

Taxidermy as ‘Otherness’: ‘Animal-Objects’ in the Art of Mark Dion and Polly Morgan

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Taxidermy is certainly an enigmatic practice; the shell of a once living creature, skin mounted and frozen in a pose, retaining traits of its former self but becoming nonetheless an object; void of life and flesh, existing within a complex web of historical, cultural and social contexts and fulfilling a turnstile sequence of changing desires. Traditionally showcased in natural history museums, *cabinets of curiosities* and imperial collections¹ as souvenirs and scientific relics contained in carefully constructed dioramas or bell jars,² taxidermy is now (re)emerging as a popular material in contemporary art. Artists Mark Dion and Polly Morgan create works that extend the taxidermy object beyond the walls of scientific pedagogy and into the art gallery.³ This “relocation”⁴ allows for new meanings through visitor encounters, wherein the materiality of these animal-objects becomes a device through which their “thingness” is accentuated, not undermined.⁵ By comparing the approaches of these two artists, I will illustrate how the incorporation of taxidermy in contemporary art

practices expresses ideas of ‘animality’ or “Otherness”⁶ in a way that is critically engaging. Their technique transposes the audience from a passive viewer and consumer into an active participant by opening up the conversation to stimulate ideas regarding the historical and cultural uses of taxidermy in exploring themes of life, death and mourning through an “experiential narrative”⁷ and displays methods where the materiality is able to bridge the gap between the natural, scientific and art worlds. As a result, the boundaries between man and animal are blurred and the specimen is re-situated as both an object and semiotic negotiator of meaning. By situating these works within a historical museological framework, a discussion on the traditional and present roles of taxidermy in natural history museums and collections will be made. Linking these art pieces within that tradition through their medium and display while demonstrating that the inclusion of conceptual, literal and symbolic traces of conventional taxidermic display are here re-invented to demonstrate a postcolonial, postmodern sensibility

that subverts and critiques our past collective passivity by locating the viewer and the animal-object within a shared environment. In the end, taxidermy becomes a mediator through its display, opening a dialogue where the viewer can develop “empathy” and ultimately “become-animal”⁸ through the critical encounter that is reached when its “thingness” is understood.⁹

The first collections of natural phenomenon were motivated not so much by scientific ambitions but rather by the desire of possessing land through nature’s material culture and for the display of wealth.¹⁰ They featured a stockpile of exotic specimens, tokens from foreign places amassed by the rich during travels and acquired through the expansion of the “luxury-trade”¹¹ which resulted in an assortment of shells, fossils, plants and animal parts displayed in the shiny jars and cupboards of *cabinets of curiosities* during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They were then viewed on occasion either through public performance or paraded around town squares in spectacles, once again for the sake of their consumption and

as part of a performative act to reinforce the status of their wealthy owners.¹² By the eighteenth century, as colonial explorers and cartographers discovered, recorded, and amassed large assortments of natural specimens which were to become the collections of national museums as “natural history,”¹³ we can see then that this category, brought about by the “European naturalists who were missionaries of a scientific method,”¹⁴ converted Native knowledge,s, plants, and animals into displays of colonial natures.¹⁵ The original impetus for collecting and displaying nature therefore props up science, possession, and consumption as the primary factors in the pursuit of material acquisitions and establishes the first privately owned and institutional collections as a display of colonial imports that performed socially to create an “aesthetic of wonder,” wherein their literal ownership and visual consumption became a means of acquiring and possessing territories through the expansion of the imperial kingdom.¹⁶ As Alan Bewell suggests in his article, “Romanticism and Colonial Natural History,”

"colonialism made late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century natural history by providing a steady flow of specimens and texts from foreign locales, in turn, natural history, both as a discourse and material practice, provided the primary discursive and material sites where Europeans learned about, interpreted and appropriated the colonial world."¹⁷

