Lively geographies of dead animals

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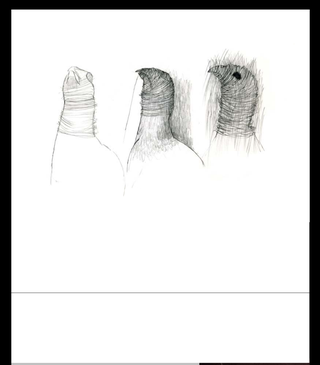
What is a zoological specimen?

Much attention has been paid to the 'finished' form and display behind the glass - in other words, its representation. Instead, our co-enquiry sought to recover something of the processes and relationships that brought these specimens to their containment and apparent stasis. This is aligned to cultural geographical work seeking to be 'more-than-representational' which has highlighted the deadening effect practices of representation have on an otherwise active world (eg Lorimer, 2005, Thrift and Dewsbury, 2000). Like Ingold, we want to avoid anthropocentric logic and prefer to view zoological specimens as 'in life', rather than fetishistically attributing life externally to zoological specimens. We looked - theoretically and practically - at the tangle of beings, practices and places that go into the making of a taxidermy mount.

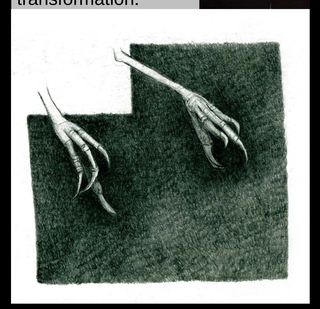
Getting under the skin

Taxidermy requires separating a skin from a body and rearranging it in a lifelike form. The great skill of taxidermist Peter Summers was a resource for artists (Andrea Roe and Kate Foster) as well as a geographer (Merle Patchett). In each separate investigation the focus was on production - whether as craft skill, as a transformation, or as a hidden process.

In Summer's view, successful taxidermy is "all about understanding what's inside - what the feathers hide". Or, as we saw it, there is liveliness in their making.



Drawings by **Kate Foster** reinserted the process by which specimens were made, and puzzled over the process of transformation.



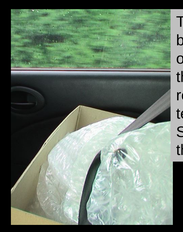
The video "Kingfisher" by **Andrea Roe,** featuring Peter Summers, reveals the delicate and creative process of taxidermy.

Contact with Peter's craftwork, Andrea's attention to sculptural process, and Kate's studies of the process through drawing, led **Merle Patchett** to reorientate her academic engagement with the historical representation and display of taxidermy animals. Received meanings were destabilized by watching and participating, and she instead began to see the specimens as active assemblages of animal parts, sculptural materials and craftwork. This understanding was particularly helpful in recovering the histories of specimens which had no complementary documentary evidence. Through close scrutiny, taxidermy mounts can reveal evidence of their manufacture and therefore can be excavated to begin to "flesh out" the histories and geographies of their making.

Enlivened geographies: Blue Antelope

The Blue Antelope is an extinct South African animal, the last one being shot in about 1800. The Hunterian Museum has one of only two known Blue Antelope skulls.

All other scarce remains are in European collections. The skull's presence in Glasgow is the result of historical movements that were choreographed by colonial expansion and scientific study.

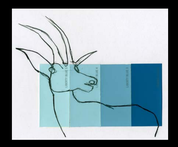


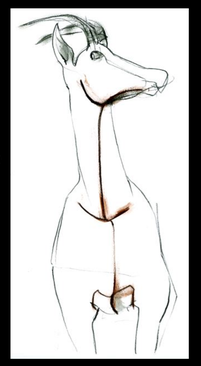
The 'Glasgow' skull's history can be understood as an assemblage of movements in the past and in the present. Most recently it returned to Glasgow from temporary loan to the Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh - the image shows it in transit.

While this is an invaluable Hunterian specimen, very little is known both about the object's history and about the species itself. Scientific enquiry provided us with an entry point. This literature focuses on whether you can tell if the Hunterian specimen really is a Blue Antelope skull - currently this is impossible to prove beyond doubt.

