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Present Signs, Dead Things: Indexical Authenticity and Taxidermy's Nonabsent Animal

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ABSTRACT: Contemporary art's recent turn to taxidermy as a sculptural medium aims both to unsettle earlier traditions of realist taxidermy and to allow new explorations of the troubling authenticity derived from the recycling of animal bodies. Developing an analogy between the preserved and mounted animal skin and Roland Barthes's realist account of the photograph as an emanation of the referent, this essay turns from art to literature to introduce a third, mediating term, *dermography*, in response to the insistent presence of skin in the questions raised by the new taxidermy. The authors propose the ontological category of the *nonabsent animal* as an aid to understanding a temporally defined *punctum* associated with an authenticity grounded in the index.

"They are the proof that something was there and no longer is. Like a stain."

—Diane Arbus¹

There is a turn in contemporary art toward using taxidermy as a sculptural medium, and consequently toward treating the biological material of an animal as an expressive substance.² Artists working

1. From a 1971 letter of Arbus to Davis Pratt, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, in response to a request for a brief statement about photographs. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/photography/8796532/Diane-Arbus-in-her-own-words.html>.

2. Rachel Poliquin's website at <http://www.ravishingbeasts.com>, along with her book *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012) offer a much richer and broader perspective on historical

with taxidermy can be roughly divided into two categories: those who work with existing museum collections that include historical mounted specimens, and those who have become skilled in taxidermy in order to create entirely new works. Artists working with existing museum specimens and artifacts deal largely with issues surrounding collections, object biography,³ and historical practices of acquisition that seem unethical by today's standards; those working in taxidermy as a sculptural technique have opened up their practices to a wider discourse that, while including the history of taxidermy, also comments on loss and longing, temporality and transience, and the role of the animal in contemporary art.

By choosing to work with taxidermy as a sculptural medium, artists raise a number of questions regarding the status of animals as objects. Can animals ever really be regarded as objects? If so, what kind of objects are they? Once they have been preserved, can these animals still be read as animals? Does it make any difference to the reading of these animals-as-objects if they are lacking the appearance of aliveness associated with the "resurrection" of traditional taxidermy, but have instead been suspended forever at the moment of death? According to Samuel J. M. M. Alberti, "the biological death of the living beast is the birth of the specimen."⁴ Once an animal is dead, its flesh becomes raw material in the hands of the artist-taxidermist and, although it is still an animal, it can also be classed as an object. It is, however, a very particular type of object, one that gives rise to an array of semiotic possibilities. As Rachel Poliquin argues, "[t]axidermy's excess of significance originates in the relationship between an original and re-animated liveliness: at once lifelike yet dead, both a human-made *representation* of a species and a *presentation* of a particular animal's skin."⁵ Or, as Jane Desmond puts it, a successful taxidermy mount is "at once unique (*this* deer) and representative (*a* deer)."⁶ Because they are using material that has so much embedded meaning, when artists work with the skins

and current trends in taxidermy than we can attempt here. See also Samuel J. M. M. Alberti, "Constructing Nature Behind Glass," *Museum and Society* 6:2 (2008): 73–97.

3. See, for example, the essays collected by Samuel J. M. M. Alberti in *The Afterlives of Animals: A Museum Menagerie* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

4. Alberti, "Introduction: The Dead Ark," in *ibid.*, p. 6.

5. Rachel Poliquin, "The Matter and Meaning of Museum Taxidermy," *Museum and Society* 6:2 (2008): 123–134, quote on p. 127 (emphasis in original).

6. Jane Desmond, "Postmortem Exhibitions: Taxidermied Animals and Plastinated Corpses in the Theaters of the Dead," *Configurations* 16:3 (2008): 347–377, quote on p. 355 (emphasis in original).

of animals, they produce sculpture that is profoundly polysemous. In addition to any meaning intended by the artists, there are added layers of interpretability that are a consequence of the recycling of real animal skins, which can never be entirely separated from their historical, material, and scientific origins.

The artwork fashioned from preserved animals calls to mind an expression used by Roland Barthes in his 1967 essay "The Discourse of History," where he describes the secularized relic as having lost all its sacred qualities except that which is "attached to the enigma of what has been, is no more, and yet offers itself as *present sign of a dead thing*."⁷ For Barthes, the relic thus conceived is part of the legacy of the nineteenth century, where it finds its place in a loose collection of cultural forms, including archaeological exhibits, history museums, the realist novel, "and, above all, the massive development of photography, whose sole pertinent feature (in relation to drawing) is precisely to signify that the event represented has *really* taken place."⁸ What these practices have in common, according to him, is a privileging of the reality effect, the production of a supposedly extra-discursive field of "the real" by the extrusion of the signified that occurs when the signifier appears to enter into a direct relation with the referent. In Barthes's account of nineteenth-century objectivism, the real is thus never anything more than an "unformulated signified," an ideological or imaginary construct produced by the constant repetition of the assertion "*this happened*."⁹ This elision of the signified is familiar to readers of Barthes's later writings on photography, especially *Camera Lucida*, where *this happened* ("*c'est arrivé*") reappears in the guise of *that-has-been* ("*ça-a-été*"), which Barthes will famously propose as nothing less than photography's "*noeme*" or essence—that which distinguishes the photographic image from other modes of visual representation.¹⁰

7. Roland Barthes, "The Discourse of History" (1967), trans. Richard Howard, in *The Rustle of Language* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), pp. 127–140, quote on pp. 139–140 (emphasis added).

8. Ibid., p. 139 (emphasis in original).

9. Ibid. (emphasis in original).

10. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 77 (emphasis in original). The most challenging critical engagement with Barthes's book is to be found in the fourteen essays collected in *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes's Camera Lucida*, ed. Geoffrey Batchen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009). It is important to stress that we make no claims here about *Camera Lucida* as an adequate theory of photography. Batchen describes it in his introduction as "perhaps the most influential book yet written about

Although Barthes's lexicon is drawn primarily from Saussurean semiology rather than Peircean semiotics, most commentators have interpreted photography's *reality effect*—the photograph as “certificate of presence”¹¹ as Barthes puts it—as a function of its indexicality. If the photograph serves to guarantee the authenticity of the recorded event, the fact of X's “being-there-then,” it is because it was produced (or caused), optically and chemically, by *contact* with the referent, of which it is a physical *trace*. (In Charles S. Peirce's terms, the photograph is an *index*, or indexical sign, insofar as it represents its object through contact.) More important still, from Barthes's point of view, it can make us forget its status as representation thanks to its supposed naturalness, its elision of any signified beyond the real itself. The photographic image tends to mask the cultural work of its production, asking to be seen less as a representation than as an *emanation* of the referent.¹² But if photography's *that-has-been* distinguishes it, in Barthes's account, from other technologies of visual representation like drawing and painting, it also serves, as we have noted, to place photography within a broader category of cultural forms, dominant in the nineteenth century, that produces its effects through a particularly close ideological identification with the real. Confining ourselves here to the realm of material culture, we can ask how other (nonphotographic) forms and practices go about grounding their claims to authenticity in their indexicality, if indeed that is how they operate.

Commenting on Barthes's own use of the metaphor of embalming in *Camera Lucida*, Michelle Henning suggests that taxidermy may be an even better analogy for photography, since it “is all about surface appearance and is made of the skin of the thing itself. Likewise, photography is concerned with surface appearance, and takes only the skin, the outward appearance, of the real.”¹³ Our own focus on skin, as we explore the analogy between photography and taxidermy to ground a reconsideration of the index, will lead us to introduce a third term—*dermography*. We use the word here not in its medical

the photographic experience” and as “surely the most quoted book in the photographic canon” (p. 3). For our part, we regard the *topoi* deployed by Barthes in *Camera Lucida* and other writings on the subject as emblematic of a dominant, if not uncontroversial photographic discourse of the past three decades.

11. Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (above, n. 9), p. 87.

