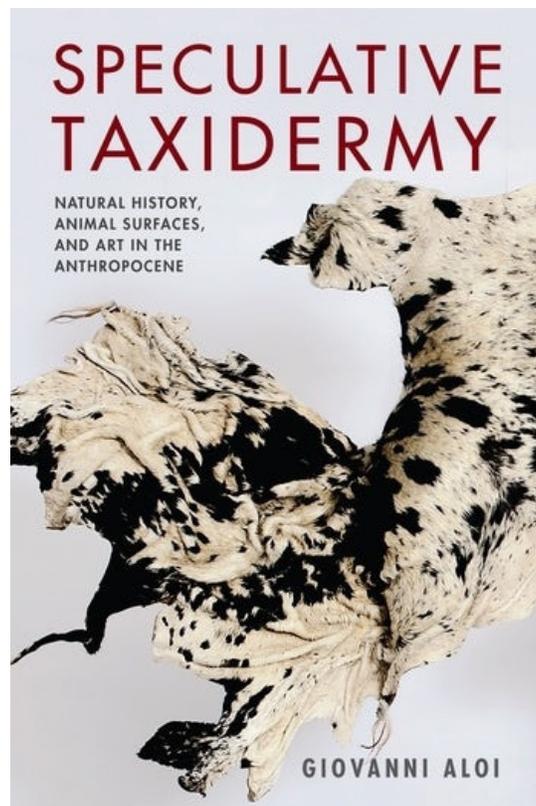


Review Article

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Artists Unsettling Anthropocentrism

Giovanni Aloi, *Speculative Taxidermy: Natural History, Animal Surfaces, and Art in the Anthropocene*. Columbia University Press, 2018. 315 pp. \$30.



In this ambitious contribution to studies of animal representation in the arts and, more broadly, human/animal studies, art historian Giovanni Aloi examines a range of contemporary artwork featuring taxidermy animals, inquiring into their potential, as complex sites of material-discursive practices, to rethink anthropocentrism. Alert to ontological shifts in taxidermy as a representational medium, Aloi is suspicious of historical metanarratives that insist on taxidermy's scientific origins and a "progressivist vision" of taxidermy as a "succession of improvements motivated by a transcendental notion" of an idealized realism (52). Not only do such explanations of

what taxidermy is necessitate a postcolonialist remediation of its continued appearance in natural history exhibits, they do not adequately address the aesthetics of taxidermy animals in contemporary art. Yet such consideration is needed, given the many ways contemporary artists are engaging with taxidermy animals, as Aloi makes clear in the examples he examines throughout his book.

While Aloi acknowledges natural history's investment in taxidermy's distinctive indexicality — animal skin undeniably references, because it is, at least in part, the actual animal — he also recognizes the mutability and motility of that same skin in aesthetic practice. In the “ontological shift from craft object to art object” (20), the unique problem of taxidermy's indexicality challenges explanations of what it is and how it works. Consider, for example, the image on the book's cover. In this partial view of Nandipha Mntambo's piece *Titfunti emkhatsini wetfu (The shadows between us)* (2013), the viewer is presented with an animal hide arranged in such a way as to resemble the fabric of a flowing dress. This initial impression is reinforced as the contours of a female form become visible, filling out a portion of the hide. Human and animal mingle uncertainly in this piece. Indeed, the question of certainty is central to Aloi's project: how are artists using taxidermy to unsettle the “ontological certainties of anthropocentrism” (21)? How are they questioning “histories of representation that have cemented man's exceptionalism” using “the very medium through which those histories were written in the first place” (21)? And how can asking such questions foster a greater critical awareness of the limitations of a human-centered perspective?

Aloi's definition of “speculative taxidermy” helps to answer these questions. Drawing on the theoretical development of speculative realism, the defining feature of which entails a rejection of western philosophy's endless deferment of the physical world, Aloi argues that much of the contemporary artwork involving taxidermy aligns with a renewed critical interest in the liveliness of things. Agency is a key concept; the physical world is above all a network of relations among mutually influencing actors of all sorts, living and nonliving, including works of art. Artists creating work in a speculative realist mode are exploring how their pieces — as material things — can shift frames of reference to generate new dynamics within the network. Aloi's examination of sculptor Berlinde De Bruyckere's *K36 (The Black Horse)* (2003) exemplifies his notion of “ontological mobility,” the opportunity presented by a work of art to “reconfigure our taken-for-granted modes of being” (140). By altering the shape of the horse's body and modifying its pose in ways that refuse to affirm received ideas of what horses look like, *K36* both confounds the indexical relation between the taxidermy object and the represented animal as well as confuses the viewer's sense of a “correct viewing point” (216-217). Speculative realism's endeavor to “decenter” the Cartesian subject and

“derail” the Kantian assertion of the primacy of language and thought in accessing reality is foregrounded in such works, Aloi contends (138). Although Aloi’s distinction between object-oriented ontology and new materialism could be better developed throughout his discussion of the “ontological turn” — the better to rethink the hierarchical relation between humans and nonhumans — his point in engaging speculative realism as a theoretical framework is clear: taxidermy objects function as active interfaces with which to critically examine the co-constitution of human-animal realities.

