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Exploring the Spectrum of Museum Taxidermy

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ABSTRACT

Animals, Artists, and Authenticity: Exploring the Spectrum of Museum Taxidermy **Elizabeth Andres**

When does taxidermy become “art” instead of “natural history”? When does a taxidermy specimen transition from being an “animal” to an “object”? Are these categories mutually exclusive? This thesis explores these questions and seeks to demonstrate that all taxidermy involves artistic illusion, and the differences in how we interpret that illusion are dependent on the context in which it is encountered. Using the idea of an artistic spectrum of taxidermy as a framework, we can explore how different types of taxidermy fall along the spectrum from highly naturalistic to more explicitly artistic. The more naturalistic a work appears, the less visible is the artist who created it. The more visible the artist, the more we are reminded that what we are looking at is merely a construct of nature, a once living creature which is now dead, yet which still possesses power as an authentic or “real” being. After an initial discussion of the concepts of nature, death, and authenticity, this thesis travels along the spectrum of taxidermy: starting with traditional habitat dioramas and vintage dramatic scenes; moving through reconstructions of rare, extinct, and fantastical creatures; and concluding with several examples of contemporary artists working with taxidermy in compelling new ways. Additional insight is provided through individual interviews conducted with museum taxidermists and taxidermy artists, as well as via an online survey assessing people’s attitudes toward taxidermy before and after participating in a visual slide show exposing them to a wide range of taxidermy creations. This project seeks to break down barriers erected by the false dichotomy between art and science, and to expand our understanding of how nature can be represented and reflected in museums through the art of taxidermy.

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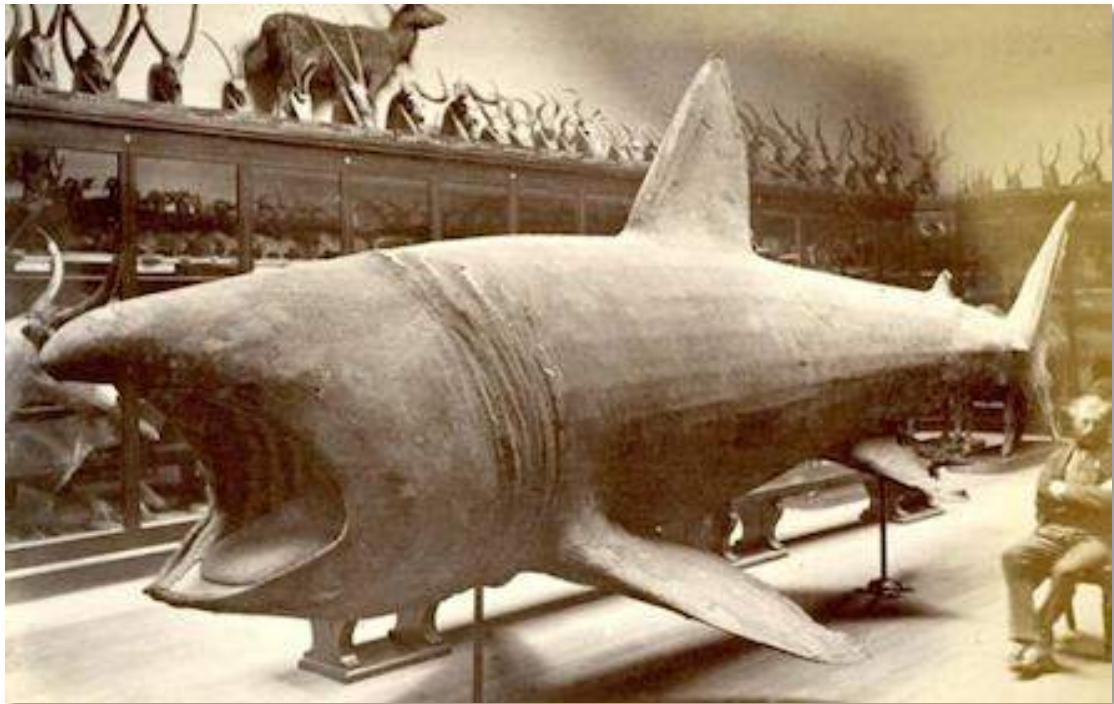


Fig 1: Shark and attendant at the British Museum, 1875



Fig 2: The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living, Damien Hirst, 1991

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is not about sharks. Nor is it about the history of preserved specimens in museum collections, or the artwork of Young British Artists of the 1990s. Rather, the two images above are intended to provoke a discussion about context, and the different meanings that emerge when we exhibit the bodies of once living animals in natural history museums versus art museums. When does taxidermy become “art” instead of “natural history”? Are these categories mutually exclusive? This thesis explores these questions and aims to demonstrate that all taxidermy involves artistic illusion, and the differences in how we interpret that illusion are dependent on the environment in which it is encountered.

When early European museum collections were taking shape in the form of cabinets of curiosities between the 16th and 18th centuries, there was no strict division between art and science¹. Items of wonder were collected from around the world, and it was common practice to display artworks and cultural objects alongside natural history specimens. In fact the concepts of “artifact” and “specimen” did not emerge as distinct categories until the early 1900s, when the nature/culture dichotomy took hold in western culture².

The first shark depicted above was in the British Museum’s collection until 1963 when London’s Natural History Museum became an independent institution, allowing the museums to focus respectively on art and natural history. (Figure 1) It is now common practice for museums to specialize in only one of these disciplines, and the types of objects they display, and the stories those objects tell, rarely overlap.

Although Damien Hirst’s *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* is not technically taxidermy, it “stands as a defining moment of public

¹ Ramljak, S. 2018. *Natural Wonders: The Sublime in Contemporary Art: Thirteen Artists Explore Nature’s Limits*. New York: Rizzoli Electra.

² Alberti, S.J.M.M. 2008. Constructing Nature Behind Glass. In *Museums and Society*, vol. 6, no. 1. Leicester: University of Leicester.

awareness of the aesthetic power of an animal in death”³. (Figure 2) It is the most infamous example of a dead animal being used for strictly artistic purposes, and continues to elicit strong emotional responses from viewers today. Hirst’s preserved animals are not markedly different from natural history specimens, yet they are displayed in art galleries and fetch art market prices. His work often looks like “science masquerading as art, a direct attempt to blur those boundaries”⁴, which is what makes him a useful starting point for our discussion.

Purpose and Goals

“All taxidermy is a choreographed spectacle of what nature means to particular audiences at particular historical moments”⁵. Even the most scientifically accurate taxidermic creations tell us more about the cultural environment in which they were created than they do about the natural environment they purport to depict. As such, taxidermy provides us with an opportunity to transcend the rigid distinctions between art and science.

This thesis looks at several examples of museum taxidermy in western collections, paying special attention to the motivations of those responsible for creating them—taxidermists and contemporary artists working with taxidermy—and illustrating that their goals are not as dissimilar as they appear. Starting with a review of the relevant literature and research methodology, the thesis then outlines the framework of an artistic spectrum of museum taxidermy, and provides additional context around encounters with nature, death, and authentic objects in museum settings, before examining several specific examples of taxidermy along the artistic spectrum.

At the heart of this project lies the question of reality, and how do artists and taxidermists represent reality through their work. Is a habitat diorama depicting an

³ Conklin, J. 2016. *Dead Animals or The Curious Occurrence of Taxidermy in Contemporary Art*. Providence, RI: David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University.

⁴ Milgrom, M. 2010. *Still Life: Adventures in Taxidermy*. Boston: Mariner Books.

⁵ Poliquin, R. 2012. *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

idyllic scene of black bears foraging for berries in Yosemite Valley an image of reality? (Figure 3) Or is an artist depicting the body of a dead deer on a white pedestal a more authentic—or at least equally valid—version of reality? (Figure 4) Exhibits in natural history museums are generally connected to the science-based belief that “there can only be one truth which must correspond with nature . . . The art object is different. It exists in a field which understands that reality is just one dimension to knowledge; subjective understandings are admissible”⁶. This thesis aims to break down barriers erected by false dichotomies, and to expand our understanding of how nature is represented in museums through taxidermy.



Fig 3: Black Bear Diorama, early 20th century, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County

Fig 4: Endless Plains, Polly Morgan, 2012

LITERATURE REVIEW

The history of taxidermy has been recounted frequently, and is closely intertwined with the rise of the Age of Exploration in Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries, and the emergence of England and France as colonial superpowers during the 18th and 19th centuries. The innovation of the habitat diorama by American Carl Akeley

⁶ Knell, S.J. (ed) 2007. *Museums in the Material World*. London: Routledge.

in the early 20th century is considered the apex of museum taxidermy, with a decline in its popular appeal from approximately the 1940s through to the modern era (Alberti, 2008; Desmond, 2002; Harraway, 1989; Hutterer, 2015; Kirk, 2010; Poliquin, 2012; Quinn, 2006; Wonders, 1993). Arguably the most thorough text on the subject is **Karen Wonder's** 1993 study of the history of habitat dioramas in Sweden and the United States. Her study is often referenced throughout the literature for the compelling connections she makes between the myth of the infinite American wilderness and the awakening of the environmentalism movement in the early 20th century, and how colonialism and notions of masculinity directly contributed to the way nature is portrayed in these historic habitat dioramas. **Donna Harraway's** 1989 essay "Teddy Bear Patriarchy" delves deeply into the power dynamics present in these most iconic of museum exhibits, deconstructing the idea that they represent natural ecosystems, and revealing them as monuments to man's insistence on dominating nature.

Rachel Poliquin's *Breathless Zoo* (2012) is the result of exhaustive research on all forms of taxidermy—hunting trophies, museum specimens, extinct species, medical anomalies, preserved pets, fraudulent creatures, anthropomorphic creatures, and taxidermy used in fashion and home decor—and explores the topic of taxidermy from a particularly poetic perspective. Her overarching theme is that "all taxidermy is deeply marked by human longing. Far more than just death and destruction, taxidermy always exposes the desires and daydreams surrounding human relationships with and within the natural world"⁷.

Many of the historical accounts discuss shifting opinions about the educational value of dioramas over that past two hundred years. Rader and Cain (2008) explore the distinction between research and education in the evolving identity of public museums. Sanders and Hohenstein (2015) discuss the value of habitat dioramas for

⁷ Poliquin, R. 2012. *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

helping children talk about death, and the benefits of sustained close looking with taxidermy specimens. **Sue Dale Tunncliffe**, with Michael Reiss and Annette Scheersoi, has conducted the most detailed studies to date focused on dioramas as educational tools, their power for storytelling, and the unique ways in which dioramas and taxidermy engage visitors in observation and support scientific inquiry (Tunncliffe & Reiss, 2000, 2011; Tunncliffe & Scheersoi, 2015).

Samuel Alberti has written extensively on the subject of museum taxidermy, including in *The Afterlives of Animals* (2011), where he examines the histories of individuals such as Martha, the last Passenger Pigeon; Dolly, the first cloned sheep; and ChiChi, a giant panda from the London Zoo; and how each of these animals took on a cultural afterlife in museum collections beyond their physical death.

Artists Bryndís Snaebjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson (2006) explored the cultural histories of thirty-four taxidermied polar bears across the United Kingdom, and how they transformed from biological entities into museum artifacts with layered cultural meanings. Here we begin to see the sliding spectrum from traditional taxidermy in a natural history museum to re-contextualization in a contemporary art gallery.

