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NANOQ: IN CONVERSATION

*We interviewed **Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir** and **Mark Wilson** to discuss ‘nanoq: flat out and bluesome’, relationships between animals and humans, taxidermy, and Damien Hirst.*

*Interview by **Giovanni Aloï***

‘Nanoq: flat out and bluesome’ is the story of polar bears, the largest land predators on earth, and their journey from the arctic wilderness to the museums and stately homes of the UK. Why the polar bear?

When we started the project in 2001 it came on the back of another project in which Bryndís had been working with the relationship between identity and place. It involved photographing polar bears belonging to the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow. At the time of photographing these specimens, they were in storage together with much of the museum’s natural history collection, in the basement of the Transport Museum, just across the road from Kelvingrove. It was an enormous warehouse space full of exotic animals from places all over the world but at that time the zoology display at the museum featured indigenous animals only. There was no order to the specimens, just an enormous number of stuffed animals, most of which one had never encountered as living creatures. The polar bears were located next to a giraffe and a rhinoceros. There was something incredibly sad and melancholic about the spectacle. We began talking about the lost histories of these animals that had been brought to this country on the back of colonial expeditions fuelled with national pride and a thirst for knowledge. Now their function seemed unclear and more, it seemed there was a sense that perhaps they should quietly disappear.

The impulse to find them, the others – and record their existence here and now was therefore political and at the same time we determined to find out more of the stories behind each individual specimen – each animal.

The project documents the histories of each bear, the legacies of the hunters who shot them and the skills and expertise of the taxidermists who stuffed them. What did you set out to capture with this project and what did you find out?

By finding out as much as we could about their history, where they were killed, their journeys from their land of origin to the UK and also their journeys since arriving in the UK we hoped to reconnect with a historic, living animal. We wanted to explore the relationship between photography and taxidermy, how in different ways both give the impression of being frozen in time. How in relation to this project both these methods of representation ‘eclipse’ not only the animal, but the act of killing and thus monumentalize death, moulding it into another reality – a ‘cultural life’ of polar bears. When we began this project it was uncommon, to say the least, for museum collections to be catalogued digitally and the record for each individual specimen is still often not easily accessible. It was therefore important to build a good relationship with zoology curators. We did our best in this and many of our museum contacts not only supported the project but ultimately became crucial to its development. In some instances our **nanoq** encouraged further research into historical developments. The polar bear in Dublin is a good example as it was only by going through a number of written documents that Mr. Monaghan, the zoology curator was able to establish for certain which of the officers and crew members had shot the polar bear in their collection. The rather lengthy account of that shooting is featured in our book. Also later, when installing the show at Spike Island in Bristol we had the pleasure of meeting George McKinnes the



Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson
Edinburgh ©

taxidermist at Liverpool Museums – early in his career he was employed at Kelvingrove and he was able to inform us of missing details in our records of the 3 Glasgow specimens.

Can you explain the title: ‘*Nanoq: flat out and bluesome*’?

The title is poetic, a compound of the respective words and their associations, but of course you can take it apart. First, the name ***nanoq*** is the Greenlandic term for polar bear. It seemed appropriate to use a name given to the animal in a region in which living polar bears are encountered and when we started the project in 2001, we had recently returned from a residency in Greenland. ***flat out*** has a double meaning for us in respect of the title. On one hand, it make reference to the pace of the project and particularly the trips we were making across and up and down the country in pursuit of polar bear specimens and their portraits, the searching and gathering of information. It also refers to the skin of the animal, after the killing or death and before the taxidermic process has been undertaken, which in respect of the

project, constituted a pivotal space between 'nature' and 'culture'. The word ***bluesome*** is normally encountered in the lyrics of country and western songs and as such has a knowing and ironic twist to it. This doesn't mean that the lyrics aren't heartfelt and capable of prompting very real emotion from the listener. It's sad and it's nostalgic and still, *self-aware*. In the same way we knew we were dealing with something not only sad, and from our perspective, regrettable even – we were also aware the specimens and the contexts in which we were finding them were very often bizarre and a bit mad. This tragicomic sense was confirmed when the work came to be exhibited and the fact that people were caught between these two responses along with all the others, is part of the key to how the work functions.