12. Ibid., p. 80.

13. Michelle Henning, “Skins of the Real: Taxidermy and Photography,” in *nanoq: flat out and bluesome: a cultural life of polar bears*, ed. Bryndís Snaebjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson (London: Black Dog, 2006), pp. 137–147, quote on p. 138.

or parapsychological meanings—as, for example, in dermatographic urticaria or the kinds of dermographism or “skin-writing” associated with hysteria¹⁴—but in the sense given to the French word *dermographie* by Michel Tournier in his 1978 short story “Les suaires de Véronique” (“Veronica’s Shrubs”) to designate an extreme and particularly sinister form of direct photography. Tournier’s story merits our attention for three related reasons. First, it offers a canonical, if shockingly perverse fictional account of photographic indexicality, throwing the theoretical stakes involved in indexical authenticity into stark relief by presenting a limit-case. Second, it goes some way toward bridging the historical gap between nineteenth-century objectivism, of which museum taxidermy is an avatar, and the taxidermic experiments of those twenty-first-century artists that interest us here. This it does by inviting us to revisit the years 1977–1983, a period of intense intellectual activity and exchange between French and American writers and scholars around notions of indexicality and theories of photography and the photographic. Finally, a consideration of dermography in Tournier’s sense, as a radically indexical art practice, will allow us to reframe certain questions concerning the status of animal bodies in the new taxidermy, and to propose the ontological category of the nonabsent animal. Our starting point, however, lies with taxidermy as a nineteenth-century activity that is not at all out of place in Barthes’s paradigm of the reality effect—partaking, like the secularized relic, in “the enigma of what has been, is no more, and yet offers itself as present sign of a dead thing.”

Realist Taxidermy and the Museum Specimen

Realist taxidermy came into being in the mid-nineteenth century as a museum practice, and it enjoyed widespread popularity during the heyday of the natural history museum during the latter part of that century and the first half of the twentieth.¹⁵ Far from being a pre-photographic representational practice, it “was born with and grew up with photography. Realist taxidermy is concerned with precisely emulating the external appearance of an animal. It is thus very different from the carapaces and hides stuffed with straw that passed

14. See, for example, Janet L. Beizer’s admirable study *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994). For an interesting contemporary practice that exploits the artist’s own hypersensitive skin, see Ariana Page Russell’s website, <http://www.arianapagerussell.com/work/skin/>.

15. Both Henning (“Skins of the Real” [above, n. 12]) and Desmond (“Postmortem Exhibitions” [above, n. 5]) offer concise histories of realist taxidermy.

for taxidermy in the eighteenth century.”¹⁶ Since Carl Akeley’s work during the 1920s and 1930s, “museum taxidermy has been done by carefully measuring and photographing the corpse of an animal, and making a sculpture based on these specific measurements and photos. Casts of the sculpture are then taken, and used to make a hollow form, over which the skin is stretched.”¹⁷ However, from the 1940s onward, taxidermy began to decline as a legitimate scientific profession that required of the taxidermist a comprehensive scientific training. The shift is charted by Susan Leigh Star, who traces its evolution from a “lower status auxiliary scientific craft, which strove for a time to be a full-fledged partner in science,” to its eventual marginalization in the 1970s, by which time it had come to be seen as an activity more appropriate to hobbyists.¹⁸

In the natural history museums of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, taxidermic dioramas revealed a culture preoccupied with freezing time and space in what was essentially a salvage operation: “The ‘frozen’ image, which both realist taxidermy and photography provide, responds to the desire to capture and preserve nature in the face of its gradual disappearance.”¹⁹ When animals were hunted in the wild for inclusion in museum collections, not only the animal was preserved, but also the environment from which it was removed. Every plant from the piece of earth where the animal was killed was plotted and diagramed so that it might be accurately reproduced and recreated at the destination museum.²⁰ The idea of maintaining the spatiotemporal purity of a culture—or in this case, an environment—has long been a common motif in anthropology and ethnography, where the impulse was strong to keep a culture unsullied by external influences.²¹ Museum dioramas similarly preserved and displayed an idealized natural environment supposedly untouched by human intervention, a sanitized version

16. Henning, “Skins of the Real” (above, n. 12), p. 139.

17. Ibid., p. 140.

18. Susan Leigh Star, “Craft vs. Commodity, Mess vs. Transcendence: How the Right Tool Became the Wrong One in the Case of Taxidermy and Natural History,” in *The Right Tools for the Job*, ed. Adele E. Clarke and Joan H. Fujimura (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 257–286, quote on p. 258.

19. Henning, “Skins of the Real” (above, n. 12), p. 140.

20. Star, “Craft vs. Commodity” (above, n. 17), p. 259.

21. See, for example, James Clifford, “On Collecting Art and Culture,” in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 215–252; and Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

of reality from which all traces of the violence that would have been required for acquisition of the specimens were suppressed. The animals were removed from their geographical and temporal points of origin and preserved in a depiction of how we would want them to be remembered.

Whether intentionally or not, contemporary artists working in taxidermy allude to past narratives associated with the practice. A prime reference is the chapter of museum history in which the killing of animals on expeditions blurred the distinction between scientific inquiry and trophy hunting. Donna Haraway has examined the sexist, racist, and hierarchical structures that were in place during the creation of the dioramas of the African Hall in the American Museum of Natural History, focusing specifically on the example of Akeley's gorilla diorama.²² In 1921, Akeley traveled to Africa in search of gorilla specimens. Although he believed in killing as few animals as possible, his vision required the acquisition of a perfect male specimen, along with a surrounding group of females and young. After acquiring sufficient specimens, he used film and photography to document other gorillas in their natural habitat. Genuinely passionate about Africa, Akeley viewed hunting as a form of preservation, a means of embodying his vision of jungle peace and harmony. The killing of animals in the name of science was seen as being for the greater good and necessary for the preservation of a disappearing natural world.²³

Although the means by which the specimens were collected is not evident in traditional museum dioramas, the reality of the colonial hunt for specimens continues to haunt such displays. Ideal-type specimens were hunted, skinned, preserved, and eventually mounted in simulated environments half a world away from their points of origin in an attempt to capture a moment in time and space. The paradoxical notion that you had to kill animals in order to preserve them derives from the desire to maintain a social or ecological system in a fixed and undefiled state of purity that could be appreciated and studied by future generations. As Henning contends, such destruction of nature in the name of salvaging it is an

22. Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936," in *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 26–58.

23. Ibid., p. 38. See also Nigel Rothfels, "Preserving History: Collecting and Displaying in Carl Akeley's *In Brightest Africa*," in *Animals on Display: The Creaturely in Museums, Zoos, and Natural History*, ed. Liv Emma Thorsen, Karen A. Rader, and Adam Dodd (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013), pp. 58–73.

underlying principle of museum dioramas, “where a living, healthy animal is sacrificed in order to enable its perfect reconstruction as a mannequin inhabiting its own skin, for the purposes of an exhibit intended to inspire in its audience a love of nature and desire to protect it.”²⁴ The irony was not lost on all contemporary observers. Frederic Lucas remarked in 1883 that “[m]an is a great destroyer, and our wild animals, and especially the larger ones, are being rapidly civilized from the face of the earth. Sooner or later the time will come for many of them when their mounted forms preserved in our museums will be all to show they once existed.”²⁵ Today, museum dioramas come to us freighted with a complex history of carnage and seem curiously anachronistic.

The legacy of the historical practice of museum taxidermy is the focus of Bryndís Snaebjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson’s exhibition *nanoq: flat out and bluesome* (Spike Island, Bristol, UK, 2004), which presents the artists’ attempt to locate and document the provenance of every mounted polar bear in Britain, with a view to bringing them together for display (fig. 1). Over the course of their research, Snaebjörnsdóttir and Wilson succeeded in locating thirty-four polar bears with a variety of histories, and subsequently made a series of large-scale photographs documenting where they were found—in private homes, in museums, in storage, or undergoing restoration. The *nanoq* project not only documented the histories of the bears, but also the legacies of the hunters who shot them and the expertise of the taxidermists who mounted them. The accompanying photographs were inscribed with text that explained the bears’ varied histories, from being captured during scientific expeditions and eventually dying in a zoo, to being hunted for sport and mounted and housed in stately homes, to acting as a mascot for a candy factory, to being kept behind the bar in a pub. Many of the specimens had been acquired by museums or private collections as the result of hunting or naturalist expeditions during the nineteenth century. Snaebjörnsdóttir and Wilson investigated the lost histories of these animals, many of which had been in storage or in private residences and no longer seemed to serve any clear purpose. In museums, where they were often displayed in dusty cases or wrapped in plastic and stored for decades, they served little didactic purpose either, while in domestic settings they functioned as a distant reminder of hunting expeditions and now largely speak to the current penchant for using taxidermy as interior decoration.

24. Henning, “Skins of the Real” (above, n. 12), p. 140.

25. Qtd. in Star, “Craft vs. Commodity” (above, n. 17), p. 279.



Figure 1. Bryndís Snaebjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, *nanoq: flat out and bluesome*, installation at Spike Island Gallery, Bristol, UK (2004). (Image reproduced courtesy of Bryndís Snaebjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson.)

