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ARRANGING LIFE AND DEATH

A ZINE ABOUT TAXIDERMY

- More of Me
- "Taxidermy as Ecobothnic Horror: Five Questions for Christy Tidwell," *Edge Effects*, 31 Oct. 2024, <https://edgeeffects.net/taxidermy/>.
 - "Haunted Earth: Genre, Preservation, and Surviving the End of the World in Jeff VanderMeer's *Hummingbird Salamander*," *Studies in American Fiction* 50.1-2, Spring-Fall 2023, 253-73.
 - Website: christyntidwell.wordpress.com
 - IG: @equirlraptor

Cover photos: Get Stuffed, London, Chris Shearer (used with permission). Background collage images from Charles Johnson Maynard's *Manual of Taxidermy for Amateurs* (1901) and M. Zaslavsky's *Making Stuffed Dummies and Animal Models* (1968).

BY CHRISTY TIDWELL

Taxidermy – the process of arranging an animal's skin over a mold to display it – dates back to at least the 18th century, when taxidermied animals were included in curiosity cabinets and private collections. As natural history museums developed in the late-19th and early-20th century, taxidermied animals took a central place in scientifically and ecologically informed dioramas. Museums no longer commission taxidermy as they used to, but taxidermied animals are still regularly displayed.

Taxidermied animals also often function as trophies & entertainment. Unlike museum taxidermy, hunting trophies are still created today, and the mounted heads of hunting trophies are not too dissimilar from the collection of related animals you might see in a museum (top right). Taxidermied animals as entertainment are exemplified both in Walter Potter's 19th century dioramas, which placed taxidermied bunnies and kittens in human scenarios like schoolrooms and weddings, and in contemporary novelty taxidermy (bottom right).

These variations all point to a tension between realism and fantasy within taxidermy. Rachel Poliquin writes about “narratives of longing” (7) driving taxidermy, and we clearly long to know animals, to connect with real creatures. But we also frequently use taxidermy to represent animals in fantastic ways – the fantasy of happy schoolbunnies, the fantasy of control, and even the fantasy of complete and accurate knowledge.



Rabbit with starling wings on a turtle shell. All parts ethically sourced. Baby Walpertinger by YouwithoutMe, <https://www.deviantart.com/youwithoutme/art/Baby-Walpertinger-taxidermy-546451361>, CC BY-NC-ND 3.0.

*This mixture is deadly poison
and must be treated as such*

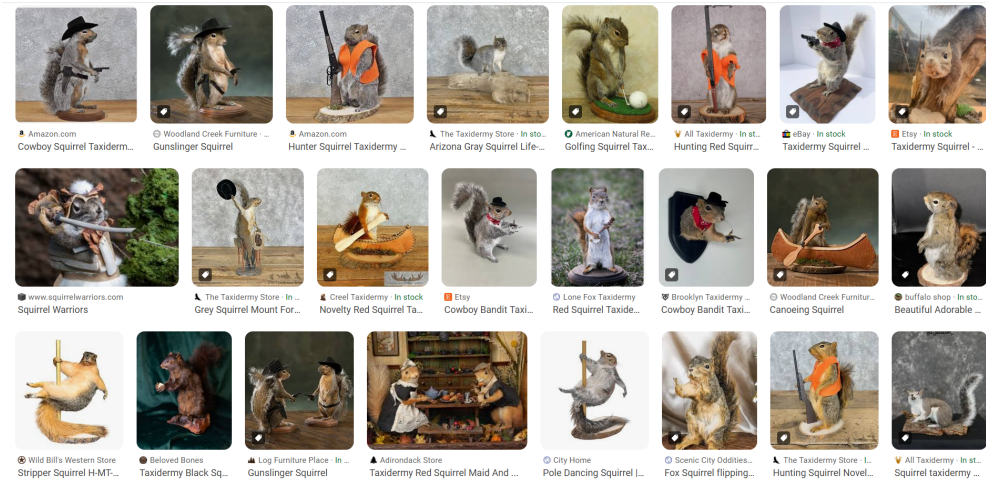
In response to concerns about animal death, some contemporary taxidermists practice “ethical taxidermy.” Artists Mark Dion and Robert Marbury recommend using animals that are already dead (e.g., roadkill, farm deaths, euthanizations), saying that “a death is a terrible thing to waste” (257). Calling an un-taxidermied animal corpse a waste implies that taxidermy is a good use, perhaps even a *right* use. It applies a logic of utility to animals, a way of thinking of them as resources rather than individuals.

But who mourns the rabbit, starling, and turtle that combine to create the Wolpertinger (right)? Who mourns the squirrels in silly poses? Who mourns *all* of the dead and taxidermied animals? Taxidermy’s use of animals does not feel like mourning. Mourning involves recognizing animals’ individual lives and treating their bodies with respect – as we do for humans.

Instead, taxidermy – “ethical” or not – presents a fantasy of preservation, one that denies the animal’s death *and* life and that re-asserts our mastery and control of the natural world.



Andrea Michelbach, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.



Screenshot of search for “squirrel taxidermy,” November 2025.

