

Such Stuff As Dreams Are Made On

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An expanded version of an essay published as 'The Right Stuff' in *Modern Painters* (March 2009), 58-63.

Farcical

It is hard to imagine a worse degradation for a human being than to be reduced to be reduced to the condition of skin, the vital contents scoured and sluiced from the container, which thereby becomes no more than a sack, sock or pocket. But there is in fact a worse. For it was not enough for Guy Fawkes to have his entrails drawn out from his body and burnt, before his eyes, after being half-hanged, and before being quartered like a chicken. He must also undergo in perpetuity the indignity of being seasonally reupholstered, and publicly exhibited as no more than his sad, scarecrow self, at once exorbitantly plumped-out and pathetically slumping, that he might be there always anew, for the guying, and the frying. T.S. Eliot took Fawkes's condition as a defining one for modern people emptied of life and will: 'We are the hollow men/We are the stuffed men/Leaning together/Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!' (Eliot 1969, 83)

The word 'stuff' has undergone a singular droop in its fortunes. German 'Stoff' signifies material in general, and medieval and Renaissance English regularly referred to costly fabrics as 'stuffs'. But, for us, stuff is indeterminate mashed-potato kind of matter, matter in which it doesn't matter at all what kind of matter it is, matter that is just there to be there, to take up space. Something constituted merely of matter that takes up space is farcical, a word which derives from Latin *farcire*, to stuff (a memory of which survives in the term *forcemeat*). It becomes our modern farce via an unexpectedly circuitous route. In the Middle Ages, the plainsong chants for the Kyrie Eleison often involved neums, passages of musical elaboration which extended and ramified single syllables (possibly from Greek *pneuma*, breath or breathing). These passages prompted paddings-out of the litany, to fill the gaps, such as this from the Sarum Missal: 'Kyrie [rex genitor ingenite, vera essential] eleyson./Kyrie [luminis fons rerumque conditor] eleyson' - Lord [King and Uncreated Creator, True Essence] have mercy/Lord [source of light and originator of all things] have mercy'. Just as hoaxes and hocus pocus are said to derive from the parodies of the

Mass (*hoc est corpus*) muttered by tricksters and charlatans, so passages of comic business improvised by clowns, as well as comic interludes in general, came also to be known as *farings*, and thence any comic business that was ridiculous or empty of meaning or merit as *fardical*. The annual debasement of the Catholic Guy Fawkes therefore joins with a Protestant contempt for Papist pomposity and bombastic phrasemaking (from *bombast*, the cotton used to pad out breeches, therefore sometimes *bum-bast*), for both signify mere outward show, with no authentic interior.

Stuffed things may seem to countermand the bathetic condition of the slack or the flaccid, evacuated, but their erectile tension is factitious, for it is not their own striving life that imparts to them their tone and uprightness, but rather the unnatural compression of some matter the tendency of which is ordinarily merely to disperse. Stuffed animals are also commonly said to be ‘mounted’ (‘upholstering’ means ‘up-holding’). The tautness of a stuffed animal is therefore not the sign of inner principle straining for expression, but a merely mechanical resiling of some externally-imposed compression. Stuffed animals are in fact in most cases no such thing, and often in fact involve the construction of complex forms of internal armature. As early as 1820, in the first book in English devoted to the art of taxidermy, Sarah Bowdich felt called upon to explain that it was an earlier practice of packing larger animals like crocodiles with straw that encourages ‘the term stuffed, (*empaillé*) for which we have substituted that of mounted; it does not perfectly express the idea we would convey, but it is always more correct than the former’ (Bowdich 1820, 4). But the fantasy of the creature filled with negligible matter continues at work within contemporary usage.

