x 38 1/2 x 9 1/2  
 Collection of Antoine Forterre  
 Photo Prudence Cuming Associates, courtesy of Pippy Houldsworth Gallery

### Polly Morgan

- Cormorant*, 2014  
 Taxidermied cormorant, cremated bird remains  
 50 1/2 x 38 1/2 x 9 1/2  
 Lent by the artist

### Polly Morgan

- p. 60 *Systemic Inflammation*, 2010  
 Taxidermied finches, taxidermied canaries, steel, leather  
 51 1/8 x 44 1/2 x 44 1/2  
 Private collection  
 Photo Tessa Angus

### Richard Ross

*Museology* series

- p. 40 *Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris, France*, 1982  
 p. 41 *Deyrolle Taxidermied, Paris, France*, 1986  
*Booth's Bird Museum, Brighton, England*, 1986  
*Royal Scottish Museum, Polar Bear, Edinburgh, Scotland*, 1993  
 Archival pigment prints  
 23 x 23 each  
 Lent by the artist, courtesy of Clark Gallery

### Deborah Sengl

- p. 66 *Der Fuchs — als Räuber — ertarnt sich seine begehrte Beute* (The fox — as predator — disguises himself as the prey he covets), 2004  
 Taxidermied fox, wood, fabric  
 17 3/4 x 31 1/2 x 11 3/4  
 Courtesy of Galerie Deschler, Berlin

### Deborah Sengl

- p. 67 *Killed to Be Dressed*, 2010  
 Taxidermied fox, taxidermied stoat, taxidermied mink, wax  
 34 1/4 x 15 3/4 x 21 3/8; 21 1/4 x 5 7/8 x 11 3/4;  
 13 x 5 7/8 x 5 7/8  
 Collection of SoArt GmbH, Austria

### Angela Singer

- p. 7 *Still*, from the *Dead Eyed* series, 2015  
 Vintage taxidermied deer and mixed media  
 18 1/8 x 14 1/2 x 7 1/16  
 Lent by the artist

### Angela Singer

- p. 52 *Spurts*, 2015  
 Recycled vintage taxidermied, mixed media  
 20 3/4 x 43 1/4 x 25 5/8  
 Lent by the artist

### Brýndis Snæbjörnsdóttir / Mark Wilson

- p. 24 *nanoq: flat out and bluesome*, 2001–06  
 p. 25 22 digital prints  
 p. 26 24 5/8 x 24 5/8, except *Somerset*, 47 x 54 1/4  
 p. 49 Collection of the Nevada Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Meg and Earl Tarble

### Hiroshi Sugimoto

- p. 31 *Gemsbok*, from the *Diorama* series, 1982  
 Gelatin silver print  
 20 x 24  
 Lent by the artist, courtesy of Pace and Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York  
 © Hiroshi Sugimoto

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## LENDERS

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## COVER

Sarah Cusimano Miles, *Brown Bear (Ursus arctos)* (detail), 2010

## INSIDE FRONT COVER

Jules Greenberg, *Fallen* (detail), 2005

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Polly Morgan *Gannet*, 2014



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