The naturalists of the nineteenth century were interested in the presentation and classification of specimens through their coherent, logical and empirical arrangements, intent on displaying the objects in museum collections in a way that "would produce scientific knowledge"¹⁸ through their containment, projection and imitation of nature. Thus taxidermy was situated within makeshift representations of their (former) colonial habitats¹⁹ in the form of *dioramas* that became the popular space for taxidermy display during the Victorian period.²⁰ Due to the increase in demand by these natural history institutions for (dead) life-like animal-subjects to inhabit their dioramic narratives,²¹ techniques in taxidermy improved from the eighteenth-century

shortcomings and the profession flourished at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.²² The Victorian taste for natural history and its material culture propagated throughout British society in a frenzied drive to "collect" and "consume collections"²³ by visiting museums and collecting taxidermy for themselves.²⁴ Taxidermy served as a silent mouthpiece standing in for the natural world, frozen and embedded in the displays that functioned as public and private spectacle, quelling the thirst for epistemological inquiry and knowledge.²⁵ Though natural history museums continued to flourish across the world during this time and well into the early twentieth century, taxidermy as a profession was relegated to the domain of hobby,²⁶ and many constituents of these vast national collections were forgotten over the decades, gathering dust in storage bins or, in some cases, facing disposal, relocation, and



Fig. 1: Mark Dion, *Mobile Wilderness Unit-Wolf* (2006), Mixed Media, Courtesy Georg Kargl Fine Arts, Vienna. Photo: Lisa Rastl

even destruction when funds were unavailable to maintain or upkeep the vast collections.²⁷ Such neglect came as a direct result of the public's opinion towards these once living, now lifeless 'animal-objects,' shifting with the offset of environmentalist and wildlife conservation initiatives.²⁸

Natural history museums and art museums have been criticized for their

role in colonial exhibitionism and for their rampant display of death in the form of taxidermy objects, which writer, curator and taxidermy-enthusiast Rachel Poliquin has described appears as "gratuitous spoilage [...] to some, even perverse."²⁹ In the recent past, however, thanks to postcolonial theory and the advocacy of museums to claim responsibility by offering apologies for

their collective institutional role in cultural appropriation through colonial material ownership and display, there have also been improvements and efforts made to democratize animal narratives and interpretations.³⁰ Part of this effort has led to the “critical reapprais[al of taxidermy] as a historical and cultural object,”³¹ and contemporary artists are thus interested in appropriating this provocative animal-object into their work. They do so in a way that does not sever it from the ideological complexities of previously subjugated modes of display, wherein the object was bound in a strict frozenness, mediating and fulfilling distinctly subjective, colonial, and imperial narratives. Rather, these artists attempt to incorporate traces of this familiar modality as a critical device, removing the hierarchical biases of institutional objectives and re-presenting the “stuffed”³² animals in a way that creates a dialogue and subverts voyeurism to make room for an actual exchange.

One such work is Mark Dion’s instillation, *Mobile Wilderness Unit-Wolf* (2006) (Fig.1), which features a nat-

uralistic taxidermy wolf, perched atop a silver utility trailer filled with soil and dressed with synthetic forestial greenery. Bare skeletal tree trunks rise out of the packed brown earth to the left, emerging like a pictorial framing device, one trunk laid atop the soil as though it had fallen behind the wolf, lodged against some jagged white-gray stones. The trailer replaces the traditional sculptural pedestal, while the cropped landscape scene growing out of the industrial metal hearkens to the attempted “verisimilitude” associated with natural history dioramas.³³ Only here, as though in a transitional phase between mounting stages, the illusionary tactics of traditional taxidermy display are exposed by removing the dioramic backdrop, lighting effects and accompanying text.³⁴ As Stephanie Turner points out, the “relocation [of the animal] as object disconnects [it] from the actual living thing [it] stand[s] in

for,”³⁵ just as the relocation of taxidermy from a traditional natural history museum diorama into this form of ‘de-constructed’ diorama removes the artifice and illusive techniques of ‘trompe-l’œil’ realism inherently present in this recognizable classical container for the dead animal-object.³⁶ Natural history museums used the diorama template to convey a framed scene of the natural world in an attempt to objectively present “science/nature” by situating the taxidermy object into a fabricated representation of its (former) habitat.³⁷ In *Mobile Wilderness Unit-Wolf*, the encounter is tangible, physical and without the exaggerated depth perception imposed by the dioramic platform which dislocated the taxidermy into a fantastical boxed space apart from the viewer, projecting the audience’s gaze in a consumptive act of “Othering” the animal-object. The viewer response thus proves to be an “experiential”³⁸ one, which arises out of the tension created when the animal-object, appearing real (only in physical likeness), is encountered as an object due to its insertion into a shared space. Dislodged from its

traditional box of artifice, the “embodied thingness,”³⁹ becomes visible, emphasized by the trailer. The viewer, through this direct and uninterrupted interaction with the taxidermy wolf, is permitted to experience an exchange unburdened by the trickery of diorama aesthetics which compels them to contemplate the relationship between human and animal, animal and science, taxidermy and natural history, and to question modes of display, while existing briefly together on an equal plane, thus resulting in an acknowledgment of its separateness, its Otherness.⁴⁰