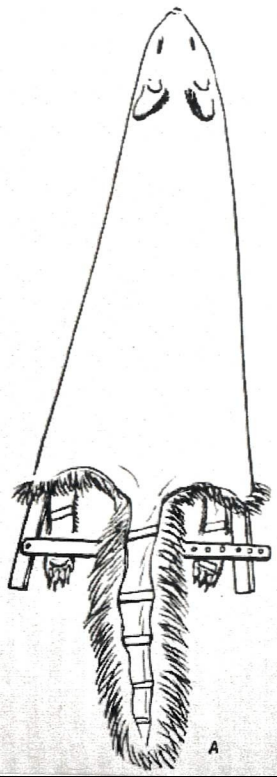
In discussions of taxidermy, writers often mention the animal's gaze. Donna Haraway writes of the taxidermied animal "ready to hold the gaze of meeting" (30). Elizabeth Effinger writes that "taxidermy intensifies the bottomlessness of the animal's gaze" (53). And Angela Singer, who creates "de-taxidermy" using taxidermied animals, describes the "accusatory gaze" of trophy kill (Aloi 15).



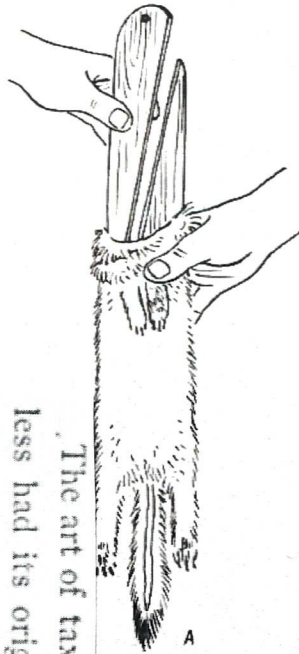
Squirrel at Harvard Museum of Natural History, angela n., <https://www.flickr.com/photos/aon/6273828525/>, CC BY 2.0.



Naturhistorisches Museum Mainz / Landessammlung für Naturkunde Rheinland-Pfalz & N. T. Back, CC BY-NC-SA.



The art of taxidermy
less had its origin
man, who not only
mammals for cloth
Birds and mammals



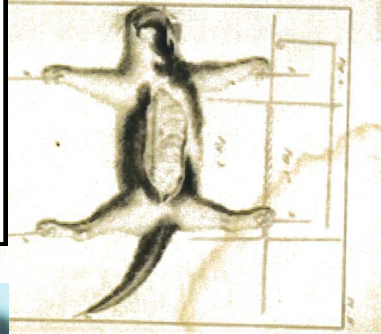
равка шкурки горностая, снятой тулкой
шкурки на правилку (обрядка); Б — расправ

To emphasize realism, taxidermied animals are displayed in lifelike positions intended to give a sense of liveliness to a dead form. According to 19th century taxidermist Frederic Lucas, taxidermy is meant to “hold the mirror up to Nature” (12); even more, it’s a way to “animate the inanimate” (Barclay). Effinger takes this idea even further, describing taxidermy as “where the trace of aliveness profoundly clings – that *still life* where *life still* appears to live” (43).

But this “trace of aliveness,” this animation and presence, is not the same as *life*. The animal is dead. The trace is an illusion, an artifact of human desires and fantasies. The tendency to fall prey to this illusion is troubling because it obscures our control of the animals involved and denial of their deaths.

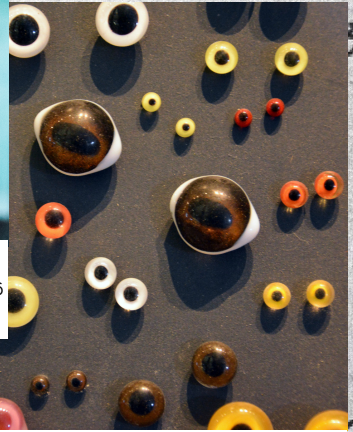
But taxidermied animals cannot and do not gaze back at the viewer. Instead, the gaze invoked here is voyeuristic; the animals, as Poliquin observes, “can no longer invite or refuse intimacy” (140).

Insisting on their gaze is a way of prioritizing our fantasies. It assuages our guilt by assigning the taxidermied animal some agency – agency it entirely lacks.



National Museum of Natural History in Sofia, Orin Zebest, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/orinrobertjohn/5596985745/>, CC BY 2.0.

for mounting
and reptiles



Naturhistorisches Museum Mainz / Landessammlung für Naturkunde Rheinland-Pfalz & N. T. Back, CC BY-NC-SA.

to keep alive
the ingredients
smaller than
This mixture
and must be treated as such



Taxidermy – from the Greek *taxis* (arrangement) + *derma* (skin) – is the process of arranging animal skin over a mold and doesn’t actually preserve the animal – or its agency. It may preserve a *part* of the animal, but it is primarily a process of manipulation. The image above shows many elements of this manipulation: molds, thread, materials for filling the skin, pliers, wire for holding parts in place. Historically, this process was even messier, often involving chemicals like arsenic sulfide or mercuric chloride – arsenic was a central ingredient until the 1970s – and stuffing wire or wood frameworks with materials like moss, tobacco, cotton, straw, or sawdust (Péquignot 247–48). This process involves taking the animal apart, removing most of it, and arranging its skin over a framework or model created to position it in ways the taxidermist chooses. Scholar Alice Would calls the process “visceral and tactile,” noting that it

“involves breaking bones and scraping at flesh”; artist Angela Singer describes her work with taxidermied animals as “break[ing] apart a fragile, vulnerable body” (Baker 168); and both of them use the language of brutality and “brute force” (Would).

Most non-taxidermists who encounter taxidermied animals may not be aware of this process, may not realize just how “unnatural” and manipulated the taxidermied animal is. This understanding foregrounds the fabricated nature of taxidermied animals: models of animals covered in skin, not animals. Of course, taxidermied animals are not purely manufactured since they do use the skins of animals. As such, they combine real and fabricated, natural and unnatural, creative and destructive, lifelike and dead in ways that both appeal and unsettle.