All this makes the word ‘stuffing’ the disreputable and derisive accomplice to the more well-heeled and up-register ‘taxidermy’, which derives from *taxis*, ordering or arrangement and *derma*, skin, and appears not to have been used in English until Sara Bowdich’s *Taxidermy: or, The Art of Collecting Preparing and Mounting Objects of Natural History* (Bowdich 1820). Where taxidermy draws attention to the surface or visible outline of an object, stuffing alludes only to an indeterminate interior, an inessential essence. Taxidermy limns the singularity of the objects it offers for display: stuffing suggests seriality and substitution. Stuffed animals are indefinite articles, that come in job-lots – lions, rhinos, donkeys, finches.

Recent years have seen an unexpected rebirth of the art of taxidermy, as a resource for art. But such a rebirth is also necessarily and so purposely a still-birth, a balked resurrection. The art of taxidermy is an art that conceals art,

which aims to create something like a photographic sculpture of the animal, in which the animal's body is the raw material used to body forth its appearance. Contemporary uses of taxidermy constitute a kind of metataxis, a rearrangement of this arranging for the eye. In traditional taxidermy, it is the animal which is put on display; in the deployments of taxidermy by contemporary artists, it is arrangement itself, the taxidermic dispositif, that is on show: art upstages taxidermy.

Ostensible

But there is another sense in which contemporary taxidermy and the traditional taxidermy it exposes to view may be doing the same thing, namely in the fact that they effect and exhibit different a kind of surrender of the object to visibility. Most natural creatures exist in a kind of discretion, semi-concealment, the very opposite of the quality of ex-istence that Martin Heidegger characterised as a 'standing-forth' from a background. Taxidermic display strips away this quality of reserve, blending in, or holding-back, drawing forth the animal form as a kind of pure figure, rather than the dappled, fluctuant, mixed body constituted by the animal and its environment. Artistic taxidermy may in fact intensify this invidious exposure of the animal, exactly by laying it bare, but in the process potentially redoubling its reduction to the condition of being merely, entirely, à-voir, to be seen and had in the seeing. So one does not see the animal, but rather sees its being-seen, more than this, even, sees its entire being as no more than a being-to-be-seen. For many animals, skin, fur or hide is precisely what enables them to hide; the final and perfected victory of taxidermy is to deprive them of any possibility of hiding, precisely by reducing them to their hides. Dutch artist Katinka Simonse, working as 'Tinkebell', has provided a violently sardonic illustration of this principle in her *Popple*, a stuffed dog, which can be unzipped and its contents folded out to form a stuffed cat.

Some artists have responded to this condition with acts of superfluous covering that seem like comic attempts at reparation. Louise Weaver takes animal forms, often of taxidermied animals, and crochets tight-fitting sleeves and overcoats for them. This restores to them something of the possibility of withdrawing from sight that traditions of display brutally deny. Thus her *Invisible Bird* (1997), covered a stuffed Hoopoe bird with crocheted cotton thread, sequins and glass beads, to provide it with camouflage in its new white gallery habitat (Kent and Weaver 2007, 412, 413). Elaine Bradford's *Untitled (Peas and Carrots)* (2006) furnishes a taxidermied deer-head with a similarly otiose knitted woollen

covering, in green and orange stripes, along with tangled wire extensions to its antlers (Anon 2006, 5).

But in this one cannot but also glimpse or intimate the animal's escape, for the very fact that only its visibility can be seen, that it can be made out only in a seeming self-evidence that cannot itself be seen round or looked behind, puts something in the way of seeing (the obvious is ob- and via, it is right there, right in the way). The stuffed animal is veiled in its very availability to view, absconds in and from its occulting apparentness.

In one obvious sense, the sadness and the scandal of a stuffed animal is that it has been lifted out of its world, marooned in the new world that harbours it. The animal that is in its nature 'poor in world' as Heidegger puts it, is here doubly destitute, its world shrunk to a clump of twigs or square yard of ersatz savannah. The animal is poor in world precisely because it is too much at home, since there is an absolute and determined congruence, as between ball and socket, between it and its mooted world. Where in nature an animal's world is never thus given as a scene, but is rather always a habitat in the making through action and occupation – patrolling, nesting, defending, marking – here its world is pure epitome, all at once and once and for all. The stuffed animal is robbed of the world precisely through being installed; it has no world to live in precisely because it cannot live its world out, because it has been raised up into the starved synopsis of its absolute being-in-its-world. The stuffed animal has not been leached of its being, but rather made replete with it. Exiled into exemplary essence, it must now for ever lack, for ever be the lack, of existence.