Mark Dion is an environmentalist and an enthusiast of natural history museums’ capacity to organize, present, and act as pedagogical sites.⁴¹ Dion insists on demonstrating that this type of display is nonetheless never authoritative at deciding what is included, excluded, highlighted, segregated or omitted; it is not a decision that reinforces the cultural and scientific narrative of the institution.⁴² *Mobile Wilderness Unit-Wolf* demonstrates this incentive to critique the mode of traditional dioramic display, prompting the

viewer to question how “contemporary values change the physical object.”⁴³ This, once again, subverts the role of natural history museums which, in the past, have presented their views, findings, and specimens in a way that is one-sided: one that excludes the ideas, associations and identities of the viewers in the name of propagating a fallacy of objective truth. It becomes a re-presentation that calls upon the viewer to consider their relationship with nature, with wildlife, as well as to consider the role of the museum, the diorama, and the colonial past that has been propped up through these displays of taxidermy. The taxidermy wolf is presented as an object forced to be on display- moved, peddled, relocated, framed, re-framed, catalogued, stored and stuffed - all without a choice but to be eternally Other, eternally an animal-object. In order to develop what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the act of “becoming animal,” (or becoming-Other),⁴⁴ an encounter must occur when one enters “into a zone of action or passion that one can have in common with the animals,”⁴⁵ wherein desubjectification is needed

to enable that loss of self so that one can distinguish the animal’s voice, hear its words, articulate its experience, and understand its Otherness.⁴⁶ Part of this experience occurs when we the see-er become the seen “in the delay of temporalization and [in] the traits of language.”⁴⁷ When we are outside ourselves and can fill the space that the Other occupies, not by replacement, animism, imitation or substitution,⁴⁸ but in surrendered understanding,⁴⁹ then we become “aware that this otherness cannot be made part of the singular or cultural self.”⁵⁰ In his book, *Becoming Animal*, David Abram describes this capacity for a language of the animal-thing in the following testimony:

Each perceived presence is felt to have its own dynamism, its own pulse, its own active agency in the world. Each phenomenon has the ability to affect and influence the space around it and the other beings in its vicinity. Each perceived thing, in other words, is felt to be animate-to-be (or at least potentially) alive. [...] All things, in this sense, are potentially expressive; all things have the power of speech.⁵¹

The taxidermy in Dion's installation gazes back at the viewer from eye level, on an equal visual plane, carrying its biographical baggage in which it has been relegated into an eternity of exhibition, asking us to consider the role of the museum in substituting it within a system of imitational nature. Here, contained within the white space of the gallery, the display, by prompting us to consider the "biography of [the] object(s),"⁵² creates a cyclical dialogue between the viewer and the viewed, reversing the gaze so that we must consider its memories as an object and our responses to its contextual, historical, and cultural function as a part of material culture.⁵³ This allows us to "become-animal,"⁵⁴ to grasp its "thingness,"⁵⁵ and to allow it to speak through the animal "skin [which] mediates the taxidermy aesthetics."⁵⁶

Let us now turn to another contemporary work of art entitled *To Every*

Seed His own Body (2006) (Fig 2), by artist and taxidermist Polly Morgan. Whereas Dion uses found taxidermy in his work, Morgan is a trained taxidermist who undertakes the stuffing of the animals herself.⁵⁷ Trained under the Scottish taxidermist George Jamieson, she developed a love and an affinity for the profession.⁵⁸ Morgan found it to be a means by which she could process and create original, contemplative and meaningful pieces that confronted life and death in a unique narrative of interplay and tension.⁵⁹ *To Every Seed His own Body* is an achingly intimate piece which features a blue tit bird lying horizontally upon a small leather prayer book,⁶⁰ peacefully as though in eternal slumber, and housed within a glass dome display case also containing a miniature Victorian-style chandelier emitting a soft and gothic halo of light to envelope the taxidermy and

