THE DISPLAY OF THE ANIMAL BODY IN THE ART OF ANGELA SINGER

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A THESIS

Submitted to the graduate faculty of The University of Alabama at Birmingham and the University of Alabama, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in Art History

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

2009
British artist and animal rights advocate, Angela Singer (1966-), confronts the act of hunting and the various uses of the animal trophy through her work. The hunt, as a violent means of collecting, is an activity dominated by men and fueled by contrived notions of masculinity. The animal trophy must be stripped of its identity and history, requirements fulfilled through taxidermy. Singer’s approach to the trophy is a process she has termed ‘re-taxidermy.’ This method utilizes “woman’s work” techniques and materials, such as sewing and the addition of accoutrements such as sequins, flowers, and jewels, to highlight the bullet wounds and sutures left behind by the hunt and the taxidermy process. Singer’s practice, coupled with her display methods that gesture towards historical precedents, construct a visual remark on the entanglement of gender and its role in the display of the trophy. These works also take into account the pursuit and contemplation of the animal body.

Chapter One situates Singer’s installation, Kill Joy (2002), within the context of heroic nineteenth-century hunt imagery. This analysis presents the artist’s work as a direct repudiation of the masculine notion of ‘fair chase’ as well as the ideal of nature as an environment in which men can act out traditional gender roles. In Chapter Two, Singer’s installation, Insides Outsides (2004), is explored as it relates to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century collecting practices of the male cabinet collectors. This chapter refutes the ideals of intellectual collecting while incorporating a discussion of both
historical and contemporary practices that utilize the display style of these early
collections. Chapter Three compares Singer’s installation, *My Dearest, Dearest Creature*
(2006), to the collecting and display practices of Victorian hunter/naturalists who,
through early taxonomy, strove to bring order to the natural world. I also situate Singer
within the realm of contemporary artists who use taxidermy and museum display
methods to comment upon human animal relations.

Singer’s work has only been explored within the context of animal rights. This
thesis will provide the first analysis of her installations as they relate to gender and
display methods as well as to the role of the taxidermy animal in contemporary art.

Keywords: taxidermy, animal trophy, installation, hunting, collecting practices
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to extend my gratitude to my advisor and committee chair, Dr. Jessica Dallow. Her assistance throughout the process of researching and completing this thesis has been invaluable. I also would like to thank Dr. Katherine McIver and Dr. Lucy Curzon for their many thoughtful suggestions. I appreciate the time, expertise, and constant encouragement of all three of my committee members.

I would also like to express deep gratitude to my parents, Richard and Sherry Allison, as well as my grandparents, W.R and Carrie Lewis. There are no words adequate enough to express my gratitude for their support, both emotionally and financially, through the many years of my undergraduate and graduate education. I would also like to thank Barry Burton for his endless patience, support, and countless hours of thoughtful editing.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the support and friendship of Wendy Jarvis, the community, and Board of Bare Hands Gallery. The time and faith you have invested in me means a great deal.
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INTRODUCTION

The hunt, undertaken not for necessity but as a social ritual, is a traditionally masculine act of pursuit, killing, and collecting, resulting in a broken animal body—a trophy. Throughout history the activity and purpose of the animal trophy have taken many forms. Hunting, as a sporting endeavor, has been popular for hundreds of years and has been indulged in by many who consider it a means of indoctrination into manhood as well as a forum for exercising primitive masculine tendencies that call for a communion with nature through violence. As an educational endeavor, the hunt in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries served as a process for the collecting of animal specimens by the male cabinet collector whose fixation with primitive scientific enlightenment served as a marker of prestige. As these assemblages evolved through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries into the early museum, hunting provided the taxidermy mounts that would form the basis for many prominent collections. However, despite its varying forms, the fundamental motivations and outcomes of hunting have remained consistent: the practice, predominately the domain of men, serves as a means through which manhood, in all its cultural trappings, is enhanced and glorified.

British artist and animal rights advocate, Angela Singer (1966-), has consistently confronted the human treatment of the animal body and the various uses of the trophy through her work. The issue of hunting, in its myriad of forms, has been of particular concern to the artist. Singer’s personal unease with hunting grew out of her experience living in rural New Zealand, where the hunting and killing of animals was an established
routine and social norm.¹ This experience mixed with a personal interest in speciesism and the privatized notions of love through which humans regard certain animals worthy of compassion while others simply exist for the confirmation or exploitation of mankind have contributed to her artistic concerns. Through her installations, Singer exposes the unnecessary death and violence of hunting and the overriding belief that animals are to be at the service of man by, “inserting dead bodies into art galleries and forcing audiences to engage with unnecessary death.”² This thesis explores Singer’s work as it relates to the collecting and display of the animal body as a male dominated activity in both historical and contemporary practices. The selected installations: *Kill Joy*, *Insides Outsides*, and *My Dearest, Dearest Creature*, will be individually examined as they relate to differing notions of identity, history, and the value of the animal body seen in approaches of female, as opposed to male, visual artists, collectors, and natural historians.

This method is unique as it considers this work for the first time within the context of not only the visual arts and animal studies but also gender studies. Singer has not expressed an artistic interest in such matters and her work has yet to be situated within the field of gender studies by scholars. This reading, however, is relevant to the artist’s work due to the cultural understanding of hunting as a pursuit predominately undertaken by men and associated with social constructs that call for a masculine communion with nature through violence. The collecting and displaying of animal trophies, as an activity following the hunt, has always been a gendered pursuit as well. While Singer does not acknowledge the entanglement of gender issues with hunt practices this concept is impossible to ignore as the artist meshes stereotypically feminine craft practices with the history of the hunt and the collecting of the trophy kill.
Taxidermy as part of the hunting ritual and a necessary step in the collecting process is a conventionally masculine practice. The gender exclusivity of the activity is exemplified in the 1965 taxidermy catalogue *Game Trails*, which begins with the bold statement, “THIS BOOK IS FOR REAL MEN.” This exclusivity has historical precedent, as early male hunters and natural historians began developing the practice in earnest in the sixteenth century. These collectors sought increasingly stable and life-like trophies produced through the use of primitive chemicals and materials. Such archaic approaches, however, have given way to a process that has evolved into a standardized procedure concerned with accurately simulating living creatures and their environments. Modern taxidermy manuals call for the camouflaging of bullet holes by the careful cutting and stitching of the fur and some go as far as to direct the hunter to suffocate a wounded animal as opposed to marring their flesh with more bullets. These procedures are but a step to fulfilling taxidermy’s objective, which is described aptly by a modern taxidermist as being to, “capture and preserve the vitality and living energy of the animal in its natural state.” The illusion of life is further facilitated through the molding of flesh to specially modeled mounts that simulate life-like poses and the application of accessories such as glass eyes and eyelashes.

The goal of taxidermy in the service of the hunter-collector is to destroy the animal’s identity and mask its death by creating a simulation of life that privileges man. Singer’s approach to the taxidermy process, which she refers to as ‘re-taxidermy,’ endeavors the exact opposite. Singer begins her process by exclusively using only discarded, donated, or old mounts acquired through her own collecting activities. This approach means that no animal ever dies for the sake of her art. The artist then goes on to
strip back the layers of skin, fur, or feathers, working down to the stuffing. The animal is then reattached to molds that the artist herself constructs, consciously revealing the bullet wounds inflicted by the hunter and the suturing left behind by the taxidermy process. Singer adorns the animals through traditional “woman’s work” techniques and materials. She embellishes her fanciful, and often overtly sentimental creatures with accoutrements such as flowers, sequins, jewels, and food. Singer goes on to display her creations in arresting assemblages that illustrate their suffering and exploitation through the hunt. The animals are posed in the moment of being shot, attached to wooden placards, and crammed into display cases. Singer explains, “Working with the history of each particular animal…I aim to recreate something of its death through the hunt.”

Scholarship dealing with work that uses taxidermy and the role of the process in the visual arts is limited. In Postmodern Animal (2000) the analysis of art historian and cultural critic, Steven Baker, focuses exclusively on what he terms “botched taxidermy.” The author approaches the taxidermy object as an ambiguous creation that in his words are, “things with which to think, rather than themselves being things to be thought about….” Baker’s interpretation of the taxidermy object is confined to its use as a vehicle for exploring human states and ignores the animal itself. The contemporary electronic journal, Antennae, has provided the most in depth exploration of taxidermy in the visual arts with two issues dedicated to the subject in 2008. The issue entitled “Botched Taxidermy,” explores taxidermy in the context of Baker’s assertions on the subject. A second installment, “Rogue Taxidermy,” represents the most comprehensive study of the subject to date as it focuses on a contingency of contemporary artists who draw inspiration from taxidermy by either working with or photographing mounts.
The trophy mount and the taxidermy process have become increasingly compelling areas for contemporary artists. The vast majority of these approaches, however, have remained true to Baker’s notion of the taxidermy object strictly as a material that facilitates the contemplation of other issues. Thomas Grünfeld’s (1956-) ongoing project that began in 1989, *The Misfits*, is a series of disturbing hybrid creatures. These creations are composed of different animal appendages and allude to fantastical animals of mythology and folklore. Grünfeld’s work has been interpreted as a response to scientific advancements that merge nature and humans and issues of hybridity. The work of sculptor and professional taxidermist, Emily Mayer (1961-), is concerned with the private relationship that humans harbor with the animals that surround them. Her creations are either the carefully posed sleeping household pets desired by bereaved owners or the laboratory mice created for her own personal work. Mayer’s goal is to portray the animal in a moment of hesitation so as to produce a suspension of reality on the part of the viewer by evoking the idea that the animal may suddenly awaken and move about. Jordan Baseman’s (1960-) work looks to the idea of pets in a less idealistic manner. His taxidermy pieces are made from road-kill cats and dogs, disemboweled and hanging on the wall. Their display visually alludes to wall tapestries or bear skin rugs. These pieces are intended to raise questions regarding the role of pet ownership as status symbol for humans. While these three artists represent a small fraction of those working with taxidermy, their work is emblematic of the role of the process and the status of the mount in contemporary practices. The motivations mentioned are varied, however, the animal body has consistently taken on the role of a material, whose individual origins are neglected to explore artistic inquiries into human-centric issues. Singer’s approach to the
animal body is focused on the history of the creature itself and she calls attention to its individual life and demise. Her attention to the identity of the animal sets her apart from her contemporaries and makes her work a compelling point of exploration.

The scholarship that addresses Singer’s work has also been narrowly focused. Singer’s installations have been interpreted exclusively with regard to her activist goals, as evidenced by Giovanni Aloi’s interview with the artist, “Angela Singer: Animal Rights and Wrongs” (2008). This interview focuses on the artist’s activist agenda and the role of her work as a form of propaganda. Singer’s use of the taxidermy mount, however, can also be interpreted as a means for exploring animal identity, a facet that has yet to be investigated by either visual artists or scholars. This thesis presents the first consideration of the taxidermy mount in the visual arts as an individual object with a historical and social role worthy of consideration. In this thesis I draw from previous scholarship by Diana Donald and her study of British hunt imagery as well as that of Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan whose writings on animal studies merge both feminist concerns and the ethics of animal rights. My approach is specifically suited to an exploration of Singer’s work. Kill Joy, Insides Outsides, and My Dearest, Dearest Creature all make use of discarded animal trophies in a manner that not only reinforces the artist’s advocacy goals but also serves as a vehicle for exposing the brutality and carelessness of the hunt and the collecting of animal bodies as an activity.

The animal body as a creative concern of women and the role of female-guided display in the construction of animal identity is not without precedent. The intricate depictions of insects, created by Maria Sybilla Merian (1647-1717) in the seventeenth century, provide an example of the female approach to the animal body within the
scientific realm. These early images, however, are anomalies in the abundant field of illustrations of botanical and insect specimens during the period for both the sex of their creator and for her attention to the individuality of the insect subjects. In the twentieth century, Annette Messager’s (1943-) series, Les Pensionnaires, perpetuates the concerns of female artists with the identity of the animal through the construction of elaborate narratives that gesture towards familial concerns. Singer’s installations present a contemporary example of female-guided display and how it imparts notions of individual character, history, and importance into an animal whose remains have been robbed of these qualities through masculine display in both historical and contemporary practices. Singer’s installations have until now never undergone a comprehensive analysis that considers them within the fields of art history, gender issues, and animal studies.

Chapter One examines Singer’s installation, Kill Joy, as it relates to depictions of the hunt, as both a gun sport and a photographic expedition, and the display of the animal trophy. Hunting during the nineteenth century was an activity dominated by the male members of the upper class. The exclusivity of the activity in European culture was grounded in medieval agricultural developments that led to the decrease in available hunting land and the abundance of leisure time available to the aristocracy. Women did participate in recreational hunting, particularly fox hunting, with a few even rising to the rank of Master of Fox Hounds. However, the female members of the social elite were less inclined to participate in the more physically taxing activity of stag hunting, which often required the stalking of prey for hours at a time. Hunting imagery, while common throughout history, became a popular and distinct artistic genre in the nineteenth century. Singer’s work refutes the notions of masculinity, the “fair chase” sporting ethic, and the
romanticized of nature as a playground for the exercise of male impulses seen in works from the period. Richard Ansdell’s painting, *Stag At Bay*, Sir Edwin Landseer’s works, *The Sanctuary* and *A Random Shot*, and George Shiras’s photograph, *A Disturbance Raised Mild Curiosity* will be examined alongside Singer’s contemporary exploration of the genre and the display of the animal body seen in these earlier works. These images provide an important point of comparison as they illustrate the values of the nineteenth-century sportsmen whose ethics have influenced modern day hunting principals.

Chapter Two focuses on Singer’s installation, *Insides Outsides*, and the display methods that have been used to manipulate the trophy kill into an object that signifies knowledge of the natural world in the realm of semi-private collecting. The *wunderkammern*, or “cabinets of curiosity,” were personal collections that were a product of the growing interest in natural history in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Predominately the activity of men, these collections housed a wide range of animal specimens that were displayed as single representatives of a whole species through crude logic and an arrangement that neglected their natural environment or history. Singer’s approach to the animal body appropriates the aesthetics of these display methods to expose the violence and erasure of context that is inflicted upon the animal body. The installation will also be explored in the context of both historical and contemporary gendered approaches to the animal.