The *nanoq* exhibition's juxtaposition of mounted polar bears and documentary photographs serves, among other things, to underscore the intertwined histories of taxidermy and photography in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century attempts to record and represent the natural world. But how do we take the analogy between taxidermy and photography beyond the context of their historical development and use? In Peircean terms, realist taxidermy, like photography, is both iconic and indexical: like the photograph, a mounted specimen is an indexical trace of a real animal *before* it becomes an iconic representation of that animal. (The temporal priority of the photograph's indexicality was thrown into sharp relief by Philippe Dubois's focus on the *photographic act* in his 1983 book of that name.²⁶) Like the photograph, then, a preserved animal can be accurately described in semiotic terms as an indexically produced icon; as Henning notes, "[t]he bears are made out of the thing they represent, out of polar bears, or at least their skins."²⁷ The bears depend, for the effect they produce on viewers, on the interplay of their indexicality and their iconicity. Broadly speaking,

26. Philippe Dubois, *L'acte photographique* (Paris: Nathan/Labor, 1983).

27. Henning, "Skins of the Real" (above, n. 12), p. 138.

their authenticity derives from their indexicality, their verisimilitude from their iconicity; both are necessary for the production of taxidermy's reality effect. Indeed, the pursuit of indexical authenticity can even extend to the groundwork of a taxidermy exhibit. Jane Eastoe quotes Phil Howard, taxidermist at the Museum of Scotland, to this effect: "The New Caledonian Crow uses a twig to get larvae out of rotten wood. We could have used any old twig, but the one that we have was actually fashioned by a New Caledonian Crow in New Caledonia. It is absolutely authentic and is a registered specimen within the museum."²⁸

Furthermore, paraphrasing Barthes's account of photography, we would contend that "realists do not take the [preserved animal] for a 'copy' of reality, but for an emanation of *past reality*."²⁹ This contention has two important implications. First, that in taxidermy as in photography, indexicality not only precedes iconicity from the point of view of production, it also carries more weight in its reception; in Barthes's words, "the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation."³⁰ Second, that it is not by chance that Barthes chooses to emphasize not only the word *reality*, but also the word *past*: "The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time."³¹ As Rosalind Krauss points out, Barthes insists as early as 1964 on photography's paradoxical presence-seen-as-past as a brand new form of perception. According to him, photography replaces the perception of the *being-there* of an object, common to all copies, with "a perception of its *having-been-there*. It is a question therefore of a new category of space-time: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority. Photography produces an illogical conjunction of the *here* and the *formerly*."³²

28. Jane Eastoe, *The Art of Taxidermy* (London: Pavilion, 2012), p. 113.

29. Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (above, n. 9), p. 88 (emphasis in original). The formulation is a refinement of his more widely cited statement, "[t]he photograph is literally an emanation of the referent" (p. 80). Although Barthes does not frame his account of photography in Peircean terms, his formulations frequently allow for fairly straightforward, if guarded translation; here, it would not be too wide of the mark to say that the copy is the icon and the emanation is the index, just as in other contexts, his *studium* might be said to be iconic and his *punctum* indexical.

30. Ibid., p. 89.

31. Ibid., pp. 88–89.

32. Roland Barthes, "Rhétorique de l'image," *Communications* 4 (1964), qtd. in Rosalind E. Krauss's "Notes on the Index," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 196–219, on p. 217 (emphasis in original).

We return to photography's and taxidermy's presence of the past below. As we shall see, taxidermy's reality effect, its message-without-code, and its *punctum* all have a temporal dimension—that of the *that-has-been* that so preoccupied Barthes in his reflections on photography. But if realist taxidermy and photography share so much, can we conclude that the feelings of disquiet we experience when we stand before a preserved and mounted animal skin are no different from the feelings that Barthes describes when contemplating certain photographs? In one of the *nanoq* exhibition catalog's essays, Steve Baker asks to what extent the preserved polar bears, which seem to inhabit the liminal space between subject and object, can or should still be thought of as animals: "The artists also commented on the difficulty of untangling the contradictory perception that each specimen 'isn't an animal, but it *is* an animal,' noting how remarkable it seemed that each one was 'simultaneously representative of itself as an object but also of itself as a former living animal,' embodying both states and maintaining only a 'membrane-thin' distinction between them."³³

The membrane that separates an animal from the outside world is its skin, although in the case of the taxidermic specimen there is no longer anything left of the animal inside the skin. The indexical trace that is the preserved animal is merely a boundary, a husk of the former living thing. Despite this, the animal's skin still has the power to affect the viewer. Baker suggests that it is the skin's aura of authenticity, the trace of a life lived, that makes taxidermy so compelling, and he goes on to compare the polar bears as trace-bearing objects with Cornelia Parker's series, *Stolen Thunder* (1997–1999)³⁴ in which she exhibited handkerchiefs that had been used to polish significant objects, such as Charles Darwin's sextant, Henry VIII's armor, and Horatio Nelson's candlestick. The tarnish carries the authentic trace of the object and its associations with history, just as the animal skins bear the authentic marks of lives lived.³⁵ It is this contact with the real, inscribed as an inalienable feature of the works themselves, that leads Baker to see them as constituting

33. Steve Baker, "What Can Dead Bodies Do?" in *nanoq* (above, n. 12), pp. 149–155, quote on p. 152 (emphasis in original).

34. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

35. The historical framing of Parker's project is reminiscent of the incipit in Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (above, n. 9): "One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: 'I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor'" (p. 3).

a challenge “to what Hans Bertens has called ‘a deeply felt loss of faith in our ability to represent the real’ in a postmodern world.”³⁶ Indeed, not content to represent the real, they incorporate it in their very presence.

For Barthes, as we have noted, it is a photograph’s indexicality, its existential connection or contact with its referent at the moment of production, that grounds the *this-happened* and *that-has-been*, the authenticity of its reality effect. Moreover, when we come to consider Barthes’s notion of the *punctum*, we must bear in mind that *Camera Lucida* is divided into two parts. In the first, the *punctum* is essentially spatial: it is an unintentional and uncoded detail in the photograph that triggers the sharply affective response that, in turn, disrupts our appreciation of the photograph’s field of cultural interest, its *studium*.³⁷ In the second, however, the *punctum* is no longer spatial, but temporal: it is “[t]ime, the lacerating emphasis of the *no-eème* (*that-has-been*), its pure representation.”³⁸ It is the co-mingling of two tenses in the mind of the viewer—“*that* is dead and *that* is going to die”³⁹—that haunts certain photographs for Barthes. The temporality of Barthes’s *punctum* is not, then, to be construed as a kind of mere pastness. As Kris Paulsen argues, the index *operates* here in the present of the photograph’s reception rather than in the past of its production. Its pointing, rendered by the shifters *this* and *that*,⁴⁰ takes place in the here and now, even if its referent is no more; it engages the viewer “in a present-tense relationship, even if the photograph is a sign of a past event”⁴¹; it renders the reality to which it refers, whether it be past or not, present to a receiver.

In the *nanoq* project, the tension between the past and present is given an interesting twist by the existence of a series of lantern slides belonging to Lord Somerleyton. The slides document an 1897 expedition to Spitzbergen that resulted in the recorded killing or capture of fifty-five polar bears, two of which are very likely the ones that have stood in the entranceway at Somerleyton Hall since they were brought back by the first Lord Somerleyton. One of these bears

36. Baker, “What Can Dead Bodies Do?” (above, n. 32), p. 154.

37. Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (above, n. 9), pp. 25–27.

38. Ibid., p. 96 (emphasis in original).

39. Ibid. (emphasis in original).

40. Barthes insists on “this pure deictic language” of photography (ibid., p. 5). Like a shifter, the photograph points indexically to its context of utterance, outside of which it is unintelligible.

41. Kris Paulsen, “The Index and the Interface,” *Representations* 122:1 (2013): 83–109, quote on p. 93.

was exhibited at Spike Island. The exhibition of a specific polar-bear mount, along with photographic documentation of the events surrounding that same bear's violent death more than a hundred years before, serves to complicate any affective response on the part of the viewer in the present. The photographs of the bears taken at the very time of their slaughter—the *that-has-been* of Barthes's temporal *punctum*—intensify the indexical presence of the taxidermic bear in the space opened up between the *here* of the present sign and the *then* of the dead thing. They remind us of what the preserved object once was and prompt us to ask once again what exactly it is now.

One of the things that particularly disturbs Barthes about the photograph is precisely its failure to distinguish between the dead (those who have died since the photograph was taken) and the living (those who are still alive when the photograph is viewed): in the photograph, dead and living are equally present. A preserved animal, on the other hand, is always-already dead—death, after all, is the precondition of taxidermy.⁴² Baker's question—Is it still an animal or not?—is clearly not the same as Barthes's: Is the person still alive or not? And the reasons for this difference lie ultimately in the differences between taxidermy's and photography's indexicality, which start with the nature of the trace left by the two past realities though are not exhausted by it.