Since the 1970s, as greater self-consciousness has grown regarding the violence involved in the display of animals, popular taxidermy has languished under the sign of derision and discredit. Not surprisingly, few of the artists who currently work with or incorporate taxidermy are inclined to take it straight or on its own terms. Perhaps, indeed, the taxidermied animal has become such a standard stage property in contemporary art because it can be relied upon to embody this kind of impropriety, as a commonplace, or locus of dislocation.

A number of artists use photography to effect an ironic displacement of taxidermy, perhaps in confirmation of the claim made by Annette Messenger, whose work of the 1990s, especially *Anonymes* (1993), which impaled 22 stuffed birds and squirrels on spikes, helped to initiate the revival of taxidermy in contemporary art, that, in preserving objects against change, photography itself already 'is taxidermy' (Messenger 1995, 112). Flavio Bonetti's *Natural History* series of photographs of the Museum of Natural History in Sofia offers images

of rhinos, antelopes, ostriches and bears in their display cases, their funerary serenity disturbed only by the small, incongruous objects that have been included in the picture – a live cat, at the feet of an antelope, a child's trainer-bicycle alongside the porcupine case (Costa 2007).

Susan Bozic photographs stuffed animals in sumptuous, rather theatrical antique interiors (Welch 2004). Northern Harrier (Hawk) (2002), from her Incarnation series, perches on the carriage of an Underwood typewriter, sharing the space with a pair of binoculars and a scroll wrapped in a ribbon. The hawk crouches with a fiercely proprietary air over the instrument, as though over captured prey. Where taxidermic displays typically reduce the animal to an exemplificatory role, here the hawk seems to have taken possession of the space of the photograph, rendering the seemingly-superseded instruments of observation (the binoculars) and description (the typewriter, the scroll) the mere signs of signmaking.

A number of artists have attempted to occupy this space of irony, in which the struggle of the animal to escape the ordeal of ostension becomes the spectacle itself.

Maurizio Cattelan offers cartoon-like animal fabulations. The squirrel who has evidently just done away with himself in *bidibidibidiboo* (1996) is richly ridiculous in a Tom and Jerry way, but the logic of the piece coils spikily in on itself. If a squirrel were really able to live the kind of doll's-house life we give to it in fantasy – precisely this kind of fantasy – it would very likely find it unbearable enough to want to die. Having despatched itself, it would, then, naturally, be available to be stuffed and mounted in just some such scene as this. Cattelan's taxidermied horse in *Untitled* (1996), shows us the outcome of a desperate and undignified gymkhana, in which a horse, perhaps attempting to leap out of the gallery, has ended up with its head stuck in the wall, like the mythical child in the railings. It is perhaps from the same stable as the racehorse *Tiramisu* which Cattelan stuffed and suspended from the ceiling of a gallery in *La Ballata di Trotsky* (1997) (when he recreated it for the Tate show *Abracadabra* in 1999, it was entitled *Twentieth Century*.) Cai Guo-Qiang's *Head On* (1996), shows a stream of 99 wolves launching themselves furiously and unavailingly against a glass wall (these figures were in fact made of adapted sheepskin rather than the bodies of wolves). We might say of all these figures something of what Ted Hughes writes of the Black Rhino, dying not just of human greed, but of the very infantile, aphrodisiac fantasy of their power: 'She is vanishing/Into a hallucination./She has blundered somehow into man's phantasmagoria, and cannot get out.'

Taxidermy has been driven in the past by the effort to preserve bodies from decay. In Europe, it has its origins in the funerary practices of mummification practised by the Egyptians. Contemporary artists, such as Damien Hirst, who employed taxidermist Emily Mayer to make two rotting cows' heads for his piece *A Thousand Years* (1990) and Erik Swenson, in his *Ne Plus Ultra* (2005), which shows the rotting head of a deer, use taxidermy to put decay into the centre of the frame.