Usefully in his definition of speculative taxidermy, Aloi demarcates the artworks he examines from those described by art historian Steve Baker as “botched” taxidermy, which operate on the principle of “botching” realism without confronting realism’s ideological framework. Whereas in Aloi’s discussion of botched taxidermy in his earlier book *Art & Animals* he allowed that such work “asks the viewer to work harder at undoing original meaning while preventing the opportunity for perceiving the animal body as a romantic and nostalgic safe retreat” (42), in this book, he is directly concerned with the limitations of its “align[ment of] the work of art with the impenetrability we attribute to animality. [...] What can we do,” he asks rhetorically, “with the knowledge that animals are inaccessible and ever withdrawing” (183)? Many artists working with taxidermy are moving beyond this rather simplistic response to the indexicality of taxidermy. In addition to discussing works by Nandipha Mntambo and Berlinde De Bruyckere, Aloi also considers the lively materiality of works by Mark Dion, Maria Papadimitriou, Roni Horn, Steve Bishop, Cole Swanson, and collaborators Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson. Aloi’s astute analyses of these works show how, by exploring the intertwined histories of animals and humans, they reveal ways that the nonhuman matters at every juncture. Papadimitriou’s installation *AGRIMIKÁ Why Look At Animals?*, for example, reassembling and relocating an animal hide shop to art gallery space, answers the titular question (first famously raised by John Berger): we look at animals because animals — including those whose bodies are rendered into objects after their death — remain a vital part of an “anthropogenic chain of agency in which humans, animals, geographies, materialities, and biodefining economics become visible” (192). *AGRIMIKÁ* works against the invisibility of animal deaths in the material objects rendered from their bodies — the installation’s glue pots, furniture, fabrics, and books. By doing so, this installation challenges Berger’s insistence that the disappearance of animals brought about by industrialization gave rise to their compensatory propagation in visual culture.

But speculative realism is not the only theoretical framework Aloi engages. More ambitiously, he examines speculative taxidermy through a Foucauldian lens, which he describes as the biopolitical register of human/animal relations that is “situated on the surface of works of art” (39). In contrast to traditional historiographical approaches, which foreground metanarratives of progress, Foucault understands history as the sedimentation of seemingly unrelated, but significantly parallel, discourses and practices. In examining contemporary taxidermy art, this perspective “enables a conception of this class of objects as a material interface inscribing human/animal relationships shaped by power/knowledge relationships, practices, and discourses” (57). Acknowledging Foucault’s lack of critical concern with human/animal relations and his limited discussion of aesthetics (40-41), Aloi nevertheless finds value for both animal studies and art criticism in Foucault’s analysis of the European ordering of knowledge. Indeed, in large part the organization of *Speculative Taxidermy* emerges from Aloi’s adaptation of Foucault’s archaeological and genealogical methods, which he uses to map “the cultural and material conditions that enable practices and discourses to form and intermingle”(48) and to trace how these practices and discourses reveal vectors of power (57), respectively. Keeping the focus on the materiality of speculative taxidermy, Aloi brings speculative realism and Foucauldian analytical methods into productive conversation.

Aloi begins with an unlikely example of an artwork comprised of wax, rope, fabric, and human hair: Degas’s sculpture *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* (1878-1881). This early object-assemblage, with its decidedly inelegant, undancer-like proportions, hinted at the potential of realism to gesture toward sociopolitical concerns, such as the stratification of gender and class in late-19th-century Paris, and, more broadly, the constraints of classical ideals of representation. Transgressive in both matter and form, Degas’s *Little Dancer* presaged explorations in speculative realism that arose later, notably among the surrealists. Here, the touchstone piece is Meret Oppenheim’s fur-lined teacup, saucer, and spoon titled *Object*. The significance of *Object*, according to Aloi, lies not in its symbolic register, which merely perpetuates an anthropocentric interpretation (for example, it is “a textbook incarnation of the Freudian uncanny” [162]), but rather its biopolitical register, which, alluding to the rise of mass-produced objects, touches on “the affirmation of exploitative regimes of industrial production aligning the human and the animal” (165), among other concerns of the Anthropocene.

