

Alternatives to death

– An illustrators thoughts on the ethics
of the zoological display.

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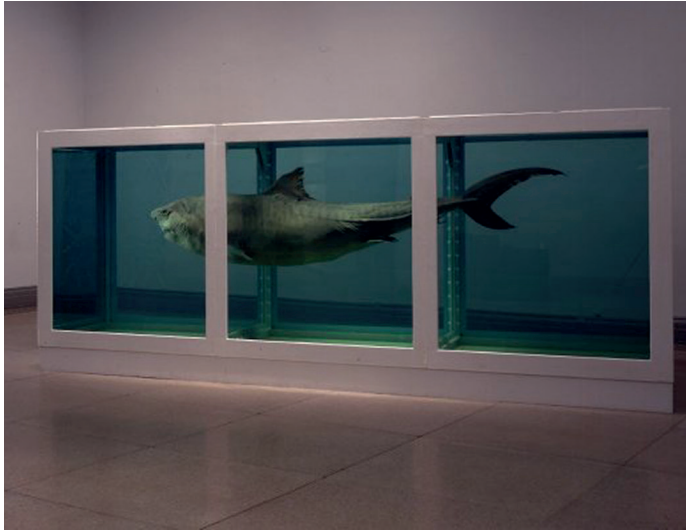
Everything that has ever lived will at one point die, but what happens after we die is not the same for everyone. Some death holds more emotional value than other, and this is something that becomes especially obvious within the walls of the Natural History Museum. While discussions surrounding the ethics of displaying human remains are constantly ongoing, few ask these questions in regard to animals. In recent times, the topic of using animals for the benefit of artistic expression has gained a great deal of both popularity and controversy, while non-human death in the context of natural history has been largely seen as a necessary evil in the search for knowledge. Within the museum space, animals are altered into visual representations of their living selves, while the fact that all these renditions of life, holding nothing but death, have been mostly ignored. Now that we are starting to understand that protecting living animals as well as ethically sourcing dead ones is a vital part of preservation, we also need discussions of when death is justified as an educational tool, and when alternative techniques and materials should be implemented.

The forgotten death

How and why we display death within the Natural History Museum is a debate that can be traced back to the mid 1900's. While educational value and the pursuit of knowledge was previously used to justify any showcasing of human remains, this is no longer the case. We have become aware that many famous museums have been populated by items procured during centuries of colonialism, and many such items have in modern times been returned to their countries of origin and to their families. Museums have sought out permission from countries and cultures to display existing collections, and as public opinion has shifted, what was once considered the origins of archaeology would now simply be referred to as grave robbery.¹ The debate about displaying human death and human remains is still ongoing, and with the displaying of contemporary humans, the aspect of consent is key. Yet in my eyes, something essential seems to be missing from this debate. What about animals in archaeological research and public displays? If we are having all these moral qualms with regards to the display of human remains, why do we not feel the same emotions with regards to the display of dead animals? A deer cannot donate its body to science and a fox cannot give consent to become taxidermy, yet we still dissect them, clean their bones and mount their bodies without a second thought. New advances in technology, materials and academic fields mean that there are now multiple alternatives out there, yet many museums still cling to the communicative potential of physical death.

Dead animals in art

In the context of artistic expression, the incorporation and use of dead animals has been both celebrated and criticised. In his essay *Animals in contemporary art: the ethical question*², Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer talks at length about the moral questions that need to be asked when using animals for artistic gain. Baptiste classifies the use of animals in contemporary art into different categories. In relation to dead animals, he implies that there are three main categories that artwork can be placed into. The first one being when the animal is already dead. Take for example the artist Jordan Baseman who in the 90s used animals that were already dead; and whose death was independent from the artistic experience, to create taxidermic sculptures. Many of these creatures were originally found as roadkill and can therefore be considered a form of *upcycling*. Secondly, there is the case of animals being killed for the artwork. Here we have examples like the tattooed pigs made by Wim Delvoye, and the hybridized, taxidermied animals by Thomas Grünfeld. Thirdly, and last of Vilmer's



Dead animals in art. Damien Hirst. Åpen lisens. fra Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection at the Brooklyn Museum.

categories, we have animals actively being killed as a piece of artwork. This last grouping is definitely rarer than the previous two, but there are still examples. In 2007, the Costa Rican artist Guillermo Vargas; better known as Habacuc, starved an already emaciated stray dog to death while it was tied to the wall of a gallery in Nicaragua.³ The piece resulted in public outcry and a petition with over 2,5 million signatures. At the same time, the artist decried the hypocrisy of the outrage since *no one cares about dogs in the streets*. Other pieces have involved the death of live animals but have created less public outrage. The piece *Helena* (2000) by artist Marco Evarsetti, placed ten goldfishes in Moulinex mixers, inviting the spectators to blend them. An animal defence organisation filed a complaint, but the artist was acquitted by the court who concluded that the animals were killed instantaneously and humanely. Another artwork famous for its use of real time death is Damien Hirst's piece *A Thousand Years* (1990). In this art-installation, a series of flies were left to breed, reproduce and ultimately die in a glass case to illustrate the cycle of life. In the previously mentioned essay, Jean-Baptiste laments that the reason for the outrage in relation to the stray dog, but not the fish and the flies, is because what we permit to be done to an animal in a contemporary art setting varies based on the specie's emotional proximity to humans.