Taxidermy has seen a remarkable resurgence among young artists in recent years. Some of these artists are creating scientifically accurate specimens from a natural history perspective, and many are creating new kinds of objects altogether, which, at least so far, seem more at home in art galleries. At the forefront of this movement is the **Rogue Taxidermy** group, and Robert Marbury's invaluable guide to the field and its practitioners (2014). These artists draw inspiration from Victorian taxidermy to create works that challenges our ideas about how we relate to nature in the 21st century. Rogue Taxidermy owes a debt to the anthropomorphic taxidermy of Walter Potter and his peers, explored in depth by Michelle Henning (2007) and Pat Morris (2014). Kat Su's *Crap Taxidermy* (2014) also finds kinship within this circle.

Kate Milgrom's *Still Life* (2010) offers insights into the day-to-day lives of taxidermists, from museum professionals, to competing amateurs, to Emily Mayer, the taxidermy artist who supplies Damien Hirst with his animal bodies.

Jo-Ann Conklin's 2016 exhibition, ***Dead Animals or the Curious Occurrence of Taxidermy in Contemporary Art***, asked the question "What happens when taxidermy moves from the natural history museums and trophy rooms into the white cube of the art gallery"⁸. Giovanni Aloï (2018), Steve Baker (2000), Helen Gregory & Anthony Purdy (2015), Suzanne Ramljak (2018), Denise Xu (2011), have all contributed insights into how artists employ taxidermy to convey different ideas about ecology and conservation.

Sandra Dudley's *Museum Objects* (2012) assembles a provocative collection of essays exploring topics around museum objects, their authenticity and physicality, the value of "the real thing," and what objects represent within museum contexts.

There is an abundance of literature regarding our relationships with animals, how we perceive them, and how we represent them in art and culture. John Berger's *Why Look at Animals* (2009) and Nigel Rothfel's *Representing Animals* (2002) each offer rich food for thought in this arena. John Mooallem's *Wild Ones* (2013) explores our complicated relationships with animals, conservation, and notions of "wildness." Finally, the journal *Antennae* is an incredible resource for all manner of discussions about animals in art, including special issues devoted to taxidermy in 2008 and 2019.

METHODOLOGY

Two additional data collection methods were employed to expand upon the research topic: individual email interviews with museum taxidermists and artists working with taxidermy; and a digital survey designed for the general public. The

⁸ Conklin, J. 2016. *Dead Animals or The Curious Occurrence of Taxidermy in Contemporary Art*. Providence, RI: David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University.

goal for both methods was to provide additional insights into how taxidermy is created and experienced in natural history and art museum contexts. Thoughts and perspectives from artists and taxidermists are referenced and/or quoted throughout the paper where relevant. The survey findings are discussed in the “Research Analysis” section at the end of this paper.

Individual Email Interviews

Participants were selected based on the nature of their work, and their accessibility. I have the privilege of working with **Tim Bovard**, the last full-time museum taxidermist in the United States, at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. He and his protégé, **Allis Markham**, kindly made themselves available for interviews, and connected me with their colleague **Stephen Rogers** at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Initial inquiries were sent to twelve contemporary artists who incorporate taxidermy in their work. Six artists responded to my inquiry and were available to participate in individual interviews via email (**Deborah Sengl, Jaap Sinke, Julia de Ville, Kate Clark, Mark Dion, and Travis C. de Villiers**). Each participant was sent an initial inquiry, a detailed “Information Sheet,” “Email Interview Sheet,” and set of fifteen interview questions. These documents described the nature and purpose of the study, how their feedback would be utilized, and addressed any ethical considerations. All participants agreed for their comments to be referenced and/or quoted in the context of this study. (Appendices 1a-e)

Digital Survey

The digital survey explored attitudes towards taxidermy in museum settings among the general public via an interactive slideshow exposing them to different types of taxidermy. Images included traditional habitat dioramas, reconstructions of rare or extinct species, anthropomorphic vignettes, and both naturalistic and highly modified examples of taxidermy created by contemporary artists. For each slide, participants were asked to rank the images along a spectrum of opposing ideas such

as art/nature, scientific/artistic, natural/artificial, authentic/illusion, life/death, ethical/unethical, animal/object, and natural history museum/art museum.

The survey was conducted in January 2020 via Survey Monkey. A link to the survey was shared with friends and colleagues via email and social media (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter), and many participants shared the survey with their own networks, resulting in a set of 645 respondents. All responses were anonymous, thereby protecting the privacy of participants. (Appendix 2)

AN ARTISTIC SPECTRUM

It is easy to think that we are looking at nature when we look at taxidermy, but in fact we are only ever looking at pieces of nature modified by human hands to meet human desires. Artists and taxidermists choose which animals to preserve and display, and which stories to tell through those animals. The pose of the animal's body and the expression on its face; the behavior it demonstrates; the details of the environment constructed around it; each of these is an artistic choice that conveys something about the cultural moment in which the specimen was created⁹.

If all taxidermy is to some degree an artistic illusion, we can consider the degree of that illusion along an artistic spectrum. At one end of the spectrum is the naturalistic taxidermy of the traditional habitat diorama. (Figure 5) At the opposite end of the spectrum is the highly modified taxidermy of many contemporary artists who often manipulate and distort animal bodies to express their ideas. (Figure 6) Between these two ends of the spectrum we can locate vintage dramatic scenes, such as *Lions Attacking a Dromedary*, with its detailed attention to anatomical accuracy infused with drama and violence. (Figure 7) Further down the spectrum we can place reconstructions of rare and extinct creatures which may be scientifically rigorous, but which produce things like a Dodo made from chickens and geese, pushing the limits of what we mean by authenticity. (Figure 8) If we accept the Dodo, can we also

⁹ Poliquin, R. 2012. *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

accept a unicorn made from dyed pony skins? (Figure 9) Is a contemporary artwork that incorporates traditional (i.e. naturalistic) taxidermy easier to accept than an artwork that depicts a bearskin rug pulling itself up on its front legs as if coming back to life to warn us about climate change? (Figures 10-11) And what of those dozens of bunnies diligently studying in their miniature schoolroom? (Figure 12) Considering where these different approaches to taxidermy fall on the artistic spectrum can illuminate many of the complexities inherent in our relationships with animals and nature.

James Perry Wilson, the muralist who created many of the backgrounds for the dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) described his work with the phrase *arts celare artem (art to conceal art)*, meaning that the diorama artist seeks to replicate nature so accurately that the artist's hand disappears¹⁰. The more naturalistic a piece of taxidermy is, the less likely we are to think of the artist who made it. Indeed, it could be considered the mark of highest achievement for a diorama artist if the viewer is so transported by the scene in front of them, so taken in by the illusion, that they forget the artist completely. We may feel as if we are looking at nature directly, and thus any message the artist is hoping to convey is less likely to be questioned and more likely to be accepted as "truth."

The believability of taxidermy is directly tied to its quality. While a well-made work of taxidermy allows us to suspend our disbelief, a poorly made work of taxidermy will immediately shatter the illusion of reality. The less natural the taxidermy appears, the more visible the artist becomes. The impression that we are looking at nature is quickly replaced with an awareness of death, followed by questions of ethics and what is, and is not, an acceptable use of an animal's body. "Regular taxidermy endeavors to give the illusion of life to the non-living, but crappy

¹⁰ Quinn, S. 2006. *Windows on Nature: The Great Habitat Dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

taxidermy highlights the subject's state of death due to the animal being contextualized in a completely surreal or absurd way"¹¹.



Fig 5: Dall Sheep Diorama, early 20th century, Carnegie Museum of Natural History

Fig 6: Capricorn, Sarina Brewer, 2004



Fig 7: Lions Attacking a Dromedary, Jules Verreaux, 1867

¹¹ Su, K. 2014. *Crap Taxidermy*. New York: Crown Publishing Group.



Fig 8: Reconstruction of a Dodo, Natural History Museum, Berlin, early 20th century

Fig 9: The Child's Dream, Damien Hirst, 2008



Fig 10: Something Wicked This Way Comes, Julia de Ville, 2018



Fig 11: We Dreamt Deaf, Nicholas Galanin, 2019



Fig 12: Rabbit's Village School, Walter Potter, 1888

ENCOUNTERS WITH NATURE

All taxidermy has a relationship with nature, which says more about the cultural context in which the work was created than it does about nature itself. Taxidermy is *constructed* nature, and once we realize this, we can begin to see the many cultural lenses that exist between the natural world and us¹².

The distinction between “artifact” and “specimen” was mentioned earlier, and becomes particularly fuzzy when it comes to taxidermy. *Taxidermy* means the arrangement of skin (Greek: *taxis* and *derma*), and consists of the mounting of the skins of once living animals onto sculptural forms with the intention of creating the illusion of life. It involves the transformation of a “specimen” (the animal skin) into an “artifact” (a human made object of cultural significance), thereby calling into question the boundary between nature and culture¹³.

The Myth of Nature

Nature is generally defined as the plants, animals, and landscapes that make up the world around us. It is the opposite of culture, thereby setting humankind outside of nature. While the natural world exists with or without humans, our *idea* of nature is a purely human concept. “When we look at nature . . . most of what we see is lines that we’ve superimposed there ourselves: taxonomic lines, legal lines, baselines of how we believe the world is supposed to look”¹⁴. We have ideal notions of what nature is and should be based on our own needs to classify, control, and understand the natural world.

During the Industrial Age, the western world experienced a great shift in how people engaged with nature. With the rise of modernization came a distancing from the natural world, which was accompanied by nostalgia for that lost connection. The late

¹² Alberti, S.J.M.M. 2008. Constructing Nature Behind Glass. In *Museums and Society*, vol. 6, no. 1. Leicester: University of Leicester.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Mooallem, J. 2013. *Wild Ones: A Sometimes Dismaying, Weirdly Reassuring Story About Looking at People Looking at Animals in America*. New York: The Penguin Press.

19th and early 20th century was a time when “every tradition which was previously mediated between man and nature was broken”¹⁵. As animals receded from our daily lives, we found ourselves longing for ways to reconnect with the natural world, and it is not coincidental that we see a rise in the popularity of natural history museums and zoos during this era¹⁶.

Dioramas historically provided a satisfying way for the public to engage with constructed nature. Although they may not always resonate with that same power for audiences today, the complicated relationships to nature that they represent still evoke strong emotions—both positive and negative—for many museum visitors.

Windows onto Nature

Traditional habitat dioramas are often referred to as “windows onto nature” because their extreme realism transports the viewer to a place where “Time has stopped. Birds soar in suspended animation. Animals gaze in perpetual fixed attention. Clouds hover motionless in azure blue skies. Behind the glass, all of nature is locked in an instant of time for our close examination and study”¹⁷. Here is nature captured and suspended for our pleasure and edification through the art of taxidermy.

Stephen Rogers, collections manager and taxidermist at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, explains that, “Andrew Carnegie realized that all the steel workers and folks in Pittsburgh would never be able to travel the world so his motivation was to bring the world to Pittsburgh”¹⁸. Surrounded by steel and concrete, a chance to witness the beauty of nature inside the museum’s walls was truly a gift. Additionally, dioramas had great potential for teaching people about science and biology,

¹⁵ Berger, J. 2009. *Why Look at Animals*. London: Penguin.