The trace left by the photographed subject is an imprint of light on a light-sensitive surface; for example, the metaphorical "skin" of photographic film.⁴³ The trace left by the animal that has been mounted is its own, very real skin, which has consequences for the ways in which a preserved animal is received—in a museum diorama, say. The *studium* of a diorama is relatively straightforward, consisting of the "average affect"⁴⁴ produced by an iconic representation of, for example, a family grouping of gorillas in their "natural" environment. (As Desmond points out, the "repertoire of approved activities" is strictly limited, excluding all reference to the kill or to the act of mating.⁴⁵ In this respect, realist taxidermy is tightly coded.) But

42. Desmond, in "Postmortem Exhibitions" (above, n. 5), argues that taxidermy's illusion of realism "depends on a fundamentally ironic epistemological structure" that consistently masks death as the necessary prerequisite to the production of a lifelike appearance (p. 354).

43. See Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000). In some Romance languages, the word for *film* covers some of the meanings of *skin*; for example the French *pellicule* and the Italian *pellicola*.

44. Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (above, n. 9), p. 26.

45. Desmond, "Postmortem Exhibitions" (above, n. 5), p. 359.

the diorama can have a *punctum* also; for instance, when a viewer, confronted with the double temporality of the display, feels a sudden stab of emotion as she registers the “enigma of what has been, is no more, and yet offers itself as present sign of a dead thing.” Our contention is that, in the case of taxidermic animals, any temporal *punctum*, any stab of feeling that disrupts the viewer’s reception of the *studium*, is likely to stem from the recognition that the animal’s skin has nothing metaphorical about it. It is the real skin of what once was a real animal—an animal, in the case of Akeley’s gorilla, that was killed in order to make the very display. The specimen, in its spatial and temporal presentness, is material evidence that the animal it once was, the animal re-presented in the diorama with its family around it, is no more. In this respect, the gorilla’s skin is as much a proof of death as John the Baptist’s head, whose eyes stare back unseeing, and the full paradox of the taxidermic animal becomes apparent: on the one hand, the use of the animal’s skin guarantees the authenticity of the reality effect, collapsing the distance between signifier and referent and eliding the cultural mediation of the signified; and on the other, it signs the animal’s death certificate and exposes the lie told ironically by the diorama. The certificate of presence is at one and the same time a certificate of death. Recent artwork fashioned from preserved animals tends to point self-reflexively to this paradox, taxidermy’s *noeme*, as it foregrounds the conditions of its own production and use of skin as material.

The New Taxidermy

Artists working in what we term the *new taxidermy* are characterized by two noteworthy traits that differentiate them from those working with existing museum mounts. The first is that contemporary artist-taxidermists are predominantly female. Given the quintessentially masculine nature of big game hunting that historically underpins many museum collections of large mammals, it seems ironic that it has been young, female artists who have so wholeheartedly embraced the current turn toward taxidermy as a contemporary art practice. Representations of man’s domination over nature have given way to delicate, poetic sculptures created from ethically sourced animals. Despite its emergence from the traditions of museum collections and trophy hunting, the new taxidermy has opened up a broader discourse on loss, memory, fragility, decay, and transformation. The second trait is that artists have shifted away from addressing issues surrounding representations or simulacra of life as portrayed through a dead specimen and moved toward the

creation of sculpture that frequently relies for its impact upon a self-conscious depiction of its own deadness.⁴⁶

Andrea Roe is a multimedia artist who combines taxidermy with animatronics. Regarding taxidermy as a combination of science and art, she believes that there is something poetic about transforming a dead specimen into something that appears to be alive. Although Roe is interested in capturing the pivotal moments in the process of taxidermy during which the taxidermist interacts with a dead body to bring about its transfiguration into something that exudes a sense of aliveness, she nevertheless also displays a desire to subvert this established narrative. In her installation *Blackbird-Menagerie* (2007), a mounted blackbird stands on a mahogany stool, watching a video of its own body being prepared by the hands of the taxidermist (fig. 2). The blackbird stands motionless and mute as music from Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* builds to a climax. The taxidermist slowly and precisely spreads the feathers to reveal the underlying skin, and as the scalpel slices into its breast, the taxidermic blackbird suddenly flicks its tail and opens its beak to let out a piercing shriek. Here, we witness a bird that is obviously dead, yet its unexpected motion unsettles our assumptions about both aliveness and deadness as it seemingly reacts to the process of its own preservation. Indexicality functions in three distinct ways in this work: first, the blackbird's preserved body acts as an indexical trace of the living thing (the past reality) that it once was; second, the gaze of the blackbird draws our attention to the video, which reveals both the bird's conditions of production and the medium (its own skin) in which it is fashioned; and finally, the entire work functions as a complex indexical sign whose

46. It is worth noting here the emergence of a subgenre of contemporary taxidermy referred to as "rogue taxidermy," which similarly acknowledges the inherent deadness of its subjects: dead animals are depicted as dead. Spearheaded by the Minnesota Association of Rogue Taxidermists (M.A.R.T.), the initiative is characterized by a macabre sensibility that combines the aesthetics of horror and the freak show with the history of mythological, hybrid, and fraudulent animals. Yet, despite occasional depictions of animals in eviscerated states, members adhere to a strict code of conduct with regards to sourcing animals in an ethical and environmentally responsible manner, and emphasize the importance of using as much of the animal as possible. Cofounder Sarina Brewer regards her work as a type of resurrection, breathing new life into discarded animal carcasses through the creation of new, boundary-pushing works of art. See the M.A.R.T. website, <http://www.roguetaxidermy.com/index.php>, for further information regarding the work of its membership, as well as Poliquin's blog, <http://www.ravishingbeasts.com/fraudulent-animals/>, for further discussion of rogue taxidermy in the context of combinatory animals. Curiously, issue 6 of *Antennae*, devoted largely to what we call here "the new taxidermy," is subtitled *Rogue Taxidermy*, presumably to emphasize the rupture with traditional mainstream practice.



Figure 2. Andrea Roe, *Blackbird-Menagerie*, an animatronic taxidermied blackbird produced in collaboration with Darren Cox and Peter Summers, with interactive electronics by Richard Brown (2007). (Image reproduced courtesy of Andrea Roe.)

referent is no longer the past reality of the formerly living thing, but the act of taxidermy itself—taxidermy as the present sign of a dead thing. The juxtaposition of the taxidermic blackbird against the video of its own creation also serves to implicate its maker in that process. The foregrounding of the act of taxidermy accentuates the particular deadness of the blackbird. It is not merely dead, but is doubly so: a dead blackbird preserved in both video and taxidermy formats; and also doubly transformed by two sets of hands, those of the taxidermist and those of the artist. The blackbird has become what Baker calls “a made dead thing; not a thing made dead, but a dead thing, made.”⁴⁷ The act of implicating the maker has the effect of rendering the blackbird even more visibly dead: not only dead, but also subject to two separate creative interventions postmortem; and although neither brought about the death of the blackbird, they are each complicit in transforming it into an animal-thing.

47. Steve Baker, “Dead, Dead, Dead, Dead,” in *Routledge Handbook of Human Animal Studies*, ed. Garry Marvin and Susan McHugh (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 290–304, quote on p. 298.

The gaze from one specimen to another in *Blackbird-Menagerie* recalls one of the elements in Spring Hurlbut's installation, *The Final Sleep/Le Dernier Sommeil* (2001). Unlike Roe, Hurlbut worked with existing museum artifacts, here drawn from the collections of the Royal Ontario Museum, the Bata Shoe Museum, and the Canadian Museum of Nature. She gathered a diversity of objects with little in common except a lack of color, and brought them together to create new narratives on the subject of death and mourning. These objects included a pair of preserved swans, ancient Egyptian mummified cats and hawks, rows of skulls exhibited in incremental order from smallest to largest, numerous study skins of albino birds and small mammals, a number of skeletons, fossilized feces, nineteenth-century footwear, embalming fluid bottles, a child's funeral wreath, and a wedding veil. The relationship between two objects in particular warrants further attention. An evocative juxtaposition occurs when a taxidermic Arctic hare in one vitrine has been positioned so that it appears to be staring at the desiccated study skin of another Arctic hare displayed in an adjacent vitrine, next to an Inuit skull-and-pin game fashioned from the skull, bones, and sinew of yet another Arctic hare. The glass eyes of the mounted hare are contrasted with those of the study skin, which have been replaced with white cotton wool, one artifact bearing witness to the other's blindness as if contemplating its possible fate.