Chapter Three explores Singer’s installation, *My Dearest, Dearest Creature*, and the exploitation of the animal trophy by the nineteenth-century natural history museum. For this work Singer appropriated the Victorian display practices of collectors and naturalists like Charles Willson Peale. His painting, *The Artist in His Museum*, provides a
visual record of these methods as they were utilized in Peale’s Philadelphia Museum. Such institutions based their display program on Linnaean taxonomy and the *scala naturae*, which presumed the supremacy of man in nature. Singer adopts these methods while simultaneously acknowledging the uniqueness of the animal and enlivening it with a sense of preciousness. This chapter also situates Singer within the scope of contemporary artists who manipulate the aesthetics of museum display to expose the fallacies within the institution.

Singer’s reclamation of the taxidermy object acknowledges the taxidermy process and utilizes historical methods of display to simultaneously expose the myth of the hunt and the masculine drive to collect animal trophies. Through an analysis of the selected installations *Kill Joy*, *Insides Outsides*, and *My Dearest, Dearest Creature*, this thesis will take into account these characteristics while creating pointed comparisons between masculine and feminine display—historical and contemporary—and how they have approached the unique history, individual character, and value of the trophy. Singer’s installations reinstate the voice of the objectified animal body by illustrating the cause of their deaths through the manipulation and embellishment of their bodies. In doing so the artist allows the animals to speak of their demise, presenting a perspective that has received limited consideration as it points to the human role in the ruination of nature through hunting and the contrived masculine perspective that fuels it.
CHAPTER ONE

KILL JOY: THE SPORT HUNT AND MASCULINE COLLECTING

Hunting in the modern world is not to be understood as a practical means of latching onto some cheap protein. It is intelligible only as symbolic behavior, like a game or religious ceremony, and the emotions that the hunt arouses can be understood only in symbolic terms...Hunting is not a matter of going out and killing any old animal, in fact very little animal-killing qualifies as hunting. A successful hunt ends in the killing of an animal, but it must be a special sort of animal that is killed in a specific way for a particular reason.18

The sport hunt as a male-centered pursuit and a signifier of power and domination has pervaded the visual, literary, and social history of western culture. Animal bodies have been collected through the sport hunt and displayed as visual metaphors for colonialism and conquest, symbols of sporting prowess, specimens of scientific curiosity, and markers of wealth. The ancient Romans sought as souvenirs the exotic animals of the lands they conquered in an early form of hunting and collecting. Centuries later, English explorers would send Queen Elizabeth I the antlers of the Virginia Cervidae, a species of deer indigenous to the eastern United States, as a symbol of both her authority and the imperial power of England in the New World.19 In the nineteenth century, wealthy Victorians undertook the fashionable collecting of animal trophies such as horns, antlers, and mounts that were often accompanied by artworks depicting hunting scenes.20

While the cultural purpose of the animal trophy and its display has varied historically, the underlying psychological and social basis of these pursuits has remained consistent: a constructed notion of gender roles that situates the male figure as
instinctually driven to dominate nature through killing and collecting. The result is the manipulation of the animal body and its metamorphosis through hunting and display into a symbol of a primitive masculine drive to act out stereotypical gender roles. Essential to fulfilling this role is a visual metaphor that must be displayed in a public forum to fully confirm the masculinity and prowess of the killer. For the Victorian male this could be accomplished by the display of taxidermy mounts as well as the heroic images of the sport hunt that were popular during the period.

Singer’s installation, *Kill Joy* (2002, figure 1), confronts the unnecessary violence inflicted upon the animal for the glorification of man through sport hunting and the taxidermy process by gesturing towards the nineteenth-century genre of hunt images. This stance will be explored through comparative analysis of Singer’s work and Victorian paintings depicting the activity. These earlier images have proven to be a valuable form of propaganda in support of the practice by providing a socially acceptable means for the visual aggrandizement of sport hunting values. Hunting images were available to a broad spectrum of society, ranging from etchings distributed through periodicals and grand artworks depicting the male centered heroics of hunting, to more sentimentalized pieces focusing on the plight of the hunted creature.

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century a popular genre of hunt images emerged and prints of the sport proliferated in publications such as the *Illustrated London News*. During the 1840s the paper often chronicled the exploits of the royal family in the Scottish highlands as they stalked deer, presenting the hunt as a prestigious activity to be admired by the populace. Appearing in the September 1844 issue of the publication, the engraving *Prince Albert and Lord Glenlyon Deer-stalking at Athol* (1844; figure 2) was
created after a drawing by Ebenezer Landell (1808-1860). The image presents a masculine ideal that calls for a communion with nature through violence in its depiction of two men alone in the wilderness stalking a stag and hinds.25

A formalized variation of these mass-produced printed images were paintings such as Richard Ansdell’s (1815-1885) *Stag At Bay* (1846, figure 3), that illustrates the male dominated heroics of hunting and the ideals of fair-chase, a sporting ethic to which hunter’s adhered and which I will explain below. Also imaging the hunt, but portraying a more sentimentalized view of nature and animal life, is the work of Sir Edwin Landseer (1802-1873). Landseer’s painting, *The Sanctuary* (1842, figure 4), demonstrates the romanticized view of nature held by the nineteenth-century hunter, as well as the notion of the male stag as a powerful foe that represents a worthy adversary to the male hunter. A later work by Landseer, *A Random Shot* (1848, figure 5), alludes to the artist’s increasing personal unease with sport hunting and exposes the foibles of the hunting ethic exalted by sportsmen in order to justify their actions. These works adorned the homes of the hunting elite and represented their wealth and esteem, while also acting as a visual confirmation of their masculine prowess.

From the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, popular interest turned to the study of natural history and new ideas of conservation. This shift brought about a conflict between sport hunters and naturalists. However, with the advent of the photography and the proliferation of cameras in the late nineteenth century some sportsmen were able to turn to “camera-hunting.” The camera “shot” replaced that of the gun, yet still allowed a “hunter” the physical and intellectual excitement of stalking,

filling, and collecting the prey. George Shiras’s (1859-1942) image, *A Disturbance Raised Mild Curiosity* (c.1898, figure 6), of a doe paralyzed in the beam of the photographer’s flashlight serves as the quintessential “shot” as the animal is captured in the photograph transforming it into a visual trophy.

Singer’s installation, *Kill Joy*, makes use of these earlier genres to expose and question man’s need to collect and display animal trophies through sport hunting. Singer’s work presents the violence and unnecessary death inherent in the activity of the sport hunt that has often been whitewashed by traditional hunting imagery. In doing so the artist is exposing the origins of the trophy, not as a symbol of male prowess, but instead as a creature manipulated to serve the egocentric needs of man. Working with her preferred medium, a discarded taxidermy mount, she uses an object that is the product of a process, which finds its purpose in the culmination of the hunt. *Kill Joy* features a small taxidermy fawn seated upon a traditional museum style pedestal. The animal is situated in front of a large photographic backdrop of a forest scene. The viewer is encouraged to engage with the work by looking at the scene through a rifle scope that the artist has positioned facing the assemblage.

The fawn at the center of *Kill Joy* is both awkwardly immobile and curiously life-like. Its pose and placement produce a disconcerting illusion that is compounded as the animal seemingly attempts to rise from a seated position. Singer also manipulates the traditional natural history museum’s diorama style display, which has in the past served as the final destination of many trophy animals. Popularized in the nineteenth century, this display method has continued to capture the imagination of viewers due to its ability to, “convey complex layers of information by combining scientific didacticism and free-
wheeling fantasy.”

With its placement in the intellectual realm of the museum, the diorama also possesses the ability to present a view of the natural world that is validated by virtue of its locale. However, instead of the elaborately painted and embellished environments found in museums, Singer’s fawn inhabits the sterile environment of the gallery. The animal is seated before an idealized woodland-scene that is reminiscent of the false backgrounds used in the commercial portrait studios of the 1970s and 1980s. The artist’s choice of medium, along with a constructed environment that possesses a universal familiarity, provides an opportunity to manipulate and expose the viewer’s understanding of the origins of the animal presented. These methods also call into question the glorification of the hunt by exposing the artifice of the ideals that sport hunting stands upon: notions of heroic masculinity, fair-chase, and nature as the dominion of man that works such as Ansdell, Landseer, and Shiras put forward.

**Kill Joy and Nineteenth-Century Hunt Imagery**

The depiction of hunting, whether focused on deer stalking or fox hunting, was a prominent feature of British art during the nineteenth century. The rise in popularity of such imagery can be attributed to the growing participation in the activity amongst a broad spectrum of upper class society. No longer the exclusive domain of landowners, the hunt became popular with wealthy professionals such as “politicians, industrialists, businessmen and financiers.” This limited democratization of the sport coupled with the growing interest amongst the public for all kinds of art led to the proliferation of hunt images in Britain.
Englishman Ansdell, well known for his dramatic life-size paintings of hunt imagery, was a favored artist of the aristocratic hunters of Lancashire. The work, *Stag At Bay*, comprises an often-repeated scene popular in painting during the period: a highly-charged image that allows the viewer to vicariously experience the most dramatic moment of the hunt—the animal’s violent death. The painting is a dynamic work that depicts the final moments of the pursuit in which the wounded animal is cornered by the hounds. The landscape swirls about the circular composition created by the dogs and stag and completed by the figure of the hunter. The animal, in the last seconds of its life, is cornered by the male hunter who rises from the rocky landscape to deliver the final shot as indicated by the small plume of gunpowder that emerges from the barrel of the rifle. The posturing of the animal, rearing back from the force of the bullet, heightens the immediacy of the scene. The viewer is privy to the violence in a manner that is immediate yet distanced from the scene. The tight cropping of the composition brings the violence closer to the viewer. This intimate proximity is heightened by the position of the stag and hounds. The creatures, situated on the precipice of the lower foreground of the picture plane, are threatening to invade the world outside the perimeters of the painting. While the violence of the scene seems ready to spill out of the frame, the overall effect of the image is tempered by its medium. For the viewer, the painting can only be engaged with as a two-dimensional work that, hanging flat upon the wall, keeps the violence at a safe distance.

The power of the image was not lost on its viewers when it was placed on exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1846. The dogs were described as possessing “extraordinary vivacity and spirit” and the stag as demonstrating “great power and
truth.” However, aside from the powerful and melodramatic nature of the image itself, Ansdell’s painting also demonstrates two important aspects of sport hunting that have carried on since the nineteenth century: the gendered and sexed specificity of the activity and its role in bolstering notions of masculinity through the notion of fair chase that guides hunters.

Hunting for the British was an activity of high-esteem and one generally reserved for men and, more specifically, for the male aristocracy. This section of society, having evolved to include both those of established wealth and a new upper class composed of businessmen and bankers, possessed the monetary funds and leisure time necessary to participate in sport hunting. For this elite, the hunt became a ritualized activity that through terminology and elaborate ceremony served to legitimize the aristocratic standing of the hunters. The only human subject in Ansdell’s painting is appropriately that of a white male who is alone, battling against the wild. The figure is cloaked in highland garb and the deep level of concentration that he is exerting in this crucial moment is accentuated by the limited view of his face, his eyes peering above the barrel of the gun. An earlier 1843 painting by Ansdell of the same title also depicts only men in the landscape as the hounds bring the wounded stag to bay. The dominance of the male figure in these paintings is indicative of the gender specificity of the sport that proclaims itself the domain of men. This assertion is roundly acknowledged, as scholar Brian Luke explains, “the practitioners of hunting are deliberately and self-consciously gender specific” and hunting has been and is still a “haven of male exclusivity.” As an activity dominated by men, hunting prowess became synonymous with the bolstering of masculinity. Entering nature and victoriously stalking and killing an animal opponent
represented a powerful form of domination. To exert control over the natural world was to command something that was uncontrollable, foreign, and often seen as greater than oneself. The late nineteenth-century big game hunter and Englishman, Charles Victor Alexander Peel (c.1869-1931), proclaimed that hunting for sport “exercises all the faculties which go to make a man mostly manly.”

*Stag At Bay* also demonstrates a crucial element to the validation of the sport hunt, the notion of “fair chase,” a self-imposed code of hunting ethic. These rules were based on the parameters that the true sportsman should allow the animal the greatest opportunity to escape; however, if captured, the victim should be quickly and humanely dispatched. This ideal of compassionate killing called for the animal, if only wounded, to be “brought to bay” by the dogs so that the hunter could quickly dispatch it. Through the imposition of these self-inflicted regulations hunters were able to maintain that the sport hunt was an activity that did not disregard the humane treatment of the quarry. Ansdell’s painting in all its drama depicts this step in the pursuit that would have been acceptable practice and a common sight for his clientele.

Singer’s installation, *Kill Joy*, refutes the notion of the hunter whose masculinity is bolstered by his adherence to the rules of fair-chase as displayed in *Stag At Bay*. The artist exposes the fallacy in this ideal through her unique treatment of the animal body, a process she refers to as ‘re-taxidermy,’ as well as through her manipulation of a constructed environment—the diorama—to display the animal trophy. Singer further enhances these elements by denying the viewer the safe position of a spectator, who in Ansdell’s scene is watching from afar yet not participating in the scene. Singer’s three-dimensional environment is intended to be walked through, examined and engaged with
from all angles. The placement of the rifle scope beckons the viewer to look through it and see what the hunter sees and experience the moment of the kill.

Traditional hunting imagery, like that depicted in *Stag At Bay*, calls for the depiction of large forceful animals whose pain is apparent but is glorified in the hunt for the exaltation of the male hunter. However, Singer’s treatment of the trophy utilized in *Kill Joy* unabashedly presents a creature ravaged by human actions. The fawn, as opposed to the massive stag, is a diminutive and helpless creature whose physical condition calls attention to the visceral brutality of the hunt and exposes the absurdity of an activity that requires of its participants a sense of decorum. Singer has removed the skin of the fawn from its original mount and reapplied it in a manner that exposes the crude suturing of its chest. The exposure of this previously hidden artifact of the taxidermy process is a striking comment upon the physical damage caused by the hunter and hidden by the taxidermist. Singer has also added a seemingly moist bullet wound, an element intended to distill the animal body into a singular effect so that, “the fawn becomes the small wretched bullet wound.” These elements illustrate with visual force the grievous wounds produced by the hunter and hidden by the taxidermy method.