The resurrectionist subterfuge of traditional taxidermy is also eschewed by Polly Morgan, who stuffs and mounts the corpses of animals. These animals are not restored to life, but so to speak, resuscitated into their deaths. Traditionally, taxidermy mounts the carcass of the animal, giving it not just volume but the illusion of uprightiness. By contrast, Polly Morgan's works all emphasise the dying fall of the animal's body, often precisely by means of the visible splints and supports by which they are raised up. In *Still Life After Death (Rabbit)*, a magician's top hat floats above the figure of an unresponsive white rabbit. In *Still Life After Death (Fox)*, a fox is snugly curled in an outsize champagne glass. In *Why Do We Wake*, a small bird is cradled in a spoon and, in *Mind Over Matter*, a rabbit is supported by soldered prongs, its muzzle drooping.

Polly Morgan is interested in the short period between dying and decaying, during which time, she told a *Daily Telegraph* reporter, the beauty of the animal's form becomes apparent: 'The wings aren't used for flying, the eyes aren't used for seeing, the beak isn't used for pecking... it just becomes an ornament' (Lane 2008). The works have been said to be defended against anthropomorphism, but it is not clear that 'ahh-how-sweet' cuteness is kept entirely at bay, especially in the miniature chandeliers which Polly Morgan rigs up for some of her lyings-in-state. Indeed, *To Every Seed His Own Body*, in which a long-tailed tit is lying on its side on a prayer-book under one such chandelier, seems to make quite explicit allusion to Walter Potter's egregious *Death and Burial of Cock Robin* cabinet, which congregated 98 species of stuffed British bird to illustrate the complete nursery rhyme: 'Who'll make his shroud? "I," said the beetle, "With my thread and needle. I'll make his shroud." ...Who'll be the parson? "I," said the rook, "With my little book, I'll be the parson."' (This was one of the pieces in a collection that Damien Hirst unsuccessfully tried to bid £1 million for when it was offered for sale in 2003.)

Perhaps the artists who have made the most serious attempt to use art as a critical displacement of taxidermy are Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, who spent four years between 2000 and 2004 attempting to track down every stuffed polar bear in Britain (they located 34), to investigate their

provenance and to photograph them in situ. Ten of the bears were also displayed, now lifted out of their contexts, in Spike Island in Bristol and a book, *Nanoq: Flat Out and Bluesome* (Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson 2006) brought all the materials together. Unlike other artists, for whom the stuffed animal is always a bodily witness, however dismal, or damaged, of an animal life that has been lived, before or behind its current condition of display, Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson aim to show the irreversible ‘“eclipse” of the “real” animal’ and its entry into a second ‘Cultural Life’, as the subtitle of their book, *A Cultural Life of the Polar Bear*, puts it (Snæbjörnsdóttir, Wilson and Byatt 2008, 34, 33). Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson work in the tradition established by the work of Mark Dion, which, on his own account ‘has never been “about nature,” but rather has been concerned with ideas about nature’ (Dion and Thompson 2005, 53), and has used various forms of research and installation to explore the ways in which nature has been construed and constructed through different kinds of display. A particular point of connection is supplied by Dion’s *Ursus Maritimus*, a piece which in its 1997 manifestation, showed a polar bear, rather poorly-stuffed and looking like a mangy Labrador, enclosed in a small puddle of oily liquid on top of a packing-case. This has been amplified into a series of photographs of polar bears in different museum settings bearing the same title. In another iteration, a polar bear sits in a ridiculously small tin bath with a ghetto-blaster held in its mouth; in *Iceberg and Palm Trees* (2007), the stranded polar bear now carries the burden of palm trees strapped to its back in a ridiculous sort of howdah, in a visual pun on the animal’s name which suggests the weight of global warming that is coming to bear on it.