Artificial eyes play a pivotal role in Roe's video *Kingfisher* (2006) in which the artist captures the moment of metamorphosis when a dead specimen begins to resemble something that is seemingly alive. As in *Blackbird-Menagerie*, the video shows the hands of the taxidermist working with a preserved mount. The kingfisher's skin has been peeled back and is inside out, revealing that the bird's interior anatomy has been replaced with a wooden form, clay, and string wrapping. There is a tuft of feathers attached to the beak and skull, but it is barely recognizable as a bird. Roe explains that "I isolated particular stages of the taxidermy process, showing the preparation of a mount, capturing the moment the bird changes in appearance from a formless skin to a recognizable bird. An interesting change happens when the eyes are inserted and the skin, still attached at the beak, goes back over the head. It is this particular moment when the raw material is transformed into a believable live animal."⁴⁸ When the taxidermist slides the skin back over the bird's

48. Andrea Roe, in an interview with Eric Frank, "Multimedia Taxidermy," *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture: Rogue Taxidermy* 6 (summer 2008): 44–50, quote on p. 47.

head the kingfisher is suddenly revealed as something recognizable, something that seems at once dead and alive. Yet, despite this apparent aliveness, we are still conscious of the means of construction upon which such artifice relies. This creates a profound sense of the uncanny, here the result of the ambivalence that arises from observing something that is both familiar and unfamiliar: a bird that exhibits in equal parts the appearance of aliveness combined with the exposed mechanisms of that very artifice.

As we have seen, the new taxidermy has turned away from the tradition of depicting the dead animal as alive, replacing it with an insistence on its very deadness. While Roe lays bare the techniques used to create a simulation of aliveness in order to draw attention to the animal's deadness, other artists choose to depict animals without any such illusions: they are presented quite simply as dead animals. The animals that many of these artists work with have been ethically sourced; many are small animals that have died naturally or accidentally; they have not been killed for the purpose of making a work of art. Some were previously domestic pets that have been donated by their owners and serve as both a memento mori and a locus of feelings of loss and longing. In general, works of contemporary taxidermy, whether intentionally or not, reflexively invoke the history of the technique as represented in museum dioramas, along with all of its embedded meanings. However, animals that were formerly kept as pets carry another level of memory that is specific not to the artist or to past artworks, but to the life of the animal itself and its relationships with humans.⁴⁹ Desmond contrasts pets preserved through taxidermy with hunting trophies, arguing that the former reference a particular animal's own being and life, while the hunting trophy, unlike the specimen in a museum diorama that was killed in the name of science or preservation, can never escape its history as something that was killed and mounted largely for vanity, as an animal that "died to provide the décor."⁵⁰ A preserved pet references not only the past life of the animal, but the emotions and memories that the owner has invested in it.

Emily Mayer has worked with deceased pets and favors depicting animals in positions of death or repose. One of the few practicing

49. See the documentary film *Furever*, directed by Amy Finkel (New York: Gaia Indie Films, 2014), for an exploration of grief over a deceased pet and the lengths to which people will go to preserve the bodies, and correspondingly the memories, of these animals.

50. Jane Desmond, "Displaying Death/Animating Life: Changing Fictions of 'Liveness' from Taxidermy to Animatronics," in *Representing Animals*, ed. Nigel Rothfels (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), pp. 159–79, quote on p. 167.

pet taxidermists in the UK, she rarely takes on pet-taxidermy commissions, as she recognizes that what pet owners really want is to have their living pet back. When Mayer is persuaded to accept a pet commission, her challenge is to replicate the appearance and character of the living animal, which has become the site of its owner's projected memories. She often suggests a sleeping pose, in part because it is more comforting to the owner, but also because it is more conducive to achieving an accurate likeness. In her sculptural work Mayer prefers to depict animals in positions of death, as she feels it is more compelling and acknowledges that death is a part of life. Mayer's sculpture *Last Resting Place (Their Death in My Hands)* (2007) is a response to both her own sculptural practice and her experiences as a pet taxidermist (fig. 3). It depicts a dead cat resting on a taxidermist's workbench alongside tools, sketches, and a mug filled with pens and pencils and functions as a commentary on mortality and on the pet as a site of embodied memories. In this case, the cat does not appear to be sleeping; it is evidently and uncompromisingly dead, waiting for the taxidermist to perform her magic.

Many contemporary artist-taxidermists work predominantly with found birds, rodents, and small wild mammals that have died naturally or accidentally. Transformed into works of art, these animals have escaped their probable fate of decaying on the roadside and are transmuted into a state of permanence. As a result of the artists' interventions, they have cheated their biological destiny and exchanged a cycle of life-death-decay for a new status as material culture. Like Mayer, Polly Morgan does not often show her subjects—for the most part birds—in simulations of aliveness, but chooses instead to preserve them at the moment of death, suspended in the immediate aftermath of death and before the onset of decay. *Still Life After Death* (2006) consists of various taxidermic birds and animals installed at Sudeley Castle in Gloucestershire. The small birds were installed on windows among dust and cobwebs, their necks appearing to drape softly over the window ledge, dead but free from the threat of decay (fig. 4).

The tradition of realist taxidermy is predicated, in part, on a principle of iconicity, from the faithful reproduction of the landscape in a diorama to the depiction of aliveness in the taxidermic mounts. Contemporary artist-taxidermists, for their part, strive to achieve if not necessarily the same sense of aliveness, at least a high degree of verisimilitude in a state of repose. But iconic fidelity would count for nothing if the animal's own skin were not there to create the aura of the preserved animal. If we replace the skin with some other material, the animal is no longer (indexically) present, but merely



Figure 3. Emily Mayer, *Last Resting Place (Their Death in My Hands)* (2007). (Photo: Steve Russell Studios, copyright © Emily Mayer. Image reproduced courtesy of Emily Mayer.)

(iconically) represented and taxidermy loses its *noeme*.⁵¹ As Desmond argues, authenticity in taxidermy relies upon using the genuine skin and feathers of the previously living creature:

Throughout this taxidermic process of dismemberment and reassembly, the presence of the animal's skin, and sometimes appendages such as claws, hooves, and tails, is absolutely essential. This outer covering is what meets our eye and it must never be fake. Soft tissues—eyes, nostrils, tongues—can be glass, wax, or plastic but only the actual skin of the animal will do. In the skin, in the “dermis” of taxidermy, lies its authenticating ingredient.⁵²

51. Strictly speaking, taxidermy's auratic qualities depend on the viewer's belief that the skin is real. It is, therefore, theoretically possible to fake a taxidermic mount's authenticity and manipulate the viewer's belief. However, whereas manipulation takes place routinely at the level of the iconic representation of the animal, it remains only a theoretical possibility at the level of the animal's indexical presence. Recent debates around authenticity in archaeology are helpful in this respect. See, for example, Cornelius Holtorf, "Authenticity," in *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas: Archaeology as Popular Culture* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005), pp. 112–129; and Siân Jones, "Negotiating Authentic Objects and Authentic Selves," *Journal of Material Culture* 15:2 (2010): 181–203.

52. Desmond, "Displaying Death/Animating Life" (above, n. 49), p. 161.



Figure 4. Polly Morgan, *Still Life After Death*, installation detail, Sudeley Castle, Winchcombe, UK (2006). (Copyright © Polly Morgan. Image reproduced courtesy of Polly Morgan.)

Roe's *Blackbird-Menagerie* is revealing in this respect. As we have seen, the installation features two versions of the same blackbird: one a taxidermic sculpture, the other a video of the bird as it undergoes the process of evisceration and preservation. They are the "same" bird, yet somehow the "live" taxidermic version has a stronger auratic quality, a higher quotient of indexicality, than the video it is "watching" and to which it apparently reacts. It is as though the *studium* and the *punctum* of the artwork had been distributed between the two cast members: on the one hand, the taxidermic processes used to produce the sculpture; and on the other, the finished product, which serves as a stand-in and point of identification for the viewer. The bird's flick of the tail and piercing shriek mediate our own emotional response, our own stab of the *punctum*. To the extent that this is an installation *about* taxidermy—and more particularly about taxidermy's temporal *noeme*—it seems reasonable to surmise that the *punctum* is here intentional, pre-programmed in the work, and therefore assimilated to the *studium*. In this respect, the installation contains a double mise en abyme—one of production

and one of reception—linked by an approximation of a strange feedback loop.⁵³

The treatment of the blackbird's gaze in Roe's installation draws attention to the more general problem of eyes in taxidermy, for if the original skin is preserved in a taxidermic mount the eyes have to be replaced with reproductions. Indeed, artificial eyes are a challenge that all artist-taxidermists face in their attempts to capture aliveness. The stillness of a creature poised on the brink of movement, combined with eyes that clearly do not see, provokes a sense of the uncanny. As Alberti remarks, “[t]axidermy mounts continue to stare back at us, albeit from glass eyes.”⁵⁴ Yet, despite this small tear in the fabric of the believable, the authenticity guaranteed by the skin seems not to be compromised, perhaps precisely because of the taxidermic animal's curious gaze. Glossing Walter Benjamin, Laura Marks describes *aura* as “the quality in an object that makes our relationship with it like a relationship with another human being. It seems to look back at us.”⁵⁵ Ultimately, what makes taxidermic sculptures compelling is that, despite the ways in which the animals have been manipulated by the artists, the authenticity of the skin retains an auratic quality that speaks to us of their past existence even as they look blindly back at us with their false eyes. Here again, death certificate and certificate of presence are two sides of the same page.