Vilmer's thoughts definitely highlight one side of the human reaction when faced with animal death in a gallery space. We most definitely have an emotional ranking in relation to other species, but this is not the sole reason why Habacuc's starving dog resulted in outrage, while Damien Hirst's life-cycle in a

box had a different outcome. What Vilmer forgets to mention is human empathy. We have an adherent need to intervene when faced with cruelty performed by others. A starving dog dying in a gallery will result in a much greater emphatic response than flies going through their natural lifecycle. Although this need to intervene exists and is deeply felt by most humans, it is something that happens in an active situation. The same feeling of empathy does not always translate well to the more passive aspects of human society. Whether we like it or not, most countries in the Western world have a very hierarchical way of looking at death. We compartmentalise different types of deaths into different parts of this hierarchy. The death of a close family member will always hold greater emotional value than that of a stranger. While the death of a family pet will have a greater emotional value than the death of any wild animal. When observing a piece of art made from an animal, we are confronted with the same issue as when facing a taxidermic display in a museum setting. The negative action, the killing of an animal, has already been completed. The animal is already dead and our intervention isn't needed. The fact that you are observing the display within the walls of a gallery or museum also feeds into this passivisation, as the framework of the established institution makes the whole scenario feel natural. There is a lessened emotional response, and because of this, it is easy to feel like there is no need for critical thought.

Animal death; tradition or necessity?

One might argue that the traditional techniques like taxidermy and wet specimens are beneficial as educational tools in the setting of the Natural History Museum, as opposed to the cultural institution of a gallery. After all, observation is an efficient step in educating a wide variety of people about animals from a biological standpoint. Being able to identify one species and visually separate it from another, is something that resonates with museum visitors of all ages. The traditional ways of exhibiting animals work especially well for creatures covered in fur or feathers, and taxidermists who have honed their craft can create display-pieces with an incredible likeness to the living thing. It is also here that we encounter the most obvious divide between galleries and museums, which is naturally how dead animals are presented. The natural history museum holds itself to the standard of presenting objects, in this case animals, as they would look in nature. An idea that feeds into our human need for *seeing things with our own eyes*. Unlike an art exhibition where an animal might be altered, transformed or even obliterated, the creatures presented within the glass casings of the museum are supposed



Bad taxidermy hedgehog. Foto: Torill Sommerfelt Ervik / UiB

to emulate their living selves. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Bad taxidermy definitely exists and some renditions don't do the original animal justice. Amphibians are a great example of animals that might end up looking almost unrecognisable compared to what they once were. Taxidermied frogs, fish and other beasts covered in skin or scales have a higher chance of drying out, shrivelling and cracking, while as wet specimens, they might lose both colour and identifying characteristics over time. An alternative method that is often utilised is the incorporation of painted casts or models reproduced from animals. Unfortunately, there is no way to train a frog to sit still for twenty minutes while you create a mould, therefore the resulting figure still depends on the existence of physical death. This tradition of killing animals as a way to showcase knowledge is deeply ingrained in both our society and our history. During *The Age of Enlightenment* when humans started to explore the more distant corners of the world, animals suddenly became worthy of artistic study. Their value as illustrative subject was directly linked to what man could learn from studying them. Preserved animals were used as physical proof of what explorers had found on their journeys, but bringing back live animals and specimens often resulted in the creatures' death at sea. As a result, other ways of preserving them became necessary.⁴ People didn't care for the animal itself, what they wanted was a physical representation of human knowledge.