Some of your recent projects identify relationships between humans and selected animals as a springboard to posit questions on cultural and individual location between 'domesticity' and 'wilderness'.

When and why have you become interested in the subject?

These two concepts which at first, seem to be at opposite ends of the spectrum have, through popular media and our fascination with natural history documentaries merged together into our domestic space where they are foregrounded according to an old and often stagnant system of classification. Some animals share a place with us in our beds or on our sofas – others are ‘food’ on our dinner tables. Some are regarded as vermin as uninvited, they take up residence in our indoor or outdoor spaces while the representations of what could be called ‘exotic’ species continue to grip and feed our imagination and desires. Simon Schama talks about ‘wilderness’ being a psychological construction and as artists we are interested in generating questions as to how/why individual animals and animal species have come to occupy the roles they play in our lives.

We have both been interested in the subject for some time before we teamed up. It was in a sense that shared interest that made us think about our practice as a possible collaboration. Working together on *nanoq* helped to cement that relationship further.

How do Mark and Bryndis work as a team?

We don’t have defined separate roles in the process of making our work. For the past 5 years we have lived and worked in a remote place in the north of England surrounded by manifestations of all manner of human/animal relations; wild animals, farmed animals, domestic animals, working, game, feral... We both travel a lot and there is not a journey to or from our studio which does not involve an encounter of some kind with an animal. We are constantly engaged with the subject of our work and from moving in and out of this environment, ideas develop which we then discuss between us for some time. Sometimes we just both see something that sparks of an idea for an art project and then, depending on the size of its demands we set about, either executing it or looking for a location and often a public agency to help realize it. We do have different conventional artists’ skills but we tend to sort of collage them together during the ideas-development. In the final execution we tend to be more formal about who is doing what and when.

The second stage of the project involved photographing the bears. What challenges did you encounter in doing this?

When it came to photographing the bears we had done the hard task of locating them and securing permission to photograph. We decided to limit ourselves with what we found there on location and interfere either not at all or, in a few cases, as little as possible. For all the shots we

used the same camera, a Mamiya 6x7 and the same film, Fuji Reala. The reason for this was that we wanted to try and stay away from the many lies/fakery that photography offers those wanting the perfect image. The issue was always that if we started to move things about or take the specimens out of their environments or rearrange the environment they were in, in order to get the perfect image we would simply be adding another layer of construction. One could say that our approach to photography was sculptural. Because we were using a hefty camera requiring a tripod, we were roped off during the shoots and we used this visibility (and minor disturbance) in a strategic way in order to engage more actively with museum visitors and staff. By so doing, we built up a dialogue and were able to gather or gain access to further information for the provenances.

It was not unusual for museum staff to be able to direct us to the next bear. On one occasion when we approached a museum where we’d been told there was a particular polar bear it transpired that the curator there was unaware of its presence. This case was also one of the few occasions on which we changed anything as this polar bear, one of an assortment of ancient, neglected objects in a theatrical ‘attic’ display was covered entirely, with the exception of its nose, by a large rug. Since the highly-publicised exhibition at the Horniman Museum in London and after the publication of the book, we have continued to receive information about other polar bears – mainly in the London area. We have pooled this information together with the images that we’ve been kindly sent.

The third stage of this project involved an installation comprising ten of the bears in a converted industrial or light-industrial art space. The amassing of these bear specimens was accomplished through negotiations conducted over a period of three years. Why did you want the project to become an installation?