¹⁶ Aloï, G. 2018. *Speculative Taxidermy: Natural History, Animal Surfaces, and Art in the Anthropocene*. New York: Columbia University Press.

¹⁷ Quinn, S. 2006. *Windows on Nature: The Great Habitat Dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

¹⁸ Rogers, S., personal interview, January 2020.

although they always excluded humans, framing us as observers of nature rather than participants¹⁹.

Artists Depicting Nature

Many contemporary artists explore our relationships with nature through their work. American sculptor Kate Clark creates hybrid taxidermy creatures with human faces as a way to “emphasize the characteristics that differentiate us within the animal kingdom, and importantly, the ones that unite us”²⁰. She subverts the typical hierarchy of man over beast, and instead presents us with “a balance between man and animal . . . forcing the viewer to reconsider our relationship”²¹.

Mark Dion is an American artist who has devoted much of his life to creating work that engages with museum practices and the construction of nature. “The whole idea of nature as something separate from human experience is a lie”²², he says, noting that taxidermy can provide a place for people to focus the anxiety and guilt we often feel about “our remarkably destructive relationship to the natural world”²³.

In contrast, Dutch artists Jaap Sinke and Ferry van Tongeren explore the pure beauty of nature through their work, divorcing it from any scientific or socio-political commentary. “Our work is not science based, but it does allow people to come close and enjoy the beauty nature has to offer . . . above all it is about the beauty of life”²⁴.

ENCOUNTERS WITH DEATH

Although most artists and taxidermists say that their work is ultimately about life, all taxidermy inherently deals with death. “That is taxidermy’s magnetism: it confronts

¹⁹ Tunnicliffe, S. D. and Reiss M.J. 2011. *Dioramas as Depictions of Reality*. London: Institute of Education, University of London.

²⁰ Clark, K., personal interview, January 2020.

²¹ Conklin, J. 2016. *Dead Animals or The Curious Occurrence of Taxidermy in Contemporary Art*. Providence, RI: David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University.

²² Dion, M. 2017. *Misadventures of a Twenty-first Century Naturalist*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

²³ Dion, M., personal interview, January 2020.

²⁴ Sinke, J., personal interview, January 2020.

viewers with both an animal's vital presence and the physical proof of the same animal's death"²⁵. Taxidermy has an undeniable emotional power due to its unique combination of beauty and death. Its stillness allows us to appreciate animals up-close in ways we never could with living creatures. Yet this closeness is only possible because the animal has died and been resurrected as an illusion of its former self.

Allis Markham is at the forefront of talented young taxidermists working today, and reflects that, "Humans have always had a complicated relationship with death. We are both fascinated and repelled by it. Taxidermy is the same way and that's what makes it controversial"²⁶. The strong reactions that taxidermy often evokes are directly connected to death. How did this animal die? Is its death justified if it can live on as an object of beauty or education, or in the name of science?

Tim Bovard, taxidermist at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County (NHMLAC), notes that although viewers are sometimes uncomfortable with the idea of taxidermy, the more they know about it, the less squeamish they become. Once they understand the process, and witness the care, and attention to detail and naturalism involved, their discomfort is replaced with appreciation²⁷.

The Illusion of Life

Taxidermy creates life from death, or at least the illusion of life. As the Austrian artist Deborah Sengl notes, "The freezing of the ultimate last pose of a former living animal has a great fascination. It shows the interface between life and death. This leaves hardly anyone untouched and most viewers can create a strong emotional bond"²⁸. We are drawn to the illusion of immortality, and attracted to the idea that time can be stopped and preserved in a moment of perfect beauty. "The animals in the dioramas have transcended mortal life, and hold their pose forever, with

²⁵ Poliquin, R. 2016. Taxidermy and the Poetics of Strangeness. In Conklin, J. *Dead Animals or The Curious Occurrence of Taxidermy in Contemporary Art*. Providence, RI: David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, pp. 61-67.

²⁶ Markham, A., personal interview, January 2020.

²⁷ Bovard, T., personal interview, January 2020.

²⁸ Sengl, D., personal interview, January 2020.

muscles tensed, noses aquiver, veins in the face and delicate ankles and folds in the supple skin all prominent . . . This is a spiritual vision made possible only by their death and literal re-presentation”²⁹.

Death and Resurrection

Some contemporary artists embrace the concept of death, and incorporate it directly into their work with taxidermy. Damien Hirst is notorious for his bold flirtations with death through art, and is one of the very few artists working with taxidermy who seemingly has no qualms with animals dying in order to be included in his artwork. Our discomfort with death, and the ethics surrounding dead animals, is an intrinsic part of what his art seeks to explore and expose³⁰.

Other artists, like the British sculptor and taxidermist Polly Morgan, have turned away from the illusionary nature of traditional taxidermy, “replacing it with an insistence on its very deadness”³¹. For Morgan, her taxidermy specimens are not restored to life, but rather are “resuscitated to their deaths,” preserved forever in the peaceful moments immediately after life ends, before rot and decay have a chance to set in³².

Loss and Remembrance

Ultimately taxidermy is an effort to preserve something that we value, whether for its aesthetic beauty, its educational utility, or for fear of losing it completely. Its poignancy lies in the fact that it is life preserved through death, compounded by our nostalgia for a mythologized closeness to nature that we fear we have lost and can never regain. New Zealand artist Julia de Ville expresses it eloquently: “Taxidermy is

²⁹ Harraway, D. 1989. *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*. London: Routledge.

³⁰ Gallagher, A. 2012. *Damien Hirst*. London: Tate Publishing.

³¹ Gregory, H. and Purdy, A. 2015. Present Signs, Dead Things: Indexical Authenticity and Taxidermy’s Nonabsent Animal. In *Configurations*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 61-92.

³² The Independent, *Death Becomes Her: Meet Polly Morgan, Britart’s Hottest Property*, 16 July 2010 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/death-becomes-her-meet-polly-morgan-britarts-hottest-property-2027383.html>> (accessed 8 March 2020)

a *memento mori* but to me this is interchangeable with *carpe diem*. If we can accept our own mortality, we can in turn celebrate the significance of life”³³.

ENCOUNTERS WITH THE REAL

Taxidermy offers us an illusion of nature, and an illusion of life in spite of death. Equally key to its power is the fact that all taxidermy must include real, authentic parts of once living animals. “In the skin, in the *dermis* of taxidermy, lies its authenticating ingredient”³⁴.

Authenticity

In a world that increasingly relies on technology and virtual interfaces, there is something powerful about encountering the “real.” Museums in particular are places where people can engage with authentic, tangible objects. Although we usually cannot touch museum objects, we can experience them bodily, by being in their physical presence. This provides us with a sensory experience that cannot be achieved in any other way³⁵. The physicality of an object can be just as important as the intellectual facts attached to it because of the personal, emotional, and sensory responses that a physical object can evoke³⁶. “To ignore the animal-thingness of taxidermy . . . is to disregard the very essence of what makes taxidermy loathed or appreciated”³⁷.

Materiality

Taxidermy has texture. Without actually touching it, we can perceive texture with our eyes through the close looking that taxidermy allows³⁸: the wrinkles in an elephant’s skin, the sharp points of a caribou’s antlers, the tensed muscles in a

³³ De Ville, J., personal interview, January 2020.

³⁴ Rothfels, N. 2002. *Representing Animals*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

³⁵ Belova, O. 2012. A Phenomenological Perspective on Visual Sense-Making. In Dudley, S. *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*. New York: Routledge, pp. 116-133.

³⁶ Dudley, S. (ed.) 2012. *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*. New York: Routledge.

³⁷ Poliquin, R. 2008. The Matter and Meaning of Museum Taxidermy. In *Museum and Society*, vol. 6, no. 1. Leicester: University of Leicester, pp. 123-134.

³⁸ Desmond, J. 2008. Postmortem Exhibitions: Taxidermied Animals and Plastinated Corpses in the Theaters of the Dead. In *Configurations*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 347 - 278.

lioness's haunches, or the softness of a wolf's paws in the snow. The materiality of the medium is a key aspect of taxidermy's appeal, and some contemporary artists have embraced it for this very reason. As Kate Clark explains, "The viewer still senses the material's quality, natural or artificial. This material—real hide—causes a visceral reaction and connection that would be missing if I used synthetic materials"³⁹.

The Rogue Taxidermists define themselves as a group of artists whose work displays "a renewed interest . . . in handcraft, emotion, and authenticity in reaction against so much detached, artificial, contract-built, elite conceptual art"⁴⁰. These artists frequently play with the idea of the "real" by making death more explicit, including elements of blood, guts, or decay in their work for a disturbing hyper-realist effect⁴¹.

What is Real, Anyway?

This begs the question, what is "real," anyway? The skin is the undeniably authentic part of taxidermy, the defining quality of the medium. Yet many other parts of taxidermy specimens are not real. Eyes, tongues, and teeth are always synthetic. Taxidermy artists frequently include cast molds of a primate's face and hands, for example, or paint in the color and texture of a bird's legs and beak. How much of an animal must be real in order for it to be a dead animal versus something else entirely⁴²?

Additionally, taxidermy animals are almost always shown engaged in charismatic idealized behaviors, as if posing for the camera on a dream photographic safari. "A male gorilla beats its chest . . . a number of distinct prey species mingle in a small area, a hippopotamus is found out of water in broad daylight, and so on . . . [we can]

³⁹ Clark, K., personal interview, January 2020.

⁴⁰ The ARTery, *Reckoning with "The Curious Occurrence of Taxidermy in Contemporary Art,"* by Greg Cook, 25 March 2016 <<https://www.wbur.org/artery/2016/03/25/taxidermy-in-contemporary-art>> (accessed 6 November 2019)

⁴¹ Desmond, J. 2008. Postmortem Exhibitions: Taxidermied Animals and Plastinated Corpses in the Theaters of the Dead. In *Configurations*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 347 - 278.

⁴² Marvin, G. 2006. Perpetuating Polar Bears: The Cultural Life of Dead Animals. In *Snaebjörnsdóttir, B. and M. Wilson. Nanoq: Flat out and Bluesome: A Cultural Life of Polar Bears*. Bristol: Black Dog Publishing.

note the slippage from ‘actual reality’ to ‘interesting presented reality’⁴³. With the exception of the Rogue Taxidermists mentioned above, animals are rarely shown bloody or injured, or even elderly. All of these aspects of “reality” are wiped away by the taxidermist’s hand⁴⁴.

Manipulated Reality in the Museum

Museums manipulate reality in order to tell the stories they think worth telling. This is not done to deceive audiences, but rather to present us with ideal versions of what we believe nature to be, and to inspire us through nature’s beauty⁴⁵. In the late 19th century the spectacle of museums was more pronounced than modern tastes allow. Exhibit designers strove to recreate nature using theatrical effects, and museum exhibits were in this way not dissimilar from wax museums and panoramas, which today we hold in very different esteem⁴⁶. Modern visitors expect to find “truths” inside museum walls, and museums are trusted to deliver a high degree of accuracy and authenticity in their exhibits. Spectacle and entertainment do not sit well alongside modern ideals about the scientific and educational value of museums. However, if we allow for more fluidity between these concepts of art and science, we may find that there is power in mixing the emotions with the intellect.