Illustration is another technique that is historically linked to natural science. Illustration is by definition meant to visualise and illuminate a message or an idea. In most cases, this refers to a drawing, photography or any other form of two-dimensional visualisation that is supposed to explain, compliment or interpret a piece of written text. It is not limited to books or printed publications, but can be incorporated in a broad variety of fields to help distribute information to groups or individuals. During the same period that taxidermy became a representation of human knowledge, illustration became another way of presenting scientific findings to the public at large. Although they might have been beautiful and intricate, many illustrations made during this time have a dark side. There is the example of the celebrated American ornithologist and naturalist John James Audubon, best known for his extensive publication *Birds of America*. This book included over 700 species of birds, all painted in exquisite detail. The morbidity of Audubon's publication is that every single bird painted, he had also killed.⁵ This makes it clear that educational tools within the museum, be it objects or two-dimensional representations, previously relied on the existence of the dead animal. Be it as part of the final product or as part of its process. This need for death might have originally stemmed

Modelling frogs by hand for a museum exhibit.
Foto: Simon Lode (2023)



Multidimensional illustration of European toad escaping glass dome
Foto: Simon Lode (2023)

from necessity, but this is no longer the case. As materials and technology have evolved, this same need is now tied to more capitalistic values. Objects are to be conceptualised, produced and consumed in a matter of moments, and it is easy to forget that this need for rapid consumption feeds into the previous need for death. It is faster and cheaper to utilise the dead animal than it is to look for alternatives. To put it bluntly, time is money and money is valued above non-human life.

The illustrated object

If this way of thinking is so ingrained, why do we even bother discussing the topic of alternatives? Animals die from a multitude of reasons every day. Is it such a big problem if one more dies just to be exhibited at a museum? When discussing the morality of displaying dead animals, the goal shouldn't be the elimination of the zoological display in its entirety. As with contemporary art, we need to evaluate when the implementation of death is actually necessary and when alternative display methods might serve a better communicative and educational purpose. If the goal of displaying an animal is the advancement of knowledge, isn't it then possible to visualise this knowledge without death?

Within the field of illustration, we often utilise the concept of narrative. In general terms, narrative refers to telling a story. Long or short, factual or imagined; told for any purpose. In Norwegian, we also have a term known as *Besjeling*. Mostly known as a literary device, it has close overlaps with the English word personification. In theory, *besjeling* means to give human skills, knowledge and abilities to something that is non-human. But the true wonder lies in the associations and context of the term itself. Directly translated, *besjeling* means to give something a soul. You are not just giving an inanimate object or animal a human or personal trait. You are bringing it to life, and with it you are bringing to life its own personal narrative. Illustrators are also experienced with creating characters, be it for a book or animation. Bringing a character to life, communicating their story and emotions is what we do. The same can be said for objects that exist beyond the two-dimensional. The multidimensional illustration, illustrations that exist as three-dimensional objects or sculptures, or that combine elements of two-dimensional illustration, for example drawing and painting, with three-dimensional elements like sculpting, can be implemented in a wide variety of settings. If you create an object or character in the form of an animal within a museum space, you still have to consider that animal's narrative. What is it trying to communicate? Is it simply a visual representation of a species,



Multidimensional illustration of European toad.
Foto: Simon Lode (2023)

or can this animal with its customised narrative communicate both biological information as well as a greater story? By carefully planning and analysing an object throughout its creation, we can alter the object's narrative to involve aspects of social, environmental or even historical challenges. If we were to incorporate multidimensional illustration into the natural history museum, we would be adding a technique that isn't reliant on death to the museums repertoire. You do not have to kill an animal when you have the time to study it gradually. Through critical observation, one can gain an understanding of scale, structure, texture and anatomy. The multidimensional illustration in this scenario becomes a form of activism, challenging the habitual choice that is death.

A collaboration between fields

Habitual might be the most accurate term when describing the general attitude towards zoological displays. It is the norm. It is what we expect. Although we are no longer dependent on the techniques that utilises death, we often forget to question why they are there. Throughout history, these techniques were a means to an end. If we had never obtained, studied and catalogued the vast number of species that exist on this planet, our understanding of the natural world might look very different. The rights and wrongs committed

in the past are what has led us to our current state, but this does not mean that the current state is final. Like any other public institution, the museum has room for development and growth. Actively choosing to not question tradition, and labelling existing techniques as a matter of fact, is the easy way out. By challenging the established, we make space for dialogue and new perspectives. Multidimensional illustration is just one of many techniques that has the potential to be incorporated in zoological displays, but as an overarching concept it differentiates itself from other methods by raising a challenging question. If man-made sculptures displaying life can function as an alternative to objects that depend on physical death, why are we not utilising them where it is possible? Does tradition and the status quo really outweigh an animal's right to life? Especially when the communicative and educational potential remains the same. Existing collections might never be completely replaced by illustrations and synthetic renditions of animals, and neither should they. It is through diversification and representation that advances are made. By collaborating between fields and engaging in discussions across academia, we avoid creating an echo chamber of ideas within our separate institutions. A natural history museum that embraces and utilises a variety of techniques has the power to engage an even wider audience. Paving the way for future dialogue in regard to how we as humans treat other living beings, not only in life, but also in death, in spirit and in concept.

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