Landseer’s work is a variant of the nineteenth-century approach to animal imagery that presents animals and the natural world in a more sentimentalized manner. The artist was highly regarded by Victorian art lovers for his images of dogs. These works anthropomorphized the animals, presenting creatures that combined “comedy and tragedy” and “near-caricature,” with serious study of authentic animal characteristics. These works, while popular with the public, have since been derided for their “cheap sentimentality.” Landseer was also known as an artist who was a favorite amongst British
royalty. He was sought out for his paintings of dynamic images of man’s encounters with the natural world through sport hunting that focused somewhat on the experience of the animal. Landseer’s work illustrates the attitudes and justifications found in discourses regarding the sport during the Victorian era. The painting, *The Sanctuary*, exemplifies a prized hunting trophy—a large male stag—whose power and strength rendered it a worthy opponent of the hunter reinforcing his masculinity. The work also presents a romanticized view of nature—the Scottish highland loch at sunset—that pervaded hunting mythology during the period.

*The Sanctuary* depicts an injured and hunted stag retreating to an island in Loch Maree in the Northwest Highlands of Scotland. The sun is setting on the panoramic landscape, casting animal and environment into near silhouette. The stag, a common creature pursued and collected in sport hunting in Western culture is prized for the symbolic nature of its physical attributes. The size of its body, its sex, and the width of its antlers are all indications of its masculinity. These characteristics are signs, for both the hunter and for those who gaze upon the trophy that the animal was of an advanced age and therefore a strong and virile creature. In his evaluation of hunting imagery, Luke observes, “Large antlers on an animal present to the hunter the animal’s success in surviving years of threats, including harsh conditions, challenges by males of the same species, and the predatory efforts of previous hunters.” It was necessary for the hunted animal to portray these visual markers of its masculinity for it to serve as a worthy adversary and validate the hunter’s own male prowess. Landseer’s silhouetted scene reduces the creature to a black voluminous shape that places emphasis upon the size and shape of the creature.
Accompanying images such as *The Sanctuary* is a constructed vocabulary that consciously ascribes mythic masculinity to the animal. Featured prominently in hunting literature are the countless declarations of the manliness of the creature through bombastic titles such as, “fallen monarch,” “ancient patriarch,” and “king of the mountain.” Landseer’s stag was described in similar terms by William Russell, a friend of Landseer. Writing for the press, Russell exclaimed, “See! the proud Monarch of the hill and glen, But just escaped the cruel sport of men….” Russell also provides us with a more personal account of his impression of the painting in a correspondence with Landseer that betrays how men and women responded differently to animal suffering. Russell writes, “a gentleman will come early next morning with his double-barreled Purdy, & a very good deer-hound, & so finish the Stag—but that may be left to the imagination, and whilst you or I may be all for getting the beast, the ladies of the Exhibition may be all for his recovering!” This statement illustrates the roles of men and women within the hunting culture. Stag hunting, a physically rigorous activity was predominately pursued by men, whereas women rarely participated. This quote also situates men in their traditional role as predatory beings while assuming that women are benevolent towards nature and felt an emotional link with the animal.

Despite his earlier images that glorified hunting, Landseer expressed in his later works an increasing personal unease with the sport hunt, a development that has been attributed to the artist’s mounting mental instability. The image, *A Random Shot*, features a dead hind that in a state of pain and fright has climbed a snowy hillside to die. By her side, attempting to feed from its dead mother is a fragile fawn. The evening light, falling on the white landscape alludes to the long and fatally cold night that the fawn
surely faces. *A Random Shot* points toward the foibles of the hunt ethic that called for the exemption of hinds from being killed. A policy that while seemingly humane, was also a means of maintaining herds for future hunts and was often not followed. This later work, through its exposure of the inconsistencies in the ethics of sport hunting, situates itself as a nineteenth-century predecessor of Singer’s *Kill Joy*.

*A Random Shot* is an antithetical approach to the hunt image. Instead of the massive stag, the artist has chosen a fragile young fawn and its dead mother as his subjects. The hind has fallen dead from a bullet wound upon a snowy and desolate hilltop, the ground around it bloodied and trampled suggesting the chaotic thrashing of the animal in its last minutes. The pitiful fawn bends over its fallen mother trying in vain to find nourishment. The scene is emotionally charged with a grand pathos that is conveyed easily into human terms. The fawn—the helpless child—is weak and alone, while the hind—a motherly figure—is left a bloody heap. Neither creature possesses the bombastic masculinity of Landseer’s earlier stag that made the animal a worthy opponent in the mind of the hunter. This contrast exposes the inadequacies of hunters to adhere to their self-imposed ethics. It was a standard practice to refrain from the killing of female deer, an act of abstinence that to the sportsman was a form of chivalry, but was in reality a method by which the herds were conserved for future hunting. This practice, however, was not always adhered to and “accidents” did happen.\(^{41}\) *A Random Shot* depicts just such a mishap.

The installation, *Kill Joy*, draws upon the traditions found in Landseer’s paintings, *The Sanctuary* and *A Random Shot*, to present a contrasting view of the hunt that is a direct repudiation of its mythology. Singer’s choice of animal size and species and the
intentional manipulation of the diorama, which has traditionally been a valid source of information regarding the natural world, negates the ideals supported by Landeer’s images.

The ideal of fair chase assumes that the animal and the hunter are equal adversaries and this notion is partially based on the perceived power of the animal based on its size and the ability of these attributes to validate the hunter. Singer’s tiny fawn, in comparison to the model represented in *The Sanctuary*, is a meager and sympathy inducing creature. The fawn is small in the scope of its environment and its size indicates its youth and vulnerability. Singer’s deliberate choice of an animal that represents an obviously passive opponent and her manipulation of its body, the exposure of old bullet holes and the addition of new ones, amplifies the excessive violence of hunting. These attributes also pit the sportsman, not against a worthy opponent, but instead against an impotent and frail creature consequently negating the masculinity of the hunter. The contrast between Singer’s work and that of the nineteenth-century painting by Landseer can be seen as indicative of the stereotypical variations in gendered approaches to animal suffering that have persisted since Russell’s description one hundred and sixty years earlier. In the words of contemporary scholar, Luke, “As a society, we expect women to respond to the suffering of animals; we see that as a ‘natural’ part of womanhood. Men, on the other hand, are expected to subsume whatever feelings they might have against the infliction of harm on animals to the grand project of Man’s Taming of Nature.” 42

*Kill Joy* also confronts the romanticized view of nature and man’s role within it that *The Sanctuary* exemplifies. The diorama style of display is one that is reliant on drama, its origins based in the mystery plays of medieval Europe, the *trompe-l’oeil*
effects pioneered by Renaissance painters, and innovations in perspective. The artifice required of a successful diorama in the presentation of the natural world whose believability is reliant on visual trickery and locale makes it a prime medium for the artist. Singer’s juxtaposition between her contrived environment—the diorama—and the ideals of nature constructed by sport hunting enthusiasts exposes the later as a melodramatic and self-serving fabrication. The damaged trophy is seated before a large-scale photograph of a woodland scene, reminiscent of the false backgrounds used in 1970s or 80s portrait studios. With the use of the massive photograph Singer attempts none of the skillful fakery that the diorama demands. The image makes no effort to fool the viewer’s sense of depth perception as the scene is truncated on all sides by stark white walls and the image is obviously a photograph. There are no visual references to the forest floor as the fawn is seated on a generic white pedestal whose symmetry and color cut through the photographic image. Landseer’s painting realistically presents a sweeping landscape that engulfs the human and animal, a wild nature that enhances the prestige of the hunter who has overtaken it and the creatures that inhabit it. Singer’s diorama inspired display, however, calls attention to the false ideals of this male constructed notion of the natural world and evokes narratives of the harm done to the animal body in pursuit of the sport hunting trophy.

While *Kill Joy* and *A Random Shot* both deal with the cruelty of the hunt and the senselessness of animal death, there are differences in the approach of each artist. The all-encompassing focus of Singer’s installation is to confront the sport hunt, its mythology and role in constructed notions of masculinity. The artist has done so in all elements of the piece: through her choice of trophy, treatment of its body, and the manipulation of the
environment in which it resides. Landseer’s painting and his personal unease with hunting and the treatment of prey animals is conveyed through *A Random Shot*. However, while Landseer’s painting depicts a tragic scene, it is not an explicit work of anti-hunting propaganda. The painting maintains some of the tenets of the genre of the hunt image, particularly the representation of the landscape as a wild and romantic playground for the hunter. Singer’s work, on the other hand, has excised this element replacing it with a poorly staged representation of the forest. In *Kill Joy* the landscape is no longer an elemental participant in the hunt, instead it has been manipulated to further point out its fallacies and deny the hunter his idealized environment.

**Camera-Hunting: The Merging of Looking, Killing, and Collecting**

Guns have metamorphosed into cameras in this earnest comedy, the ecological safari, because nature has ceased to be what it had always been—what people needed protection from. Now nature—tamed, endangered, mortal—needs to be protected from people. When we are afraid we shoot. But when we are nostalgic, we take pictures.  

By the mid-nineteenth century the hunting image had begun to evolve as popular interest turned to new technological advances in photography. Beginning in the 1850s, various sportsmen and explorers had begun to utilize the camera as a means for documenting animals, their antlers and hides, to make scientific records as well as verify their hunting accomplishments. The final decade of the nineteenth century brought advancements in the production of roll film, smaller and lighter cameras, faster film speeds, and the increased telescopic abilities of camera optics. The rapid evolution in the medium and its accessibility to a greater range of society made photography a powerful force in the realm of image making. These advancements created a challenge to
both the popular print medium and the aristocratic paintings of the first half of the century as average people were now able to create their own images.

George Bird Grinnell, editor of *Forest and Stream*, was one of the first to champion the practice of “camera-hunting.” On May 5, 1882, in the editorial, “Hunting with a Camera,” Grinnell introduced the term and situated camera hunting as a new means of hunting and collecting animal trophies. Grinnell felt that gunless hunting presented the opportunity for a greater communion with nature. For his approach to appeal to regular sportsmen, however, “tangible” results in the form of trophies had to be acquired. The answer was found in the kinship between the photographic process and that of hunting.

For the sport hunter the photograph was also valuable for the validity it lent to hunting imagery. The photograph by virtue of the immediacy of its process carries with it a previously unparalleled sense of realism that could not be accomplished through earlier methods. Shiras, a pioneer of camera hunting, proclaimed the photograph “an invaluable souvenir” of dead animals; however, in later publications, he espoused employing the photograph alone as a trophy. In his guide “Hunting Wild Life With Camera And Flashlight,” (1898) Shiras laments, “It is unfortunate, however, that to many men the peep-sights of a rifle continue to circumscribe their vision.” The author goes on to say, “…the camera offers further means of exercising even greater hunting skill than does the rifle, for skill, and not kill, should be the motive….“ Shiras’s photograph, *A Disturbance Raised Mild Curiosity*, exemplifies the ‘camera-shot’ principle. The doe is arrested on film in the bright blast of light from the photographer’s flashlight as it attempts to drink water from a pond. The ability of the
camera-hunter to stalk and acquire an image of the animal is akin to the process of the sport hunt, except instead of an outcome comprised of violence and dismemberment the trophy is a still representation. Shiras’s image represents a mythical ideal of nature, a secretive and unseen element that the trophy kill, with its stiff articulation upon a wooden mount and vacantly gazing glass eyes, cannot mimic. This photographic trophy embodies a form of attainment, the acquisition of what is normally unseen by humans. Further enhancing the prestige of such an accomplishment is the gaze between the doe and the human that is captured on film. This element links man with nature through the act of simultaneous looking. They peer at one another across the “abyss of non-comprehension” and in the animal’s look there is a reflection of the man’s, but there is knowledge that is ultimately unknowable to the former.\(^4\) The ability to capture such a moment on film is a testament to the hunter/photographer’s prowess.

Singer’s installation, *Kill Joy*, draws from the method and aesthetics of camera hunting to refute the masculine values of attainment that its practitioners sought. Singer’s use of the recycled rifle scope, which invites the viewer to be an active participant in the mock hunt, creates a visual link between killing and looking and induces a sympathetic unease in the viewer. Singer’s use of the taxidermy mount also alludes to the symbiotic relationship between photography and taxidermy that existed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

In *Kill Joy* the artist uses the position of the young deer to deny the viewer the value of the returned look, a crucial element to substantiate the masculine prowess of the photographer/hunter. The animal in its sights of the rifle scope does not acknowledge or return the viewer’s look instead it faces off into the distance of the white walled gallery.
Furthermore, the mangled fawn, situated in an overtly falsified environment, is manipulated into a pose that suggests an awkward and pained attempt to rise from a seated position. Through these elements Singer presents a visually compelling contrast to the naturalistic animal of Shiras’ photograph. The piece is emblematic of the oppressed and fragile view of nature espoused by critic Susan Sontag. She saw modern technology, both cameras and guns, as having transformed nature into a benign place that no longer proved a danger to man. This position runs counter to the fabricated ideal of nature that placed importance on its wild and mysterious mystique. These characteristics were enhanced by the simultaneous act of looking that occurred between hunter and prey, which created value in the images made by Shiras and the practitioners of camera hunting.

In *Kill Joy* Singer presents visual comparisons between guns and cameras alongside the taxidermy mount alluding to the symbiotic relationship between photographic and taxidermy methods. These processes have historically worked in tandem to exploit the animal body and to serve the ego-driven needs of man. During the nineteenth century, images such as Shiras’s and those taken by other camera-hunters were a crucial element in the process of creating life-like mounts. Photographers oftentimes relied on taxidermists to compensate for the deficiencies of their equipment and the medium, just as taxidermists used photographs as a means to accurately render the details of their subjects. The photograph, hindered by its two-dimensional format, was incapable of capturing the animal in a manner that adequately depicted its physical size, an important element in validating the trophy and one that could be accomplished by the mount. Taxidermy, on the other hand, could look to photography for guidance in the
accurate representation of animal skins and postures, elements which facilitated the approximation of life valued by hunters and collectors of mounts. The convincing nature of the trophy mount is reliant on the camouflaging of artifacts of the hunt such as bullet wounds. The careful attention to the masking of such details is what allowed it to serve as a souvenir of an experience—that instead of invoking horror in the viewer—induced esteem for the hunter. Singer’s fawn is not an articulate model of a deer that represents the ideal desired by the taxidermist and facilitated by the photograph. As the viewer gazes through the scope, which recalls the viewfinder of a camera, the animal is obviously an irrevocably damaged creature—small and wounded—not the example of masculine domination that would be desired by the sport hunter. The scope’s ability to frame the scene distills the moment creating a sense of isolated viewing that is exceptionally disconcerting as the advanced optics provide for an uncomfortably detailed look at the punctures and sutured tears in the fawn’s fur. The artist provokes a visceral response that not only includes discomfort over the harm done the animal, but also potential harm done to the body of the viewer.50

The sport hunt is a violent and active means of collecting that demonstrates man’s need to control and dominate nature through attainment. The activity, driven by a constructed male psychology, is framed by a sporting code. These self-imposed ethics define the hunt, validate its violence, specify its quarry, and exalt the male sportsman. Singer’s installation, Kill Joy, exposes the mythology of the hunt that is founded upon these guiding principals as demonstrated in hunting imagery from the nineteenth century.