HABITAT DIORAMAS

Habitat dioramas are understood as a mixture of art and science. This may be one reason why they can appear anachronistic in modern museums where we have largely segregated art and science into separate institutions. Frederic Lucas, director of the American Museum of Natural History stated in 1927 that taxidermy “can only

⁴³ Tunnicliffe, S. D. and Reiss M.J. 2011. *Dioramas as Depictions of Reality*. London: Institute of Education, University of London.

⁴⁴ Desmond, J. 2008. Postmortem Exhibitions: Taxidermied Animals and Plastinated Corpses in the Theaters of the Dead. In *Configurations*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 347 - 278.

⁴⁵ Quinn, S. 2006. *Windows on Nature: The Great Habitat Dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

⁴⁶ Gruneberg, C. 2004. Life in a Dead Circus: The Spectacle of the Real. In Kelley, M. *The Uncanny*. Koln: Walther Konig, pp. 57-64.

be considered as art because it certainly is not nature”⁴⁷. Among the most iconic types of museum exhibits, dioramas are what most people envision when you mention museum taxidermy. They have become part of popular culture’s shared imagery of museums. For this reason, they form the starting point along the artistic spectrum of taxidermy.

A Brief History

Traditional dioramas, however artful, took a scientific approach to displaying nature from the very beginning. While European focused on taxonomic displays of taxidermy, museums in the United States embraced the narrative possibilities of the habitat diorama. As the public became increasingly aware of the fragility and impermanence of wild ecosystems, the habitat diorama evolved in response to a desire to preserve that wilderness before it disappeared, and to promote a sense of stewardship for wild places. Artists and taxidermists took great pains to represent every detail of a given scene with accuracy and precision, hoping to create a sense of having just stumbled upon an idyllic scene of nature at its finest⁴⁸. (Figure 13)



Fig 13: Watering Hole Group, early 20th century, Hall of African Mammals, American Museum of Natural History

⁴⁷ The Harvard Crimson, *The Art of Stuffed Animals*, by Denise Xu, 29 March 2011
<<http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2011/3/29/animals-taxidermy-nbsp-specimens>> (accessed 20 February 2020)

⁴⁸ Quinn, S. 2006. *Windows on Nature: The Great Habitat Dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

Carl Akeley is credited with perfecting the habitat diorama as we know it today. Not satisfied with stuffed animals and stretched skins, Akeley and his peers innovated new ways of creating sculptural forms based on precise measurements of individual specimens, and built up with clay, to create extremely naturalistic taxidermy mounts. Their work gave “scientific legitimacy to the new ‘artistic’ techniques of displaying zoological specimens”⁴⁹. As AMNH President Henry Fairfield Osborn noted in 1914, “In Mr. Akeley’s hands, taxidermy has entered into the realm of sculpture and art . . . [Akeley] is the first taxidermist to approach the art from the standpoint of sculptor instead of from the standpoint of filling out the skin”⁵⁰. Akeley remains a fascinating figure today because he embodies the many tensions within taxidermy, from hunter to conservationist, and from artist to colonial pillager⁵¹.

The Specter of Colonialism

Taxidermy in natural history museums is generally perceived as an objective display of scientific truth⁵². Here is a preserved animal or ecosystem, presented with such detail and accuracy, that it is as if we are viewing a photograph. One does not have to look far beneath the surface, however, to find that the truth is more nuanced.

The diorama emerged out of a sense of urgency to protect and preserve the rapidly disappearing American wilderness at the turn of the 20th century. They became “three-dimensional time capsules of vanishing landscapes”⁵³. While the dioramas did (and do) preserve an idealized vision of nature, it is important to understand that not only are we viewing a sanitized version of nature—an illusion representing the perfect construct of nature as we wish it to be—but that virtually every diorama also

⁴⁹ Wonders, K. 1993. *Habitat Dioramas: Illusions of Wilderness in Museums on Natural History*. Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell.

⁵⁰ Kirk, J. 2010. *Kingdom Under Glass: A Tale of Obsession, Adventure, and One Man’s Quest to Preserve the World’s Great Animals*. New York: Henry Holt and Co.

⁵¹ The ARtery, *Reckoning with “The Curious Occurrence of Taxidermy in Contemporary Art,”* by Greg Cook, 25 March 2016 <<https://www.wbur.org/artery/2016/03/25/taxidermy-in-contemporary-art>> (accessed 6 November 2019)

⁵² Alberti, S.J.M.M. 2002. Placing Nature: Natural History Collections and their Owners in Nineteenth-Century Provincial England. In *The British Journal for the History of Science*, vol. 35, no. 3. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 291-311.

⁵³ Milgrom, M. 2010. *Still Life: Adventures in Taxidermy*. Boston: Mariner Books.

carries the baggage of colonialism, and its accompanying violence and cultural biases⁵⁴.

Colonialism and empire building do not occur without violence and ideologies of dominance and superiority. Scholars such as Donna Harraway argue that the version of nature displayed in the dioramas from this period reflects an image of western man's control over nature, and the "natural order" he desired to see in the world. Akeley and Roosevelt would spend months trying to obtain the perfect specimen, which was invariably a male in the prime of life. Habitat groups tended to showcase nuclear family groupings of charismatic mega fauna in triumphal poses, mirroring the strength and fortitude of the men who had triumphed over nature in the process⁵⁵. The amassing of taxidermy displays reflected the reach of empire—conquering the "pure" and "virginal" lands of Africa and North America—and in this way "exotic animal skins were transformed into colonial propaganda," symbolizing the courage and vigor of the victors over the vanquished⁵⁶.

Educational Value

All that being true, habitat dioramas can transcend this darker history to a degree through their beauty and educational value. As the large American natural history museums were filling their halls with taxidermy specimens, the habitat diorama evolved from mere spectacle to the primary tool for communicating about science and nature to the visiting public⁵⁷. Nowhere else could people come into such close contact with real animals and learn something about their behavior and habitat, and the ecological interdependence of species⁵⁸.

⁵⁴ Gregory, H. and Purdy, A. 2015. Present Signs, Dead Things: Indexical Authenticity and Taxidermy's Nonabsent Animal. In *Configurations*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 61-92.

⁵⁵ Harraway, D. 1989. *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*. London: Routledge.

⁵⁶ Poliquin, R. 2012. *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

⁵⁷ Wonders, K. 1993. *Habitat Dioramas: Illusions of Wilderness in Museums on Natural History*. Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell.

⁵⁸ Milgrom, M. 2010. *Still Life: Adventures in Taxidermy*. Boston: Mariner Books.

Dioramas tell stories about biology, ecology, and conservation. They also provide focal points for visitors to tell their own stories, and create their own meanings. They encourage close and sustained looking, critical thinking, and dialogue. The details captured within a diorama are ripe for numerous forms of interpretation and story telling among all types of visitors⁵⁹. “Science alone could give accuracy without interest; art alone, interest without accuracy; habitat groups provide both”⁶⁰.

Diorama Artists Today

The Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County is the only museum in the United States that still employs a full-time taxidermist. Tim Bovard describes himself as a taxidermist, but also a sculptor, model-maker, exhibit designer, storyteller, naturalist, and diorama artist. Although most of the museum’s dioramas date to the 1930s and 1940s, Bovard notes that NHMLAC’s animals are more “typical” of their species than many museums which had closer connections to their local hunting communities and thus tend to display more “ideal” examples (i.e. trophies).

Bovard has created countless works of new taxidermy, and also maintains the historical dioramas. Most recently he updated the African Lion diorama by adding several lions in more naturalistic poses, and shifting the emphasis to the female lions and typical family behavior. The two females at the center of the scene greet each other with a friendly “head bonk,” while a male scratches behind his ear, and other members relax and play around the rocky outcrops of their savanna habitat. This new composition more accurately reflects lion behavior, and shows “cats doing cat stuff”⁶¹. (Figure 14)

⁵⁹ Sanders and Hohenstein 2015. Death on Display: Reflections on Taxidermy and Children’s Understanding of Life and Death. In *Curator: The Museum Journal*, vol. 58, no. 3, pp. 251-262.

⁶⁰ Lincoln, M. 1941. History of the Habitat Group. In *NHM Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 19-24.

⁶¹ Bovard, T., personal interview, January 2020.



Fig 14: Taxidermist Tim Bovard installing lionesses in the Lion Diorama, 2019, African Mammal Hall, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County

Allis Markham trained under Bovard and now runs her own business (Prey Taxidermy) creating and preserving works for museums throughout California, as well as engaging private commissions for film and television. Like Bovard, Markham strives to tell the stories of the individual specimens in her work, and to convey information about science and conservation by showing rather than telling⁶². Her taxidermy “falls in the middle of this Venn diagram of art and science. While she considers every piece she does art, her training helps her prioritize making museum-quality, anatomically correct work”⁶³.

VINTAGE DRAMATIC SCENES

Before the habitat diorama, most taxidermy was displayed according to taxonomic categories. Devoid of clues to habitat or behavior, taxidermy specimens were arranged in neat rows within their cases to display the range of diversity within each taxonomic family⁶⁴. Around the same time however, artistic taxidermy tableaux were being exhibited at the international expositions of the mid 19th century, and

⁶² Markham, A., personal interview, January 2020.

⁶³ Smithsonian Magazine, *Why Taxidermy is Being Revised for the 21st Century*, by Matt Blitz, 19 June 2015 <<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/why-taxidermy-being-revived-21st-century-180955644/>> (accessed 19 January 2020)

⁶⁴ Poliquin, R. 2012. *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

these works were full of drama, spectacle, and violence⁶⁵. They represent the next step along our artistic spectrum of taxidermy.

The most well known example of these artistic taxidermy tableaux is Jules Verreaux's *Lions Attacking a Dromedary* of 1867. (Figure 7) Originally created for the Paris Exposition of that year, the group depicts an Arab courier riding on a dromedary camel being attacked by two lions. The female lion lies dead beneath the camel's legs, while the male lion leaps up, its giant paws grasping the camel's body, and its snarling face lunging toward the Arab rider who stabs at the lion with his scabbard.

The drama and violence of *Arab Courier Attacked by Lions* stands in sharp contrast to the usual tranquility of the later habitat dioramas. This is not a scene of nature, although natural specimens are involved. "Simultaneously a work of art, a group of scientific specimens, and a cultural artifact," the work employs the realism of taxidermy for great dramatic effect⁶⁶. It is currently displayed in the lobby of the building that houses both the Carnegie Art Museum and the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, a fitting location for a work that could rightly belong in either type of institution.

Many museums in the United States are dismantling their habitat dioramas, which is an incredible loss in terms of preserving the contributions of the artists who created them, and the taxidermy specimens within, many of which represent rare species. Some of these museums are replacing their dioramas with a mixture of the old taxonomic display methods and more dramatic scenes like those described above. The Smithsonian Museum of Natural History opened the *Kenneth E. Behring Family Hall of Mammals* in 2003 with taxidermy specimens organized by continents, and only trace elements of habitat details. A central vignette shows two lions attacking

⁶⁵ Wonders, K. 1993. *Habitat Dioramas: Illusions of Wilderness in Museums on Natural History*. Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell.