dance upon (and through) the surface of the glass. The work emerges like a testimony of mourning, a mounted narrative that seems to honour the dead-animal object by containing it in a pose of permanent death, frozen from the technicalities of decay that would otherwise consume its flesh, here hollowed out and preserved in a pose that echoes the fate of its former living self. Morgan only uses specimens that have either been donated after dying from natural, unpreventable causes, or that were “casualties of the road”,⁶¹ and her primary goal is to retain them in their state of *death*, rather than to rearrange them in traditional taxidermy poses⁶² that would mimic liveliness or “life-like[-ness]”⁶³ typical of the practice. In an interview with Anthony Haden-Guest, Morgan stated, “I wanted to keep the birds and mammals looking dead, as they looked when they came to me. I can understand why people want to resurrect them but I thought there was something quite beautiful about their death pose that I thought was worth preserving.”⁶⁴ This attitude towards the formal qualities of the material dif-

fer greatly from the traditional natural history taxidermy which attempted to re-animate the animal skin into realistic poses in order to convey some natural truth and retain scientific credibility as an educational prop. By preserving the element of death in this piece, the taxidermy is able to maintain a literal representation of death “through the [fixed] corpse”⁶⁵ and a symbolic death through the narrative apparatuses in the form of the prayer book, somber lighting, and chandelier. All this seems to create a human environment for honouring the deceased animal-object by sealing it within a chamber demarcated into a sacred space. The subversion of traditional taxidermy’s formal qualities (wherein the animal is expected to appear lively) is here accentuated by the pose of the bird-object, which becomes imbued with a pseudo-spiritual, supernatural dimension through the use of human materials often associated with



Fig. 2: Polly Morgan, *To Every Seed His Own Body* (2006), Taxidermy blue tit, Crystal chandelier, Leather-bound prayer book, Glass Wood. Source: Polly Morgan: Psychopomps Photo Credit: Tessa Angus Editor: Haunch of Venice (2010)

death and funerary processions. This “mode of viewing through the pathos of mourning,”⁶⁶ as described by Stephanie Turner, as well as the biography of the actual animal-object which had died of natural or unpreventable causes, allows for the taxidermy to be read in an experiential narrative wherein its visible permanently evoked death calls the viewer to encounter its “thingness”, its “”, through its materiality.⁶⁷

Once again, let us turn to the argument presented by Abram in *Becoming Animal* concerning the idea of perception and animation. He says,

The simple act of perception is experienced as an interchange between oneself and that which one perceives-as a meeting, participation, a communion between beings. [...] Death itself is more a transformation than a state; a dying organism becomes part of the wider life that surrounds it [...] there is thus no clear divide between that which is animate and that which is inanimate. Rather, to the oral awareness, everything is animate, everything moves.⁶⁸

This statement comes to life when we apply it to taxidermy, in conjunction with the idea of “becoming animal” by Guattari and Deleuze, already discussed. Abram is essentially saying that all things are animate, all things are alive (even in death), and all things encountered have a presence mediated through perception.⁶⁹ If we consider this in light of the taxidermic bird in Morgan’s sculpture, then the animal-object is animated through its capacity to influence the space around it,⁷⁰ as well as on an atomic level. The presence⁷¹ of the object here, though formally contained within the scope of the glass jar, extends beyond the limitations of the container to permeate the viewer’s space through its very perception⁷² and through the candescent light refractions that rebound and stretch into the room, ceremoniously drawing the spectator into an encounter with its Otherness. This encounter is also in-

tensified through the reflections of the gallery, and in turn the viewer, which superimposes in a collage of translucent layers upon the convex glass surface to create a scene where death and life co-mingle, and where the animal-object is included in a mirrored scene inclusive of the spectator who must then confront the presence of this “Other-thing” being projected back within the cohabitated scene.⁷³ This subtle process in turn functions within Poliquin’s “experiential mode,” wherein the taxidermy’s “thingness” is reinforced through the interaction of life and death, movement and static stillness enclosed within the encounter.⁷⁴