The focus of Kill Joy is a dilapidated taxidermy fawn that the artist has manipulated to expose its once hidden wounds, artifacts concealed by the taxidermy
process. Singer situates the creature in a fabricated environment, reminiscent of the museum diorama style of display. The artist’s deliberate use of these elements points towards the fallacy of the sporting ethic of fair chase as well as the romanticized view of nature adhered to by hunters and illustrated in the work of Ansdell and Landseer. The installation also addresses the notions of looking and killing as they relate to early photography and the activity of “camera-hunting” as seen in the work of Shiras. Singer’s placement of the rifle scope presents a view that represents both the view of the hunter and that of the photographer who both seek to capture a souvenir of the animal present.

*Kill Joy*, through the artist’s use of materials and the physical space that the work commands, presents a formidable opposition to the ideals of the sport hunt. It is a provocative work that engages the viewer, demanding that they too take part in an activity steeped in violence. The fawn, at first glance, is a seemingly benign creature. However, as the viewer peers through the scope, the magnification brings into focus the horrible damage inflicted upon its body. The animal trophy, in the hands of Singer, ceases to represent the celebration of the hunter but instead leaves the viewer unsettled.51 The issues raised by the condition of the animal are at the heart of Singer’s goal, as an artist, and are consistent throughout her entire body of work. The artist seeks to force her audience to question the “morality of our willingness to use animals for our own purposes.”52 Humans have throughout history destroyed nature with an unabashed ease. Singer’s work exposes this overriding complacency in mass killing and the objectification of animals to serve human needs.
CHAPTER TWO

INSIDES OUTSIDES: THE INTELLECTUAL TROPHY

In some sense, the educational value of any specimen (whether it’s a dissected organ or a stuffed animal) lies in its power to extend illumination beyond its own individuality. A true specimen is a species representative rather than an idiosyncratic particular. This explains why we freeze the otherwise fluctuating and transient individuals of nature into static universals.\(^5\)

The drive to collect and display is a long-standing human preoccupation and a distinctly male privileged pursuit. This compulsion was aptly displayed in the evolution and proliferation of the “cabinet of curiosities,” or wunderkammern of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These semi-private collections, ranging in size from entire rooms to single drawers, were rudimentary attempts to understand the natural world. They also served as signifiers of wealth and prestige for their male owners. Between 1640 and 1700, slightly less than one hundred cabinets of curiosity were documented in the thriving city of Amsterdam. This low count is a testament to the exclusivity of the practice and the limited availability of collectable items.\(^5\) The growth of such collections paralleled the increasing interest in natural history and animal specimens, which were integral components within the collection. In the context of the cabinet collection, however, the specimens were not acquisitions of sport but instead trophies of masculine intellectual superiority acquired by careful collecting. Central to the role of the animal bodies on display was their standing as a visual representation of an entire species. They were objects whose importance derived from “the relationship between an original and re-animated liveliness: at once lifelike yet dead, both a human-made representation if a
species and a *presentation* of a particular animal’s skin.”

This use of the collection, as a signifier of male power through intellect, and its positioning of singular animals as representations of an entire species was achieved through the rudimentary preservative methods used to sustain the specimens and the crude display arrangements employed by their collectors.

Imbedded in the notion of a collection is an assurance of totality. This was the goal of the presumably male collector in constructing the cabinet of curiosities. These collections were intended to be private worlds created through the collection of scientific wonders that when combined would represent all knowledge of the natural world. The inclusion of animal specimens alongside the various minerals, plant specimens, and fantastical objects favored by collectors was crucial in facilitating this sense of totality. To create such visual completeness with once living and sentient creatures it was necessary that individual animals be reduced to single representations of an entire species by divorcing them from their distinctive natures and unique habitats. The use of rudimentary preservative methods and crude display arrangements achieved this erasure of context. The specimens found in cabinets were displayed fixed to simple mounts and rigidly facing forward on shelves and in drawers with no vague attempts at habitat simulation. The unsophisticated taxidermy techniques relied more on the sturdiness of the specimen than the skill of the practitioner, which allowed for the creation of specimens that were awkwardly posed with no suggestion of natural posturing or movements. These methods de-contextualized the animal by divorcing it from its reality, a crucial step in allowing for its absorption into the collection as mechanism whose intention was to encompass the entirety of knowledge. This totality was a defining goal of the collector.
and is important to both the success of the collection and its role as a signifier of male power through intellect.

Singer’s installation, _Insides Outsides_ (2004, figure 7), demonstrates the artist’s gesturing towards the collecting habits and display methods of the _wunderkammern_. While Singer has not acknowledged an interest in this specific period of history, its collecting programs or the relations between humans and animals at the time, she has stated a concern with the relationship between the contemporary knowledge of animals and the situations under which this knowledge has been formed. The role of the museum in shaping humans’ understanding and relationship with animals is undeniable and the cabinet of curiosities played a pivotal role in the development of these institutions.

Singer’s emulation of the aesthetic of cabinet displays prompts an evaluation of the destruction of the animal identity to serve the intellectual and social needs of men that this early collecting program required. _Insides Outsides_ consists of a variety of taxidermy mounts that the artist has embellished with sequins, beads, porcelain flowers and funerary floral arrangements. Mixed among the standard hunting trophies of stags and antlers are a variety of other animals, that while undesirable to the sports hunter, represent approximations of the creatures that would have proven valuable to the cabinet collector. There are three individual works within the installation that exemplify Singer’s goals: the piece entitled _Recovered_ (2004; figure 8), a wounded male deer, _Chilled Lamb_ (2004; figure 9), a shabby lamb, and _Perch_ (2004; figure 10), an assemblage of antlers and mounted birds. These works, individually and within the entirety of the installation, call into question the roles of animals as specimens: living creatures transformed into objects


through the taxidermy process within sixteenth- and seventeenth-century collections as well as later museum practices.

**The Cabinet of Curiosities**

The *wunderkammern*, while a sixteenth- and seventeenth-century collecting method, originated in the pre-Renaissance infatuation with the accumulation and display of religious relics. Beginning in the early Middle Ages, expensive and extravagantly ornate displays were being fabricated for the presentation of sacred artifacts. The repositories were meant to be viewed by the devoted pilgrims who had undertaken perilous and often extensive journeys to sacred sites in Europe and the Holy Land. These religious displays evolved as interest in the natural world became increasingly widespread. Eventually, mingled amongst the traditional items of saintly relics and contemporary church paraphernalia, could be found items from the natural world. These secular objects—tortoise shells, meteorites, elephant tusks, and lion skins—took on religious significance as they evoked to the devout a sense of awe at the vastness of God’s creation.

The cabinet collection is representative of the shift from collecting for religious veneration to an activity that concerned itself exclusively with ambitious academic pursuits based on a private interest in the natural world. For the male collector, the intellectual purpose of the cabinet of curiosity was to serve as a visual encyclopedia, which endeavored to present a miniaturized version of the universe in its entirety by displaying objects representative of every facet of learning. This programme of collecting was a visual manifestation of the scholarly ideals of the period, which valued
proficient knowledge in a variety of fields of study. To achieve such ends collectors endeavored to create what the scientist and philosopher Francis Bacon referred to as, “a small compass, a model of the universal nature made private.”\textsuperscript{61} This extensive undertaking raises questions about what items are worthy of collecting—specifically which animal species—and what method should be employed to display them.

The accumulation and arrangement of such a vast quantity of items on a disparate range of subjects proved to be a challenging undertaking that resulted in rooms that appear to the modern eye as comprised of seemingly discordant categories of objects. However, the purveyors of such cabinets organized their creations based on the intellectual standards of the day—as precise metaphors for the natural world.\textsuperscript{62} These arrangements, however, pay no attention to the individual nature of the specimens on display, their history, or natural habitat. These elements of its identity are stripped away to de-contextualize the animal and remake them into a material object meant to serve masculine intellectual interest or curiosity. The Museum Francesco Calceolari in Verona (1622; figure 11) provides an example of the seemingly haphazard yet thoroughly staged display methods in which animal specimens are heavily represented. Dangling from the rafters are the bodies of porcupine, a leopard, reptiles, fish, a number of sharks, and a crocodile. Beneath this densely populated ceiling, roosting upon the top shelves can be found a variety of stuffed birds mixed in with a number of small animals. Within the clutter of the shelves are numerous animal parts including antlers, snail shells, and the blade of a sawfish. This chaos, however, is organized around a system that was based on an amalgam of knowledge that was conventional at the time. For instance, the cabinet is ordered around objects from antiquity—the ancient statuary of Atlas and Minerva, the
Greek architectural features of the cabinet in the center of the room, and the Egyptian obelisks. These classical features, while based in mythology, were considered ideal truths by the early collectors and represented the limited knowledge of the natural world available to scholars during the period. These elements acted as a means of fusing together and instituting a system of display that would be universally understood by their contemporaries.

The specific animals deemed important enough to reside in the cabinet of curiosities were also codified by the interests of collectors and comprised of both items from the natural world and those of mythology and fantasy. As the taxidermy method was still in its formative stages this emergent hierarchy was often guided by the ability of the animal’s remains to be easily preserved. Birds, for instance, were among the most sought after and the Birds of Paradise, in particular, were prized. These birds, as those seen in Calceolari’s cabinet, were thought to have no feet and the common belief that they spent their entire lives in flight elevated their value as objects of natural wonder.

Another common species of animal collected were reptiles, such as crocodiles, turtles, and iguanas, whose tough skin made them particularly viable specimens. Alongside such naturally occurring specimens were a variety of mythical creatures that came into being through the sheer imagination and blatant fabrication. Unicorns, for instance, were particularly prized, and cups manufactured from their “horns” were a fixture in many cabinets. These vessels were said to have the miraculous ability to detect poison. This conglomeration of creatures, both real and fantastical, was representative of the primitive knowledge of the natural world common during the period. It also confirmed the ability of superstition to contaminate scholastic endeavors.
These early rudimentary attempts at harnessing and understanding the natural world were predominantly the domain of men and the practice garnered prestige as it indicated to the viewer the wealth and high intellectual standing of the collector. The exclusivity of this programme of collecting is evidenced in the detailed guest book kept by the Italian scientist and collector, Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522-1605). Recorded in its pages are the names of; “907 scholars, 118 nobles, 11 archbishops, 26 ‘famous men’ and 1 single woman.” This glaring disparity attests to the low standing of women in the intellectual sphere during the period. It has been recorded that even Caterina Sforza, the equivalent of Italian royalty at the time, who arrived to view Aldrovandi’s collection with, “fourteen or fifteen coaches and carriages containing fifty Gentlewomen, the flower of the first families of the city, accompanied by more than 150 Gentlemen…” was not considered of substantial enough intellect to be invited to sign the guest book.66 As evidenced by such accounts the male collector held unquestionable domination in the realm of intellectual pursuits and the practice of collecting. Men, therefore, solely determined in what manner the animal bodies—which became trophies of intellectual superiority—would be regarded and displayed.

While the exact hunting practices of the cabinet collectors remain vague, it is evident in the many engravings and illustrations of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century cabinets that traditional hunting trophies such as stags and their antlers as well as a multitude of less traditional creatures such as reptiles and small mammals, even the fantastical such as unicorns and Scythian lambs, were collected. The conventional items indicate that hunting, as a masculine blood sport concerned with not only the stalking and killing of an animal but also the acquisition and preservation of its remains, was a
contemporary interest of the period. However, many of the animal specimens found in the cabinets were simply acquired through trade in foreign lands or sheer happenstance. For instance, a prize in among Aldrovandi’s many curiosities was a “fearsome dragon” that the collector scientist acquired from a herdsman who found it wandering on a road and dispatched it with a simple knock upon the head. Aldrovandi quickly preserved the mysterious creature and set about writing a massive seven-volume history of the dragon in Latin. While these methods of hunting—the traditional premeditated kill with a goal of acquiring specimens and the chance encounter with a rarity to be obtained—differ from one another, the central concern remains the same. Both are a result of man’s need to dominate nature and acquire it for self-serving purposes.

**Insides Outsides**

Singer’s installation, *Insides Outsides*, is a room populated with a menagerie of recycled taxidermy mounts—animals that vary from a large male deer to a tiny songbird—all embellished with fanciful jewels, lace, sequins, and flowers. The artist’s choice of animals, a selection reminiscent of the trophies prized by cabinet collectors, their adornment, and the manner in which Singer displays them allude to historical precedent. However, this approach manipulates these methods to construct decorously grotesque narratives from beautiful subjects that present a tale of the ruination of nature at the hands of men, a ramification never considered by the intellectual collector. The individual works—*Recovered, Perch*, and *Chilled Lamb*—will each be discussed in relation to these issues.
In *Recovered*, the taxidermy deer lies on its side in a pose commonly demonstrated in imagery of young fawns. This presentation imbues it with a sense of vulnerability and innocence. The creature’s back and right flank are elaborately embellished with sprouting flowers and glittering jewels. The stag, or male deer, was a traditional prize for the sport hunter that also proved a valued specimen for cabinet collectors. The *Kunstkammer* of the Archbishops of Salzberg (c.1668; figure 12) was established by Count Guidobald Thun, Archbishop of Salzburg (1654-1668), as a diversion for visiting clergy and dignitaries. This collection, a subtle variation on the *wunderkammer*, serves as an example for the inclusion of hunting trophies, particularly the antlers of the stag, into the formal collecting programme of male cabinet enthusiasts. Singer’s antlered deer recalls this tradition and manipulates its protocols. Facilitated by the artist’s method of adornment, which highlights its demise and alludes to its life in the wild, the animal presents itself as having a unique identity. These qualities present a simultaneous narrative of its living state, violent destruction, and eventual role in death.