To arrive at this close reading of Oppenheim’s *Object* in the book’s fifth chapter, Aloi in the first chapter, “Reconfiguring Animal Skins,” challenges the traditional historiography of taxidermy, delving into the origins of taxidermy as a site of discourses, practices, and power relations that highlight the varied cultural afterlives of

taxidermy animals. The focus is on the processes and institutions through which an animal becomes an object within commodity with value. Tracing this process is important in understanding the human/animal relationship “inscribed in” the taxidermy animal (55). At the same time, however, the unique indexicality of the object that is animal skin made to look like the living animal gives rise to an ontological instability; it is in some sense still an animal. It becomes a thing, an object that asserts itself, continuing to make distinct and important demands on our attention. In reaching this conclusion, Aloï takes a cue from Arjun Appadurai’s notion — inspired by Foucault’s emphasis on history as sedimentation — of the “social lives of things,” a notion that, “shifting the focus of inquiry from the *essence* of things to their *function*” (55), recognizes the potential agency of the certain kind of things that taxidermy animals are. This agency enables viewers to distinguish the “‘representational’ animal” from the living one, as Aloï describes in his thoughtful analysis of Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson’s multimedia project *between you and me*, in which the two artists explore the various historical and material permutations of human/seal interaction.

Aloï explores the historical underpinnings of the “representational” taxidermy animal in chapters two and three, “A Natural History Panopticon” and “Dioramas,” respectively. In his genealogical examination of the classical tradition of realism in natural history representation in chapter two, Aloï draws on Foucault’s analysis of early modernism’s “epistemological spaces of visibility” (77) to consider how such systems of ordering as the medieval bestiary and cabinets of curiosity had a flattening effect, bringing animals into the objectifying purview of science. Mark Dion’s critical cabinets of curiosity question this natural history panopticon by highlighting their arbitrary ordering of natural objects. Aloï’s emphasis on the flatness of animal representation is central to both chapters. With this concept, he is referring to Ron Broglio’s analysis, in *Surface Encounters*, of western science’s view of nonhuman life as lacking depth — that is, of being devoid of self-reflexive and cognitive capacity — relegating animals to the “surface of things” (87). The development of taxidermy, the manipulated surface of animals, reaffirmed the flatness and subjectivity of animals under the human gaze. The development of the diorama and photography became new means with which to reinforce the surface-intensive, primarily optical mode of natural history representation. Aloï’s genealogical analysis of the continuing influence of notions of classical realism is thorough in chapter three, showing how the “aesthetic rhetoric of natural history” (109) has given rise to a “transdiscursive intermingling” (112) of natural history and art in the speculative works of diorama photographers Oleg Kulik, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Diane Fox, and Karen Knorr.

Aloi develops his examination of photography of taxidermy in chapter four, “The End of the Daydream,” situating it at the ontological turn of speculative realism’s inquiry beneath the surface of things. In this chapter Aloi effectively links Foucault’s concepts of the *tableau-objet* and the *event*. The relevance of these two concepts to speculative realism is undeniable: while the *tableau-objet* refers to a painter’s deliberate calling of attention to the surface of the painting, an *event* occurs as a result of an artist’s “appropriation and transfiguration” of images within the work (150). Both phenomena are described by Aloi as non-affirmative, Foucault’s term for a viewing experience that, in contrast to the affirmative “daydream” of the panopticon, challenges the viewer’s sovereignty (144). As Aloi makes clear in his analysis of photographer Roni Horn’s non-affirmative images of taxidermy birds, which decenter the viewer by subverting the portrait genre, the processes of the *tableau-objet* and the *event* “acquire considerable relevance when animals are present in the picture plane” (150).

In chapter five, “Following Materiality,” Aloi shifts his attention away from photographic images of taxidermy animals and back to the materiality of the taxidermy animal itself. The consideration of surfaces remains important, however, in Aloi’s critical examination of the failures of, first, Berger, and following Berger, Akira Mizuta Lippit, to acknowledge the persistent materiality of animal representation as it migrated across mediums. Aloi’s genealogical method is evident in his analysis of the “weird loop” (172) of rendering, the industrial-scale assembly and disassembly of animal bodies both in the new modalities of photography and film as well as in the slaughterhouses of food animal production. Borrowing from Nicole Shukin’s analysis in *Animal Capital* of the parallel developments of industrial agriculture, automobile assembly lines, and moving image culture — notably Eadweard Muybridge’s motion studies of animals — Aloi undertakes a mini-archaeology of animal materiality across these parallels, with broad implications for speculative taxidermy. In general, new materialist interpretations, he explains, “follow materiality,” “tak[ing] us to the very edges of the boundaries of discourses, and well beyond the conception of authorship — [following materiality] challenges what can be said and thought about the objects we shape and that shape us” (186). The focal example is Robert Rauschenberg’s *Monogram*, featuring a taxidermy angora goat in a tire. Indebted to the surrealists’ use of found objects, or readymades, this famous piece is a “precursor of speculative taxidermy” (182), Aloi contends, because it questions “the ontologies of natural and man-made within the context of representational realism” (183).