In order to foster the sentiment of empathy, required in the process of “becoming-animal,” it is necessary to achieve “desubjectification,”⁷⁵ made possible “in the delay of temporalization and the traits of language.”⁷⁶ Through the reflection of the viewer on the concave form of the bell jar, there is a moment where the spectator becomes included and visible within the spectacle, thus enabling desubjectification to occur through the distance/delay of vision

to reflect the self outside of ourselves.⁷⁷ This seemingly instant process allows for the viewer to exist outside of his own subjectivity and encounter the language of this animal-object which, according to Abram, remains animate even in death, and speaks a language through the expression of its mortal pose.⁷⁸ The use of glass dome display cases serve a secondary function: linking it with the specimen jars of the natural history museum, the glass containers featured in the early *cabinets of curiosities*, affiliated with scientific inquiry and most notably with the bell jar, a primary mode of display in Victorian homes for taxidermy.⁷⁹ Morgan’s use of the jar is able to reframe the animal-object here within a traditional museum display mode for taxidermy, but through a critical filter that invokes empathy at the moment of encounter, as opposed to mere passive consumption, creates a sanctified space for the taxidermy bird to be mourned and heard. This “speech”⁸⁰ is evoked through its “thingness,” its material Otherness, its re-animation through death, which emerges through the “experiential narrative”⁸¹ emphasizing

ing mourning through the bell jar, which contrasts the traces of life and death in reflections and movements, mutually coexisting within the viewer's periphery.

Mark Dion and Polly Morgan have both used taxidermy in their work while incorporating different formal presentations that are reminiscent of traditional natural history museum display modes for the animal-objects, allowing for cognitive and transcendental exchanges to occur within the moment of encounter between the viewer and the taxidermy. Whereas nineteenth and early twentieth century natural history museums used artifice and illusion to create dioramas in which to situate the animal-object,⁸² these two artists have created taxidermy art that challenge modalities of display through subversion by dismantling the traditional elements inherent in museum display and inserting the language⁸³ of the animal-object as an ethereal dimension that allows the spectator to be a critical agent in the encounter of its Otherness. Dion's work succeeds in deconstructing the diorama to expose its aesthetic charade, highlighting the taxidermy as material object, a cultural,

social, and historical signifier that has fulfilled a range of desires through its placement and myriad of (re)locations. By situating the taxidermy within the museum space, unconstrained by the typical walls of the traditional diorama, the installation becomes a location for self/cultural-reflection wherein the "thingness" of the animal-object is emphasized through the "experiential narrative."⁸⁴ What results is an encounter where the viewer sees through the object to consider the complex network of cultural and historical meanings associated with it.⁸⁵ This critical participation creates a zone for the viewer to "become animal"⁸⁶ within the context of Guattari and Deleuze, who express that this moment occurs when the spectator can discern the language of the animal/Other/object, when it is finally encountered as a thing.⁸⁷ Morgan succeeds in creating a work which also subverts traditional natural museum display modes

of taxidermy, firstly by representing the animal-object in a state of death, which contrasts the usual intention of taxidermists to imitate liveliness, and secondly through her use of the bell jar, classically associated with Victorian display of taxidermy. In both works the “embodied thingness”⁸⁸ of the taxidermy is accentuated through the display and formal devices, Dion’s as a dismantled diorama in transit displacing the ‘animal-object’ from the synthetic natural museum habitat, and Morgan’s, where the bell jar is unapologetically displaying the animal’s death, forcing the viewer to see through the artifice of traditional displays of nature and to understand taxidermy as a material negotiator of this illusion.

Endnotes

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- 3 Stephanie S. Turner, “Relocating ‘Stuffed’ Animals: Photographic Remediation of Natural History Taxidermy,” *Humanimalia* 4 (2013): 1.
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- 5 Rachel Poliquin, “The Matter and Meaning of Museum Taxidermy,” *Museum and Society* 6 (2008): 126.
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- 39 Ibid.
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- 41 Joanna Marsh, "A Conversation with Mark Dion," *American Art* 23 (2009): 37.
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- 43 Ibid., 40.
- 44 Lawlor, "Following the Rats." 173.
- 45 Christoph Cox, "Of Humans, Animals and Monsters," *Becoming Animal: Contemporary Art in the Animal Kingdom*, curated by Nato Thoma (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005): 23.
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- 49 Lawlor, "Following the Rats," 183.
- 50 Poliquin, "The Matter and Meaning," 129.
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- 55 Poliquin, "The Matter and Meaning," 129.
- 56 Turner, "Relocating 'Stuffed' Animals," 5.
- 57 Anthony Haden-Guest, "Polly Morgan's Peaceable Kingdom," in *Polly Morgan: Psychopomps* (Haunch of Venison: 2010): 8.
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- 68 Abram, "The Real in its Wonder," 268-269.
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