The deer of *Recovered* is molded to sit on its side with its head reared back in a look of pain and horror. This fabricated action is made disconcerting to behold due to the awkward rigidity created through the taxidermy process. Singer’s penchant for the combining of stereotypically feminine decoration and traumatic death is here at its height. The wound in the animal’s neck, once hidden by the preservative method and uncovered by the artist, is a ripe vibrant red, a simulation of blood composed of beadwork. The streams of blood, suspended in mid-air, threaten to soil the viewer. Encircling the animal’s neck is a wooden taxidermy plaque, the traditional means of mounting and
displaying antlers and heads. This inclusion of display paraphernalia suggests to the viewer a disturbing duality of existence. The animal as a sentient being that is still living is aware of its future as a specimen. The presentation of simultaneous life and death is further enhanced by the porcelain flowers that spring from the animal’s back. This horizontal field of fur and flesh serves as a fertile landscape, suggestive of the forest floor and creates a pointed visual conflict between beauty and aggrandized killing. Singer’s deer is not like those collected by the intellectual connoisseur who requires it to take its place in the clean scientific, order free of any trappings of its violent end. The artist’s presentation of \textit{Recovered} exposes the pointless destruction of a creature by presenting it in its trophy form in a manner that makes obvious the narrative of its death. This revelation is made more disconcerting for the viewer by the animal’s ability, through display methods constructed by the artist, to present a first-hand account that is both poignant and horrific.

In \textit{Perch}, a second work that composes \textit{Insides Outsides}, the artist combines two traditionally collected animal specimens to fabricate a disturbing coexistence between life and death at the hands of men. The work consists of two taxidermy birds, a duck and a songbird, perched upon the disembodied antlers of a small deer. While birds were prized creatures to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century collector, they also appeared in later historical records and collections. The Dutch anatomist Frederik Ruysch (1638-1731) was known for the intricate and elaborate tableaux that he created from his collection of dried and embalmed anatomical and natural specimens. A small bird, preserved in a jar topped with an abundance of plant and insect specimens (1744; figure 13), appears in an engraving by Cornelius Huyberts for Ruysch’s \textit{Thesaurus animalium primus} (1744).
Figure 13. Cornelius Huyberts, Frederik Ruysch's anatomical preparations from wet and dry specimens from the animal, plant, and insect world, 1744. Reproduced in Arthur MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment: Collectors and Collections from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 165.
Later, in the nineteenth century, Victorians accumulated birds for their collections as well. The specimen of a *Vestiaria coccinea* (c. 1845; figure 14), a Hawaiian finch now considered a vulnerable species, was one of only two surviving specimens from the Royal College of Surgeons that were transferred to the British Museum in 1845. The prominence of the bird as a specimen led to the focus on the preservation of its remains in the evolution of the taxidermy method. Early procedures called for the bird to be preserved one of three ways: the filling of the body cavity then washing and arranging the plumage before immersion in brandy, the saturation of the skins with brandy then situating them in containers of straw or chaff, or embalming the creature by voiding its body cavity and filling it with a preservative agent such as lime. Such careful and comparatively advanced methods demonstrate the value and popularity of bird specimens. The duck and songbird featured in *Perch*, derived from these earlier traditions, are imbued with an individuality and consciousness through the method of their display.

Singer’s display of the birds lends a playful, if not cartoonish, quality to these brightly colored animals as they lean inward, precariously resting upon the severed antlers. This juxtaposition creates a scene that is both visually delightful and strikingly macabre. Singer has consciously situated the birds facing into the hairless scalp of the deer, which is surrounded by vibrant red beads meant to suggest blood. Through this presentation, the creatures, although already dead and preserved through taxidermy, are intended to simulate living beings that acknowledge their fate. Adding to this notion is the presence of the wooden taxidermy plaques worn about their necks as dogs and cats wear collars. Singer is stating that their future role will be at the whim and disposal of
Figure 14. Documentary Photograph of a specimen of *Vestiaria coccinea* preserved in spirit, one of two surviving specimens transferred from the Royal College of Surgeons to the British Museum in 1845. The Natural History Museum, London. Reproduced in Arthur MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment: Collectors and Collections from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 145.
humans. The work also directly deflates the grand notion of the collecting of specimens for intellectual enlightenment through the mundane quality of the species that the artist has chosen to represent. They are familiar creatures—either a duck occasionally seen as a hunting trophy or a songbird commonly found in the everyday landscape—neither representing an exotic specimen.

The work, *Chilled Lamb*, a vulnerable and tragic creation, adorned with pink rhinestones, fake glass bubbles, and porcelain flowers, inhabits a corner of Singer’s installation. The cabinet collector’s fascination with the lamb was founded in a folkloric tradition that, in the sixteenth century, evolved into serious intellectual inquiry. Known as the Tartar, Scythian, or vegetable lamb this strange creature represented a bridge between the realm of animals and plants—a zoophyte. The Tartar lamb, as a scientific wonder that confounded already existing notions of nature, was an object of fascination for the men behind the great collections of Europe. Sir Richard Lee, ambassador to Russia from 1600-1601, received a ‘gowne or long cloake, made after the fashion of that cuntrie with the skins of those Tartar lambes’ as a gift from Boris Godunov upon his departure from Russia. The garment made its way into the Bodleian Library at Oxford in December 1612, bequeathed by Lee after his death in 1609. These fantastical creatures, however, were merely fabrications wrought from man’s imagination and constructed through rudimentary taxidermy. Johnann Philipp Breyne (1680-1764), a prominent botantist, examined a Scythian Lamb specimen (1725; figure 15) of unknown origin only to
conclude it a fake and the entire species a fable. In Breyne’s findings he stated:

Close inspection also showed that one of the front legs had been artificially inserted, and that the head and neck were not of one continuous substance with the body, but had been very cleverly and neatly joined on to it. In fact, this root, or stem, had been skillfully manipulated into the form of a lamb…. 73

This account provides an example of the construction of a specimen based upon mythical creatures and the serious consideration such fabrications were given by learned men. The early processes available to collectors for the creation or preservation of animal specimens facilitated their fantasies, which meshed with scientific truth.

Singer’s piece, *Chilled Lamb*, derives from this earlier tradition in cabinet collecting by recalling the interest in the Tartar Lamb and utilizing it to draw conclusions regarding the role of the animal body, both fabricated and real, as an intellectual trophy and the part that early taxidermy had to play in this pursuit. The display of *Chilled Lamb* initially resembles that of the creatures found in cabinet collections. Isolated in the gallery, the lamb as a singular specimen is representative of a whole group. Singer has placed the creature on a white pedestal, a modern museum display tool, while also including a marble base to which the animal’s feet are attached. The stone base recalls an antiquated display aesthetic while also creating visual comparisons to trophies, which often times appear on such ostentatious surfaces. The lamb that the artist has chosen to present is a seemingly aged specimen, its fur appears shabby, the articulation of its facial features indefinably awkward, and its tale is un-docked and ragged. Singer’s choice allows for the visual manipulation of the shortcomings of the taxidermy process to create a symbol of the human ruination of nature. This modern specimen, like the oddity examined and debunked by Breyne, is a poor approximation of a living creature. Despite such dilapidation and the shortcomings of the preservation technique, the animal exudes a
preciousness through the artist’s attachment of pastel pink beads and flowers. These additions lend it a girlish, juvenile quality that intimates innocence and vulnerability and consequently amplifies the viewer’s horror at its death. By presenting an example of human depravity through a creation so excessively endearing, Singer reinstates the lamb’s identity as a unique living creature, not a stereotyped specimen, and enables it to tell a story contrary to the intent of its original creator. The addition of the flowers and leaves, while visually pleasing, also allude to the earlier accounts of the Tartar Lamb that describe it as part vegetable and part animal with stalks growing from its body. Singer’s piece is also a hybrid; however, the intellectual pursuit in which it is founded is concerned exposition of earlier collecting habits and display practices to remark upon animal death. This trophy is not for the intellectually curious but is instead a visual statement upon the desire of men to dominate and manipulate the natural world to serve their lofty goals.

_Arabric Identity in a Seventeenth-Century Precedent_

Singer’s installation, *Insides Outsides*, harkens back to antiquated collecting practices and the display methods that their male owners utilized in their study of the natural world. The artist, however, diverges from this male dominated programme of display that aided by the taxidermy method striped the animal of its identity in order to create a singular specimen for man’s intellectual and social prestige. Yet Singer’s goal for the installation, giving voice and identity to a living creature that would merely be trampled upon by men’s intellectual pursuits is not without a historical precedent. Through much of history the scholastic and artistic education of women was inhibited by
gender constraints. However, a small number found their place amongst the famous men who dominated the fields. The artist and naturalist, Maria Sybilla Merian, represents a well-documented seventeenth-century precedent for the female approach to the contemplation and display of the animal body. Merian’s renderings individualized the insect specimens that she raised, illustrated, and wrote about. For this reason, her representations and writings were an anomaly in the field of botanical and insect images of the period.

Merian, born in Frankfurt am Main in 1647, had a fortuitous start in a family of artists, which allowed for her education by disregarding contemporary ideas relating to the inherent inferiority of the female mind. Merian’s father was the artist and publisher Mathias Merian the Elder (1593-1650) and her stepfather the prominent still-life painter, engraver, and art dealer Jacob Marrel (1614-1681). While schooled in the traditionally feminine art of embroidery, Merian was also allowed to learn drawing, still-life painting, watercolor, and copperplate engraving from her stepfather and his male pupils.

Merian began her artistic career with a three-part publication of plates featuring botanical images intended as patterns for amateur painters and embroiderers. After this appropriately feminine accomplishment, the artist turned her interest to natural science, particularly the study of insects and published a book concerned with western European butterflies and moths. Raupen (1679) or the Wonderful Transformation and Singular Flower-Food of Caterpillars...Painted from Life and Engraved in Copper provides an early example of Merian’s interest in these insects and her drawings and writings depict them as unique creatures with individual histories.
To create the one hundred copperplates that comprised *Raupen*, the artist worked from live specimens that she observed and depicted through the various stages of their lives and in both states of flight and rest. In her compositions there is always a plant; yet, the plant, instead of defining the composition, is only a foodsource for the insect, which is Merian’s real focal point. The hand-colored counterproof, *Metamorphosis Of The Silkworm With A White Mulberry Leaf* (1679; figure 16), was the first plate from *Raupen* and demonstrates the artist’s interest in the individual nature of the creatures she drew. The image chronicles the metamorphosis of the silkworm as it lives and feeds upon a mulberry tree. Adding to the power of this work as a unique account of the insect’s life, Merian also included a series of notes on the specimens that provides the reader a detailed narrative. The artist describes, almost lovingly, the manner in which she fed the caterpillars after they had devoured the mulberry bush: “When the caterpillars were still very small and there was not a single leaf on the mulberry, I fed them on lettuce. When they are bigger they have to have mulberry leaves in order to spin a thread.” What sets Merian’s work apart from the many male artists producing images of plants and insects during the period was the prominent role she afforded the creature. Even the artist’s stepfather and mentor, Marrel, concerned himself more with his botanical subjects than with the tiny creatures that inhabited their shadows. Marrel’s watercolor, *Spring Flowers In A Glass Vase With A Spider In Its Web* (1634; figure 17) is an example of the secondary role of the insects. Merian’s caterpillar, however, is not there solely to add a realistic quality to the image of the plant but, in the words of Ella Reitsma, “The insects were there for themselves.”
Merian’s drawings provide a historical precedent for female-guided display and its concern with the individuality and history of the animal specimen that is similar to Singer’s contemporary approach. However, despite obvious similarities such as the preoccupation with the animal as an individual creature there are marked differences in their goals. On the other hand, Singer’s work utilizes a creature that came to its death through violent means and a secondary process of physical and figurative dismemberment. Merian’s caterpillars, on the other hand, lived seemingly charmed lives in the care of the artist who tended them. The insects, however, were essentially cabinet objects as they were collected, documented, and categorized for the artist’s enjoyment and learning, as well as for the male naturalists who used her books as field guides. The taxidermy animals that inhabit *Insides Outsides* speak to a darker history, one that acknowledges the brutalities undertaken in the name of scientific enlightenment.

**Hirst and Singer**

British artist, Damien Hirst (1965-), provides a contemporary male counterpoint to Singer’s approach to the taxidermy trophy animal. Hirst’s work demonstrates the persistence of the male-driven collecting and display practices of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century cabinet collectors. A compatriot of Singer, Hirst has produced a body of artwork that has consistently made use of the animal body by placing its preservation and decay on display for the viewer. In Britain during the 1990s, the devastating and costly farming disaster, the foot-and-mouth crisis, was accompanied by the proliferation of images of sick and dying cattle and the unceremonious destruction of their remains on flaming pyres. This national and international concern combined with
contemporary debates on the role of animals in medical research, animal cloning, and the continued celebration of sport hunting, particularly in England, inspired a new consciousness regarding animal welfare.\textsuperscript{81} During this period Hirst’s works involving the preservation of animal specimens in scientifically inspired displays began to gain prominence. His piece, \textit{Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purpose of Understanding} (1991; figure 18), presents the seemingly systematic ordering and display of preserved fish in a medicine cabinet. The creatures represent a variety of species that all face in the same direction, each ensconced in a precisely fitted melamine case. This work possesses striking visual similarities to the systematic manner in which cabinet collectors would present their intellectual trophies. The fish are displayed in an order that implies a rational scheme; however, upon further contemplation one realizes that they are simply a discordant mix of species, with duplicate specimens appearing randomly throughout.