Tropical

Where one of the ostensible aims of the taxidermy practised by naturalists and their institutions had been broadly taxonomic, that is to set out the differences and relations between different kinds of creatures, many contemporary taxidermists seek to reactivate a minor current of anomaly within the history of taxidermy, that employed taxidermic technique to create fanciful or hybrid creatures. Rather than asserting the specificity of species, taxidermy is now often the vehicle of thought- and eye-experiments in artifice and body-modification. The best-known of these is the series of *Misfits* produced by Thomas Grünfeld, in which literally stitched together heads and bodies of different species to create a series of exquisite corpses, which seem to be appealing to us for names – as it may be, the peakeroo (peacock’s head on kangaroo body), budgericat (budgie’s head, cat’s body), lambhound (self-

explanatory) – cowstrich (cow’s head on ostrich) and ostrookey (ostrich head, rooster’s body and donkey legs). The works certainly arrest but perhaps do not sufficiently detain, for we must wonder how far they succeed in exceeding their descriptions.

The eye occasions more occupation for the mind in the work of the Dutch group who work collectively under the name of IDIOTS – Afke Golsteijn, Ruben Taneja and Floris Bakker – and who effect compoundings of animal forms with fabrics, glass, silver and jewels. Whether intentionally or not, their name might be taken to evoke, not just stupidity or foolishness, but also the Greek root *idios*, peculiarity or singularity, which is at work in words like *idiom*, *idiosyncrasy* and *idiomorphism*, meaning with its own characteristic form.

Their works include songbirds fitted with gaily decorative winding keys in their backs and, in a sequence entitled *Industrial Evolution*, familiar birds ‘improved’ by long peacock-like trains decorated gorgeously with beads and needles. Taxidermy is only one of a series of techniques which spill out across what Daniel Dennett has called the ‘Design Space’ of nature and culture (Dennett 1996, 85-103). Desecration and decoration are often exquisitely sutured in their work, for example in *Corpse Bride*, in which a taxidermied vulture perches on the body of some indeterminate prey, dragging at its viscera, which are in fact made up of strings of red and white pearls. Despite the cool and glittering elegance of their Fabergé-like constructions, IDIOTS seem far from neutral about the interpenetration of the animal and human worlds, though sometimes we must rely on the title to supply the interpretative nudge, as in *No Title No Status*, which shows the head and shoulders of a bellowing calf emerging from a rug made of its own skin.

The most striking of the works produced by IDIOTS is *Ophelia*, which shows a contentedly-snoozing lioness, head poised snugly on paws, whose lower body tapers off into a series of bubbles of molten gold. The implied alchemy is palindromic – we may well imagine the animal being melted down into an industrial product, but might also see a miracle of form emerging from indeterminate matter, both alternatives perhaps contained in the dream of the lioness. The work’s title alludes to the death of Shakespeare’s Ophelia, as mediated by Millais’s painting of the subject, of whom the artists themselves intriguingly allege that ‘she takes her own life by using the weight of gold jewellery to drown herself in a pond’ (Anon 2006b). This is itself a transmutation of the description of Gertrude’s description of Ophelia’s death, which not only makes no mention of gold weights, it does not even suggest suicide, reporting instead that Ophelia falls into the water when a branch on which she is hanging flowery garlands snaps. Nor could Millais’s Ophelia easily

have supplied the idea of gold-assisted suicide; on the contrary, the conspicuous buoyancy of his Ophelia fills out Gertrude's claim that 'Her clothes spread wide;/And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up'. The mermaid has a distinctive profile in the history of taxidermy, since taxidermic techniques were frequently used to produce the alleged physical evidence of the existence of these fabled creatures, for example in the 'Stuffed Mermaid', formed by stitching together the torso of a monkey and the tail of a fish, that was put on show in London in 1822, and reappeared twenty years in Philadelphia when it was taken on tour by P.T. Barnum (Bondeson 36-63).

