

# Mourning the Mounted: An Analysis of the Taxidermy Exhibition *Dead Animals with a Story*

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**Abstract** This article analyzes the taxidermy exhibition *Dead Animals with a Story* located in the Natural History Museum of Rotterdam in order to discover the subversive potentiality of taxidermy. Through granting the taxidermy animals subjectivity, by recognizing human and non-human kinship, and by creating accountability towards animal suffering, *Dead Animals with a Story* sets the stage for the animals to be deemed grievable. This points to the potential of the exhibition to reshape pre-established social and cultural boundaries between the human and the animal, which becomes ever so important in a world marked by extinction and loss.

**Keywords** Taxidermy. New taxidermy. Human-animal relationship. Mourning. Animal Studies.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Taxidermy and the Human-Animal Relationship. – 3 Entangled Mourning. – 4 Electrocuted Fur, McFlurry Cups, and Duck Dinners. – 5 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction

Walking into the Natural History Museum of Rotterdam, one can hardly look away from the large glass display placed at the entrance hall of the museum. Within the display case lay nine remarkable taxidermy critters curated next to each other, with light illuminating their bodies. At first glance, it is a peculiar and shocking sight. A large goose and stork, a crushed pigeon, and an electrocuted weasel all lying silently on their backs, naturally building curiosity. When one steps closer to the exhibition a sense of individual subjectivity emerges. The large goose and stork are represented as victims of littering. The crushed pigeon is introduced as a city pigeon, killed by the descending Boerengat bridge in Rotterdam, and the electrocuted weasel is displayed as the second weasel killed by the particle accelerator Large Hadron Collider (LHC) in Geneva. By displaying these eerie animal deaths, the taxidermy exhibition *Dead Animals with a Story* (Natural History Museum Rotterdam, 2013) shows the potential dramatic consequences that can happen when humans and animals collide in their everyday activities.

Taxidermy derives its meaning from the Greek word *taxis*, which translates to ‘arrangement’ or ‘order’, and the word *derma* meaning ‘skin’ (Straughan 2015, 363). In practice, taxidermy is the utilization of different methods of preserving animal skins by stuffing or mounting them over a sculpture (Péquignot 2006, 248). It is long been theorized that by utilizing these different techniques taxidermists aim to create a three-dimensional object that creates a faithful reproduction of animals into a state of permanence (Straughan 2015, 363-4). These reproductions are often considered an ideal type and try to create an illusion of movement to represent a choreography of the dead to stimulate life. Ultimately, this allows for taxidermy to possess a certain fabricated liveliness (Desmond 2016, 34-5). Taxidermy as practice and object has been a heavily contested subject in academic inquiry. Haraway’s (1984) analysis of natural history museum taxidermy remarks the ways in which taxidermy can portray and sustain patriarchal and colonial ways of knowing and endorse power structures. Yet, taxidermy can likewise rethink natural narratives, prompt inquiry about human and animal relationships, create affective responses, and have the ability to destabilize ontological binary oppositions (Aloi 2018, 64).

While most taxidermy animals are structured as ideal types in natural history museums, the animals in *Dead Animals with a Story* are depicted as ‘truly’ dead. Ultimately, this represents a new sensibility in taxidermy, which Gregory and Purdy have termed “new taxidermy” (2015, 74). New taxidermy differentiates itself from traditional realist taxidermy by moving away from realist portrayals of dead animals as lifelike to the creation of taxidermy that relies