\textit{Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purpose of Understanding} can be considered an impetus for one of Hirst’s most famous pieces and one that would transform the artist himself and his patron, prominent British art collector Charles Saatchi, into intellectual-artistic hunters in their own right. \textit{The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living} (1992; figure 19) features a preserved tiger shark suspended in a glass and stainless steel vitrine. The shark that inhabits the work is a prestigious fishing trophy and the coast of Australia is lined with fishermen willing to risk their lives to capture one. Hirst’s shark was procured by
commission through Vic Hislop, a shark fisherman with his own museum, and shipped back to England for preservation and installation.\textsuperscript{82}

*The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* embodies many of the characteristics desired by cabinet collectors. The shark, a prestigious fishing trophy, was hunted and killed at the request of the artist to fulfill a commission. The animal, suspended silently in a tank of formaldehyde, displays no evidence of its origins. The sterile environment lacks any other creatures, vegetation, or written information that might allude to its native origins. The creature also displays no evidence of the wounds that brought it to this end. The preservation process hides any evidence of the large hook and multiple bullet wounds that would have been necessary to kill it. The conscious omission of such elements strip the animal of its individual history and identity allowing it to fulfill Hirst’s artistic goals, which were to demonstrate the ease by which one can acquire such a preposterous thing as a shark.\textsuperscript{83}

Considering Hirst’s work against that of Singer, there are the obvious and basic similarities: two artists of British origin working with the remains of animals that serve in various forms as trophies. However, beyond these simplistic comparative points, Singer’s work diverges greatly from Hirst’s creations. Hirst ostensibly exhibits no qualms regarding the death of the animals he uses as the killing and dismemberment of the many sheep and cattle that populate his works demonstrate. The shark from *The Physical Impossibility...* was hunted and killed at the request of the artist to fulfill a commission. In Hirst’s words, “I like ideas of trying to understand the world by taking things out of the world. You kill things to look at them.”\textsuperscript{84} This statement simplifies the ideology demonstrated by the male collectors who captured, killed, and stuffed the animals that
filled their cabinets of curiosity. This position is contradictory to Singer’s working method, as she never harms an animal in pursuit of her artistic goals, using only discarded, old, or donated materials. Singer’s desire to bring a voice to the trophy kill that will reinstate its identity and expose the violent and unnecessary nature of their deaths, is achieved by betraying the erasure of their context through the taxidermy process.

Singer’s installation, *Insides Outsides*, appropriates many of the collecting and display characteristics of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century cabinet of curiosities. Central to these collections were the preserved bodies of animals that served as intellectual trophies for their male collectors. Essential to fulfilling this role was the destruction of their identity by stripping away their origin, the physical evidence of their deaths, and presenting them as a single representative of an entire species. Singer’s work counteracts these goals to refute the notion of intellectual integrity upon which these collections relied. The artist manipulates the taxidermy process by exposing the damage the procedure masks and displays the mounts in a manner that questions the gratuitous nature of their deaths.

There are examples of both historical and contemporary models for the use and display of the animal body by artists. Merian’s seventeenth-century approach, though similar to Singer’s in its attempt to give voice to the animal specimen through narrative, situates her as an intellectual voyeur whose work facilitated the investigations of her contemporary male counterparts. In the twentieth century, Hirst presented a number of pieces that remarked upon preservation and decay. His display methods involve the placing of animals into sterile environments that are free of any individualized visual or
written information regarding the origins of the animal. These earlier works are vehicles for man’s contemplation of the natural world and his role within it. *Insides Outsides* gives voice to the animals themselves by presenting narratives from the point of view of the creature on display. This approach leaves the modern viewer questioning the role of the animal and uncomfortable with their complacency with the act of killing by looking at the animal’s remains. The work creates a dialogue between the dead animal and the living human that poignantly illustrates John Berger’s assertion that, “…no animal confirms man….”86 Singer’s installation is unique for the value it places on the animal’s experience. This facet in the relationship between the animal, as an object to be collected, and its male collector has continually been ignored.
CHAPTER THREE

MY DEAREST, DEAREST CREATURE: THE PRIVATE TROPHY MADE PUBLIC

The exotic object represents distance appropriated; it is symptomatic of the more general cultural imperialism that is tourism’s stock in trade. To have a souvenir of the exotic is to possess both a specimen and a trophy; on the one hand, the object must be marked as arising directly out of an immediate distance; space is transformed into interiority, into “personal” space, just as time is transformed into interiority, in the case of the antique object.  

87 The study of natural history was a popular preoccupation for wealthy men that was perpetuated by the collecting of animal specimens and resulted in the creation of the institutional museum. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, science was not a refined discipline. Instead the field encompassed many avenues of inquiry including zoology, botany, geology, mineralogy, and medicine.  

88 This merging of many disparate subjects was an obvious outgrowth of the early collecting habits of the cabinet enthusiasts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Their impact, however, was not limited to the cerebral, as these great collectors also provided the materials that would form the foundation of the early natural history museum. As the passion for personal collecting began to wane in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the animal trophies—the antlers, stuffed birds, reptiles, and small mammals—popularized by the cabinet collectors began to merge with and become important elements in this new public institution. Many of the prolific hunters and naturalists of the period began to open their own collections to the public or donate them to newly formed institutions. William Oswell’s collection of hunting trophies and African souvenirs was a common destination
for the schoolchildren of Tunbridge Wells. The prolific British animal painter, Landseer, also possessed a remarkable collection of heads that was of great interest to researchers. These animal objects, however, were no longer displayed according to rudimentary science based in mythology. Taxonomy had become a popular means of understanding the natural world and scientists and natural historians utilized the method. Preserved animal remains were now identified and labeled through strict naming protocols and ordered through comparative analysis.

The once private assemblages of hunting trophies, which evolved into semi-public primitive scientific attempts to understand the natural world, were initially intended to serve as signifiers of the individual intellectual proclivity of their male owners. In the realm of the natural history museum, however, these once living creatures became scientific specimens that were widely marketed to and accepted by a curious public. Such material objects imbued hunting and taxidermy with a new lofty goal—the act of collecting and preserving for the education of the masses.

Singer’s installation, *My Dearest, Dearest Creature* (2006, figure 20), represents the artist’s interest in the early museum practices of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and situates her in the landscape of contemporary artists using the aesthetics of the museum to critique its as an institution. Singer’s primary concern with *My Dearest, Dearest Creature* is the role of hunting in fueling the growth of the natural history museum. In Singer’s words, “The diorama works came out of my concern for the recent rise in the popularity in taxidermy. The last period when taxidermy was fashionable was the Victorian age. It wasn’t a good time to be an animal.” The installation approaches this early museum system through the referencing of period display methods, the use of
animal specimens popular at the time, and the presentation of poorly fabricated mounts that recall early taxidermy methods. Many of the works are encased in glass domes that resemble scientific bell jars or terrariaums, fixtures commonly seen in Victorian museums to protect specimens of plants or small animals from damage by the elements or insects. There is also the use of the standard museum pedestal, a feature that has carried over into the contemporary museum. Singer has filled the environment with taxidermy animals that are disheveled or poorly preserved but are also bejeweled with rhinestones or encased in food-like materials. These broken creatures have been recycled and manipulated by the artist to exhibit their identities and their deaths, which were erased as required by their role as educational devices through the taxidermy process.

*The Hunt, the Mount, and the Museum*

The animal specimens that filled the early institutions came from two sources: the donation of unwanted relics or through the active hunting of creatures intended to serve specifically as specimens. Hunting and the study of natural history held a symbiotic relationship during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hunters and naturalists both sought out an interaction with nature in order to take control over it. To possess a vast knowledge in natural history was to have authority over nature and it is this position of power over wild things that drew hunters to the study and naturalists to the sport. William Bullock (1773-1849), proprietor of the London Museum, addressed hunters in his *Brief Instructions* from 1812 by stating, “Gentlemen having collections of foreign skins may have them put up in the best possible manner at the Museum, where Natural Curiosities of every description are purchased or exchanged for others.”
The role of the hunter and the art of taxidermy in relation to the collecting needs of the early museums were captured in a number of writings from the period. Such published materials were particularly crucial during the eighteenth century as the advent of photography was still years off and taxidermy was the only method by which the multitude of exotic animals flooding into Europe could be preserved. These texts reveal not only the evolution in early preservative processes, but also the emotional responses of the practitioners themselves. In a 1771 edition of *Philosophical Transactions*, Tesser Samuel Kuckahn (d. 1776) advised hunters to employ gunshot of the most minimal of gauges to ensure limited damage to the animal’s body. In the same publication Réne Antoine Ferchault de Réaumur (1683-1757) counseled hunters and naturalists to arrange the feathers of dead fowl by positioning them, “into their natural Order,” so as to make them appear alive. A number of preservative techniques were also published. The most popular procedure involved the stuffing of the animal’s gutted cavity with a variety of materials including cotton, oakum (hemp infused with tar), hay, and, straw.

A unique addition to this body of literature is the materials that provide details of the working methods and personal interests of the men who undertook the hunting and preserving of animal trophies. Prominent amongst such hunter/naturalists was James Audubon (1785-1851) whose works represent a mastery of the taxidermy process, drawing, painting, hunting, and a vast knowledge of natural world. It is worth noting that like so many other naturalists, Audubon simultaneously killed the same things he admired while idealizing his role in both his writing and his art. As a collector and hunter he proclaimed himself, “the American woodsman,” and backed up this romanticized vision of himself in the work *The Golden Eagle* (1833; figure 21). Audubon is depicted,
“as a predator who, like the eagle who must kill to survive, commits violence for the
‘sustenance’ of science and art.”

My Dearest, Dearest Creature and the Natural History Museum

My Dearest, Dearest Creature is comprised of a number of individual works that
draw from and confront the eighteenth- and nineteenth- century museum display
aesthetic. Dripsy Dropsy (2006; figure 22) features a small rabbit’s head that is missing
the left side of its face including its ear. The void has been filled with faux diamonds and
red beadwork that resembles large drops of blood. I Scream, U Scream, We All Scream
(2006; figure 23) is a second piece that once again utilizes a bell jar to cover and protect a
song bird, suspended upside down and drowning in a coat of a garish pink material. The
title and the texture of the material imply melting ice cream. Finally, Love Bird (2006;
figure 24) is a wrenching assemblage composed of a taxidermy creature that appears to
be an infant fawn that is being nuzzled, seemingly comforted, by a taxidermy love bird.
This work is placed on a small pedestal, deviating from the use of bell jars as seen
elsewhere in the installation.

In considering Singer’s installation and the individual works within it in relation
to eighteenth- and nineteenth- century museum practices, it is worthwhile to consider the
standard model from the period. The most illustrious example that represented the ideals
of the study of natural history, the display of animal specimens, and the usefulness of
hunting in these pursuits was Charles Willson Peale’s Philadelphia Museum, founded in
1786. Peale was the quintessential Enlightenment man whose interests included portrait
painting, politics, and natural science. His institution was ground breaking for its time

and representative of the Victorian desire to control and understand nature by bringing
order to it. To achieve this, Peale implemented a rigid display method based in
Linnaean taxonomy and on the *scala naturae*, or Great Chain of Being, that sought to
order the natural world and placed man in a position of supremacy over other creatures.

Peale’s painting, *The Artist in His Museum* (1822, figure 25), provides a dynamic
visual record of not only the common display methods of the early museum, but also
hints at the complexity and multi-faceted skills of a collector of Peale’s caliber. The work
presents Peale lifting a curtain, a symbolic veil of knowledge, to expose to the viewer the
wonders of the natural world. The cases that line the walls, filled with taxidermied
animals, are organized according to Peale’s understanding of the Linnaean taxonomy.
The artist also took care to demonstrate his many skills as a hunter, painter, and
taxidermist through the inclusion of a dead turkey slumped over a box of taxidermist’s
tools and the painter’s palette laden with pigments. The focal point of the museum, the
mastodon skeleton, can be seen just behind Peale. Its exhumation and reconstruction
served as Peale’s greatest triumph.

Peale summed up his passion for the study of nature on the first page of his
journal by writing, “I love the study of Nature because it teacheth benevolence.” There
is much irony to be found in this statement when the means by which the animal
specimens that populated the Philadelphia Museum’s exhibition halls are considered.
Peale gathered animal trophies for his museum both through his own hunting activities
and by soliciting the bounty of other hunters. The artist’s diaries indicate that his many
trips to Maryland, Delaware, and New Jersey were focused hunting excursions during
which he shot and preserved on location many birds and small mammals. The act of
hunting and the preservation of specimens also became a family affair for Peale as he often employed the skills of his sons Titian and Raphaelle. These personal hunting trips were not Peale’s singular means of acquisition. He also implored local hunters and collectors to relinquish their skins and mounts for the cause of public education. In an advertisement from 1787, Peale appealed to the masculine egos of his fellow Philadelphians, “Mr. Peale’s respectful compliments to the gentlemen sportsmen of Philadelphia, and [he] will be obliged to them for such birds and Beasts as are not yet preserved in Mr. Peale’s Museum.”

Taxonomy was vital to the field of natural history and represented a means by which man could exert power over the natural world by bringing order to it. The arrangement of the creatures seen in The Artist in His Museum is based upon a hybrid protocol informed both by Linnaean classification and the scala naturae. These systems served as a means of classification that brought order to the natural world while also placing men in the highest position. Linnaean principals indicated harmony, order, and regularity in nature that simultaneously exalted men for their abilities to interpret these qualities. The Great Chain of Being, according to Arthur O. Lovejoy’s interpretation, exhibited the perfection of nature due to its diversity and abundance. These display methods can be seen in Peale’s painting with the vertical order of the birds rising from floor to ceiling and being topped off with the most advanced species of all, men, as represented in Peale’s paintings of influential Americans. Another example of the artist’s innovative ideas, Peale had at one time considered showcasing the embalmed corpses of important men, but due to technical difficulties was forced to substitute paintings instead.
**Singer and Peale**

Singer’s installation, *My Dearest, Dearest Creature*, looks to early display methods and collecting habits adopted by intellectual hunters such as Peale and illustrated in the painting, *The Artist in His Museum*. Instead of chaotic organization based on mythology and primitive knowledge as seen in the work of the cabinet collectors, museums like Peale’s were employing new ideas such as Linnaean taxonomy, which championed a system of order based on naming and comparative physiology. The artist appropriates many of these visual techniques in order to refute the ideals that they represent. Instead of presenting a natural world that is tightly organized and free of symptoms of human violation, Singer’s methods call attention to the animal identity and its existence outside of these prescribed models of display. Her creatures are not relegated to the role of anonymous trophy looked upon because of intellectual curiosity, but rather present narratives of death and dismemberment in the service of humankind.

Singer’s animals are lined up singularly, side by side, in a horizontal row at equal distances apart. This purposeful ordering resembles the taxonomical methods utilized to organize the specimens seen in Peale’s painting of his museum that are neatly stacked vertically, each in its prescribed location. A major focus of Peale’s philosophy on natural history was that nature was both “hierarchical and harmonious” and he demonstrated this belief through this form of visually regimented display. While at first glance Singer’s animals reflect a visual order, upon further inspection the details of the works reveal a realm of damaged bodies, chaos, and violence. Within each dome animals are dismembered and fashioned back together with traditionally feminine materials of beads, jewels, and flowers. Others seem to be suffocated or encased in brightly colored opaque
liquids that resemble food. Singer’s representation is simultaneously ordered and horrific, presenting an alternative to the clean and controlled environment prized by collectors and showmen such as Peale. The animals in My Dearest, Dearest Creature announce the broken nature of their bodies and disrupt the narrative of peace and harmony in the animal and human realm as proclaimed by The Great Chain of Being.