The installation in Spike Island brought together 10 stuffed polar bear specimens borrowed from public and private collections. We deliberately presented the bears starkly, with no vestige of the diorama and signage normally associated with zoology display. There were just the polar bears in their custom-built uniform glass cases on the bases they’d arrived on. The provenances that we had gathered were distanced from the individual specimens and displayed as a list on a wall we’d had built in the middle of the space, thus allowing the audience to make whatever connection they could. The polar bear specimens were very different, dating as they did from the late 18thC to the late 20th C. Their different appearances spoke about the history of taxidermy and



Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson
Spike Island, Bristol, 2004 ©

human knowledge of the biology and anatomy of this animal in this period. There was a mix of those having died in captivity and those that were killed in the 'wild'. All the bears on show were born in the 'wild' either in Greenland or the Canadian Arctic. It is important to consider when thinking about the installation of the 10 polar bears in the empty warehouse space of Spike Island, that into this exhibition was also built a daily programme of public events. Each afternoon the gallery staged talks and screenings, from the film 'Nanuk of the North' by Robert J Flaherty to discussions on collecting, the environment, arctic exploration etc and together with the artistic director Lucy Byatt, we organized a one-day conference (*White Out*) with speakers including Steve Baker, Garry Marvin and Michelle Henning. Furthermore as well as the 10 polar bears there was a large sculpture that acted as a seating area at the far end of the space. Behind that we had a video back-projection of the de-mounting and removal of the bears from their usual location in preparation for the journey to Spike Island. What we wanted to achieve by amassing the polar bear specimens in this installation was to connect the audience

to their own notions of the 'wild' whatever they may be and to allow a reappraisal of what they might know about polar bears, natural history collections and the arctic – indeed the relationship or contradictions between all these things. The fact that grouped in this way, each specimen was no longer simply a token of its species but instead a discrete and unique individual triggered a recognition in the minds of many, of a life having being lived.

Did you have the opportunity to witness the reaction of visitors to the show?

Yes, we did, during an artist talk we gave one day and again at the conference as well as during the installation and the opening night. When we were installing the show there was a lot of concern from some, that animal activists might target the show, which we felt would have been a complete misunderstanding of what it was about – anyway we didn't experience any anger or resentment from the public. People told us of experiencing sadness and later when we exhibited the photographs in amongst



Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson
Spike Island, Bristol, 2004 ©

the zoology collection at Bristol Museum and Art Galleries we were told by a member of the audience that we had ruined for her the pleasure she'd found in looking at zoology collections as she could now only see 'dead' animals. We were impressed by how much information people were actually able to take from the polar bear specimens in Spike Island. Many were able by looking at their claws to distinguish between those who had met their death in captivity and in the wild. There were of course the usual comments asking 'is this art?' and 'have they now become sculpture' – questions that never preoccupied us.

It could be argued that the project addresses the notion of polar bear as a symbol of status. Do you feel that the symbolic value of the polar bear has shifted over the past few years as a result of global warming?

Yes we can see why you say that. The polar bears came to this country on the back of large expeditions often with aristocratic connections and the ones that we found

in private homes are mainly in stately residencies. Since we finished the project we have received a number of emails often with photographs attached of polar bears that we missed. None of those are from stately homes. One is from a taxidermist shop in East London, two are in bedrooms of single young men and one is outside a family home in the snow (at least temporarily we suppose, for the photograph). We always knew that the ones we might miss would be privately owned.

Many of the articles that were written in the national press in response to the show (two years after its initial outing) seemed to focus upon and even push the 'timely' nature of the project in its relation to the environmental threat. The symbolic value has changed enormously over the years yes and spectacularly in the last fifty years and we were conscious of this as a component of the project. Early on in the 200 year history from which we were drawing, the animal was an icon of strength and power over which colonial adventurers were seen to triumph, as made evident by the mounts in natural history collections. It's clear now that this powerful animal is something that we have

begun to take 'responsibility' for – in this light it has become highly vulnerable and a token not only of the demise of its own habitat and threatened survival but possibly of ours too.

Which was the strangest bear you encountered and why?

