

Reading Ecological Subjectivity in Mark Dion's Animal Installations

Beyond Humanism

Humanism, as a school of thought mostly associated with Classical, Renaissance, and Enlightenment philosophies, has been facing criticism since the last half of the twentieth century. Enlightenment philosophy replaced God with reason in its quest to conceive the world through individualistic values of freedom, moral duty, and a rationalism leading toward scientific progress. But its universal model of Man – the male, autonomous, liberal, white European – as representative for all humans could no longer stand in the face of feminist and post-colonial thinkers. As feminist and posthumanist theorist Rosi Braidotti explains:

This Eurocentric paradigm implies the dialectics of self and other, and the binary logic of identity and otherness as respectively the motor and the cultural logic of universal Humanism. Central to this universalistic posture and its binary logic is the notion of 'difference' as pejoration ... In so far as difference spells inferiority, it acquires both essentialist and lethal connotations for people who get branded as 'others'. These are the sexualised, racialised, and naturalised others, who are reduced to less than human status of disposable bodies. (2013, p.15)

This is the narrative that anti-humanism develops in the twentieth century with thinkers such as Michel Foucault. However, more recently, more attention has been paid to the dialectic between the humanist subject and the naturalised other, or the natural world. In the wake of environmentalist degradation resulting from extractivist logics that see only instrumental value in the environment, ecocritical and posthumanist thinkers are calling into question the very anthropocentrism at the heart of humanism, which concerns the human first. While the field of posthumanism is broad and often given a bad name by the association with technological rhetoric of transhumanism, its broad aim to decentre the human has much to offer environmental discourses. Posthumanism in this respect is not post-human (signalling the end of humankind), but post-humanist, and I look particularly to the work of Braidotti and Cary Wolfe as examples.

My focus lies specifically on the human/animal dialectic in the work of Post-Conceptual artist Mark Dion. Wolfe, following the philosophers Stanley Cavell, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, maintains that the humanist subject has achieved transcendence by sacrificing the animality of its being (Wolfe, 2003, p.6). Because of our inability to truly understand, and truly control, what the animal knows of us, we have exiled the animal out of fear: we have domesticated them, turned them into commodities, turned them into "stimulus-response mechanisms", and treated them as monsters (Wolfe, 2003, p.4-5). This model of the humanist subject, based on what Derrida calls the "non-criminal putting to death" (1991, p.112) of animals as well as humans given animal status, is at the core of what Wolfe terms the institution of speciesism (Wolfe, 2003, p.6). The task of posthumanist and ecocritical theory is thus to show, as Wolfe states, that: "the "human", ... is not now, and never was, itself" (Wolfe, 2003, p.6).

Mark Dion's work provides a model for this line of inquiry, as it questions the ontological separation of humanity from the natural world, and suggests what a more relational, ecological subject might be.

Mark Dion's *Mobile Wilderness Unit – Wolf* (2006)

Mark Dion is a North American Post-Conceptual artist who trained at the Independent Study Programme at the Whitney Museum of American Art in the 1980s, where his teachers were preoccupied with two artistic debates of the era: representational methods in art and culture, and institutional critique (Corrin, 1997, p.39). While the former offered a critical approach to the ways in which images circulated in both art discourses and the mass media, the latter encompasses a critical investigation into the politics of the art institution itself, often in terms of its funders, its governing bodies, and its relationship to its civil location. Both these critical approaches negate the idea of art, image and institution as autonomous bodies, existing outside the realms of politics and society. Dion applies both frameworks to the question of nature, as a cultural construction that epitomises the ontological separation of humanity and nature.

Dion's practice is varied. He often works with natural history museums to form his critique, exhibiting cabinets of curiosities and dioramas to mimic and subvert their practices of taxonomy and objectivity, which are humanist at their core. As Norman Bryson writes, after Darwin's concept of evolution significantly altered the human ontology by decentering it, the natural history museum worked to find a new model of sovereignty – at the highest point of the evolutionary chain (1997, p.93). This is the narrative that Dion puts into question in multiple ways. He looks at the power dynamics of scientific epistemological investigation, both in the laboratory and in the field. For Dion, fieldwork always upholds a power dynamic between the researcher and the object of investigation. But when items are decontextualised in the museum, viewed as specimens, this relationship becomes even more troubling (Kwon & Dion, 1997, p.22). Placed in bottles, pinned to boards, these "samples" seem worlds away from human life, not least because they are not living – the placement into the museum signals the end of that life. As Dion states, "the observation of life was actually the study of death" (Kwon & Dion, 1997, p.22).

