

Museum of Extinction: The Field Ornithology Collection

NATALIE FIELD

Norges Teknisk-Naturvitenskapelige
Universitet (NTNU), Norway

info@nataliefield.art

KEYWORDS

Speculative taxidermy; materiality;
museology; re-imagining; extinction.

DOI

[10.54916/rae.142530](https://doi.org/10.54916/rae.142530)

DATE OF PUBLICATION

03/05/2024

ABSTRACT

This artistic research project combines an exploration of natural history conservation at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology and museology at Museene i Sør-Trøndelag. The exposition is structured around Field Notes: qualitative records of my observations. Taking an ethnographic and interpretive phenomenological approach, I argue my hypothesis through the subjective experiences of the living, as well as the living dead. Drawing a correlation between the utilitarian subjugation of the animal-other and loss of biodiversity, I posit that the re-presentation of animal materialities in art and artefacts has the potential to re-form culture in the time of the sixth extinction.

Museum of Extinction: The Field Ornithology Collection is dedicated to the 150 billion birds that should have been but are not.

Speculative Taxidermy in the Time of the 6th Extinction

Field Note: 07 September 2021

I have taken a particular interest in a 120-year-old giraffe I happened upon at the NTNU Vitenskapsmuseet, which is coming undone at the seams. While the museum diorama historically endeavors to portray scenes of unspoiled nature, the unusual inclusion of this specimen is an honest representation of objects that are not stable, but slowly continuing the process of decay to return to the natural state of the universe: CHAOS: a visual analogy for the state of disrepair our attempts at control and dominion over nature has led to.

The acknowledgement of gratuitous animal death and colonialist power embedded in animal materialities found in natural history museums (Haraway, 1984), has seen the display of taxidermized animals fall out of favor. Considered anachronisms, incongruent with present culture, museums continue to substitute these “virtual reality machines of their age” (Wecker, 2016, para. 8) with new media and interactive displays. Subsequently, many of the older artefacts are discarded or archived for us to forget a past that no longer serves us (Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995). As taxidermy disappeared from natural history, it re-materialised in the unexpected sphere of contemporary art. Although there is a long history of artists working with animals, dead and alive, the early 2000s saw a sharp rise in taxidermy in the gallery. Born from material artistic practice rather than traditional craft, trends like *Botched Taxidermy* (Baker, 2000) produced hybridised, tatty, and garish experimental creations that relied on shock value to draw our attention to issues around food and fur industry practices, trophy hunting, environmental degradation, and species loss, while simultaneously seeming to relish its own excess. Over time, this approach evolved to become a dedicated theoretical tool for articulating such artistic concerns. In 2018 the term *Speculative Taxidermy* was coined by art historian Giovanni Aloï to describe art in which preserved animal materials are incorporated with the explicit aim to re-think human/animal relationships. My practice is situated in this field of *Speculative Taxidermy*, as I investigate past and present relations between human and non-human animals by questioning how man-made representations of, and cultural ideas about, the animal-other influences our ethical,

social, and ecological behaviour towards the living world.

There are numerous examples of artists working with *Speculative Taxidermy* in the art gallery. But what happens when we leave the white cube behind to exhibit such artworks in the context of the museum, to recontextualise the environments they are placed in, or, vice versa, recontextualise the animal-objects themselves? Through curatorial gestures that encourage artistic intervention, such as Mark Dion’s *The Tar Museum* (MUMOK, 2018), Tessa Farmer’s *Little Savages* (Farmer, 2007) and Claire Morgan’s *By the Skin of the Teeth* (Horniman Museum, 2019), artists have worked with and through taxidermy to give new meanings to natural history museum collections. My research project calls for extending the range of artistic intervention from the natural history museum, where people perhaps expect to be confronted with issues concerning human/animal relationships; to cultural museums, where taxidermized animals are present but obscured by the exceptionalism of man: the ready-made in an artwork, the skin on a drum, the fur of a coat. Animals whose functions have shifted from living beings (mother, brother, lover, predator) to tools (utilitarian, pedagogical, material) to animal artefacts. Animals existing in the ambiguous duality of “body as object” and “object as body” (Aloï, 2018, p.180).