upon a “self-conscious depiction of its own deadness” (75). In other words, it tries to make visible the constructed nature of taxidermy by focusing on the representation of its deadness. Besides actively commenting on taxidermic practices, new taxidermy can highlight themes, such as loss, grief, longing, temporality, and the human-animal relationship. Considering that *Dead Animals with a Story* can be classified as a new taxidermy exhibition, it becomes an interesting endeavor to discover if *Dead Animals with a Story* can productively address the human-animal relationship, without reaffirming humanist notions of superiority. In other words, can the nine animals in *Dead Animals with a Story* be silent educators in the refiguring of the human-animal relationships? This is an important inquiry, because the objectification of animals through taxidermy within natural history museums has taken place over millennia, continuously reproducing harmful and anthropocentric discourses. New forms of taxidermy can contribute to a change in these narratives and create possibilities for future alterations in relation to our human-animal existence (Aloi 2018, 64). Stated differently, new forms of taxidermy can function as influential semantic points of access that can challenge anthropocentric conceptions of the human-animal relationship (Aloi 2018, 18). This further contributes to the importance of academic inquiry into new taxidermy exhibitions. Bearing this in mind, the following research question is posed: does the new taxidermy exhibition *Dead Animals with a Story* invite a reframing of pre-established social/cultural boundaries between the human and the non-human animal? To answer this research question, this paper will first briefly examine and indicate the complicated relationship of taxidermy and the human-animal relationship to outline what is at stake when examining taxidermy. Thereafter, a close examination of mourning, as a mechanism to rethink human-animal relationships will be highlighted to offer a framework for the analysis of the exhibition. Using this lens, the exhibition will be analyzed, and careful attention will be paid to its mise-en-scène and narration. At last, a conclusion is given.

## 2 Taxidermy and the Human-Animal Relationship

The human-animal relationship in taxidermy is a complicated and contested matter. It has long been theorized by several critics that taxidermy, no matter its refashioning, stands as a sign of human superiority and mastery (O’Key 2021, 644). On the one hand, this is engendered by taxidermy’s ontological status as a human-based creation (Varela 2019, 299-300). By altering, preserving, and mounting, animal skins to create lifelike idealized specimen, it is the taxidermist that controls the portrayal of these creatures. Ultimately, this renders the dead animal as passive, with no control over its own

representation. Furthermore, when these critters are eventually curated in museum dioramas, bell jars, or other exhibition spaces, the taxidermic scenes depicted are on numerous occasions rooted in dominant and anthropocentric tropes of the human-animal relationship, such as a relationship embedded in dominance over the non-human (Desmond 2016, 31-3). Furthermore, other common anthropocentric representations of taxidermy illustrate power relations, such as predator and prey, dominant and dominated, and the self and the other (Mondal 2017, 2). Ultimately, this widens the already existing gap between the human and the non-human. Both points allude to the human desire to order, control, and exhibit anthropocentric versions of animals and other life forms. This form of yearning to explain the natural world is fundamental to taxidermy (Poliquin 2012, 6).

As a human-made creation, anthropocentrism will without a doubt be an inherent part residing in the ontological status of taxidermy (Varela 2019, 301). However, more recently scholars are denoting that taxidermic animals have the potential to disrupt and challenge the anthropocentrism that resides within them. An author who has made a valuable contribution to this argument is Giovanni Aloi. According to Aloi:

The matter is not so much whether these objects vacillate between the ontological status of natural or man-made, but that they essentially are commodities that can enable the retrieval of discursive formations, cultural conditions, practices, and power/knowledge relationships between humans and animals. (2018, 53)

In other words, as indicated by Aloi, taxidermic creatures have the potential to reclaim and restructure the naturalized discourses imposed on them. This shows that taxidermy is not a fixed phenomenon but can actively alter meaning. This is happening more often in modern taxidermy practices, such as botched taxidermy and new taxidermy, where discourses surrounding human mastery are actively challenged (Colvin 2016, 65). Instead of creating naturalized human-animal relationships, modern taxidermy can map multispecies intermingling by showing humans with animals and restructure hegemonic binaries between the human and non-human (65).