⁶⁶ Lippincott, L. 2019. One Object, Three Histories: Provenancing the Dromedary. In Milosch, J. and Pearce, N., *Collecting and Provenance: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. New York: Rowan & Littlefield.

a cape buffalo, displayed in the round like a sculptural group, evoking a sense of violence and drama highly reminiscent of the work of M. Verreaux. (Figure 15)



Fig 15: African Lions and Cape Buffalo, 2003, Kenneth E. Behring Family Hall of Mammals, Smithsonian Museum of Natural History

RECONSTRUCTIONS

In both the habitat dioramas and the dramatic vignettes we see that art and science blend, and that a degree of artistic illusion is required in order to bring the dead back to life to suit the taxidermist's purpose. Our next step along the artistic spectrum deals with reconstructions of rare creatures, extinct creatures, or even fantastical creatures, and how these forms of taxidermy continue to play with our concepts of nature, death, and authenticity.

Rare Creatures

In addition to its historic diorama halls, the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County has several modern exhibitions that incorporate taxidermy specimens. In one corner of the *Age of Mammals* exhibition, which focuses on mammal evolution, sits a contemplative polar bear, its chin resting on crossed paws. This is one of Bovard's recent creations, and while it represents a "real" polar bear, it was constructed using pieces of skin from a 1960s rug, and an old trophy mount. It is literally hundreds of

pieces of skin glued to a custom mount to create the illusion of a single polar bear⁶⁷. When we look into the face of that bear we are not looking at an individual who once lived and breathed within that skin; we are looking at an artistic illusion designed to illicit an emotional response. (Figure 16)



Fig 16: Polar Bear, 2010, Age of Mammals, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County

Polar bears are highly endangered, and have become potent symbols for climate change. This means they are not readily available as taxidermy specimens. Museums are no longer in the habit of hunting large mammals for their collections, and instead rely on donations of specimens from zoos and wildlife rehabilitation centers. Either way, you are not likely to come across a fresh polar bear very often. Taxidermists must therefore become increasingly creative.

Contemporary artists Bryndís Snaebjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson explored the history of collecting and exhibiting polar bears in their exhibition *Nanoq: Flat Out and Bluesome*. Between 2001-2006 they conducted a survey of taxidermic polar bears in the United Kingdom. They located thirty-four specimens and documented each bear's individual provenance as a way to explore topics such as colonialism, human

⁶⁷ Bovard, T., personal interview, January 2020.

and animal relationships, and what it means when animals become objects. Unlike Bovard's composite bear, all of the bears in *Nanoq* are complete animals who lived as biological individuals, but who at the moment of their death—the moment of their encounter with humans—transformed into cultural objects⁶⁸. In the process, the bears moved beyond their value as scientific specimens, and accrued new meaning as reflections of human activity⁶⁹. (Figure 17)



Fig 17: Installation view, *Nanoq: Flat Out and Bluesome*, 2006

The polar bears discussed above have transcended their biological identities in the process of becoming cultural artifacts. The next example looks at an individual whose cultural significance is directly dependent upon his unique biological identity.

Lonesome George was the last Pinta Island tortoise. When he died in 2012, it was decided that he should be preserved and exhibited as a symbol of extinction and conservation. He is currently on view in a dramatically lit, climate-controlled gallery at the Charles Darwin Research Station in Ecuador. (Figure 18) Lonesome George is

⁶⁸ Marvin, G. 2006. Perpetuating Polar Bears: The Cultural Life of Dead Animals. In Snaebjörnsdóttir, B. and M. Wilson. *Nanoq: Flat out and Bluesome: A Cultural Life of Polar Bears*. Bristol: Black Dog Publishing.

⁶⁹ Poliquin, R. 2008. The Matter and Meaning of Museum Taxidermy. In *Museum and Society*, vol. 6, no. 1. Leicester: University of Leicester, pp. 123-134.

an example of “endling taxidermy,” which refers to creatures that have disappeared under the watch of humans⁷⁰. Other examples include the Great Auk and the Passenger Pigeon, and may soon include creatures like the Sumatran Orangutan and Black Rhino.



Fig 18: Lonesome George, 2012

Endling taxidermy presents the viewer with an interesting tension between the animal’s importance as an individual (the last of its kind), and its symbolism as a representative for an entire species whose importance is magnified through its loss. The physical presence of the animal is intensified by the knowledge that this is not just another Pinta Island tortoise; this is Lonesome George, *the last* Pinta Island tortoise⁷¹.

Extinct Creatures

The Musée National d’Histoire Naturelle in Paris has a gallery devoted to “des Espèces Menacées et des Espèces Disparues.” Low light levels and cool temperatures help preserve the precious specimens displayed here, including a Quagga (extinct since 1883) and Tasmanian Tiger (extinct since 1936). Visitors to the gallery describe

⁷⁰ Bezan, S. 2019. The Endling Taxidermy of Lonesome George: Iconographies of Extinction at the End of the Line. In *Configurations*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 211-238.

⁷¹ Ibid.

it as a haunting experience, with many “struck silent by the assemblage of these ghosts”⁷². Not only are these specimens extremely rare, but they also carry the extra weight of representing what we have lost.

The Dodo is an icon of extinction. The last living dodo was documented in 1688, and today we have only a handful of dodo specimens, including soft-tissue and skeletal material (see the Durban Natural Science Museum, the Mauritius Natural History Museum, and the Oxford University Museum of Natural History). There are no authentic taxidermy dodos because the species went extinct long before the science of taxidermy had been perfected. When we see dodos in museums, therefore, we are always looking at a reconstruction, which by definition uses the parts of extant animals “to create a scientifically accurate fantasia of an animal too rare to kill, or so long gone that no modern human has seen one alive. In other words, it’s fake nature at its most realistic”⁷³. The dodo at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology is made of chicken, duck, and ostrich feathers. (Figure 19) The so-called “Franken-Dodo” at the Natural History Museum, London is made from swan and goose feathers, based on paintings by Roelant Savery who depicted the dodo as much fatter and plumper than scientists now believe it to have been⁷⁴. (Figure 20) Are these dodos examples of science, or art, or a combination of the two?

⁷² Atlas Obscura, *All That Remains: A Haunting Gallery of Extinct Animals in Paris*, by Allison Meier, 2 July 2014 <<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/last-of-their-kind-photographs-of-the-extinct-taxidermy-in-paris>> (accessed 1 March 2020)

⁷³ Next Nature, *Animals Made from other Animals*, by Allison Guy, 7 September 2011 <<https://nextnature.net/2011/09/animals-made-from-other-animals>> (accessed 1 March 2020)

⁷⁴ Vice, *The Dodo Didn’t Look Like You Think it Does*, by Roisin Kiberd, 15 March 2015 <https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/vvbqq9/the-dodo-didnt-look-like-you-think-it-does> (accessed 1 March 2020)



Fig 19: Reconstruction of a Dodo, 1938, Harvard Museum

Fig 20: Reconstruction of a Dodo, 1946, Natural History Museum, London

Reconstructions of prehistoric creatures are the ultimate challenge for a taxidermy artist. When attempting to reconstruct an animal that has been extinct for thousands of years, a taxidermist is no longer preserving life but resurrecting it. Ken Walker is renowned in the taxidermy community for specializing in reconstructions. He famously created a Giant Panda called “Thing-Thing” using the skins of several black bears with different seasonal coats to capture the black and white coloration. And in 2005 he reconstructed the *Megaloceros giganteus*, or the Irish Elk.

The Irish Elk is one of the largest deer that ever lived. It roamed Eurasia during the Pleistocene, and is known to us through the fossil record and Paleolithic cave art⁷⁵. Walker studied an Irish Elk skeleton at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, and created detailed drawings and models based on those measurements. He then used his knowledge of anatomy and biomechanics to extrapolate the musculature, and referenced cave paintings for clues to the animal’s coloration. For materials, he worked with the skins of three white elk he hunted himself, and a set of fiberglass

⁷⁵ Milgrom, M. 2010. *Still Life: Adventures in Taxidermy*. Boston: Mariner Books.

antlers. His goal was to create a taxidermy mount that was scientifically sound, and that appeared so natural that “people who have studied these things their entire lives would believe that it is real”⁷⁶. The final piece won the “Best in World” award at that year’s World Taxidermy Championships before being exhibited as Deerassic Park in Ohio. (Figure 21)



Fig 21: Irish Elk, Ken Walker, 2005

Fantastical Creatures

If a taxidermist can create a long extinct dodo or Irish Elk using the skins of other animals, how much of a stretch is it to use those skins to create animals that never existed at all? In 18th century Europe, it was not uncommon for taxidermists to create mythical and hybrid creatures. Basilisks, dragons, and griffins, were popular parlor décor. When Europeans first encountered the platypus in 1798, people thought it was yet another piece of taxidermic fantasy, and initially wrote it off as a hoax⁷⁷. Our appetite for fantasy in taxidermy has changed dramatically since then, and it can be unsettling to encounter a taxidermy specimen of something we know not to be real. Damien Hirst’s *The Child’s Dream* (2008) presents a foal with a fake

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ LeMaitre, J. 2016. *Wonders are Collectible: Taxidermy and Tranquil Beauty*. Belgium: Lannoo Publishers.

horn preserved in formaldehyde (Figure 9). Sarina Brewer, of the Rogue Taxidermy collective, is known for her composite taxidermy, including griffins made from parts of cats, birds, and snakes, and chimaeras made from baby goats, birds, and fish tails (Figures 6, 22). These types of creatures currently only exist in art galleries, which leads us to our final section on contemporary artists working with taxidermy.



Fig 22: Obsidian, Sarina Brewer, 2012

TAXIDERMY IN CONTEMPORARY ART

In contrast to the naturalistic habitat dioramas at the beginning of the spectrum, contemporary taxidermy art makes little effort to conceal the artist's hand. Instead of scientific object, animals are turned into artistic subject⁷⁸, and utilized as vehicles for exploring issues around museum practices, death and mortality, and our relationships with animals and the natural world⁷⁹. They represent the endpoint of our artistic spectrum.

Many more women are involved in taxidermy today than ever before, resulting in more variety in how animals are depicted. Taxidermy has moved beyond the ideal trophy specimen, and the social hierarchies and colonial power structures evident in

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Gregory, H. and Purdy, A. 2015. Present Signs, Dead Things: Indexical Authenticity and Taxidermy's Nonabsent Animal. In *Configurations*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 61-92.

historic dioramas⁸⁰. Instead of attempting to dominate nature, many contemporary artists (including both men and women) are subverting what they perceive as outdated narratives about nature and our place within it. Animal bodies become metaphors, loci for the surreal, and political statements, in their hands⁸¹. A different ethical sense also prevails. Animals are sourced humanely, strictly following local and international wildlife laws. Many artists rely primarily on road kill, or “upcycled” taxidermy that would otherwise be discarded⁸².

Art for Art's Sake

It is nearly impossible to engage with the topic of taxidermy in contemporary art without encountering Damien Hirst. This is ironic because most of his work does not technically involve taxidermy, but rather specimens preserved in formaldehyde. Hirst does not preserve his animals himself, but works with artist Emily Mayer for all his animals⁸³. It is estimated that over one million animals have died for his art, including insects, cows, sheep, horses, and at least two tiger sharks, which were hunted to create *They Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991)⁸⁴. (Figure 2) These qualities separate Hirst from other artists discussed here, yet his work remains relevant for the way it provokes viewers to consider beauty and death side by side, and the ways in which he challenges the boundaries between specimen and art object by presenting viewers with real animal bodies in an art historical context.