Drawing from literature in the field of taxidermy as it pertains to both natural history and art, as well as the correlation between them, I will address a critical gap in our consideration of the taxidermized animal as cultural artefact by asking, “How can the re-presentation of animal materialities in art and artefacts re-form culture in the time of the sixth extinction?”. Through my research I explore how animal surfaces are made visible, or in some cases invisible, in public collections; how the human presence as creator or curator of an object can be separated from the material itself; and how we can follow that materiality to discover object-oriented ontologies. By addressing these issues in museums that are dedicated to ethnography, I create a dialogue between the historical and contemporary cultural values embedded in animal artefacts, to re-imagine pluralistic futures.

Faced with biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse in the midst of a sixth extinction event caused by anthropomorphic machinations, we must recognise that the utilitarian subjugation of the other-than-human for our own advancement has evolved well

beyond matters of need. Driven by greed and speciesism, the unsubstantiated belief that our species' well-being and right to exist surpasses that of other life forms, we are creating a hostile living environment; not only for ourselves, but all living creatures. Current extinction models predict a loss of up to 27% in vertebrate diversity by 2100 (Strona & Bradshaw, 2022). Loss of biodiversity is preceded by population collapse. A 2021 study by Callaghana, Nakagawab and Cornwell concluded that there are an estimated 50 billion wild birds on this planet. That is six birds per human. Some have a surprisingly optimistic reaction to this revelation. However, it is worth comparing the data to a similar study by Glaston and Blackburn from 1997, which calculated there to be between 200 and 400 billion individual birds. At the time, that equated to approximately 60 birds per human at the high end. One might argue that the human population has increased in that timeframe and would impact the bird-to-human ratio, as I did. However, calculations reveal an astounding correlation between human population growth of 25% from six to eight billion between 1997 and 2021, and the decline in bird numbers of 75% from 200 to 50 billion in the same timeframe!

Museum of Extinction: The Field Ornithology Collection is dedicated to the 150 billion birds that should have been but are not.

Through this project I work to make the invisible, loss, visible.

Method to my Madness

The interdisciplinarity of this project called for partners in both natural history conservation and museology.

My biggest challenge in creating the Museum of Extinction was learning a new craft to produce the animal artefacts. I applied to the Trondheim Art Academy (KiT) specifically because the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) houses its own Natural History Museum. My application indicated my interest in developing a material-led investigation of the dead animal body as artistic medium by learning conservation techniques at the Department of Natural History, as well as my desire to collaborate with the museum for public outreach. However, this was not to be.



Figure 1. Artistic Research at IKOM/NTNU Norway.
Photo: Natalie Field.

Consequently, I contacted Guus Wellesen at Arctic Skeletons through Instagram. Within one month of the master's program launching, I had embedded myself into the world of specimen conservation at his place of work, the Department of Clinical and Molecular Medicine (IKOM), also at NTNU (Fig.1). The key focus at IKOM is the pedagogy of human anatomy in medical education. The department produces specimens for its anatomical museum, where they are also developing a comparative anatomy collection. Here, I learnt (and continue to learn) the traditional techniques of skeleton articulation, taxidermy, and entomology collection, as well as observe the more complex processes of corrosion casting and plastination. The term taxidermy specifically refers to working with animal skins; however, I use it more loosely to include all these various techniques when describing my work.

As I became familiar with the craft of taxidermy, the feasibility of the project became a reality. The question on my research wall "How to make a bird?" was replaced with "Why to make a bird?". In order to re-imagine historical representations of the animal-other, I needed to explore cultural

institutions and their archives to uncover notions of human exceptionalism. I gained access to the Museene i Sør-Trøndelag's (MiST) collections and knowledge as one of two recipients of their master's scholarship program. This enabled me to study the representation of animals in art at the Trondheim Kunstmuseum, artefacts of cultural heritage at the Sverresborg Folkemuseum, decorative arts and crafts at the Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimuseum, and musical instruments at the Ringve Musikkmuseum. My research was conducted in five phases: Preliminary Research; Site visits as Public Participant; Survey via Online Questionnaire; Archive Visits and Documentation; and finally Artistic Intervention.

Further research was conducted at NTNU's Natural History Museum and Botanical Gardens, and Bergen's University Museum in Norway; Vilnius Art Academy and Kaunas Tadas Ivanauskas Museum of Zoology in Lithuania; Rejmyre Art Lab, the National Museum and Linnaeus Museum in Sweden; and Documenta 15 in Germany.