### 3 Entangled Mourning

One way of reframing dominant paradigms of the human-animal relationship resides in the ability of modern taxidermy to render taxidermic animals as subjects of mourning (Colvin 2016, 65). Through various means, taxidermy has the ability to yield taxidermy animals grievable. Before addressing these techniques, it is important to

denote the specific mourning addressed when thinking about mourning in relation to the non-human. Mourning is intrinsically seen as a human-centered phenomenon. Even though most humans spend their lives intermingled with various animals, humans hardly mourn for their deaths. In order to gain insight into this actuality, philosopher Thom van Dooren in his book *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* poses the question why, in a world marked by extinction and environmental disaster, humans hardly mourn non-humans (2014, 141). To answer this question, van Dooren states that mourning has a preoccupation with human exceptionality, in which humans feel superior to the non-human. This hierarchical way of thinking makes it difficult to mourn for other life forms (141). Therefore, van Dooren emphasizes that people must learn to mourn with non-human life forms, in order to create meaningful shared worlds (143-4). Donna Haraway in her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016) similarly emphasizes the importance of people learning to mourn with other life forms to establish valuable kinships. This form of mourning can be realized through the de-centering of the human (Ryan 2017, 125). Decentering the human, according to Ryan is:

not simply a turn from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism (from culture to nature), but rather a return to a sense of relationality between species as the essence of mourning. (127)

This shows that at the heart of mourning is the realization that the human and the non-human form entanglements that are inherently embodied, material, sensorial, and affective (126). As Stanescu beautifully states in the context of mourning and the non-human, mourning “is a way to make connections, of establishing kinship, and of recognizing the vulnerability and finitude of the other” (2012, 569). Mourning in this framework is an entangled and social process. It is attesting to a life, and realizing that we as humans are mixed, mingled, and meshed with the multiple other creatures that surround us. As previously stated, it has been theorized that modern taxidermy can elicit these particularities of mourning. By visibly showing the specificity of the death inflicted upon the animal, the taxidermy animal can be rendered as an individual subject to be mourned for (Colvin 2016, 65). Traditionally taxidermy as an epistemological tool emerged due to the desire of humans to classify animals into idealized species, not to create idiosyncrasies (Aloi 2018, 160). By recognizing the animal as an individual-embedded actor, it not only engages affective states of mourning, but it ultimately challenges the human-animal relationship. Furthermore, taxidermy has the potential to invoke mourning by emphasizing the value of the animal and the worldly entanglements between the human and non-human

(Colvin 2016, 70). In the following paragraphs, this essay will examine how the taxidermy exhibit *Dead Animals with a Story* engages mourning in order to rethink the human-animal relationship.

#### 4 Electrocuted Fur, McFlurry Cups, and Duck Dinners

While visiting the exhibition *Dead Animals with a Story* it became prevalent that these bodies did something. They captivated and intrigued. It is therefore not surprising that the museum brochure describes the exhibition as an exposition you will never stop talking about. As mentioned, the exhibition consists of nine taxidermy animals carefully curated next to each other [fig. 1]. At least eight of these animals are represented as double dead, which means that the taxidermic creatures are dead and simultaneously appear to be dead. The representation of the animal's deadness is accentuated by their poses. For example, the taxidermy animal, called "Facemask gull" is represented lying on its back with light illuminating its body. This pose is reminiscent of the position of a deceased person in an open-casket funeral [fig. 2]. Ultimately, this way of displaying the animal, subverts the traditional formal qualities of taxidermy, where the animal appears life-like. As already mentioned in the introduction, this way of curating taxidermy creatures is called new taxidermy. These new taxidermy works, whether intentionally or not, reflexively challenge the history of taxidermy techniques, along with all their inserted meanings (Gregory, Purdy 2015, 78).