In our discussion of *nanoq* and its recycling of realist or museum taxidermy, we argued that while nineteenth-century taxidermy and photography share the same underlying semiotic structures that work to produce their respective reality effects, they nevertheless differ in important ways. Most significantly, if both photography and taxidermy are received indexically by the viewer as an “emanation of past reality” rather than iconically as a copy of reality, the nature of the emanation, of the trace, is quite different from one to the other: the authenticity of a preserved animal depends in large part on the use of the animal's own skin to produce its reality effect. Our consideration of indexical authenticity takes us back now to photography, but to a special form of photography that, like taxidermy, relies upon the referent's skin to signify the real.

53. By “approximation,” we wish to indicate that although the work does not create a true strange loop—there is no tangled hierarchy here—it gives the viewer the impression of a strange loop.

54. Alberti, “Introduction” (above, n. 3), p. 6. We find the same observation in Poliquin, “The Matter and Meaning in Museum Taxidermy” (above, n. 4): “The eyes may be glass, but the animal stares back” (p. 127).

55. Marks, *The Skin of the Film* (above, n. 42), p. 81.

Dermography, or the Art of the Secularized Relic

One of Dubois's examples of indexicality *without* iconicity is the case of a suntan. Here, the sun leaves a trace or imprint on a light-sensitive surface—in this case, the skin—but there is no question of reading the resulting tan as a likeness of the sun. However, if we complicate his example by placing an object on the skin before its exposure to the sun, we can imagine the result as a distant cousin of Man Ray's Rayograph in which a measure of iconicity is introduced. As Rosalind Krauss reminds us, "Rayographs (or as they are more generically termed, photograms) are produced by placing objects on top of light-sensitive paper, exposing the ensemble to light, and then developing the result. The image created in this way is of the ghostly traces of departed objects; they look like footprints in sand, or marks that have been left in dust."⁵⁶ Our own pursuit of "ghostly traces"⁵⁷—as a variation on the "present sign of a dead thing"—takes us now to a literary treatment of a "secularized relic" in Tournier's short story "Veronica's Shrouds."⁵⁸

As well as being one of France's leading novelists from the 1960s through the 1980s and the author of several books on photography, Tournier was also, from 1960 to 1965, the presenter of a monthly television program, *Chambre noire*, and during 1969–1970 the co-creator of the international festival, *Rencontres photographiques d'Arles*, which was to become a major venue for photographers. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Tournier was in regular working contact with many of the leading photographers of the day and even bought an apartment in Arles in 1971. The story that interests us here was published in a collection of short fictions in 1978 at the height of his visibility as a novelist and media figure.⁵⁹ The date is important, as

56. Krauss, "Notes on the Index" (above, n. 31), p. 203.

57. Susan Sontag had already used this expression to describe photographs in *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 9.

58. Michel Tournier, "Veronica's Shrouds," in *The Fetishist*, trans. Barbara Wright (New York: Doubleday, 1984), pp. 130–143.

59. Michel Tournier, *Le coq de bruyère* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978). The most sustained critical writing on "Veronica's Shrouds" can be found in the journal *Incidences*, nos. 2–3 (1979), devoted entirely to Tournier's story. See also Marja Warehime, "Writing the Limits of Representation: Balzac, Zola, and Tournier on Art and Photography," *SubStance* 18:1 (1989): 51–57; Alain Buisine, "A Dispossessed Text: The Writings and Photography of Michel Tournier," *SubStance* 18:1 (1989): 25–34; Walter Redfern, *Michel Tournier: Le Coq de bruyère* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), pp. 62–72; and Abderrahman Gharioua, *Michel Tournier et la photographie* (Saarbrücken, Germany: Éditions Universitaires Européennes, 2011), pp. 92–119.

it coincides with the start of what we might call the indexical turn in French thinking about photography. Barthes's *La chambre claire* would see the light of day in 1980. Susan Sontag's essays on photography, which were collected in book form in 1977 and translated into French in 1979, had been appearing in the *New York Review of Books* from 1973 through 1977.⁶⁰ Krauss had published the two parts of her "Notes on the Index" in *October* in the spring and fall of 1977; the essay was taken up in Paris and published in 1979, in a slightly modified French translation, in the last issue of the short-lived journal *Macula*.⁶¹ As Katia Schneller explains, the French version of 1979 contained important changes, the combined effect of which was to place photography, for a French public, under the aegis of a Peircean semiotics that foregrounded the index, and to propose the notion of the *photographic* as an *epistemic* category that would have to wait for the 1983 publication of Dubois's *L'acte photographique* for a full theoretical elaboration.⁶² This, then, is the historical and theoretical context of Tournier's story, which we propose to read as emblematic of this wave of theorizing about photography and the indexical arts.

"Veronica's Shrouds" opens during the Arles festival, as a nameless narrator, an habitué of the town, recounts his meetings over the space of two years with Veronica, a young photographer, and Hector, a photographic model whom Veronica soon claims as her own. Invited to the modest farmhouse in the Camargue that Veronica has rented for herself and Hector, the narrator is struck by the improvised gym, where the young man is required to work out with utter dedication and that suggests "both an operating room and torture chamber."⁶³ The imagery is modulated with the description of the "huge rolls of paper of all colors that photographers use to isolate their models, just like insects pinned up in an entomologist's box,"⁶⁴

60. The French translation of Sontag's volume of essays—*La Photographie* (Paris: Seuil, 1979)—is referenced in the very selective bibliography that accompanies Barthes's *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, Gallimard, Seuil, 1980).

61. Like *October*, *Macula* was founded in 1976. Krauss was a member of its editorial committee from 1978. See Katia Schneller, "Sur les traces de Rosalind Krauss: La réception française de la notion d'index, 1977–1990," *Études photographiques* 21 (2007): 7.

62. Ibid., p. 16. Krauss's articles in *October* had argued against Greenbergian modernism in an attempt to open up a new theoretical space, that of the index, for the understanding of recent artwork under the tutelage of Marcel Duchamp. For a full account of Krauss's and Dubois's understanding of the index and their contribution to the theory of photography, see Marc Tamisier, *Texte, art et photographie: La théorisation de la photographie contemporaine* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009).

63. Tournier, "Veronica's Shrouds" (above, n. 57), p. 133.

64. Ibid., p. 134.

or of Hector's photographed body, which "looked frozen, stripped to the bone, dissected by a kind of autopsy or anatomical demonstration."⁶⁵ In defense of her experiments, Veronica invokes the example of Renaissance art as "the discovery of the corpse," citing Vesalius to explain the "obsession with the *écorché*."⁶⁶

Three days after the narrator's visit to the farmhouse, he runs into Veronica in a less than reputable bar in one of Arles's poorer neighborhoods. She is drunk and tells him that Hector has fled, leaving behind a letter in which he complains of having been plucked like a chicken or a rabbit.⁶⁷ His body has been transformed, not so much by the physical regime she has imposed on him as by the daily photographic sessions that have eaten away his very substance: "Those twenty-two thousand two hundred and thirty-nine bits of me that you have so jealously classified, labeled, and dated—you can have them. All I have left is my skin and bones, and I intend to keep them. You won't have my hide, dear Veronica!"⁶⁸ Hector's image of being plucked by his photographer is a clear allusion to a fanciful theory of Balzac's recounted by Tournier in an essay on the nineteenth-century photographer, Nadar. The novelist, who had posed for Nadar as early as 1842, believed that every photograph of a living being resulted from a process of plucking (*épluchage*) one of the infinite number of spectral layers that composed that being. The "skin" thereby obtained was then applied to the photographic plate. Each photograph thus entailed an infinitesimal diminution of the subject's being.⁶⁹

The next news the narrator has of Veronica comes from an acquaintance in Paris the following winter. She has tracked him down and the two are together again. Veronica has recently produced a series of "direct photographs": "That's what she calls shots taken without a camera, without a film, and without an enlarger. In short, the dream of most great photographers who consider the technical

65. Ibid., p. 135.

66. Ibid., p. 136. Veronica also quotes Paul Valéry as saying, "Truth is naked, but underneath the naked is the *écorché*" (p. 135).