Figure 2. Claire Morgan, *By the Skin of the Teeth*, 2019.
Installation View, Horniman Museum, London.
Photo: Natalie Field.

Working closely with IKOM and MiST, I challenged myself, conservators, and curators alike to look at animal-artefacts with renewed interest in the materials themselves: objects in a state of flux, vacillating between functional and ornamental, natural and man-made, living and dead.

Death at the Museum

Field Note: 30 September 2019

Upon entering the great hall of the Horniman Museum, I was confronted by something unexpected: a squirrel, fox, raven, and parakeet hung suspended, maws and beaks agape, each with a spiraling cone of small pieces of black plastic spewing from their mouths... The image has stayed with me. What makes this work so impactful? Is it the juxtaposition of the natural and man-made materials and the tension created at the point of their intersection? Or the unexpected confrontation with our own culpability in creating an uninhabitable planet for other species?

Further to the artistic work of Claire Morgan (Fig.2), I have come upon two examples of ‘dead animals’ in natural history museums. Of course, there are often displays in which a predator has caught its prey. But these scenes are different, in that there is no reference to the cause of death, and death itself becomes the subject of the diorama narrative. The first I found in Lithuania’s Kaunas Tadas Ivanauskas Museum of Zoology (Fig.3). A fallen falcon lies dead in a clearing in the woods – or so the diorama would have us believe.

The second example is exhibited in Sweden’s National Museum, where several squirrels are posed in activity; in comparison, one lies lifeless in the bottom left corner.

Field Note: 23 August 2022

“Oh no! It’s dead!” I overhear a teenage girl proclaim upon seeing the dead squirrel. Her friend responds in a rather dry tone, “They’re all dead.”

And therein lies the crux of the matter: By making death visible through material form, the animal



Figure 3. Diorama. Kaunas Tadas Ivanauskas Museum of Zoology, Lithuania, 2022. Photo: Natalie Field.

absence is made explicit. By derailing the conventional taxidermic goal of reanimating the dead, attention is drawn to the death at the museum, leading to a recontextualized experience of the other stilled lives in the collection. In the natural history museum, this might betray the unnatural repose of frozen tableaux; in the cultural museum, counter narratives of man's exceptionalism to expose the cost at which our greatest achievements have come.

What draws people to look at animals is the “innate urge to affiliate with other forms of life”, a desire described by E.O. Wilson (1984) as “Biophilia”. By introducing the death of the animal into public spaces, this desire is confronted, and the animal surface becomes a channel for communion between the living and the dead.

Documenta 15 (2022) proved that exhibitions have the potential to be sites of learning. Rather than the work of art being the result of our research, it can be a step in the journey of discovery, for public and artist alike. Though this thesis project takes

a critical approach to institutionalized forms of animal representation, the goal is not to subvert the museum by problematizing its structure, but rather to utilize it as an entry point for thinking together. Using mimesis as a tool to explore and critique the relationship between representation and reality, and the ways in which that association can shape our understanding and perception of the world, we can become more present in our assimilation of visual knowledge. To quote installation artist Olafur Eliasson, “changing a basic viewpoint necessarily must mean that everything else changes perspective accordingly” (2003, as cited in Bishop, 2005, p.80). Working with those in positions of authority to create scenarios for public dissemination and participation that address this moment between the past and future to think about animals beyond utilitarianism is crucial. Literary critic Magnus William-Olsson (2014) argues that the public sphere is indeed a prerequisite for philosophical and aesthetic criticism that aims at understanding and transforming through the conceptualization, evaluation, and interpretation of artistic knowledge.



Figure 4. Natalie Field, *Falling*, 2023. Bullfinch, Magpie, Firecrest, Blue Tit, Hooded Crow, Cuckoo, bones, thread, found object. 250 x 100 x 100 cm. Installation View, Museum of Extinction, K-U-K Norway. Photo: Natalie Field.

In the context of the Anthropocene, the critical consideration of the dead animal body as medium plays a vital role in relation to issues surrounding realism, truth, and constructivism. Where the living dead: corpses, skins, fragments of beings that still hold their material memory even when they are no longer reflected in shape nor form, create pathways for undoing historical approaches to knowledge building.