New taxidermy considers the biological materiality of the animal's skin to be an expressive potentiality that can express meaning (71). However, the skin on a taxidermy animal can only function as a powerful point of access when the authentic skin of the previous living animal is used. This is not necessarily unique to new taxidermy. As Jane Desmond has argued elsewhere, authenticity in all taxidermy relies upon using the genuine skin, feathers, and fur of the previously living critter. Desmond writes:

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. (quoted in Gregory, Purdy 2015, 80)



**Figure 1** Full exhibition on display, 2024. Rotterdam, Natural History Museum Rotterdam. Author's photo, courtesy of Natural History Museum Rotterdam



**Figure 2** Photograph of the "Facemask gull", 2024, NMR998900172803. Rotterdam, Natural History Museum Rotterdam. Author's photo, courtesy of Natural History Museum Rotterdam

In an instruction video posted on YouTube, taxidermist Ferry van Jaarsveld from the Natural History Museum of Rotterdam explains that the ethically sourced dead animals in *Dead Animals with a Story* are dismembered, stuffed, and restructured, yet their original skin and fur is always retained.<sup>1</sup> This does not only create an authentic taxidermy exhibition, but in *Dead Animals with a Story* this emphasizes an affective dimension prevalent in the exhibition. As explained, the taxidermy animals exhibited highlight the often unaddressed suffering of animals killed by the technologies of modern life and capitalist production. This unaddressed suffering is made visible for the spectator through the authentic preservation and showcasing of the animal's skin, that contains the trauma and pain inflicted on these animals, which eventually caused their deaths. This is most prevalent in the portrayal of the "Cern weasel 2", "Bridge pigeon", and the "Trauma gull". In the "Cern weasel 2", the electrocuted fur and the weasel's burned paws function as embodied traces to remind the spectator of the weasel's tragic death caused by the Large Hadron Collider in Geneva [fig. 3]. Similarly, the "Bridge pigeon", still retains the gaping hole in its fur that was caused by the descending Boerengat Bridge in Rotterdam [fig. 4]. In the "Trauma gull", when one looks closely physical scrapes from the collision with the trauma helicopter that caused the gull's death are still present on the body of the bird [fig. 5]. These embodied traces create both an affective response within the viewer and highlight the particularity of the animals that once lived. Ultimately, this leads to the possibility of rendering them as subjects that can be mourned for, instead of remaining passive, naturalized non-individuals.



**Figure 3** Photograph of the "Cern weasel 2", 2024, NMR99900003507. Rotterdam, Natural History Museum Rotterdam. Author's photo, courtesy of Natural History Museum Rotterdam

<sup>1</sup> OPEN Rotterdam (2020). "Dode dieren als hobby? Ferry doet het! Kunst en cultuur". YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pW4C8PCLQ6w>.





**Figure 4** Photograph of the "Bridge pigeon", 2024. Rotterdam, Natural History Museum Rotterdam. Author's photo, courtesy of Natural History Museum Rotterdam



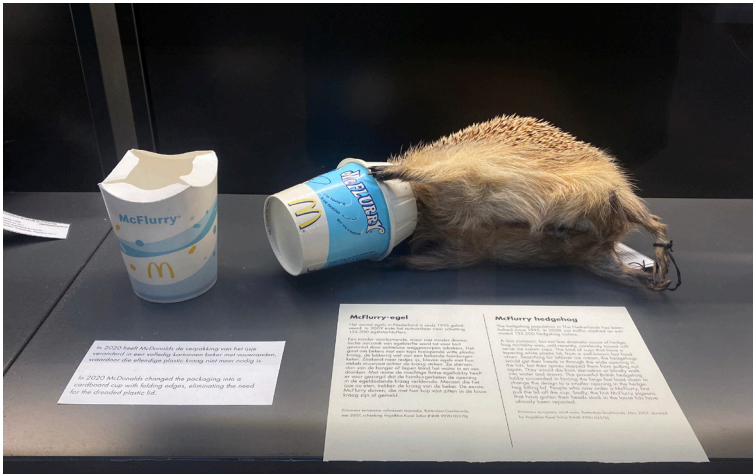
**Figure 5** Photograph of the "Trauma gull", 2024, NMR998900003254. Rotterdam, Natural History Museum Rotterdam. Author's photo, courtesy of Natural History Museum Rotterdam