67. Ibid., p. 138.

68. Ibid., p. 139. The translator has chosen the word *hide* to render the French *peau*—the usual word for *skin* (p. 152).

69. See Michel Tournier, *Le crépuscule des masques* (Paris: Hoëbeke, 1992), p. 28. Sontag recounts the same anecdote, translating Balzac's expression by "ghostly images" (*On Photography* [above, n. 56], p. 158)—a clear echo of her own "ghostly traces" (p. 9). See also Warehime, "Writing the Limits of Representation" (above, n. 58), p. 52; and Buisine, "A Dispossessed Text" (above, n. 58), p. 26.

constraints of their profession to be an ignominious defect.”⁷⁰ (One suspects Man Ray’s rayographs were one inspiration for Veronica’s direct photographs. In an essay on Man Ray, whom he knew personally, Tournier comments on these “photographs” taken without a camera.⁷¹) Using large sheets of photographic paper exposed to daylight, she immerses Hector in a developing bath and then positions him on the paper; then she sends him off to shower while she washes down the paper with an acid fixative. “The result of all this is strange, flattened silhouettes, a flat projection of Hector’s body rather like, as Veronica actually said in so many words, what remained on some walls in Hiroshima.”⁷² As for Hector, he has been hospitalized with generalized dermatitis—lesions usually found on the hands and forearms of tanners, drysalters, and engravers, but in Hector’s case appearing on parts of the body rarely exposed to chemicals.

A few months later, the narrator arrives in Arles to read in the newspaper that an exhibition called *Veronica’s Shrouds* is being held at the Musée Réattu in the Chapel of the Knights of Malta. The article concludes with an interview with the artist, who explains that, after a series of experiments with direct photography on paper, she had started to work with linen:

The cloth was impregnated with silver bromide, to make it photosensitive, and then exposed to the light. Next it was used to ensnare the model, still dripping wet, as he came out of a developing bath; he was wrapped in it from head to foot—“like a corpse in a shroud,” Veronica added. Finally the cloth was fixed, and then washed. . . . In short, Veronica had concluded, traditional photography has been surpassed by these new creations. *Dermography* would be a more appropriate word.⁷³

A visit to the Réattu confirms the narrator’s worst fears. The chapel, its walls and floor covered with unwound “shrouds,” has the feel of a morgue: “It made you imagine a whole series of human skins that had been peeled off and then paraded, like so many barbaric trophies.

70. Tournier, “Veronica’s Shrouds” (above, n. 57), p. 141.

71. Tournier, *Le crépuscule des masques* (above, n. 68), p. 47.

72. Tournier, “Veronica’s Shrouds” (above, n. 57), p. 141.

73. Ibid., p. 142 (emphasis in original). Parallels with Yves Klein may be too obvious to mention, but it is perhaps worth pointing out that Klein also used cloth for one series of body-paintings titled “Suaires.” In an essay on Klein, Tournier makes the comparison with Veronica’s veil and also with the “human silhouettes imprinted in the stone of the streets and walls of Hiroshima by the atom bomb”; see Michel Tournier, *Le Tabor et le Sinai: Essais sur l’art contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), p. 99 (our translation).

. . . I remembered, not without horror, the bloody and symmetrical imprints we used to obtain at school when we trapped a fly between two sheets of paper and crushed it with a blow of the fist."⁷⁴ Running into Veronica on his way out, he asks what she has done with Hector. In reply, she points to the shrouds and says, "But he's . . . here. What I've done with him . . . is this."⁷⁵

That Veronica's is an art of the index is underscored by the vagueness of this last gesture and the use of the shifters *here* and *this* to at once locate Hector and describe his fate. Far from being mere photographic copies, or iconic images, of Hector's beautiful body, Veronica's shrouds, her dermographs, *are* Hector. She has had his skin and it is on display. In this sense, Tournier's story literalizes the indexical claims made for photography by those theorists who collapse the distinction between sign and referent. André Bazin, for example, argues in "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" that the image "shares, by the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model."⁷⁶ It is true, of course, that Tournier's story plays with both icon and symbol, as well as index: in medieval etymology, the name *Veronica* was mistakenly construed as "true image" (*vera* and *eikon*) and it would be less easy to make the case that the photographer's shrouds are, to use Barthes's term, *secularized relics* if the story did not exploit the symbolism associated with Veronica's veil and the Turin shroud so brazenly.⁷⁷ However, the supposed imprints on both veil and shroud are themselves, of course, primarily indexical, and in the economy of Tournier's story the dermograph is so literally the "present sign of a dead thing" that it rivals the taxidermic animal in indexical intensity

74. Tournier, "Veronica's Shrouds" (above, n. 57), p. 142.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

76. André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 14 (emphasis in original), qtd. in Krauss, "Notes on the Index" (above, n. 31), p. 203.

77. Tournier calls Veronica the inventor of the photographic image and repeats the erroneous medieval etymology (*Le crépuscule des masques* [above, n. 68], p. 172). The first issue of *Cahiers de la photographie* (1981) published (on page 2) a reproduction of the Turin shroud, accompanied by a quotation from Jean-Claude Lemagny describing it as "la trace conservée d'un visage qui a existé / the preserved trace of a face that existed" (qtd. in Schneller, "Sur les traces de Rosalind Krauss" [above, n. 60], p. 13 [our translation]). In fact, comparisons between the shroud and the photograph were in circulation as early as the late nineteenth century; see Patrick Maynard, "The Secular Icon: Photography and the Functions of Images," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42:2 (1983): 155–169, for a lively and astute discussion of the photographic image that takes the shroud as its starting point and primary reference.

and surpasses it in horror. If, as Desmond argues, the plastinated corpses of Gunther von Hagens's hugely popular *Body Worlds* exhibitions are acceptable to a mass public precisely because they function as a form of anti-taxidermy,⁷⁸ removing the skins to show only the anatomical details beneath, Veronica's "skins" reinstate the disturbing authenticity of the taxidermic animal while dispensing with any illusions of three-dimensional realism.⁷⁹ They are not in any way to be construed as lifelike representations of a man; they are *presentations of this man, this dead thing, this Hector.*

The Nonabsent Animal

A recent article by Kris Paulsen makes a compelling case for questioning the frequently heard argument that the index died along with analog photography, and that digital technologies, because they are immaterial, "sever the indexical link with the world that the physical processes of analog media once ensured."⁸⁰ What is of particular relevance for our own arguments is Paulsen's contention that the enthusiastic reception accorded Sontag's view of the photograph's ability to "usurp reality" led to serious and far-reaching misconceptions about the nature of the index itself.⁸¹ Attributing photography's truth claims solely to the material contact or impression that produced the photographic image, instead of to the complex interplay of indexicality and iconicity characteristic of analog photography, this view paved the way for arguments by new media theorists that digital photography is nonindexical and, as a result, cannot fulfill analog photography's evidentiary function.⁸² Paulsen rereads Peirce in order to elaborate a more richly nuanced account of the role of indexicality in photography. Among his conclusions are: that indices, far from being guarantors of truth, are characterized by uncertainty and need to be interpreted according to the logical process that Peirce calls "abduction," which proceeds by hypothesis, guesswork, and conjecture; that the index engages the viewer in a

78. Desmond, "Postmortem Exhibitions" (above, n. 5), p. 349.

79. Desmond argues that the stripping away of the skin removes almost all traces of a unique life history, the marks left on the surface of the body by an individual life lived (*ibid.*, p. 370).

80. Paulsen, "The Index and the Interface" (above, n. 40), p. 84.

81. Sontag had argued in *On Photography* (above, n. 56) that the photograph drew its power to "usurp reality" from its indexical nature as "a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask . . . a material vestige of its subject" (p. 154).

82. Paulsen, "The Index and the Interface" (above, n. 40), p. 87.

present-tense relationship with both the sign and the referent; and that Barthes's account of photography's *indexicality*, even though he never uses the term, is enlightening precisely because it shifts the focus away from production to reception. We have already made some of these arguments, or similar ones, in our own account of the role of skin in the production and reception of indices in taxidermy and dermography. Here, we will simply elaborate briefly on some specific points raised by our own corpus, which can perhaps be clarified by Paulsen's take on the index.