Museum of Extinction

If the culture of today determines the heritage of tomorrow, what would the artefacts in the museum of the future reflect of contemporary culture?

In consideration of my thesis statement “the re-presentation of animal materialities in art and artefacts has the potential to re-form culture in the time of the sixth extinction”, I conceptualize a speculative museum of the future along with the physical artefacts that will, in due time, populate its halls. This collection of artistic animal artefacts, further referred to as “animalARTefacts,” explicitly incorporates dead animal bodies to draw attention to narratives around extinction. This hypothetical museum of the future makes the objects in its collection available for loan to actual museums in the present, to create site-responsive work in dialogue with death at the museum to focus our attention on the correlation between man’s exceptionalism and the sixth mass extinction. By constructing an imagined future to comment on the present by contrasting it against a historical framework, we can begin to re-imagine our relationship with the animal-other and influence the trajectory of a tentative future.

A vault is the perfect place for a post-apocalyptic narrative.

The physical manifestation of the *Museum of Extinction* (Fig.4) is a shrine to the fallen: a dark, quiet, and intimate sanctuary for reflection. Set in Hvelvkjelleren at Kjøpmannsgata Ungst Kunst (K-U-K), visitors remove their shoes before stepping through a space-time-portal to become subjects within an orchestrated tableau of a crypt. The animalARTefacts are exhibited spaced, separated by darkness, revealed by light. The mood is somber and melancholic. Each encounter with a relic of reverence is marked as a distinguishable moment in time that draws an emotional response to these sacred bodies before us.

The scenography of the museum is centered around *Falling: A Bullfinch, Magpie, Firecrest, Blue Tit, Hooded Crow, and Cuckoo* come tumbling down amidst vertebrae towards a pile of bones on the floor. The air is filled with whispers of votive offerings. The six birds in *Falling* represent the current bird-to-human ratio and invite the spectator to speculate on a world in which ‘their’ six birds have fallen. This narrative is supported by all the deconstructed bodies in the room, skins and bones reconstructed to represent various stages of loss. Dying, death, decay. Amongst the dead, a place has been carved for “staying with the trouble of living and dying together on a damaged earth”, a practice developed by Donna Haraway (2016). A note on the bench reads: SIT WITH ME. And for some time, you sit with a bird, as I have.

Simultaneously sculpture and cultural object, the mimetic potential of the animalARTefacts to simulate relics from the past allows for artistic intervention into contemporary cultural institutions. By virtue of the installation setting within the museum, the juxtaposition of the artworks alongside existing objects enables them to establish a dialogue, to comment on and respond to one another.

Both *Museum of Extinction* and the artistic intervention it initiates take the form of installation: art that insists on first-hand experience of the work. This embodied perception of the material physically disrupts the traditional single-point perspective viewing of art and artefacts associated with “complacent bourgeois spectatorship, in which real life is observed from a safe, detached and disengaged distance” and motivates what Claire Bishop (2005), author of *Installation Art*, describes as “activated spectatorship”. In this state, the active presence of the viewer brings awareness to the individual’s own body and lived experience, activating their ability to become more self-reflexive.

Field Note: 05 May 2023

Here comes the “audience”, to cast a glance of feigned interest. But perhaps today your living presence arrests their attention. They have mistaken their position. The work was not created for them to gaze upon you, but to draw them to your altar to be transformed in your presence.

By creating a network between the museum (a human-centered construct), the dead animal body (loss of biodiversity) and the intervention (introduced material agent), we can reflect on the

significance of the physical, historical, and cultural context of a particular site in relation to the material of its objects.

Return to the Scene of the Crime

Working with museums and institutions as memory-keepers, how can artistic intervention support the museum's role as custodian of natural heritage through a critical position on the representation of the other-than-human? To re-imagine the animal-as-object, we need to not only look at, but respond to, the 'scene of the crime.'

Field Note: 14 September 2022

We start with NK1947-048: Box with lid cut out of white bone. One thing a digital museum can never prepare you for is the size of an object. It

is tiny and incredibly delicate, which makes it seem even more precious in an art world that has conditioned us to believe 'bigger is better'. Curator Solveig Lønmo comments on this feeling of preciousness: "I hope the animal material was collected from something left behind, rather than something stolen". She refers, of course, to the life itself.