Besides making the visible traces of the animal's deaths explicit through their authentic skin, the exhibition uses cultural objects in the glass display to render the animals as subjects of mourning. An

important aspect of taxidermy is that the interpretation of taxidermic animals is dependent on the objects that are placed alongside each animal. In *Dead Animals with a Story* the taxidermy animals are framed alongside several cultural objects. The “Rubber band stork”, for example, is placed alongside ingested rubber bands, which the stork mistook for worms, leading to the bird’s death [fig. 6]. Another example includes the display of a McFlurry cup placed alongside the “McFlurry hedgehog” who became an unfortunate victim of careless littering, dying from starvation due to being trapped within a McFlurry lid [fig. 7]. Ultimately, these objects transpose the animals from a natural context to a profoundly cultural context. By creating these natural-material-cultural relationships, *Dead Animals with a Story* allows the viewer yet again to recognize the highly individualized particularities of the animals’ deaths setting the stage for them to be mourned for. Furthermore, it grants the viewer a moment to think through the intimate entanglements between human-made objects and nonhuman beings in everyday interactions. It is these assemblages between the objects and the animals that engage the viewer in a series of considerations involving human and animal relationships.



**Figure 6** Photograph of the “Rubber band stork”, 2024, NMR998900006147. Rotterdam, Natural History Museum Rotterdam. Author’s photo, courtesy of Natural History Museum Rotterdam



**Figure 7** Photograph of the “McFlurry Hedgehog”, 2024, NMR999000002576. Rotterdam, Natural History Museum Rotterdam. Author’s photo, courtesy of Natural History Museum Rotterdam

Furthermore, the exhibition recognizes the value of the non-human animal by its potential to engender feelings of regret and accountability within the exhibition and the spectator. The language used within the exhibition, while mostly staying neutral in order to provide epistemological knowledge about the animals, echoes feelings of regret. Words, such as victim, tragic, and unfortunate within the exhibition captions of the taxidermy animals all point to feelings, such as regret and compassion, alluding to the recognition of the value of animal life. Similarly, the large backdrop behind the exhibitions crystallizes these same feelings. The taxidermy animals are accompanied by a mural painted with extinct mammoths, that gaze at the viewer. It is as if these mammoths speak to the viewer; recognize their value, and take accountability, before they end up like us, extinct. This form of highlighting accountability is once again accentuated by the glass display. The beauty of the glass display is the ability to transpose the reflection of the spectator into the exhibition. Here, it is the viewer that looks directly at them-, her-, or himself. While this can be read as the human imposing themselves yet again into the natural world, in the context of the affective domain of the exhibition the reflection elicits feelings of shame, guilt, and accountability. It is through the eliciting of these feelings and by highlighting the value of animal life, that the exhibition sets the stage for the animals to become creatures to be mourned for. In the aforementioned paragraphs, it became evident that *Dead Animals with a Story* can elicit mourning, through recognizing the animal as an embodied individual, highlighting the non-human animals value in the world, and by

emphasizing human and non-human intermingling and accountability. By eliciting feelings of mourning, the viewer is able to attest to these lives and recognize how the human and non-human are intrinsically entangled, therefore changing pre-established hegemonic binaries where human superiority reigns.

However, while some elements of the exhibition indeed actively dismantle the anthropocentric relationship between the human and the animal through eliciting mourning, other parts of the exhibition reaffirm its strong grip. This is most evident through the language use of the exhibition. While as previously stated most of the language use in the exhibition captions of the taxidermy animals is neutral and explanatory or even echoes feelings of guilt and accountability, some sentences exude anthropocentrism. An example of this is the caption of the “Facemask gull”, which contains the following sentence:

in itself, a road-killed herring gull is nothing special, but this bird got one of her legs entangled with the elastic band of a disposable facemask.