At the end of "Veronica's Shrouds" the reader may find it curious that the narrator, on seeing the shrouds in the chapel at the Réattu and hearing Veronica's chilling response to his question about Hector's whereabouts, still seems reluctant to believe the worst. It is as though the indexical evidence of the material imprint of Hector's body on the shrouds, even supplemented by Veronica's words and what the narrator has learned from other sources, were not enough to convince him of Hector's fate. It takes the introduction of another index, a tiger's tooth worn by Veronica around her neck, to send him running out of the museum in horror. He has recognized Hector's lucky charm, the talisman that kept him safe from predators and from which he would never be separated, and can no longer doubt what has befallen him. The detail is a strange one and may seem superfluous in the economy of the story, which the reader may feel would have been tighter and more effective without it. The tiger's tooth risks coming across as a "McGuffin" where none is needed. What it adds, however, is a recognition that while the index may seem to provide an unmediated guarantee of truth or authenticity, in reality it is characterized by uncertainty and must always be interpreted by a process of abduction. In fact, our proficiency at processing indices is highly complex and underlies individual differences in our ability to successfully read the world: Sherlock Holmes is a skilled and practiced interpreter of indices, Dr. Watson is a bumbling incompetent. Tournier's narrator is more Watson than Holmes, and it is because of his slowness to draw the necessary conclusion from the first index (the shrouds) and its supporting evidence, that a second index (the tiger's tooth) is introduced to serve as an interpretant to the first. Neither overly credulous nor unduly skeptical, his reluctance to believe the worst of Veronica allows Tournier to make a less sensational though more nuanced point about indexicality. The *punctum*, held at bay before the dermographic evidence of the shrouds, returns to bite the narrator at the sight of the tooth, which tells him that not only is Hector *present* (here), he is also *not absent* (not elsewhere), a state that requires further commentary.

We have chosen to foreground Barthes's notion of the *present sign of a dead thing*, initially formulated in the context of an essay on the discourse of history, and to reflect on its applicability not only in photography, but also in taxidermy, both of which produce what Barthes calls, in Krauss's translation, "an illogical conjunction of the *here* and the *formerly*."⁸³ It now seems appropriate to reopen the question in light of Paulsen's strong emphasis on the presentness, rather than the pastness, of the index: "The index is a sign that calls all three terms—sign, referent, and receiver—into a contextual, present-tense situation. The index is a sign, and it is an event."⁸⁴ Such an emphasis on the temporal co-presence of the three elements flows from Paulsen's proposed shift in perspective from production to reception—"Much as with Barthes's account of the *punctum*, Peirce's explanation of the index focuses on the sign's reception, on the crucial link between the receiver and the referent"—which in turn hinges on the act of interpretation that the index requires. The index—the tiger's tooth, for example, or the shrouds—brings the apparently absent referent, Hector, forcefully into the present of the receiver and demands that she/he pays attention to it. But does this work in the same way in the case of the taxidermic animal?

We have argued that the specimen, for example in a museum diorama, can be considered as the present sign of a dead thing—the dead thing in this instance being the animal that once was, but is no more. In Peircean terms, if the animal is the referent, the preserved animal is the sign—part icon, part index—produced for a receiver, the viewer. We have also argued that it is, first and foremost, the viewer's response to the animal's skin, as trace-presence of the animal, that brings viewer, sign, and referent together in what Paulsen calls a "present-tense relationship." Such a view, which is, of course, little more than a schematic overview of the semiotic functioning of the taxidermic animal, minimizes the "past reality" of the "dead thing" in keeping with Paulsen's tight focus on the present-tenseness of Peirce's account of indexicality. But have we lost something in the process? Have we done justice to the *emanation* of past reality? Bearing in mind that our starting point was in the discourse of history, have we sacrificed too readily the quality of mystery that characterizes "the enigma of what has been, is no more, and yet offers itself as present sign of a dead thing"?⁸⁶ To come back to Baker's

83. Krauss, "Notes on the Index" (above, n. 31), p. 217 (emphasis in original).

84. Paulsen, "The Index and the Interface" (above, n. 40), p. 95.

85. Ibid.

86. Barthes, "The Discourse of History" (above, n. 6), pp. 139–140.

question, are we absolutely sure that the animal that once was *is no more?*

We would suggest that the enigma in question is that of the past itself. As historian Carolyn Steedman reminds us, the past is something that “does not now exist, but which once did actually happen; which cannot be retrieved, but which may be represented.”⁸⁷ For the historian, then, the past is absent, but can be made present by representation. At the heart of taxidermy’s present is an almost tangible absence, that of the animal (or, in the case of Veronica’s dermographs, of Hector), that gives rise to questions of an ontological nature. Dissatisfied with traditional models of history and pursuing her own reflections about Argentina’s *desaparecidos*, philosopher of history Ewa Domanska turns for guidance to Håkan Karlsson’s “contemplative archaeology,” inspired by his reading of late Heidegger. The “archaeontology” she proposes, focusing on the ontological status of the trace-presence of the past, turns first to the dead body as trace-being, both as evidence of crime and as focus for the work of mourning. The liminal, and deeply ambivalent, condition of the “disappeared” disrupts both these functions, endowing the missing body with an “uncanny,” ghostly character that “resists the dichotomous classification of present versus absent. In this context, *the disappeared body is*, as it were, *a paradigm of the past itself*, which is both continuous with the present and discontinuous from it; which simultaneously is and is not.”⁸⁸

The trace-presence of the disappeared body, like that of the animal in taxidermy though in a different register, is ontologically problematic, leading Domanska to look outside the binary opposition of present and absent that constitutes the default frame of historical reference for thinking about the past. In an attempt to open up the semantic field and lay bare the logical implications surrounding this binary model, she proposes a Greimassian semiotic square: “I am less interested in the terms *present* and *absent*, which are usually used to distinguish between the present and the past, than in the secondary concepts, that is, a past that is non-absent (i.e. whose absence is manifest) or non-present (i.e. whose presence is not manifest).”⁸⁹ Setting aside the nonpresent, which she sees as central to other (epistemological) debates about historical knowledge,

87. Carolyn Steedman, “The Space of Memory: In an Archive,” *History of the Human Sciences* 11:4 (1998): 65–83, quote on p. 67.

88. Ewa Domanska, “Toward the Archaeontology of the Dead Body,” trans. Magdalena Zapedowska, *Rethinking History* 9:4 (2005): 389–413, quote on p. 404 (emphasis in original).

89. Ibid., p. 389 (emphasis in original).

she turns her attention to the ontological category of the nonabsent past, “a past which is somehow still present, which will not go away or, rather, which we cannot rid ourselves of. The non-absent past is the ambivalent and liminal space of ‘the uncanny’; it is a past which haunts like a phantom and therefore cannot be controlled or subject to a finite interpretation. It is occupied by ‘uncanny,’ ‘ghostly artifacts,’ which undermine our sense of the familiar and threaten our sense of safety.”⁹⁰ “What is the nature of their life after life?” asks Garry Marvin of preserved and mounted animals. “Do they haunt us from this afterlife?”⁹¹

It is important to stress that the category of the *nonabsent past* is in no way exclusively tied to the case of the disappeared; indeed, Domanska proposes the term for generalization in the framework of a rethinking of history’s way of conceiving the past. In his recent book *The Archaeological Imagination*, Michael Shanks enthusiastically accepts her invitation and embraces the category as a way of rethinking some of the central tenets of his own discipline.⁹² For our part, it is in the space of this nonabsent past that we would situate Hector at the end of “Veronica’s Shrouds” or Roe’s blackbird. The demographic shrouds render Hector (as he was in life) manifestly absent—neither present (here) nor absent (elsewhere), but nonabsent. Between the absent past (the animal, human or nonhuman, that once was) and the present past (the indexical presence that is the skin) there is a third entity that is and is not—the nonabsent past that haunts and disturbs. The new taxidermy, as practiced by the artists we have examined, explores this “third space-time” of the nonabsent past, not by “bringing the animal back to life,” but by allowing it to inhabit and trouble the entire taxidermic process from evisceration to display. The animal *is* here, in the nonabsent past that is now.

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90. Ibid., p. 405.

91. Garry Marvin, “Perpetuating Polar Bears: The Cultural Life of Dead Animals,” in *The Afterlives of Animals* (above, n. 2), p. 157.

92. Michael Shanks, *The Archaeological Imagination* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2012); see esp. chap. 3, “An Archaeological Narratology.”