To create site-responsive work we must first identify whether the site of investigation refers to the museum or the animal bodies themselves. I propose that we enter the site through the animal bodies, through their individual deaths and collective narrative, in the context of the site of the museum. It is only through communing with the museum and the deconstructed bodies that inhabit it, that we can give voice to the silent creatures that inertly dwell these institutional halls.



Figure 5. Left: FTT.58565: Victorian glass dome diorama. Glass, wood, porcelain (flowers), textile (butterflies), plants, paper-mâché, metal thread, bird. 53,5 x 28,5 x 19 cm. Sverresborg Trøndelag Folk Museum, Norway. Right: Natalie Field, Sands of Time, 2023. Corvus cornix, plant material, soil, glass, polyurethane, wire. 30 x 20 x 20 cm. Photos: Natalie Field.

I visited 25 animals in the MiST collection. These encounters not only influenced the direction of the project but also inspired the animalARTefacts. For example, *Sands of Time* (Fig.5) takes inspiration from a Victorian cloche in the archive of the Sverresborg Folkemuseum. A glass dome filled with flowers and a small ‘stuffed’ hummingbird variety; this type of home décor diorama became fashionable in the late 1800s when natural history collection was at a peak. This object motivated the creation of an antithesis to the traditional cloche narrative. By turning the dome upside down and filling it with the skeletons of leaves and a crow, I am reflecting on the historical trend of excessive collection against the contemporary framework of the biodiversity crisis.

While the animals in the museum have long been transformed, let us also acknowledge the unformed material in the artist’s hands, these bodies that are to be re-made into animalARTefacts.

Field Note: 22 May 2022

The limp body lies before me... I place my hands on them and acknowledge their presence. Through sobs I whisper, “I am speaking with, through, to, the ether, the lifeforce, the spirit, the great mystery. That which lies within and without all matter. Even when the breath no longer flows. The living remains present in the material. Spectator to the creative process. Bearing silent witness to this transformation. Bearing witness to my being and becoming. Your death is the birth of my art. We are intertwined in life through death. I give thanks to you. I cry for us.” I sit for a moment with this ghost that still haunts me. I pick up my scalpel...

Acknowledging the individual raises questions of RECIPROCITY. How can I work WITH these creatures, performatively, experimentally, or mystically in a way that equalizes the taking/giving dynamic? To create something ceremonial and sacred, that gives reverence to the animal’s life, instead of forcing the animal into the role of the utilitarian or symbolic. How do I speculate with the animal? To give the dead agency by developing what Petra Lange-Berndt (2015) refers to as “a Methodology of Material Complicity: to marginalize form, to give agency to material, to follow the material and act with the material”. Where the dead animal does not merely signify the loss of biodiversity, but retains their individuality to become an active agent, rather than passive participant, in the act of speculation.

I don’t choose the birds; the birds choose me. To date, all the specimens I have worked with have been gifts. Unlike conventional artistic mediums, the material that is the animal body arrives at the scene of creation with history and agency that cannot be denied. Whereas the taxidermist conventionally aspires to work with unspoiled bodies to produce museum-quality specimens that perpetuate visions of unspoiled nature, the artist may work with the ruined body. Not to purposefully create “animals that have gone wrong” (Baker, 200, p.55) as in *Botched Taxidermy*, but rather to tell that animal’s story – split feathers, torn skin, and fractured bones become material reminders of violence and indifference towards the animal-other. These imperfections create an intimacy that transcends them becoming mere indexical reproductions that represent a species, but “living ruins that point to death and the fact that nature has long been ruined itself” (Brown University, 2016), as Berndt explains.

An embodiment of the challenges and anxieties of the extinction crisis, animal materiality has the potential to evoke visceral reactions from anguish to regret and sorrow. Emotions that insist on immediacy. Underlying all of these, lies the devastating loss of each death encountered.

Cultivating Acts of Recognition

Field Note: 25 August 2022

The forest swallowed me whole. I couldn’t find my way out again... I finally entered the town from an unforeseen direction. That was when I saw you, black body against black concrete. The incident, an accident, must have just occurred. But you were already gone, only the feathered vessel remained. Still, I couldn’t leave you there...