Dion's *Mobile Wilderness Unit – Wolf* has been displayed at multiple exhibitions focused on the rhetoric of nature, such as: *Radical Nature: Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969-2009* at The Barbican, 2009; and *Yes Naturally: How Art Saves the World* at The Hague's Gemeentemuseum, 2013. *Mobile Wilderness Unit* is comprised of a taxidermy European wolf standing amongst foliage on a moveable metal trailer. The curator of *Yes Naturally*, Laura Stamps, states that the metal trailer illustrates that the natural world is "transportable and removable according to human preference" (2013, p.45). The work is presented as a discrete unit and incites the late-capitalist notions of seriation, or the endless production of commodities in series, and mass consumption. Significantly, Stamps also suggests that Dion's

use of taxidermy illustrates the way that the natural world is “processed (or even killed) before we can perceive it” (2013, p.45).



Mark Dion
Mobile Wilderness Unit – Wolf
2006
Taxidermy wolf, car trailer, leaves, stones, artificial plants and fungi
274x148x294cm
Photo credits Beatrix Bakondy, courtesy Georg Kargl Fine Arts

My concern lies with Dion’s use of taxidermy with reference to what the artist calls “the study of death”. But it is initially worth acknowledging the ethics of exhibiting animals in the gallery space. The exhibition of both dead and living animals for the sake of art is ethically questionable; it seems to have no justification other than for art’s sake, and it must be considered if that is excusable. Most artworks and exhibitions are commodities, and the use of animals only reinforces the ways in which life is capitalised and commodified in neoliberal societies. Dion argues that his use of taxidermy is as ethical as possible, often finding objects in museum collections, flea markets, or using roadkill or already-exterminated animals so that limited animals die for his work (Aloi, 2018, p.425-26). It is his methodology to replicate power systems to call them into question, and it must be considered, as Dion does, why there is outrage to the use of taxidermy in art, when the extermination of animals for food, fur, handbags, animal testing, trophy-hunting, or even because they are considered “pests”, remains a part of culture (p.423). In short, Dion’s use of taxidermy, while I struggle with it ethically, has the potential to call into question the institution of speciesism that Wolfe refers to.

The European wolf in *Mobile Wilderness Unit* originated from a Neolithic museum exhibit. In many ways Dion's sourcing of objects from museums and flea markets compares to the Surrealist's found object, which André Breton defines as "searching for objects that can be found nowhere else: old-fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensible, even perverse" (Breton, 1960, 51-52).

While the Surrealists rarely collected their objects from museums themselves, they showed a distaste for the research objects of bourgeois rationality and sought to subvert them (Breton, 1972, 227). The redundant objects found in flea markets were transformed into Surrealist fantasy. Petra Lange-Berndt argues that this also applies to taxidermy, and provides the example of Joan Miró's *Poetic Object* (1936), in which a taxidermy parrot sits on a wooden perch, above a stuffed stocking with a velvet garter and a doll's shoe, a hanging cork ball, a plastic fish, a map, all on top of a derby hat (2018, p.207). The parrot in this case becomes a Surrealist dream symbol, leading its viewer to their sexual unconscious.

The ability for taxidermy to conjure the unconscious is an attribution Dion also acknowledges, stating that it is "an expression of the power of the uncanny aspect of nature, which has strengthened as our everyday contact with wild places and beings has greatly diminished" (Aloi, 2018, p.426). The European wolf especially points to this, as a species that has faced severe population threats across Europe due to hunting; while it has now reached a stable population level in the UK, it was extinct in the UK in the mid-1700s.

So, what effect does an encounter with Dion's wolf have? It is shocking seeing a dead animal posed as alive, that allows you to encounter it *as if it were alive* without the repercussions of being physically affected by it. It is objectified yet remains uncanny. It is both familiar and unfamiliar because it is dead but alive, and because it is a recognisable species but a species that we do not encounter in daily life – we know it largely through documentations. There is a strangeness to an encounter with taxidermy, which alludes to Julia Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves*, in which she writes:

With the Freudian notion of the unconscious the involution of the strange in the psyche loses its pathological aspect and integrates within the assumed unity of human beings an *otherness* that is both biological *and* symbolic and becomes an integral part of the *same*. (original emphasis, 1991, p.182)

Psychoanalysis for Kristeva is a way of dealing with otherness in a xenophobic society, because it forces us to acknowledge the stranger within ourselves – our unconscious – which destabilises and fragments the human subject, and the dialectic of Self and Other. A turn to psychoanalysis may be a surprise in light of my overarching ecological focus, but Wolfe also turns to Freud's *Civilisations and Discontents* as a starting point for his analysis of humanist subjectivity. As echoed by Derrida, Freud argues that the origin of the human lies in the "organic repression" of the animality of its origin (1961, p.46-47). But the knowledge of this repression remains in the unconscious; it points to the artificiality of the humanist construction of the subject by bourgeois Enlightenment thinking.

Dion's use of taxidermy can be seen to conjure an acknowledgement of the animal within the unconscious, shattering the notion of the ontologically separate, humanist subject. To return to Wolfe: "the "human," ... is not now, and never was, itself" (2003, p.6).