Walter Potter and the Rogue Taxidermists

The anthropomorphic taxidermy of Walter Potter is in a class of its own. He created a private museum to display his charming vignettes of kitten weddings and rabbit

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Aloj, G. 2008. Taxidermy Chic: An Interview with Polly Morgan. In *Antennae*, issue 6, summer 2008, pp. 38-43.

⁸² Marbury, R. 2014. *Taxidermy Art: A Rogue's Guide to the Work, the Culture, and How to Do it Yourself*. New York: Artisan.

⁸³ Milgrom, M. 2010. *Still Life: Adventures in Taxidermy*. Boston: Mariner Books.

⁸⁴ Artnet News, *How Many Animals Have Died for Damien Hirst's Art to Live? We Counted*, by Caroline Goldstein, 13 April 2017 <<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/damien-whats-your-beef-916097>> (accessed 1 March 2020)

school houses, but these works were not created with the educational or artistic intent that we associate with public museums⁸⁵. (Figure 12) Although very popular with his Victorian peers, many modern viewers find Potters' work "increasingly odd, and even unbearable. It no longer seems to be about nature, but about death"⁸⁶.

One reason Potter's work may seem disturbing to us today is because Potter himself is so visible in each scene. The illusion of nature is dispelled by the presence of the artist's hand, thereby reminding us that these are little dead creatures arranged for our viewing pleasure. There is no sense that we have happened upon a natural scene of squirrels playing cards in the woods. The Rogue Taxidermists credit Walter Potter as a major inspiration for their movement, not because they seek to replicate his approach, but because they embrace the presence of the artist and the power of the uncanny to illicit an emotional response.

Rogue Taxidermy refers to "a genre of pop-surrealist art characterized by mixed-media sculpture containing traditional taxidermy materials used in an unconventional manner"⁸⁷. These artists value a return to craft, and maintain high ethical standards, employing taxidermy to tackle issues of conservation and human/animal relations, as well as to create works of often surreal and sublime beauty⁸⁸. Several Rogue Taxidermists have already been referenced in this thesis, including Deborah Sengl, Julia de Ville, Kate Clark, Polly Morgan, and Sarina Brewer. It is worth looking at a few of these artists more closely now that we have arrived at the end of our artistic spectrum.

Polly Morgan embraces the death of her subject, but her work is never gruesome. Many of her pieces highlight the beauty of death, or more precisely, the moment

⁸⁵ Morris, P. 2014. *Walter Potter's Curious World of Taxidermy*. New York: Blue Rider Press.

⁸⁶ Henning, M. 2007. Anthropomorphic Taxidermy and the Death of Nature: The Curious Art of Hermann Poucquet, Walter Potter, and Charles Waterton. In *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 35, pp. 663-78.

⁸⁷ Marbury, R. 2014. *Taxidermy Art: A Rogue's Guide to the Work, the Culture, and How to Do it Yourself*. New York: Artisan.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

immediately following death when a creature is at peace. “I liked the idea of having apparently dead birds lying on my windowsill at home but knowing that they’d never rot,” she says of *Dead Garden Birds* (2006)⁸⁹. (Figure 23) While earlier taxidermists tended to favor large, male, trophy specimens, Morgan is drawn to smaller, more delicate creatures like birds, foxes, and snakes⁹⁰. Her work has been described as a “magical realist depiction of mortality”⁹¹, highlighting the beauty of nature, the beauty of death, and the reality of how both can be manipulated by the artist.



Fig 23: *Dead Garden Birds*, Polly Morgan, 2006

In contrast, American artist Peter Gronquist confronts the idea of the trophy head on, repurposing existing mounts, and replacing horns and antlers with golden, gleaming machine guns. (Figure 24) His work references hunting and collecting practices of the past, highlighting the weapons we use to kill animals in the modern era while repositioning the hunted as the hunter. In a similar vein, Australian artist Rod McRae considers himself an environmentalist, and much of his work aims to motivate viewers to reconsider their relationships with other animals and the

⁸⁹ Aloj, G. 2008. Taxidermy Chic: An Interview with Polly Morgan. In *Antennae*, issue 6, summer 2008, pp. 38-43.

⁹⁰ The Independent, *Death Becomes Her: Meet Polly Morgan, Britart's Hottest Property*, 16 July 2010 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/death-becomes-her-meet-polly-morgan-britarts-hottest-property-2027383.html>> (accessed 8 March 2020)

⁹¹ Marbury, R. 2014. *Taxidermy Art: A Rogue's Guide to the Work, the Culture, and How to Do it Yourself*. New York: Artisan.

environment⁹². *Are You My Mother* (2010) puts into perspective the contrast between a “living” animal and a family member on display as a mounted head. (Figure 25)



Fig 24: Thompson Impala, Peter Gronquist, 2005



Fig 25: Are you My Mother? Rod McRae, 2010

Of the artists discussed in this thesis, Kate Clark’s work is perhaps the most disturbing for the way she juxtaposes animal and human within a single taxidermic sculpture, highlighting the “uneasy coexistence of man and beast”⁹³. *Licking the Plate* (2014) consists of an authentic kudu hide and horns, but with a synthetic human face. (Figure 26) The effect is uncanny, and invites us to consider ourselves in the animal’s skin. Playing with ideas of nature, death, and the “real,” these artists create taxidermy sculptures that are loaded with relevance and provocation for modern viewers.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.



Fig 26: *Licking the Plate*, Kate Clark, 2014

The Artist and the Museum

Of the many artists working with taxidermy today, Mark Dion is unique in the way he directly challenges museum practices. His work exposes the fact that museums are not neutral spaces, and that the decisions they make shape our understanding of nature and natural history⁹⁴. As a visual artist, Dion blends the worlds of art and science, highlighting the emotional power of the arts to create deeper connections to nature. "Science is certainly critical, but it doesn't have a monopoly on nature and environmentalism"⁹⁵.

Artistic interventions in natural history museums is a hallmark of Dion's practice. *The Tar Museum* at the Natural History Museum in Vienna (2017) juxtaposed stuffed and tarred animals on shipping boxes with the museum's historic taxidermy cases. (Figure 27) The blackness of the tar makes the animals stand out visually, and evokes memories of the destruction of recent environmental disasters. By highlighting the

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Dion, M. and Rockman, A. 2018. *Wondering Aloud: On Making Art in the Anthropocene*. In Ramljak, S. *Natural Wonders: The Sublime in Contemporary Art: Thirteen Artists Explore Nature's Limits*. New York: Rizzoli Electa.

death of these animals, Dion casts light onto traditional display methods that we are accustomed to seeing in museum contexts⁹⁶.



Fig 27: *The Tar Museum*, Mark Dion, 2017, Natural History Museum, Vienna

Fig 28: *Landfill*, Mark Dion, 1999-2000

Dion also seeks to demystify the illusion of museum dioramas as authentic views of nature⁹⁷. His revisionist dioramas present viewers with scenes that show our human impact on the environment, including animals that thrive in our wake, and which we often consider pests. *Landfill* (1999-2000) takes the form of a diorama within a shipping crate, and shows a massive heap of garbage being picked over by sea gulls, pigeons, and a stray dog. (Figure 28) “The setting of the landfill stands diametrically opposed to the Garden of Eden aesthetic that has been traditionally constructed in dioramas”⁹⁸. Instead of removing human impact, Dion makes it explicit, exposing the fact that all depictions of nature are constructs.

Taxidermy is powerful because it is grounded in reality. Real animal bodies offer a direct connection to nature, and to life through death. If the relevance of museum taxidermy seems to have waned in recent decades, perhaps artists can provide new ways to harness its power for modern audiences.

⁹⁶ Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Mark Dion, *The Tar Museum* <<https://www.mumok.at/en/mark-dion-0>> (accessed 15 December 2019)

⁹⁷ Erickson, R. 2017. Into the Field. In Dion, M. *Misadventures of a Twenty-first Century Naturalist*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

⁹⁸ Aloj, G. 2018. *Speculative Taxidermy: Natural History, Animal Surfaces, and Art in the Anthropocene*. New York: Columbia University Press.

RESEARCH ANALYSIS

As a final component of this thesis, a digital survey was conducted to assess attitudes toward museum taxidermy before and after a visual slideshow that exposed participants to a spectrum of taxidermy approaches. The slideshow was intended to build awareness, and also to provoke participants to think about museum taxidermy in new ways. For example, if we think that a traditional habitat diorama is “natural” and “scientific,” how do we feel about a reconstruction of an extinct dodo constructed from different animals? If we are comfortable with the ethics and educational value of the dodo, how do we feel when we see a “reconstruction” of a unicorn? Is it ethical to utilize a taxidermy polar bear to communicate a message about climate change and extinction, but unethical to display common rabbits in a schoolhouse vignette? For the purposes of this study I am less interested in how participants ranked the individual images, and more interested in how their attitudes may have been influenced by the slideshow experience (however the complete raw data is available upon request).

Attitudes Toward Museum Taxidermy

Participants were asked the same nine questions before and after completing the slideshow in order to assess their attitudes toward museum taxidermy, and to determine if the slideshow effected any change in these attitudes. The chart below shows the responses to each question pre- and post-slideshow.

Pre Slideshow	Agree/Strongly Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree/Strongly Disagree
Post Slideshow	Agree	Disagree	
Taxidermy is more nature than art	39% 37%	38% 43%	23% 20%
Taxidermy is more art than nature	20% 23%	45% 47%	35% 30%
Taxidermy is charming, and interesting from	60% 61%	26% 22%	14% 16%

a historical perspective			
Taxidermy helps us understand nature	84% 84%	10% 9%	6% 7%
Taxidermy helps us understand ourselves and our relationships with other animals	52% 66%	32% 20%	16% 14%
Taxidermy is antiquated and old fashioned	28% 25%	20% 21%	52% 54%
Taxidermy is beautiful	56% 58%	28% 27%	16% 15%
Taxidermy is creepy/disturbing/disgusting	28% 30%	22% 30%	50% 40%
I like taxidermy	56% 60%	28% 25%	16% 15%

Although we do not see a large shift in attitudes pre- and post-slideshow, it is fair to say that participants appear to be thinking about the subject of museum taxidermy in slightly more analytical and nuanced ways post-slideshow, as the following word clouds further illustrate.

Following each attitude assessment, participants were asked, “Are there any other words you would use to describe museum taxidermy?” This provided an opportunity for them to include thoughts or perspectives in addition to the very specific questions asked above. Although again, we do not see a marked shift in attitudes for most respondents, it is possible to identify some trends in each data set. Responses run the gamut from people who find taxidermy beautiful and fascinating, to those who find it macabre and repellent. Many respondents highlighted the educational and/or historic value of museum taxidermy, while others described it as old-

fashioned and unnecessary in this modern era of television and virtual reality. While some respondents revealed a fundamental lack of understanding about how and why taxidermy is created, many noted the power of seeing the “real thing” in person, that the perception of respect for the animals was extremely important, and that quality is a huge factor in people determining whether taxidermy is “worth it” or not.