Two days later, I invited participants of the KUNO course “Everything you want was already here” at Rejmyre Art Lab in Sweden to join me for this Jackdaw’s funeral. Set in the liminal space of the attic of the historical Rejmyre Glassbruk, attendees took their mark at a piece of bound paper to form a semi-circle. Within, a short poem composed to mark the occasion, accompanied by a pressed flower collected from the local graveyard, hallowed ground. Together we held a minute of silence while contemplating our personal relationships with the other-than-human. I encouraged them to not only think about how they connect with Nature, but



Figure 6. Natalie Field, *Offering to the Forest God*, 2022. *Performative Intervention*. Installation View, Rejmyre Art Lab, Sweden. Photo: Natalie Field.

how we may create opportunities for Nature to feel more connected to us. What acts of recognition and care could we practice in our everyday lives? This thought experiment was followed by our collective reading of the poem. Repeated three times. An incantation. Each person then entered the crawl space of the attic, to share a private moment... and a gift of flowers and seeds in an act of reciprocity. Finally, I collected the Jackdaw on their bed of flowers and led the procession down three flights of stairs and a quiet street to the edge of the forest: their final resting place.

Sometimes I forget that my relationship with interspecies encounters, especially those of the dead variety, has been cultivated over many years. And that it is something rather unique to me. The discourse following *Offering to the Forest God* (Fig.6) reminded me that for others such encounters are new, a little frightening, or even ominous. Through this experience I learnt that navigating emotions through the scenography of the intervention/installation is paramount to conveying love and respect. Having successfully achieved this, participants were open to this unusual rendezvous with death and found it deeply meaningful as a way of connecting with the loss of the animal-other.

For me, this intervention clarified the potential for transforming personal moments of consciousness into communal acts of recognition by translating the experience of the work of art to the audience through the artwork, as discussed by John Dewey (1934) in *Art as Experience*.

Field Note: 05 August 2022

*I meet with Iris Verena Barth in the conservator's workshop at the Ringve Musikkmuseum. The facilities are clean and modern. Yet, little jars of secret potions, brushes, tools, and spools of string in various metals act as reminders that you have entered an artisan's workspace. On the worktable lies an ivory recorder in a soft cloth that has been folded open. A treasure to be sure. A number has been carved on the foot joint. A barcode? Is this object a prisoner to this place? As it turns out, to some extent, yes. Iris and I discuss the complexities of being a steward of an artefact crafted from material that is now illegal to trade in. Ivory, once coveted for its exoticism and rarity, now forbidden for exactly those reasons. Meanwhile, I am acutely aware of *The Elephant in the Room*.*

To test the museum intervention hypothesis, I invited Ringve Musikkmuseum to be an early adopter of the concept and take an animalARTefact on loan from the *Museum of Extinction*. *Bird Cage* (Fig.7), a Rainbow Lorikeet suspended in a cage of bones, has been designed to comment on exotic animal bodies embedded in their instrument collection. Accompanied by the sound of flapping wings, the juxtaposing of the motionless body alongside the subtle sound of movement serves as a trigger for the recontextualization of animal materialities arrested in a time and place foreign to their own.

To gauge public reaction to the intervention, the artwork is supplemented by *animalARTefact: The Elephant in the Room*, a thematic tour guided by future human April Rain. The performance starts with a reconstructed scenario around *Field Note: 05 August 2022* and goes on to visit several museum artefacts, including a Congolese Nadomo (Fig.7), Inuit Qilaun, Andean Quirquincho, and Tibetan Thod-rnga, before ending at the intervening animalARTefact. The event closes with a guided discussion in which we reflect upon the experience of re-contextualization and how we may become more self-reflexive in our daily activities of perception to acknowledge the animal-other through acts of recognition.