Singer’s choice of species gestures to the collecting habits of the eighteenth and nineteenth century museums. As Rachel Poliquin states, “The nineteenth-century infatuation with natural history might have been destructive, but it wasn’t a nebulous, abstract, or careless fancy. Victorians knew their nature and doted on specific species, whether dead or alive.” Peale was no different and sought out particular animals, amassing a collection of specimens that was impressive in its diversity and size. Aside from the preserved specimens, Peale’s museum was also known for keeping a large menagerie of living animals. Peale’s son, Rubens, advanced the collection of live specimens that included bears, owls, snakes, wolves, a tiger, and a rhinoceros. While this level of showmanship was not the elder Peale’s main interest, he was nonetheless also an advocate for animals as long as their purpose was for the benefit of humankind.

Birds were a species that were of particular interest to museum collectors. Their popularity likely stemmed from their abundance in older collections as well as the ease by which the small creatures could be preserved. Peale assembled an extensive variety of birds for his museum. Speaking of his collection in 1805, “…there are in this collection, perhaps all the birds belonging to the Middle, many of which likewise belong to the Northern and Southern States, and a considerable number of South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, New Holland, and the recently discovered islands of the South Seas. The
number exceeds 760 without the admission of any duplicates, contained in 40 cases." In *The Artist in His Museum* there are an abundance of birds filling the numerous cabinets that line the walls of Peale’s museum testifying to their importance within the collection.

Singer acknowledges this influence through her inclusion of a variety of birds in *My Dearest, Dearest Creature*. In *I Scream, U Scream, We All Scream* a yellow songbird is shoved upside down into a mass of garish pink liquid that resembles melting ice cream. This inclusion of a material suggesting food, like the artist’s use of traditionally feminine materials, alludes to her approach as being one that considers the artist’s gender as a unique factor in the depiction of animal suffering. The presence of food gestures towards the stereotypical ideal of women as nurturers whose role in part is to provide sustenance. Singer’s application of the pink material, however, manipulates this underlying meaning. It highlights the animal’s death as the substance completely envelops the bird’s head, presumably suffocating the creature instead sustaining it. The bird’s feathers are disheveled, a characteristic that runs counter to the taxidermist method of carefully arranging the animal’s plumage in order to present an ideal specimen. The bird is also claustrophobically confined to the bell jar, the tips of its tail feathers smashed against the top of the glass structure. Singer’s display exposes the contrived nature of taxidermy and early museum display methods by presenting a thoroughly contradictory approach to the presentation of a bird specimen.

Singer also includes a bird in the piece, *Love Bird*. While the central subject is the poorly preserved albino fawn, perched upon its back is a large green bird. The bird, with its vibrant green plumage presents a strong contrast to the stark white of the fawn’s fur.
The artist also manipulates the visual impression of the creatures through the clever use of size. The young deer is very tiny and this quality is greatly accentuated by its size in comparison with the green bird that, from tail feathers to head, is almost as large. Birds, as generally perceived by humans and in comparison to other animals, are small and Singer manipulates this characteristic to further accentuate the fragility of the fawn.

The green bird in *Love Bird* also evokes the idea that the creature is sentient in its ability to display compassion towards another creature. Nuzzling against the head of the fawn, the bird seems to be providing comfort to the small animal. Singer’s arrangement of the animals in this manner imbues them with emotion and identity, characteristics that collectors disregarded and taxidermists attempted to erase. Peale’s museum exemplified these goals. As Edward Schwarzschild explains “The spectacle of death that Peale sought to create would ideally transform the fact of physical vulnerability into a didactic, carefully organized, self-serving and self-saving freak show.”

Singer’s work makes every attempt to convey the complete opposite: broken sentient creatures meant to confront their viewer and evoke questions, if not outright guilt, over their demise.

Singer chooses animals that would have been popular with collectors; however, she also refutes early collecting programs by actively displaying discarded animal trophies that were constructed from animals that would have been of no intellectual or utilitarian value and of little interest to either the scholar or the hunter. The artist explains “For these works I deliberately turned away from the magnificent trophy animals we have deemed worthy of respect and turned my attention to the animals normally considered unworthy; rats, sparrows and rabbits, animals we choose not to have in our homes; animals that collectors of taxidermy are not pursuing.” The trophies that appear
in *My Dearest, Dearest Creature* are representative of these unwanted species. The rabbit of *Dripsy Dropsy*, with its damaged head, is a common nuisance known for the destruction of crops and prolific breeding. The emaciated and disturbingly fragile fawn of *Love Bird* is a grotesque aberration and exhibits none of the majesty of God’s creation that museums would have desired to place before their public or would have fit into the ideals of The Great Chain of Being. These broken animal bodies are all trophies that would have been ignored by the collector or dispatched as either vermin or insignificant as intellectual specimens.

In *My Dearest, Dearest Creature* Singer’s approach to taxidermy through the use of the discarded or damaged mount negates the primary goals of taxidermy within the context of the museum. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, advancements in taxidermy allowed museums to fulfill their missions of presenting nature for the masses by facilitating the preservation of specimens. The method served to arrest life, sanitize death, and present an authorless and essentially anonymous creature intended to serve as a representative of an entire species. Donna Harraway writes, “taxidermy was about the single story, about nature’s unity, the unblemished type specimen…The power of this stance is in its magical effects: what is so painfully constructed appears effortlessly, spontaneously found, discovered, simply there if one will only look…This art repays labor with transcendence.”¹¹⁷ The power of the taxidermy was not lost on Peale and he was an innovator in the field. He so prided himself on his abilities that in his painting, *The Artist in His Museum*, he includes amongst the visual records of his achievements a set of taxidermy tools. The animals that comprise *My Dearest, Dearest Creature* are not on display in order to provide calculated information on animal behavior, habitats, or
how these elements reflect upon humanity in order to elevate it. Instead they evoke visceral responses to the desecration of living creatures and to cause the viewer to question the unnecessary nature of their deaths.

The technical goal of taxidermy is to conceal death through artistic skill—stitching up bullet holes and positioning dead creatures in a variety of fabricated natural poses in order to create life-like simulations of living beings. *Dropsy Dropsy*, the head of a small brown rabbit positioned within a bell jar, is simultaneously endearing and horrific. The level of damage exhibited in the mount is unacceptable according to the tenet of hunting for mounts that requires as little damage as possible be done to the body. The animal is missing the left side of its head including its ear. This disruption in the natural balance of the structure of the creature’s face is further enhanced by the single erect ear that stands up from its head. Singer has embellished the void with red beads in a variety of sizes that resemble drops of blood alluding to the corporeal nature of the animal—the bloody side of the situation that taxidermy attempts to hide. The opposite side of the rabbit’s face is covered in white diamonds. The presence of these valuable, although fake stones imbues the creature with a preciousness despite the unfortunate condition of its other half.

*Contemporary Artists and the Manipulation of the Museum Aesthetic*

The manipulation of the museum apparatus as a part of art-making practice has thrived in contemporary art since the mid-twentieth century. Evolving alongside and merging with these interests has also been the role of the animal body within the institution. Singer’s work is not unique in the use of commonly held and sometimes
antiquated display methods lifted from the visual vernacular of the natural history museum to explore the representation of the animal body.

Mark Dion (1961-), a contemporary of Singer, is a member of the current generation of artists who have manipulated museum aesthetics in order to question the museum’s role in society. In particular, Dion is concerned with the power of the museum apparatus as a means for constructing universal understandings of nature and the role hunting has played in such endeavors. Dion’s interest in hunting lies in what he sees as its, “fundamental contradiction: the hunter’s sensitivity to, and profound knowledge of nature are, in the final analysis, manifested in the killing of animals.” The artist’s interest in the collecting of specimens has also been fed by his personal collecting habits, which include private assemblages of insects and curiosities, numerous exploratory trips to the tropics, and frequent visits to natural history museums worldwide.

Dion’s installation, *The Octagon Room* (2008; figure 26), is a large-scale representation of an interior that acts simultaneously as a nineteenth-century representation of a gentleman naturalist’s study and a twenty-first century museum space. The eight-sided room, which is a reference to the popularity of such architecture during the nineteenth century, is dark and forboding. The walls are adorned with a variety of objects that point to the importance of the hunter and naturalist and the relationship between animals and humans during the period. Hanging on the wall, a multitude of frames are filled with images of prominent men of science and discovery such as Linnaeus and Darwin. To their right are four mounted deer heads, coated in tar and oil. The animals create black vacant outlines, meager representations of living creatures. They seem to disappear into the flotsam of the room, yet their presence alongside the
famous men gestures towards the exploitation of the animal kingdom in the name of science.

Dion sets up The Octagon Room, however, to have a dual purpose. On one hand it is a representation of a nineteenth-century interior, complete with William Morris style wall coverings. On the other, it becomes a museum open to a modern viewer and a window into a violent past. The installation illustrates the artist’s respect for the preservation of historical museums as ‘time capsules’ that should remain unadulterated by modern views and stand as testaments to past concerns and biases. Upon the top shelf of the cabinet is a neat row of specimen jars filled with objects from Dion’s own collection. The vessels are clearly labeled and precisely aligned, display features that recall past museum practices. The placement of the opulent Victorian ottoman in the center of the room suggests the modern practice of placing benches in museums and galleries as a means of suggesting further contemplation. Dion is beckoning his viewer to sit and contemplate, with a modern understanding of the intentions of the museum space, while being immersed in a fabricated historical environment.

Dion, like Singer, utilizes museum display in order to confront the relationships between humans, animals, and the public. However, Dion’s installation is concerned more with human representation rather than animal. The vast quantity of photographs of men, the presence of a small library, and a desk with maps and tools, all allude more to human identity than animal. Singer’s work does not concern itself with human representations other than to expose the violence that man has wrought upon the natural world. Human presence in her work is always lurking invisibly in the periphery and only manifests itself in the presence of bullet holes and damaged bodies.
While the focus of The Octagon Room is primarily with the human side of the relationship between men and the natural world, Singer’s looks upon man from the perspective of the animal. The French artist, Annette Messager, presents yet another contemporary approach to the display of the animal body that focuses primarily on sentimentality and private narratives. The artist’s work is a female precedent for the appropriation of museum display techniques to present the animal body, both taxidermied and fabricated from organic materials. Messager’s pivotal work, Les Pensionnaires (The Boarders 1971-72), encompasses a series of pieces involving the anthropomorphizing of taxidermy and hand-crafted sparrows and their display within cabinets and glass vitrines. Through knitting, photography, text, and display the artist creates personalized narratives that evoke feminine notions of childhood and maternal care. These methods portray the birds as creatures who must be tended as a mother would a child. Messager’s birds, macabre and endearing, are dolls through which the artist pantomimes human activities. These exploits are then documented and preserved in notebooks, an activity which resembles the traditional motherly constructions of albums and scrapbooks of children. The Boarders reside in the realm of human concerns where Messager uses them to tell a story. Singer’s animals exist, although facilitated by the artist, to tell a story of their own.

Messager’s series of works was born from a request by the Galerie Germain to create a piece that employed wool for an exhibition sponsored by Woolmark. The body of work encompassed by Les Pensionnaires is the product of the artist’s collecting habits—the accumulation of the bodies of sparrows, some stuffed and some constructed from feathers that the artist later dressed in tiny knitted sweaters. This process was a continuation of her customary working methods that Catherine Grenier describes as,
“appropriating things and activities that have been devalued, and investing them with supreme value; inventorying the most anodyne private practices and catapulting them into the public sphere; and translating childhood games into the adult world.”

The work, *Le Repos des Pensionnaires* (The Boarders at Rest 1971-72; figure 27), features the sparrows in a variety of poses, dressed and organized in a glass vitrine. Messager’s interest in bestowing value upon that which has been deemed unworthy of esteem is exhibited in both her use of feminine craft, ordering, and museum inspired display. The birds, animals considered common nuisances, are imbued with importance as their individualized garments are created through the time honored feminine practice of knitting. Messager’s act of clothing the animals, nurturing them in a relationship similar to that between mother and child, anthropomorphizes the sparrows and imbues them with a sentience and vulnerability. The placement within the glass vitrine further enhances their importance. Our common understanding of objects in museums is that of precious relics, carefully protected, ordered, and preserved. The sparrows seem to be purposefully organized in neat and ordered rows below the protective glass. The sterile white surface upon which they rest also alludes to the necessary cleanliness of both a child’s nursery and contemporary museum preservation practices.

*Le Repos des Pensionnaires* is accompanied by an abundance of documentation accumulated in school notebooks that chronicle in first person narrative the constructed childlike lives of the birds. Through text, photographs, and drawings, these narratives record the daily activities of childhood such as walking, napping, and punishment. The photograph, *La Punition des Pensionnaires* (The Boarders’ Punishment, 1971; figure 28) features the birds lying awkwardly upside down tied to small metal beams. *La*

Promenade des Pensionnaires (The Boarders’ Walk, 1972; figure 29), a second photograph from the collection, presents the birds perched upon toy cars, the ungainly nature of the poses revealing their preservation. This series of documentation is sentimental in its depiction of idealized childhood activities and loaded with the stereotypical concerns of motherhood that call for the tending of children. These materials also recall the notes and drawings created by naturalists and collectors that guided early taxonomy and that later informed the public understanding of natural history.

Messager’s work demonstrates an avid appropriation of both museum display methods and the aesthetics of taxonomy that resonates in Singer’s *My Dearest, Dearest Creature*. Both artists create works that are seemingly analogous in their desire to present narratives that imbue lifeless animals with a sense of individuality through museum display methods such as the use of vitrines, bell jars, and precise ordering. However, despite these influences Messager’s and Singer’s works revolve around different issues. *Les Pensionnaires* and *My Dearest, Dearest Creature* are both concerned with creating narratives; however, while Singer’s is wrapped in violence and the ruination of nature, Messager seeks private tales that revolve around domesticity and feminine roles regarding home and children. It is possible to attribute these differing approaches to generational differences: Messager’s work came to fruition at the height of early feminist art when women artists were confronting gender roles and the identity of women outside the home. The status of women, as having a valuable position within society that did not relegate them strictly to the realm of caregivers, was being firmly cemented. This revolutionary turn in social constructs no doubt influenced much of the female art made
during the period. Singer’s work, on the other hand, has come into being in a time when such concerns, the insular confines of domesticity, while still a major subject to female artists, no longer dominate the landscape of female art making.