Figure 29 shows the pre-slideshow word cloud, and we can see that words such as **creepy, informative, important, nature, sad, dusty, beautiful and up-close** are most prevalent. Second-tier words include *understand, useful, unique, realistic, art,* and *animals*, with a wide variety of other impressions sprinkled throughout.

Figure 30 shows the post-slideshow word cloud, and we can see a subtle shift in people’s attitudes. Although many of the same words appear, their relative importance and frequency is slightly different, with words such as **intriguing, beautiful, fascinating, interesting, artistic, sad, creepy, and thought-provoking** taking center stage. Second-tier words include *scientific, unique, important, complicated, weird, useful, art, and creative*.

The post-slideshow words indicate a slightly more nuanced level of understanding by the participants, with a higher frequency of words such as *complicated, provocative, evocative, and thought-provoking*, and words such as *macabre, strange, and quirky* receding further into the background. Although hardly conclusive, it is interesting to note that the three words that seem to hold relevance most strongly pre- and post-slideshow are **beautiful, creepy, and sad**, a testament to the complex emotions that taxidermy can evoke.



Fig 29: Word cloud showing attitudes toward museum taxidermy, pre-slideshow
Fig 30: Word cloud showing attitudes toward museum taxidermy, post-slideshow

CONCLUSION

While the traditional habitat diorama has always been understood as a unique blending of art and science, the potential for art to inform our appreciation of science and nature has not been fully utilized within museums. When we examine taxidermy along an artistic spectrum, as this thesis has done, we can start to see the benefits of breaking down the barriers that have kept art and science relegated to separate institutions. As we become increasingly removed from nature, “we require art that helps us reimagine our place in nature, revealing the interconnectedness of all things”⁹⁹.

The construct of pristine wilderness presented by dioramas is enchanting, but modern audiences require more. Studies by Annette Scheersoij found that museum visitors are especially intrigued by taxidermy dioramas that include cultural elements or evidence of human activity¹⁰⁰. This suggests that people are intrigued not only by nature, but also by the complexity of our *relationships* to nature. Traditional dioramas reflect our cultural attitudes toward nature, but the casual museum visitor often misses this because the artist has disappeared into the fiction of nature that the diorama presents. As the artist becomes increasingly visible, so too do the messages and narratives they hope to convey.

Natural history museums are interested in helping people form deeper connections to the natural world. Taxidermy as an art form can encourage—or even force—visitors to think more critically and examine their notions of “nature.” Contemporary art has the capacity to tell different stories about conservation and extinction, and to reflect more accessible and relevant truths about our interrelationship with nature.

⁹⁹ Dion, M. and Rockman, A. 2018. *Wondering Aloud: On Making Art in the Anthropocene*. In Ramljak, S. *Natural Wonders: The Sublime in Contemporary Art: Thirteen Artists Explore Nature's Limits*. New York: Rizzoli Electa.

¹⁰⁰ Tunncliffe, S. and Scheersoij, A. 2015. *Natural History Dioramas: History, Construction and Educational Role*. New York: Springer Press.

Creating more opportunities to exhibit contemporary taxidermy art in natural history museums “could make people re-see the museum”¹⁰¹.

The goal of this research project was to explore how blurring the line between art and science is easier than we often realize. In fact, it is occurring already in many different ways, notably in the field of taxidermy. By stitching together examples of taxidermy art along a gradual spectrum from what we usually encounter in natural history museums, to what we expect to find in art museums and galleries, this thesis has hopefully contributed something to such a discussion. As the artist Julia de Ville notes, “If there is a place for taxidermy art in a natural history museum, I would personally love to see that”¹⁰².

¹⁰¹ The Harvard Crimson, *The Art of Stuffed Animals*, by Denise Xu, 29 March 2011
<<http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2011/3/29/animals-taxidermy-nbsp-specimens>> (accessed 20 February 2020)

¹⁰² De Ville, J. personal interview, January 2020.

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APPENDIX 1: ARTIST INTERVIEWS

A) Initial Request for Email Interview

Subject: Taxidermy Research Project for the University of Leicester

Dear ARTIST,

My name is Liz Andres, and I am working on a master's thesis in Museum Studies through the University of Leicester that explores cultural lenses on museum taxidermy, and the relationships between art and nature that manifest in taxidermy displays. I'm also interested in breaking down some of the barriers that exist between art museums and natural history museums, particularly where taxidermy is involved.

As part of this project, I am distributing a short email interview to a selection of taxidermists and artists who work with taxidermy in an effort to learn more about your work, and your perception of how that work is viewed by the public. I realize there is a variety of information about your work available online, but I would love to hear directly from you if you have the time to participate in this brief interview process.

If you are willing to participate, please reply to this email to let me know. I will then send you the interview questions, and a brief participation sheet with all the information you need to know. **I hope to complete all interviews by January 31.**

Thank you for your consideration!

APPENDIX 1: ARTIST INTERVIEWS

B) Participant Confirmation Email

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an email interview associated with my master's dissertation project through the University of Leicester!

Your responses will be an important component of my research, but I know that your time is valuable. There are a total of 15 questions here (divided into "Artist" and "Audience"), but please feel free to provide as much, or as little, information for each question as you see fit. Some questions may not resonate for you, but hopefully some will elicit fulsome responses that provide insight into your work and the field of taxidermy art more broadly.

I hope to have all responses submitted to me by JANUARY 31, 2020. By completing and submitting this questionnaire, you agree that your responses may be interpreted and used for the purposes stated above; that any presentation of your responses will include your name; and that you are free to withdraw from the study by contacting the researcher named below any time before March 1, 2020.

APPENDIX 1: ARTIST INTERVIEWS

C) Artist Interview Questions

PART 1: THE ARTIST

1. How do you define yourself professionally?
 - a. Taxidermist
 - b. Taxidermy Artist
 - c. Artist
 - d. All of the above
 - e. Other (please describe)

2. Where is your work usually displayed?
 - a. Natural history museum
 - b. Art museum
 - c. Art gallery
 - d. Private collections
 - e. Retail/interior décor/film
 - f. Other (please describe)

3. What or who inspired you to work with taxidermy?

4. What do you feel are the most important skills you bring to your work?

5. Where do you obtain most of your specimens?

6. Do you work with historic taxidermy specimens or displays? If so, what are some of the advantages and challenges of working with pre-existing taxidermy?

7. Have you ever had the opportunity to work on an “endling” (an animal who is the last of their kind)? If so, what was the biggest challenge of such a project?

8. Have you ever constructed a taxidermy mount of an extinct animal, or an endangered animal, using other parts of other more easily obtained animals?

9. What are you trying to achieve with your work?

10. Is your work about life, or death, or both?

PART II: THE AUDIENCE

11. Taxidermy often creates strong emotions in the public (positive, negative, and everything in between). What do you think makes taxidermy so provocative and powerful in this way?
12. How do you feel when you encounter people who are uncomfortable with taxidermy? What do you say to them?
13. Do you consider yourself a storyteller? What kinds of stories are you trying to tell with your work?
14. Do you believe that your work has the ability to change how people see, understand, and/or relate to the natural world?
15. What do you think is the future of taxidermy in museums? Do you think this future looks different in art museums versus natural history museums?

Thank you so much for completing this interview! Your participation is GREATLY appreciated. Have a beautiful day.

APPENDIX 1: ARTIST INTERVIEWS

D) Email Interview Invitation



School of Museum Studies

E-mail Interview Invitation

Dear ARTIST,

I am a postgraduate student at the University of Leicester, and I am currently working on my dissertation for a master's degree in Museum Studies. My project has the working title "MUSEUM TAXIDERMISTRY: ART & NATURE," and my research seeks to explore cultural lenses on museum taxidermy, specifically the relationships between art and nature that inform the practice and display of taxidermy, and different approaches to taxidermy in art museum and natural history museum settings.

For the purposes of this research, I would like to invite you to an email-based interview, through which I hope to learn more about your work as a taxidermist/taxidermy artist, and how your work is displayed and perceived in museum settings. I would like to interview you because you are a highly regarded professional in your field, and I felt you might have particularly interesting insights into the practice and display of museum taxidermy in art museum and/or natural history museum settings.

The interview will consist of my sending an email with fifteen questions, which you will be kindly asked to answer by replying to my email. With your permission, I may then follow up with an additional email to ask a few further questions to clarify your answers as needed. You are welcome to contact me if you would like more information about my project or have any further questions. **I hope to have all interviews completed by January 31, 2020.**

The findings of this email interview will be presented in my final dissertation project to be submitted in spring 2020. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time before March 1, 2020. The research will be carried out in accordance with the University of Leicester's Code of Research Ethics, which can be viewed at <http://www2.le.ac.uk/institution/ethics/code>. If you have any questions about the ethical conduct of this research please contact the Museum Studies School Research Ethics Officer, Dr. Jennifer Walklate, on jaw72@le.ac.uk.

Material you provide as part of this study will be treated as confidential and securely stored in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016.

I will be happy to answer any further questions you might have regarding this interview.

I would be grateful if you could please, after reading the above information, reply to this email to indicate your decision regarding taking part in this study, by including in your

email the following statement: “I have read the relevant information about the project MUSEUM TAXIDERMISTRY: ART & NATURE. I understand that I have the right to withdraw at any time, and I consent to be interviewed by email by Elizabeth Andres. I request that my real name and institutional affiliation be connected with the answers/comments I provide [or, I request that my responses remain anonymous].”

Thank you,

Elizabeth Andres

APPENDIX 1: ARTIST INTERVIEWS
E) Information Sheet for Participants



School of Museum Studies

Information Sheet for Participants

Date: January 7, 2020

Project Title: MUSEUM TAXIDERMISTRY: ART & NATURE

Contact Address: Elizabeth Andres, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, 900 Exposition Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90007; tel: 213-763-3534; email: eea8@student.le.ac.uk

I am contacting you to request your participation in a research project I am conducting via the University of Leicester. If you are willing, your participation would consist of responding to a handful of questions about your work via a brief email interview. The following information sheet provides more information about who I am, the nature of the project, why I am undertaking this research, and how you were selected for the project. I would also like to inform you about how your data will be used and the protections of your privacy and confidentiality that are in place.

Who is conducting the project

I am a graduate student in the Museum Studies Program at the University of Leicester. I am also full-time staff in the Education Department at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. I have many years of experience working in art museums & natural history museums, specifically in education and exhibition development.

What is the purpose of the project

This interview is a key component of my master's dissertation project through the University of Leicester, which will explore cultural lenses on museum taxidermy, specifically the relationships between art and nature that inform the practice and display of taxidermy, and different approaches to taxidermy in art museum and natural history museum settings.

How you were selected

You were selected to participate in this project because you are a highly regarded professional in your field, and I felt you might have particularly interesting insights into the practice and display of museum taxidermy in art museum and/or natural history museum settings.

Your role in completing the project

I am distributing this interview to approximately ten different taxidermists/taxidermy artists. I anticipate it will take you between 10-30 minutes to complete, although you are welcome to spend more time with it if you like. I have designed the interview to be completed via

email for everyone's convenience. In the interest of both time and sustainability, I encourage you to simply type your answers into the form provided. Please let me know if you prefer that I mail you a hard-copy, however, and I would be happy to provide you with that along with a self-addressed-stamped-envelope in which to return the interview to me.