It is here, in chapter five, where Aloi most directly touches on the “pressing ethical questions” (173) raised by the materiality of taxidermy animals in contemporary art. “Taking the materiality of works of art seriously,” he observes, “can [...] challenge the

intrinsic anthropocentrism embedded in our relationship to objects, leading to the recovery of networks and agential relationships inscribing a political agenda" (175). However, Aloi could better develop the ethical commentary surrounding such artwork. The ethical issues are complex and indeed, often foregrounded in the works themselves, as he notes in chapter six, "The Allure of the Veneer," in examining works by Nandipha Mntambo, Berlinde De Bruyckere and Steve Bishop. A closer look at the ethical assertions of these and other speculative taxidermy artists is particularly important in critically examining the harms brought about by anthropocentric views and practices. Aloi does delimit the ethical issues by pointing out that the artists he writes about do not kill animals to make art; rather, much like the surrealists' use of the readymade, they repurpose animal objects. In view of such an apparently benign practice, however, it is noteworthy that contemporary artists nevertheless deem it necessary to develop a set of guidelines governing the use of animal objects to make art.

Aloi includes these ethical guidelines in an appendix. Co-authored by artists Mark Dion and Robert Marbury, "Some Notes Toward a Manifesto for Artists Working With and About Taxidermy Animals" raises some provocative points that Aloi could more productively consider in the last three chapters. For example, Dion and Marbury's dictum that "a death is a terrible thing to waste," the third item in their list of advice to artists, echoes Shukin's analysis of animal rendering, the biocapitalist imperative to use "everything but the squeal" in extracting value from animal bodies (Shukin 95). It would be interesting to hear Aloi's interpretation of how the work of speculative taxidermy artists might renegotiate this biocapitalist imperative by adhering to Dion and Marbury's dictum. A closer critical engagement with the "Manifesto" could also illuminate the related dictum stipulating the artist's responsibility to minimize waste during the creative process. How does the waste from the creation of speculative taxidermy function within its material-discursive practices? Aloi could address the over-emphasis on the symbolic register in Dion and Marbury's guideline for artists to be sensitive to viewers' "very strong reactions to seeing dead animals" (258), and he could fruitfully enfold into his analysis the generative aspect of their mandate to "be curious" about both the larger context of the animals' "classification, habitat, and biology" as well as "the oneness of each specimen" (258). This last advice, especially, could be better taken up in Aloi's analysis, as the affective potential in encountering the animal thing — the "aesthetics of attunement" (Weil 34-35) — figures prominently in speculative realist theory.

While Aloi could more directly engage with Dion and Marbury's ethical guidelines, the scope of his effort to bring Foucauldian concepts and methods into conversation with

new materialist ideas and approaches is impressive. Indeed, with each new work he encounters, Aloï identifies new ways to map this conversation. In the seventh and final chapter, “This Is Not a Horse: Biopower and Animal Skins in the Anthropocene,” for example, he finds in Steve Bishop’s “It’s Hard to Make a Stand” the potential for Foucault’s notion of the *dispositif* — the array of institutional means of controlling bodies — to critique the naturalizing narratives of animal domestication residing just beneath the surface of taxidermy. The question here is how an assemblage of readymade objects, in this instance a horse-like figure with a dog-like head fabricated from the fur of some other, unidentified, animal, makes visible the overlapping ontologies of domestication and domination. How, in other words, does taxidermy art “perform a political critique of the technocapitalist economies of visibility defining human/animal relations in the Anthropocene” (223)?

In the book’s coda, Aloï considers the possibility for reenchantment in contemporary art invoking animal materiality, that is, its potential to elicit a pre-scientific perception of the natural world. Pondering Cole Swanson’s multimedia, participatory installation *Out of the Strong, Something Sweet*, which imagines mythological relations of humans, cows, and bees, Aloï observes the power of this and similar works to create models for “registering human/animal interconnectedness beyond scientific/capitalist optics, while still productively incorporating very real histories of human-animal becomings” (255). Such work is much needed in the larger Anthropocene project of realigning the human with the rest of the world.

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