This points to a sense of human superiority and animal objectification. It is the human that decides whether or not the road-killed gull can be deemed special, while simultaneously rendering this specific taxidermy gull as ‘lucky’ to be included. This overall language use also alludes to the dominant cultural desensitized attitude to the sight of road-killed animals (Monahan 2016, 154). Another example in which human superiority is reaffirmed through language is prevalent in the caption of the “Homosexual necrophiliac duck”. According to the director of The Natural History of Rotterdam Kees Moeliker (2001), this duck was the first victim of homosexual necrophilia in the mallard. The duck died by colliding into the glass window of the Natural History Museum of Rotterdam, where after dying the duck was raped by another duck. Each year on June 5<sup>th</sup> the duck is commemorated during Dead Duck Day. A day on which people engage in productive conversation to prevent glass-bird collisions. What happens after these conversations echoes tragic irony. The full caption reads as follows:

Each year on June 5<sup>th</sup>, at 5’55” PM, a short open-air ceremony called Dead Duck Day takes place under the glass façade of the museum, at the exact spot where the duck lost its life. The homosexual necrophiliac duck is commemorated and methods for preventing collisions between birds and glass are discussed. Afterwards, a six course duck dinner is offered at Tai Wu, Mauritsweg 24. All are welcome! (Natural History Museum Rotterdam 2013)

This is quite the contradictory passage. While the creation of an open-air ceremony to prevent collisions between glass and birds

alludes to the productive action established for animal suffering, the six-course duck dinner represents the ducks as mere commodities. This language pushes the viewer that reads the caption out of an embedded interaction with the animals on display towards the dominant anthropocentric worldview that animals live in service of the human. Both of these examples point to a linguistic anthropocentrism that has become extremely invasive specifically in the English language, where dominance over the non-human is asserted through language (Fill 2015, 182).

## 5 Conclusion

The complicated human-animal relationship implied in taxidermy has illustrated taxidermy's double-sided nature. On the one hand, taxidermy's ontological status as well as the ways in which these animals are displayed, reside in anthropocentric paradigms of the human-animal relationship. However, taxidermy and more specifically modern taxidermy, such as new taxidermy, has the ability to restructure and challenge these dominant frameworks. Ultimately, this elicits certain questions. Can all new taxidermy exhibitions invite a reframing of the human-animal relationship? If so, how? What is ultimately at stake? By zooming into and analyzing the new taxidermy exhibition in The Natural History Museum of Rotterdam *Dead Animals with a Story* this essay has tried to answer some of these questions. On close examination, it becomes prevalent that the exhibition *Dead Animals with a Story* holds space for mourning. By granting the taxidermy animals subjectivity and individuality, by recognizing human and non-humans shared entanglements, by acknowledging the value of animals, and creating a space for the spectator to be held accountable for animal suffering, the exhibition sets the stage for these animals to be deemed grievable. Ultimately, this points to the potentiality of the exhibition to reshape pre-established social and cultural boundaries between the human and the animal, where human superiority and extraordinary rule. However, through the language use of the exhibition it became prevalent that the human is not fully dethroned from its position of superiority, which was illustrated by the examples of the invasive nature of linguistic anthropocentrism in the exhibition.

Pitfalls of the analysis point to what Poliquin already denoted when talking about taxidermy that: "The subject is simply too broad, too nuanced, and too detailed to discuss in full" (2012, 9). To better understand the exhibition, further research can examine the long history of taxidermy itself and the Natural History Museum as an active stakeholder in shaping meaning. Furthermore, the lens of mourning allowed to examine the exhibition through one specific affective

angle to rethink the human and animal relationship. However, each experience of mourning, even for the non-human is unique and highly shaped by social, cultural, historical, and political factors, which need to be considered in further research.

Still, *Dead Animals with a Story* suggests that these animals were in fact members of our society who were left in the display to call upon the human to mourn the mounted. Perhaps then, we can recognize that humans and animals share an entangled world and create valuable kinships of care.

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