Messager’s concern with play-acting at feminine narratives through personal collecting habits and working methods demonstrates an approach to the animal body that negates its identity in order for it to serve human interests and needs. The birds become dolls that are dressed and attended to, and the notebooks serve as approximations of family albums that document the birds’ lives. Through the birds the artist is purposefully “playing at life.”¹²⁵ Such anthropomorphizing bestows upon the sparrows a voice; however, it is not one that is representative of their individual makeup but instead seeks to divorce them from nature.

While the artist has remained staunchly against the attachment of her biography to the work it is impossible to refute the stereotypical influences of gender upon the animals and the themes they explore.¹²⁶ It is not a great leap to draw comparisons between a caged bird as a metaphor for the female condition in society throughout history, even up until the late twentieth century. In the minds of men, women have resided alongside animals, as being inferior in intelligence, feeling, or value.¹²⁷ Messager’s inclusion of feminine crafts and sentimental role-playing further propels these comparisons.

Singer has never stated a personal interest in gender nor has her work been received in the context of such concerns. It is, however, difficult to provide a fully developed critical analysis of her work without considering the connotations of her method. My Dearest, Dearest Creature, utilizes materials of feminine craft in much the same way as Messager’s. However, the faux diamonds, beads, and food-like substances
that encase Singer’s animals serve a much different purpose. The Boarders are swathed in tiny sweaters meant to bring a cozy sense of comfort. Singer’s embellishments, however, are not intended to facilitate domestic sentimentality. These accoutrements provoke a visual juxtaposition between beauty and death and highlight the animal’s violent ends. This reading of Singer’s approach, while not the intention of the artist, is in direct opposition to Messager’s work that does not acknowledge the means by which the sparrows came to be dead.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries represent a pivotal point in the evolution of the study of natural history as the once antiquated display methods of the past evolved through advanced methodologies such as Linnaean taxonomy and the scala naturae. The private collections of animal specimens, belonging to the cabinets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, provided the foundation for these new institutions. The preserved creatures were crucial to the early collections, such as the one amassed by Peale for his Philadelphia Museum. These once living creatures, made into intellectual trophies were hunted, collected, and displayed in the name of scientific inquiry. The need for such specimens fueled numerous hunting expeditions and led to the exaltation of the hunter naturalist.¹²⁸

Singer’s installation, *My Dearest, Dearest Creature*, appropriates many of the display methods seen in repositories such as Peale’s. This use of the aesthetic of museum display as a means of exploring human and animal relations has found ground among contemporary artists. Dion’s *The Octagon Room*, a dual representation of a gentleman hunter’s study and a museum environment, focuses primarily on the human presence in the collecting of animal specimens. Messager’s series of works, *Les Pensionnaires*, is
concerned with the imposition of contrived narratives upon taxidermied and fabricated sparrows.

Singer’s installation, *My Dearest, Dearest Creature*, diverges greatly from both those of Dion and Messager. The focus of the artist’s work is primarily on the animals that reside in the environments that she fabricates. Singer’s animals tell a story of their death and the ruination of nature to fulfill the needs of humans. Through her working method the bullet wounds in the creature’s fur are exposed and embellished, highlighting the violence of the hunt and the artifice imposed by the taxidermy method. The mounts are intended to tell their own unique stories instead of those opposed upon them by human intentions as in the case of *Les Pensionnaires*. Singer’s use of museum display methods in conjunction with the damaged animals accentuates the damage done to nature in the name of scientific inquiry. Unlike Dion’s installation, which focuses on the history of human involvement with nature in the pursuit of learning, Singer’s installation presents the animal perspective. The artist’s concern with the animal identity and history as opposed to one inflicted upon it by human intervention or disregarded in favor of that of man is what sets her work apart from that of her contemporaries.
CONCLUSION

Taxidermy as a valid material and working method is undergoing a surge in popularity within contemporary art. The motivations of these artists who use taxidermy, however, have largely remained true to Baker’s assertion that the preserved animal body is an object to think with but not about. Animal remains—stretched, stuffed, decorated, or dismembered and reassembled—have been relegated to acting as metaphors for a variety of human-centric concerns. The taxidermy creatures in Singer’s installations are by all initial appearances beautiful, ornate, and sentimental—qualities found in much of the art created with the medium. What sets her work apart, however, is that her approach extends beyond simple aesthetic qualities, to uniquely serve Singer’s goal of re-instating the animal voice by illustrating narratives of their death. In the artist’s words:

Sometimes a soft voice finds more listeners. The element of beauty certainly increases the audience for the work and I’ve been careful to make sure the animals aren’t insipid. Wishy washy art that lacks substance is currently endemic; I see it as escapism from the harsh realities of our time. It’s cowardly.

Singer’s process of ‘re-taxidermy,’ the exposing of the once hidden bullet holes and suture marks left behind by the hunt and the preservative method, reveal the violent demise of the creatures. However, the artist’s use of traditionally feminine craft practices to embellish the discarded and often malformed mounts serves to soften the visual blow—the recognition of ruined natural beauty. The effect, however, is momentary as the sequins, flowers, and jewels coupled with the grievous wounds serve to turn the experience back upon the viewer through a disturbing juxtaposition of decoration and death. The animals in these installations are not present for human enjoyment, which was
their original purpose as trophies, but instead call attention to the harm done to them by their collectors. The harsh reality Singer portrays is of a world in which humans, men particularly, have willingly abused animals by hunting, killing, and displaying their dead bodies to facilitate their ego driven needs.

I have argued that Singer’s installations represent a unique direction in the field of contemporary art that utilizes taxidermy as it takes into account the identity, history, and value of the once living creatures. The artist accomplishes this by utilizing stereotypically feminine materials and practices alongside the male dominated activities of hunting, taxidermy, and displaying animal bodies. The artist uses flowers, jewels, and sequins to adorn the creatures wounds and sewing to expose their sutures, artifacts of the hunt and taxidermy method, to draw attention to the animal’s death while also acknowledging their history as once living creatures. Singer’s display methods, drawn from historical precedents, also allude to the unnecessary violence of the activity. The artist’s use of these materials and display methods draw comparisons between the approaches of female, as opposed to male, visual artists and natural historians towards the animal body.

By setting Singer’s treatment of the animal trophy within the historical contexts of nineteenth-century hunt imagery, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century wunderkammern, and the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century institutional museum’s program of ordering as governed by early taxonomy, this thesis has demonstrated the important role gender and the social constructs which define it play in the human approach to the animal body. These comparisons demonstrate a level of consistency through history by which the visual treatment of the animal as a sentient and unique creature has either been erased by the male hunter/collector or acknowledged and
elaborated upon by the female artist or naturalist. My analysis of Singer’s installations exposes this lineage while also fitting the artist’s work within its continuum.
NOTES


2 Ibid., 11, 13.


6 Steven Baker defines the term “botched taxidermy” in relation to human states by saying, “The look of the postmodern animal…seems more likely to be that of a fractured awkward, ‘wrong’ or wronged thing, which it is hard not to read as a means of addressing what it is to be human now…The term ‘botched taxidermy’ might be suggested—though it should not always be taken literally—to characterize instances of recent art practice where things again appear to have gone wrong with the animal, as it were, but where it still holds together.” The Postmodern Animal (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2000), 54.

7 Ibid., 75.

8 Eric Frank positions The Misfits as emblematic of concerns amongst contemporary artists with scientific advances that merge nature and new technologies. He describes the artistic response as, “a complex, postmodern ambiguity: dismay, even anger, at our disregard for our earthly home, its environment, and its animal populations, delight at the potential for science to address some of these issues, and a fascination—sometimes fearful, sometimes celebratory—with technology,” “Thomas Grünfeld: The Misfits,” Antennae 7 (2008): 22.


10 Ibid., 48.


12 Singer, in the Antennae interview with Aloi states, “In New Zealand we lived rurally, the killing of animals, mostly by hunters, was a weekly occurrence. Witnessing animals being routinely hunted, killed and butchered made me determined to challenge a culture in which hunting is readily acceptable” (12).


14 For more information on the development of hunting culture in Europe with regard to class see Matt Cartmill, “Hunting and Humanity in Western Thought,” Social Research 62, no. 3 (1995): 177, and


16 Ibid.

17 “The scala naturae, usually translated as The Great Chain of Being, was the predominate metaphor for the order of nature in the eighteenth century. The scala naturae is indicated in the painting by Peale made of his museum in 1822; portraits of famous men hang above the mounted birds, at the top of the hierarchy,” Carla Yanni, *Nature’s Museums: Victorian Science and the Architecture of Display* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 28.

18 Cartmill, 10.


22 Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald describe the importance of the public display of animal trophies, “acquiring trophies without public recognition demean the original show of prowess, and manhood itself is constantly in danger of being voided if not displayed or when trophies are out-displayed.” “Reading the Trophy: Exploring the Display of Dead Animals in Hunting Magazines,” *Visual Studies* 18, no. 2 (2003): 115.

23 Donald, “Pangs Watched”, 52.

24 Donald, *Picturing Animals in Britain*, 238.

25 Ibid., 300.


29 Donald, “Pangs Watched,” 54-55.

30 Newall, 86.

31 Cartmill, 777.


35 Donald, “Pangs Watched,” 53.


37 Donald, Picturing Animals in Britain, 127, 300.


39 Donald, Picturing Animals in Britain, 300.

40 Donald discusses the effect of Landseer’s mental state upon his works by stating, “Landseer’s ability to conjure up such tortured images derived in part from his own mental struggles: he became steadily more fatalistic, more pessimistic, and more ambivalent about man’s relationship to the nature order.” “Pangs Watched,” 59.

41 Donald, “Pangs Watched,” 60.


43 Yanni, 10.


45 Ryan, 206.

46 Brower, 15-16.

47 George Shiras, Hunting Wild Life With Camera and Flashlight Vol. I (Washington, D.C: The National Geographic Society, 1898), 64.


49 Ryan, 206.


51 Steven Baker, Something’s Gone Wrong Again: Art, Animals, Ethics and Botched Form (Dunedin: The Blue Oyster Gallery, 2003), 9.

52 Aloi, “Angela Singer,” 11.

53 Asma, 36.

54 In 1700, the Netherlands had a population of approximately two million people and Amsterdam was a major center in the region. The limited number of documented cabinets within such a large population testifies to the exclusivity of the practice. Massimo Livi Bacci, The Population of Europe (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Limited, 1999) 8, and Philipp Blom, To Have and To Hold: An Intimate History of Collectors and Collecting (New York: Peter Mayer Publishers, Inc., 2002), 24.

56 Susan Stewart remarks upon the impression of totality that is crucial to the success of a collection by stating, “Any collection promises totality. The appearance of that totality is made possible by the face-to-face experience of display, the all-at-onceness under which the collection might be apprehended by an observer,” “Death and Life, in that Order, in the Works of Charles Willson Peale,” in *Visual Display: Culture Beyond Appearances*, eds. Lynne Cooke and Peter Wollen (New York: The New York University Press, 1995), 31.

57 Singer explained her curatorial motivation for the 2003 exhibition, *Animality*, as being focused on an exploration of, “connections between our understandings of animals and the cultural conditions in which these understandings have been formed,” quoted in Aloi, “Angela Singer,” 13.


60 Yanni, 16.

61 MacGregor, 11.

62 Philipp Blom describes the multitude of influences that shaped the cabinet collectors’ interpretations of the natural world and affected the display methods they chose. *To Have and To Hold: An Intimate History of Collectors and Collecting* (New York: Peter Mayer Publishers, Inc. 2002), 37.

63 Ibid., 39.

64 MacGregor, 44.

65 Ibid.

66 Blom, 13.

67 Ibid.,14.

68 MacGregor, 32.

69 During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the terms *wunderkammer* (cabinets of natural wonders) and *kunstkammer* (collections of works of art) were both used to describe collections of natural and manmade objects. While the translations differ the collections lacked clear distinction. For the purpose of this analysis what is important is the display of animal bodies in both by male collectors. Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor, *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 3.

70 Ibid., 164, 145, 143.


72 Ibid.

73 Ibid., 27.

75 Ibid., 142.

76 Ibid., 143.


78 Ibid., 147.

79 Ibid., 76.

80 Ibid., 149.


83 Ibid., 145.


85 Aloi, “Angela Singer.” 11.


87 Stewart, 147.

88 Herman, 7.

89 Yanni, 30.


91 Herman, 8.

92 MacGregor, 267.


95 Ibid.

96 Ibid., 189.


Yanni, 28.

Burns, 32.

Writing of the expedition Peale states, “…went ashore and shot a number of small birds,” and, “a considerable number of Mother Carry’s chickens came round the Vessell and we shot five of them, we might have taken many more of them but this number was sufficient for my purpose.” Peale, quoted in Brigham, 187.

For more information on Titian and Raphaellie Peale’s involvement in the hunting and collecting of specimens for the Philadelphia Museum see Brigham, 188.

Ibid.

Yanni, 14.

Brigham, 197.


Brigham, 198.

Hart and Ward, 394.

Brigham, 183.


In one catalogue alone were listed, “quadrupeds 190; birds 1240 (not including duplicates); tortoises 40; lizards 112; snakes 148; fish 121.” “Charles W. and Titian R. Peale and the Ornithological Section of the Old Philadelphia Museum,” *The Wilson Bulletin* 44, no. 1 (March 1932): 30.


For further explanation of Peale’s interests in particular species that he felt could best serve man see Brigham, 200.

Burns, 24.

Schwarzschild, 84.


Schwarzschild, 84.


122 Corrin, Kwon, and Bryson, 17.


124 Ibid., 49.

125 Ibid., 51.

126 Ibid., 49.

127 Josephine Donovan and Carol J. Adams describe the hierarchy of gender and species in society by stating, “A hierarchy in which men have power over women and humans have power over animals, is actually more appropriately understood as a hierarchy in which men have power over women, (feminized) men, and (feminized) animals,” “Introduction” in *The Feminist Care Tradition In Animal Ethics*, eds. Josephine Donovan and Carol J. Adams (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 10.

128 Herman, 81.

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