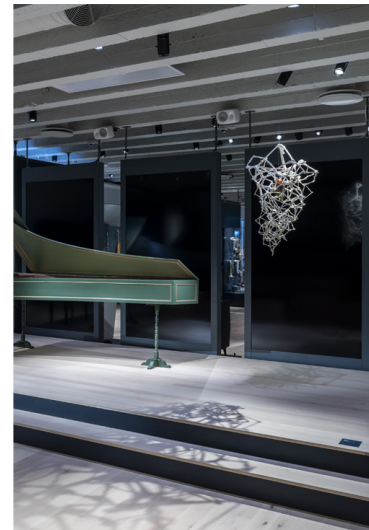


Figure 7. Left: RMT300: Congolese Nadomo. Wood, skin, ivory. 61 x 33 x 15,5 cm. Installation View, Ringve Musikkmuseum, Norway. Center: Natalie Field, Bird Cage, 2023. Rainbow Lorikeet, bones, wire. 100 x 40 cm. Right: Natalie Field, animalARTefact, 2023. Performative Intervention. Installation View, Ringve Musikkmuseum, Norway. Photos: Natalie Field.

(Self) Reflexive

The work of art creates opportunities for us to become more self-reflexive in our mediated experiences of the animal-other. The process of self-reflexivity requires taking a critical view of oneself or one's work to refer to and discuss the same. The sculpture *Arrested Decay* (Fig.8) could be described as self-reflexive, as it is a commentary on the very craft that created it: taxidermy. The assemblage of mushrooms sprouting from a greenfinch reflects on the natural process of decay that has been arrested in time by my intervention with the animal body. Through this artwork, I question my personal position on a newly established material practice, while simultaneously acknowledging my human self in the epoch of the sixth extinction.

Creating the skeletal structures for *Falling* and *Bird Cage* demanded 'Bones. Bones. Bones'. The process of cleaning bones has three stages: maceration, whitening and degreasing, and takes up to three months. By the end of 2022 I realised I was facing a temporal dilemma. And subsequently spent the entire month of January 2023 preparing animals for this project.

It was a massacre.

More than 20 animals later, my hands knew things my mind did not. Maybe it didn't want to know. At first, I tried to keep a record of each individual. In the end, I lost count. And still it wasn't enough. More bones were donated to the cause. Still, there could have been more. This goes to say, there are many animal deaths embedded in this project.

My own hands are not clean. But then, they never were. After all, I am also human.

I had never skinned an animal before taking this apprenticeship. A great teacher, Wellesen has demonstrated his craft time-and-again, his trained hands following the body's contours while he explains anatomy to me. He makes it look easy. But this is tacit knowledge, obtainable only through practice and experience. The work of deconstructing an animal is both graphic and disturbing. And when I fall asleep at night, scenes of skin peeling away from flesh dance against closed eyelids. Discomfort has been countered by profound moments of discovery. Once, I found a clutch of unformed eggs inside a hen... the next day, a single



Figure 8. Natalie Field, *Arrested Decay*, 2023.
Greenfinch, fungi, moss, clay. 12 x 12 x 12 cm.
Photo: Natalie Field.

egg in a canary. Even then, these unborn lives evoked a particular kind of melancholy. Some have suggested that I outsource this work. But I do not believe in outsourcing the work of art. There is an intimacy in tending to the dead that informs the final outcome of our collaboration. Acts of violence are followed by care as bones are articulated and bodies reconstructed. The experience of re-creation is ritualistic, even cathartic at times. In mending the broken bodies, I slowly stitch together a world coming undone at the seams.

Field Note: 27 April 2081

It is the year 2081. I have taken the post-apocalyptic name, April Rain. The habitat loss that led to the loss of biodiversity in the animal-other soon impacted humans too – we never could awaken from our illusion of separateness. Now, we live in a Utopian Dystopia. I have taken the role of memory-keeper upon myself, as the founder and curator of the Museum of Extinction: a collection of animalARTifacts that reflect upon the 6th mass extinction... I now offer you the impossible opportunity to experience artefacts on loan from a speculative future.

Acknowledgements

I hereby extend my warmest thanks to all who supported me during this journey.

First and foremost, to Guus Wellesen, my master... thank you for taking me in as your apprentice. It has been an incredible learning curve, and this project would not have been possible without your unparalleled generosity. With thanks to Norwegian University of Science and Technology's Department of Clinical and Molecular Medicine, and particularly Michel van Schaardenburgh, for supporting this unconventional collaboration.