This tradition has recently been revived by the group of artists who trade as the Minnesota Association of Rogue Taxidermists. Its members, Sarina J. Brewer, Robert Marbury and Scott Bibus, use taxidermy among other techniques to construct fantasy or customised creatures, including griffins, flying monkeys, the jackalope (or antlered rabbits), the chupacabra (or goat-sucking monster) and the imaginary urban beasts, such as the tusked 'Nar-dog' of Robert Marbury. Other artists have built on the tradition known as cryptozoology, which investigates mythical or imaginary animals (Bessire and Smith 2006).

One may well wonder whether, in all these ways of inducing taxidermy to give a new account of itself, artist-taxidermists may in fact be repeating a move that is made by and within taxidermy as such. During its heyday, taxidermists and their clients indulged an arrogant impulse to play with the bodies of animals that finds its counterpart in some of the works of the more roguish and vogueish contemporary art-taxidermists. Rowland Ward, Britain's premier taxidermist during the Edwardian period, who continued trading until the 1970s, used up left-over animals and animal parts to confect popular novelty items like owls and herons mounted as fire-screens. 'zoological lamps' built around the bodies of eagles, owls and monkeys, inkwells made from rhino horns and horses' hooves (most notably those of the aptly-named 'Holocaust', who fell in the 1899 Derby), and, perhaps most familiar, and grimly emblematic of the taxidermic enterprise, elephants' feet made into waste-bins (Morris 2003, 84-6, 21, 127).

The most vulgar and nowadays deprecated form of taxidermy is the sporting 'trophy', a word that derives from Greek *troph*, or *stroph*, a turning, deflection (the trophy marking the enemy's reverse in defeat and exhibition). Even the word taxidermy itself has felt the tug of this current, for it is sometimes (for example in the current Wikipedia entry), dubiously glossed as 'moving skin', perhaps because the suffix 'taxis' is also found in words like *phototaxis* (turning towards light), *phonotaxis* (turning towards sound) and even *trophotaxis*

(movement in response to a movement). Perhaps contemporary taxidermic works are indeed apotropaic, aiming to effect in us an inward turning-away, averting of the gaze, or aversion to looking mounted from within it. If so, they are not likely to succeed, given how saleably ubiquitous taxidermy has become.

Steve Baker has influentially identified a characteristic form of 'botched taxidermy' in contemporary artistic practice, in which the result of the botching is that the animal becomes visible as a 'fractured, awkward, "wrong" or wronged thing' (Baker 2000, 54), and taxidermy itself becomes a phenomenon in which 'things...appear to have gone wrong with the animal, as it were, but where it still holds together' (Baker 2000, 56). In this way, the 'compromised being' of the animal allows it also to become a 'questioning entity' (Baker 2000, 54, 73). The artistic engagement with taxidermy does indeed seem caught up in a dynamic of damage and repair. Some artists, like Annette Singer, deliberately use taxidermy to open up wounds and exhibit the damage done to animals in effecting their apparent rescue from time (Aloi and Singer 2008). Here the visible wounding and careless repair of the animals is part of the effort to make restitution for a larger violation. In fact, taxidermy provides an uncomfortably literal enactment of the processes that Melanie Klein claims lie at the root of impulses both to destroy and to create. For Klein, the infant undergoes an early 'paranoid-schizoid' period, during which it is violently split between the comfort and satisfaction it derives from the breast and the rage and hostility it directs at the breast when it fails to supply that comfort. Klein proposes that a primary component of this rage at the absent or evacuated breast is the mimetic fantasy of 'completely scooping out, sucking dry, and devouring the breast' (Klein 2001, 7), as a punishment for its failure to supply inexhaustible plenty, a fantasy that is soon transferred from the breast to the inside of the mother's body (Klein 1932, 184). Most suggestive of all is Klein's suggestion that the breast might be turned in fantasy into a container for the infant's own poisonous rage, being scooped out and then filled with 'poisonous and destructive excreta' (Klein 1932, 310).