Fixing Evolutionary Time

Mobile Wilderness Unit's undoing of humanist ontology can be taken further by placing it into another Surrealist context: the fixed-explosive. Part of what Breton describes as "convulsive beauty" (1987, p.10), or the psychological categories of beauty that Surrealists subscribe to, the fixed-explosive is that which is meant to be mobile seen in stasis. A classic example of this is Man Ray's photograph *Fixed Explosive* from 1934, which depicts a woman paused while falling.

As art historian Hal Foster argues, the fixed-explosive always points to the "the authority of death" (1993, p.25). Foster's interpretation of the fixed-explosive expands Dion's use of taxidermy because the body becomes static, or paused, in evolutionary time. The taxidermy body goes against the temporalities of life; originally used for a Neolithic exhibition, the body has been preserved to defeat time.

In *Becoming Undone* (2011), Elizabeth Grosz traces a lineage from Charles Darwin, to Henri Bergson, to Gilles Deleuze to outline what has now been termed the philosophies of becoming. Life in this respect is a process; the present is always in relation to the past and the future. Viewing Dion's *Wolf* is thus seeing a body processed in order to refute this notion of time.

The significance of this refutation lies in its relationship with difference. The natural history institution uses taxidermy to categorise species as discrete units, in which difference lies in external, measurable characteristics. This could be viewed as a difference in kind. But for Grosz, the durational perspective that evolutionary thinking points to puts this into question (2011, p.17). Darwin's *The Descent of Man* illustrates that difference between humans and other species is a difference of degree, and not difference in kind (Darwin, 1889, p.147). It is not a categorical difference, even though it may appear so in the present; it has emerged continually in relation to other species and other things in the web of life, on a series of timescales to which we are not necessarily attuned to.

The notion of difference has been vital for anti-humanist thinkers like Grosz, who seek not to challenge the differences themselves, but the power structures that enforce the view that being different rather means being inferior. This difference of degree removes essentialised categories such as "Human" and "Animal", and depicts a more relational, decentred view of the subject – which we might call the ecological subject.

Learning from the Birdwatcher

To conclude this reading of Dion's work as an incitement of ecological subjectivity, it is worthwhile considering another of Dion's animal installations: *The Library for the Birds of Antwerp* (1993). There have been several of these installations in different locations, but I will focus on the first incarnation, exhibited at Antwerp's Museum of Contemporary Art. Eighteen

African finches occupied the exhibition space turned into an aviary, among a tree structure surrounded by a series of objects that point to the city's sixteenth-century trade of these birds. There are wooden cages, metal traps, springs, gun cartridges, a catapult, and an axe, placed alongside a series of books, such as James Audubon's *Birds of America* (1827). These texts, exhibited alongside objects of extermination and capture, allude to certain reasons behind extinction threats and implicate Antwerp, through its history of trade, in this system.



Mark Dion

The Library for the Birds of Antwerp

1993

18 African finches, tree, ceramic, tiles, books, photographs, birdcages, bird traps, chemical containers, rat and snake liquid, shot gun shells, axe, Audubon prints, bird nests, wax, fruit, assorted objects

Installation dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles

Once again, the ethical considerations of containing these finches for the sake of an exhibition cannot be ignored. But there are a few points worth drawing out. Firstly, the tree, as a symbol of Darwinian phylogenesis, or the evolutionary tree on which humanity has positioned itself at the top, is placed at the centre of the installation. As Bryson argues, the dire state of the tree, which is rotting and dying, suggests the ways in which humanity's position has come to endanger the tree itself (1997, p.93). This can be read as an ecological warning, but Bryson illustrates that there is a more complex interpretation to be found. There is an absurdity in the installation's premise that the library is there for the birds, and the unquestioned assumption that our epistemological investigations are for them (p.96). The linguistic and symbolic are meaningless to them as the finches sit and defecate on these great literary and artistic works. Bryson outlines the significance of this:

If the primary habitat of human beings is the order of symbols and communication (the library), then nature can never be captured in any single representational system we may produce. The real exists as an excess lying beyond the scope of representation, as a reserve which the production of truth draws upon, but cannot exhaust or contain. (1997, p.96-97)

Thus, we return to the original discussion of Wolfe, as he outlines the ways humanity has outcasted the animal because of our inability to understand or control how the animal sees us (2003, p.4). The question lies with what to do with this difference. Rather compensating this insecurity through our epistemological domination, this installation rather offers a second option. The phenomenological experience of being with the finches without any barriers is affective and sensorial; producing both anxiety and wonderment (Bryson, 1997, p.97).

Essentially, the museum visitors become birdwatchers. This is a practice based on patience; which does not expect immediacy; which is drawn out of a genuine love and interest from the natural world but is non-invasive. It does not wish to claim this world for its own. Perhaps the ecocritical and posthumanist task of finding alternative models of subjectivity can learn from birdwatching, as a more compassionate way of relating to the natural world.

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