I am hoping that all participants can complete the interview and submit it to me via email by January 31, 2020. Your responses will complement my survey data and research into how people create, display, and perceive taxidermy in museum settings.

Your rights

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the project at any time before March 1, 2020. If you are uncertain or uncomfortable about any aspect of your participation, please contact the researcher listed at the top of this letter to discuss your concerns or request clarification on any aspect of the study.

Protecting your confidentiality

Your responses will only be used for the purposes of this dissertation project, and will not be published in any other context. Your responses may be quoted and/or referenced within my dissertation, and will not be anonymized unless you specifically request such anonymity when you submit your responses to me.

If you have any questions about the ethical conduct of the research please contact the Research Ethics Officer, Dr. Jennifer Walklate, on jaw72@le.ac.uk.

Thank you,

Elizabeth Andres

APPENDIX 2: TAXIDERMY SURVEY

The digital survey, titled “Museum Taxidermy: Art & Nature,” was created via Survey Monkey, and can be viewed here: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/699CF7R>. All raw data is available upon request.

MUSEUM TAXIDERMY: ART & NATURE INTRODUCTION

This survey aims to explore attitudes towards taxidermy in museum settings. The results will be an important component of a research project being conducted through the Museum Studies Program at the University of Leicester. The survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. Thank you for taking time to participate!

Elizabeth Andres
Museum Studies Program
University of Leicester

MUSEUM EXPERIENCE

First, please tell us a little bit about your experience with museums.

1. Do you currently work or volunteer in a museum?
 - Yes/No

2. If yes, what kind of museum?
 - Art Museum
 - History Museum/Historic Site
 - Natural History Museum
 - Science Museum
 - Zoo or Aquarium
 - Other
 - N/A (I do not currently work or volunteer in a museum)

3. How frequently do you visit art museums?
 - At least once a month
 - Several times a year
 - About once a year
 - Rarely
 - Never

4. How frequently do you visit natural history museums?
 - At least once a month
 - Several times a year
 - About once a year
 - Rarely
 - Never

5. When I visit an art museum, I expect to . . . (check all that apply)
- Have fun
 - Learn something
 - Socialize with friends/family
 - Engage with the exhibits
 - Touch things
 - Be intellectually stimulated/challenged
 - Be emotionally stimulated/challenged
6. When I visit a natural history museum, I expect to . . . (check all that apply)
- Have fun
 - Learn something
 - Socialize with friends/family
 - Engage with the exhibits
 - Touch things
 - Be intellectually stimulated/challenged
 - Be emotionally stimulated/challenged

ATTITUDES

Next, please provide some insight into your personal attitudes regarding museum taxidermy. Please indicate your degree of agreement with the following statements:

7. Taxidermy is more nature than art.
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
8. Taxidermy is more art than nature.
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
9. Taxidermy is charming, and interesting from an historical perspective.
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree

10. Taxidermy helps us understand nature.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

11. Taxidermy helps us understand ourselves, and our relationship with other animals.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

12. Taxidermy is antiquated and old-fashioned.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

13. Taxidermy is beautiful.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

14. Taxidermy is creepy/disturbing/disgusting.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

15. I like taxidermy.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

16. Are there any other words you would use to describe museum taxidermy?

SLIDESHOW #1

You will now be presented with a series of 10 taxidermy images and accompanying questions. Please use the sliding scale to record your response to each question.

1. For you, where does this image fall on the sliding scale between **art** and **nature**?
IMAGE: *Collared Peccary habitat diorama, 20th century, American Museum of Natural History, New York*
2. Do you think this image tells a **story**?
IMAGE: *Lions Attacking a Dromedary, 1898, Carnegie Museum of Natural History*
3. In your opinion, is this image more **scientific** or **artistic**?
IMAGE: *Reconstruction of a Dodo, Karl Kästner and Kwa Ja Götz, 20th century, Museum of Natural History, Berlin*
4. Does this image make you feel **happy . . . intrigued . . . sad/disgusted**?
IMAGE: *The Child's Dream, Damien Hirst, 2008*
5. To your eyes, does this image appear to be more **natural** or **artificial**?
IMAGE: *Still Life after Death, Polly Morgan, 2009*
6. Do you think this image is basically **authentic**, or is it an **artistic illusion**?
IMAGE: *Dead Birds, Polly Morgan, 2006*
7. From what you can tell, do you think this image is more **ethical** or **unethical**?
IMAGE: *We Dreamt Deaf, Nicholas Galanin, 2019*
8. In your opinion, does this image belong in an **art museum** or a **natural history museum**?
IMAGE: *Gambling Squirrels, Walter Potter, late 19th century*
9. For you, does this image represent **life** or **death**?
IMAGE: *Lonesome George, last of the Pinta Island Galapagos Tortoises, by George Dante, 2012*
10. Is this an **animal** or an **object**?
IMAGE: *Piglet, Julia de Ville, early 21st century*

SLIDESHOW #2

Let's try another round! You will now be presented with a series of 10 *different* taxidermy images and accompanying questions. Please use the sliding scale to record your response to each question.

1. For you, where does this image fall on the sliding scale between **art** and **nature**?
IMAGE: *Licking the Plate, Kate Clark, 2014*
2. Do you think this image tells a **story**?
IMAGE: *Are You My Mother? Rod McRae, 2010*
3. In your opinion, is this image more **scientific** or **artistic**?
IMAGE: *The Fallen Elk habitat diorama, early 20th century, Carnegie Museum*
4. Does this image make you feel **happy** . . . **intrigued** . . . **sad/disgusted**?
IMAGE: *Capricorn, Sarina Brewer, 2004*
5. To your eyes, does this image appear to be more **natural** or **artificial**?
IMAGE: *Concrete Jungle, Mark Dion, 1996*
6. Do you think this image is basically **authentic**, or is it an **artistic illusion**?
IMAGE: *Jaguar habitat diorama, 20th century, American Museum of Natural History, New York*
7. From what you can tell, do you think this image is more **ethical** or **unethical**?
IMAGE: *Obsidian, Sarina Brewer, 2012*
8. In your opinion, does this image belong in an **art museum** or a **natural history museum**?
IMAGE: *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living, Damien Hirst, 1991*
9. For you, does this image represent **life** or **death**?
IMAGE: *Rabbits' Village School, Walter Potter, ca. 1888*
10. Is this an **animal** or an **object**?
IMAGE: *From the Wunderkammer Series, Kimberly Witham, 2014*

ATTITUDES REVISITED

Almost done! Now that you have completed the main sections of the survey, please indicate your degree of agreement with the following statements:

17. Taxidermy is more nature than art.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree

18. Taxidermy is more art than nature.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree

19. Taxidermy is charming, and interesting from an historical perspective.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree

20. Taxidermy helps us understand nature.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree

21. Taxidermy helps us understand ourselves, and our relationship with other animals.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree

22. Taxidermy is antiquated and old-fashioned.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

23. Taxidermy is beautiful.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

24. Taxidermy is creepy/disturbing/disgusting.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

25. I like taxidermy.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

26. Are there any other words you would use to describe museum taxidermy?

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Your (optional) responses to the following demographic questions will be helpful in overall data analysis.

1. How old are you?

- Under 18
- 18 - 24
- 25 - 34
- 35 - 44
- 45 - 54
- 55 - 65
- Over 65
- Prefer not to say

2. What is your gender?

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to say

THANK YOU!

Thank you for completing the survey! Your participation is greatly appreciated. Have a beautiful day.

Survey Image Credits:

1) *Collared Peccary habitat diorama, 20th century. American Museum of Natural History, New York.* <https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/north-american-mammals/collared-peccary>

2) *Lions Attacking a Dromedary, 1898. Carnegie Museum of Natural History.* <https://carnegiemnh.org/tag/lion-attacking-a-dromedary/>

3) *Reconstruction of a Dodo, Karl Kästner and Kwa Ja Götz, early 20th century. Museum of Natural History, Berlin.* <https://artsandculture.google.com/theme/everything-you-ever-wanted-to-know-about-the-dodo%C2%A0/IQKCJWtqLqvEIA>

4) *The Child's Dream, Damien Hirst, 2008.* <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/246783254552216934/?lp=true>

5) *Still Life after Death, Polly Morgan, 2009.* <http://pelicansandparrots.com/2011/02/polly-morgan/polly-morgan-fox/>

6) *Dead Birds, Polly Morgan, 2006.* http://thedrawbridge.org.uk/issue_5/post_19/

7) *We Dreamt Deaf, Nicholas Galanin, 2019.* <http://blog.honoluluacademy.org/honolulu-biennial-artist-nicholas-galanin-withdraws-his-work-from-the-whitney-biennial/>

8) *Gambling Squirrels, Walter Potter, late 19th century. Photo credit: Marc Hill/Apex.* <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/picturegalleries/howaboutthat/8059876/Walter-Potters-Museum-of-Curiosities-bizarre-Victorian-collection-of-stuffed-animals-goes-on-show-again.html?image=5>

9) *Lonesome George, last of the Pinta Island Galapagos Tortoises, by George Dante, 2012. Photo credit: Liz Tormes.* <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/lonesome-george-the-giant-tortoise-preserved-in-all-his-glory/>

- 10) *Piglet, Julia de Ville, early 21st century.*
<http://www.juliadeville.com/julia-deville/press-publications/taxidermy-art/>
- 11) *Licking the Plate, Kate Clark, 2014.* <https://www.kateclark.com/#/new-page-92/>
- 12) *Are You My Mother?, Rod McRae, 2010.*
<https://crappytaxidermy.com/post/1670178225/are-you-my-mother-installation-by-rod-mcrae>
- 13) *The Fallen Elk habitat diorama, early 20th century, Carnegie Museum.*
<https://carnegiemuseums.org/magazine-archive/2016/summer/feature-558.html>
- 14) *Capricorn, Sarina Brewer, 2004.*
<https://www.sarina-brewer.com/introduction.html>
- 15) *Concrete Jungle, Mark Dion, 1996.*
<https://inhabitat.com/taxidermy-and-contemporary-art-collide-in-nevada-museum-of-arts-late-harvest-exhibition/taxidermy-3/>
- 16) *Jaguar habitat diorama, 20th century, American Museum of Natural History, New York.* <https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/north-american-mammals/jaguar>
- 17) *Obsidian, Sarina Brewer, 2012*
<https://www.sarina-brewer.com/introduction.html>
- 18) *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living, Damien Hirst, 1991. Photo credit: Prudence Cuming Associates. © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved, DACS 2012* <http://damienhirst.com/the-physical-impossibility-of>
- 19) *Rabbits' Village School, Walter Potter, ca. 1888. Photo credit: Pat Morris/Joanna Ebenstein.* <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/gallery/2013/sep/13/curious-world-walter-potter-pictures-taxidermist-victorian>
- 20) *From the Wunderkammer Series, Kimberly Witham, 2014. Photo credit: Redux Contemporary Art Centre.*
<https://www.charlestoncitypaper.com/charleston/from-recycled-roadkill-to-stuffed-squirrels-taxidermy-transforms-animals-into-art/Content?oid=4871742>

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