My gratitude also extends to Museene i Sør-Trøndelag, for giving me the opportunity to work with you as a Master Scholarship holder in 2022. Annabella Skagen, thank you for your guidance and enthusiasm for the work, your personal attention has meant a great deal to me. To Åse Fredrikson at Trondheim Kunstmuseum, Ingrid Lunnan Nødseth and Solveig Lønmo at Nordenfjeldske Kunsthindustrimuseum, Iris Verena Barth at Ringve Musikkmuseum, and Lene Serine Strøm and Mette

Maske at Sverresborg Folk Museum, thank you for giving your time and expertise to this project.

I would also like to acknowledge Creature Conserve's support through the Mentorship Program. Being a mentee in the last six months of my master's helped me reconnect my thesis more clearly to the urgency of biodiversity loss. From the monthly development workshops guiding us through the various stages of an art-science project, to experiencing the joy of the written word through the writer's circle led by Diana Renn, and the deep and meaningful relationship developed with my mentor Georgina Nolan, it has been an inspiring experience!

To the Kunstakademiet i Trondheim, thank you for the opportunity to pursue my Master of Fine Art in Norway! There are too many to mention, however, I will single out my supervisors Leslie Johnson and Nabil Ahmed, thank you for supporting and guiding me throughout the process. Also, to the other academies in the KUNO network who hosted me, with special thanks to Rūta Spelskytė, David Larsson and Daniel Peltz for "thinking together".

And lastly, it would be remiss of me not to give recognition to the creatures, both dead and alive, with whom I have spent most of my time. Your presence brings me much joy, your loss great sadness – fighting for you is my reason for breathing.

References

- Aloi, G. (2018). *Speculative taxidermy: Natural history, animal surfaces, and art in the Anthropocene*. Columbia University Press.
- Baker, S. (2000). *Postmodern animal*. Reaktion Books.
- Bishop, C. (2005). *Installation art: A critical history*. Tate Publishing.
- Brown University. (2016). *Petra Lange-Berndt – Object Hacking: Taxidermy as Living Ruin* [VIDEO]. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57zmwe2mTc&t=3170s>
- Callaghan C.T., Nakagawa, S & Cornwell, W.K. (2021). Global abundance estimates for 9,700 bird species. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118(21), e2023170118. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2023170118>
- Derrida, J. & Prenowitz, E. (1995). Archive fever: A Freudian impression. *Diacritics*, 25(2), 9–63. <https://doi.org/10.2307/465144>
- Dewey, J. (1934). *Art as experience*. Capricorn Books.
- Documenta 15 (June 18 – September 25, 2022). Kassel, Germany.
- Farmer, T. (2007). *Little Savages* [ARTWORK]. Retrieved 03 08, 2023, from Tessa Farmer: <http://www.tessafarmer.com/little-savages>
- Gaston, K.J. & Blackburn, T.M. (1997). How many birds are there? *Biodiversity and Conservation* 6, 615–625. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1018341530497>
- Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.
- Haraway, D. (1984). Teddy bear patriarchy: Taxidermy in the garden of Eden. *Social Text*, 11(Winter, 1984-1985), 20-64. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466593>
- Horniman Museum. (2019). *About the art: Claire Morgan* [ARTWORK]. Retrieved 03 08, 2023, from Horniman Museum: <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/story/about-the-art-claire-morgan/>
- International Council of Museums. (2022) *Museum Definition*. Retrieved 03 08, 2023, from ICOM: <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standardsguidelines/museum-definition/>
- MUMOK. (2018). *Mark Dion: The Tar Museum* [ARTWORK]. Retrieved 03 08, 2023, from MUMOK: <https://www.mumok.at/en/mark-dion-0>
- Strona, G. & Bradshaw, C.J.A. (2022). Coextinctions dominate future vertebrate losses from climate and land use change. *Science Advances*, 8(50), eabn4345. <https://www.science.org/doi/epdf/10.1126/sciadv.abn4345>
- The Hudson Review (2007). Georg Simmel: Two essays (The ruin). *The Hudson Review*, 11(3), 371-385. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3848614>
- Wecker, M. (2016, 10 11). *The History and Future of the Once-Revolutionary Taxidermy Diorama*. Retrieved 01 23, 2023 from Smithsonian Magazine: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/ode-once-revolutionarytaxidermy-display-180960707/>
- William-Olsson, M. (2014). *The seminar as a form of thinking*. Ariel Publishing.
- Wilson, E.O. (1984). *Biophilia*. Harvard University Press.