Taxidermy seems to offer an almost embarrassingly precise correspondence for these processes. Precisely because it is the body of a beast, and not the breast, the animal, which is so often taken as a substitute source of comfort for the child, can be made the victim of what Klein calls 'destructive introjection', that 'impetuous and insatiable craving, exceeding what the subject needs and what the object is able and willing to give' (Klein 2001, 7). But the body of the animal is also available, in a way that human bodies are usually not, for the act of reparation which the objects of art allow. If, as Klein suggests that 'the sculptor who puts life into his object of art...is unconsciously restoring and

recreating the early loved people, whom he has in phantasy destroyed' (Klein 1998, 335), taxidermy may be regarded as a kind of sculpture on living bodies. Taxidermy may be read, not as a making conscious exactly, but as a corporealisation of these unconscious fantasies. This means that the 'questioning entities' that taxidermic art brings about may have questions to ask of that art as well as of the traditions from which that art may claim or feign to distance itself. In no other arena of art, perhaps, do violation and restitution lie so close to each other. As Klein writes, '[t]he struggle with nature is therefore partly felt to be a struggle to preserve nature, because it expresses also the wish to make reparation' (Klein 1998, 337). But this means that, like Katinka Simons's Moebius-strip cat-dog, restitution may also further the impulse to violent incorporation, if only in art's institutional refusal to countenance any kind of containment or inhibition, even while urging it on others.

Enchanting

Rachel Poliquin, whose Ravishing Beasts website (www.ravishingbeasts.com) gathers together an impressive number of sources on the history of natural preservations, connects the interest in taxidermy with the 'temptation of enchantment' (Poliquin 2008, 6) and the revival and rehabilitation of the affect of wonder, which Descartes called the first of the passions. Luce Irigaray has influentially proposed that wonder 'beholds what it sees always as if for the first time, never taking hold of the other as its object. It does not try to seize, possess, or reduce this object, but leaves it subjective, still free' (Irigaray 1993, 13). More recently, Jane Bennett has explicitly linked the revival of wonder, described as a 'mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness, a sense of having had one's nerves or circulation or concentration powers tuned up or recharged' (Bennett 2001, 5) to 'the encounter with beings, including ourselves, who morph from one category of being to another' (Bennett 2001, 13), and the crossings and disturbances of identity characteristic of our new age of genetic and mediated mongrels.

Both of these proponents of wonder forget Descartes's warning (even though Rachel Poliquin takes care to quote it), that, far from relieving objects of our calculative intent, wonder can freeze the objects of our attention into mere occasions of affect, rather than prompting us to investigation. Contemporary cabinets of curiosity may therefore be seen as a way of making and keeping us incurious:

when it is excessive and makes one fix one's attention solely upon the first image of presented objects without acquiring any other knowledge of them, it leaves behind a habit which disposes the soul to dwell in the same way upon all other presented objects, provided they appear the least bit new to it. This is what prolongs the sickness of the blindly curious – that is, those who investigate rarities only to wonder at them and not to understand them [les admirer et non point pour les connaître]. (Descartes 1989, article 78, 61)

Enchantment and interrogation might seem like contrasting or even opposed kinds of response to taxidermied works, but Rachel Poliquin suggests a connection between the wondering at elicited by earlier displays of the marvellous and anomalous in nature and the wondering about which seems to be provoked by the more ironic uses of taxidermy in art and museum displays. She reasons that

if taxidermy is the use of animals for looking and the knowledge that comes from looking, it is no longer entirely clear what we are looking at....Animals are not fixed entities fully explained by the hierarchies of natural order, nor – either - by recent cultural or political discourse, but rather provocative forces, both ruthlessly physical and semantically ambiguous. (Poliquin 2007).

But our routine unease about turning animals, or each other, into 'objects' can lead to a cultivation of the merely curious or bizarre that is subject to just the same objection as Descartes proposed to the hypertrophied affect of wonder, namely that it subjectifies objects, filling them up with our fascination, rather than allowing them to elicit in us the self-evacuation of understanding. This renders taxidermied objects repositories of reverie, allegory and pedagogic affect – neither knowledge, exactly, nor out-and-out sensation, but that all-too-agreeable contemporary chimera, the shimmering knowledge-sensation.

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