As a result of this project, the skull has been put firmly behind glass in the newly refurbished Hunterian. For good curatorial reasons, the skull benefits from a controlled and carefully monitored environment - and so like many treasured objects it can now only be really be said to sit still. The image was taken before the skull's encasement – the curator measured the skull and took a DNA sample though a result was not achieved for technical reasons.

Our combined geographical and artistic interest ranged in other directions - initially asking quite playfully whether these animals were really blue?





From this came more complex questions:

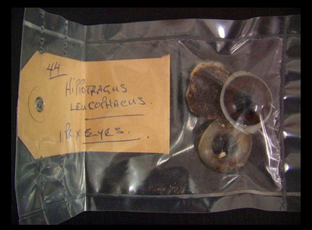
By which world should the Blue Antelope be known? By what territorial arrangement should we place it? And according to whose voice, language and values?

How should such a specimen be labelled? Does an African name for Blue Antelope still exist?

Alongside the disappearance of the Blue Antelope itself in 1800, the culture and language of indigenous Khoisan in South Africa has been all but destroyed. This is a question Kate Foster will ask in a forthcoming artist's residency in the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa

www.blueantelope.info

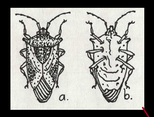
A website brings together our work on Blue Antelope and re-casts it in other contexts. This is the most comprehensive source of information available about this animal, and is available to those who cannot actually see the skull. By adding creative work through an exchange of drawings and ideas, we generated more ways for people to look at the few remains that exist.

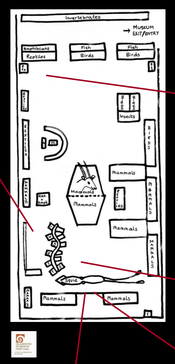


Enlivened geographies: an exhibition "out of time"

The Hunterian Zoology Museum is embedded within the Biology Department of Glasgow University and is open to the public. With the curator's generous support, a cross-disciplinary exhibition took place in June 2007. This drew on sustained inter-disciplinary relationships that have been building up over time. It was a practical outcome of different investigations into ways that zoological collections can be reactivated. Each exhibitor teased out an aspect of a specimen's entanglement with human activity, both present and past. The craft of taxidermy gave a frame for providing information as well as artistic departure.

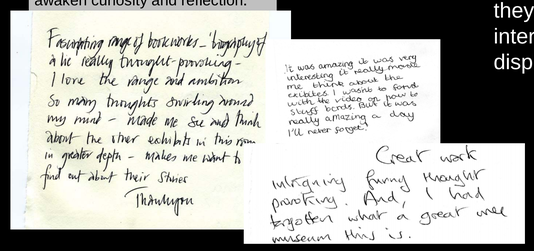
Each exhibit showed something taken 'out of time' in a different way, offering different realities and possibilities of animal lives. Being familiar with the museum, we used it strategically to make juxtapositions. We drew on fine lines between life and death, nature and culture, the artificial and the real.





We concentrated on ensuring both that the inserted pieces offered a new 'take', and also that they could act to renew interest in the existing displays.

Feedback showed that in combination the exhibits could awaken curiosity and reflection.



Fascinating range of book works - beautiful & he really brought - provoking - I love the range and ambition So many thoughts swirling around my mind - made me see and think about the other exhibits in this room in greater depth - makes me want to find out about their stories Thankyou

It was amazing it was very interesting it really moved me. Think about the critters I used to find with the video. Sorry you've stuff bones. But it was really amazing a day I'll never forget.

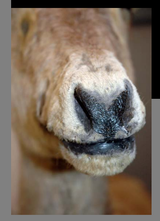
Great work Intriguing funny thought provoking. And I had forgotten what a great one museum this is.

Conclusion

Our aim is to reassemble 'lively geographies'. By this we mean a focus on past and emergent practices and processes that enable, drive and produce 'zoological material', over different sites and on different scales.

Two projects - a website about an extinct animal and a museum exhibition - affirmed that lively geographies have more than academic application.

Commitment to inter-disciplinary work has let us show how specimens have been entangled 'in life' as well as creatively take part in their after-lives.



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