The strangest one and probably the saddest one was the juvenile Worcester bear. It was so small and pathetic. It was acquired by a glove factory and for some reason ended up with a taxidermist that made it resemble a teddy bear more than a polar bear. Then there were those that we were told about but lost or never found like the one that had been seen outside a demolition ground in Glasgow but when we tried to track it down the company had gone into receivership and no one knew what had happened to the bear. Apparently the demolition yard had had it for some time and would hire it out for parties. The polar bear that was reported to have been in a school in Leicester with red lights instead of eyes, also eluded us despite tracing the school and no one there on site wanted to acknowledge it having been there. The Somerset bear had been thoroughly 'domesticated' standing as it did in the hallway of a private residence wearing a fez and clutching a basket of illuminated tulips.

Can you tell us a story you encountered as a result of exploring the legacies of the hunters who shot the animals and the taxidermists who stuffed them.

There is one story (which some have said is, in part, apocryphal) concerning the bear specimen now in Ulster Museum. It is laid out in some detail in the book but in essence, the 25 year-old bear (named 'Peter') was in captivity in Belfast zoo in the early '70s and was not taking kindly to the introduction of two new bears to the zoo and so it was decided that the bear should be destroyed. The story was told to us by Tony Irwin, a zoology curator at Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery who worked at Ulster Museum at the time. Prior to its demise the Zoo offered the bear to the Museum who accepted, on the condition that it was killed by using drugs as opposed to a captive bolt, specifically so that the skin and skull would be intact and the taxidermy would be without blemish.

Drugs were duly administered by means of darts and when the bear collapsed a lethal injection was given. The animal was then moved (apparently by ten men) into a van and transported across town towards the museum. During the journey the van was intercepted by an army patrol who asked what was 'in the back'. On hearing the

truth they were asked to get out of the vehicle. The soldiers began a search, found the bear and quickly told the party to move on because they believed the animal was not dead. At the Museum, Peter was moved into the freezer. The story goes on to describe how the security guards who'd been teasingly been alerted to the 'possibility' that the animal was still alive, became aware of noises of bumping and knocking emanating from the room. One thing led to another and a City-wide search (involving the police) for the biologist who'd put down the bear, drew the attention of the international press who arrived en masse by the next morning. Eventually, when he was found, the biologist pronounced Peter 'dead' and 'likely to remain so for the foreseeable future'.

A thought on Damien Hirst's use of animals in his work.

Looking at some of the isolated polar bear specimens from our installation at Spike Island, Damien Hirst's tiger shark work called "The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living" comes to mind. The similarities are purely formal and there is a fundamental difference in that the tiger sharks were commissioned and killed specifically for this work (a new shark replaced the old one in 2006) whilst in our work, although acknowledging the 'death' of the animal used a very different starting point and ultimately foregrounded the act of killing as the beginning of what we came to term its 'Cultural Life'. There are simply enough animals out there that have gone through all the possible processes of death one can imagine for us to want to add to that. In 1996 we went to see an exhibition called 'Private View' at the Bowes Museum in Barnard Castle, where the art had been placed in amongst the historical collection. A work by Damien Hirst 'Away from the Flock' had been placed next to a two-headed, six-legged stuffed calf which instead of complementing the artwork upstaged it. For us, feeling that so much of it is already out there, it was crucial in our role as artists instead to use what was there already and to find a new configuration and context of display so that it could begin to nudge the audience and raise questions not asked before.

What do you think of the renewed popularity of taxidermy as a form of artistic expression?

There is a thin but clear line. We don't condone killing for the sake of art. We do however not have anything against using the skill of taxidermy on already dead animals or using already taxidermied specimens in a creative way – in order to make art happen.

Would you consider working on a similar



Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson

Askja The Centre for Natural Sciences, University of Iceland 2006©

project but focusing on another animal?

It could be interesting to do the fox and we've considered it. You often see them stuffed in the most unlikely places. In the human mind it has such a fixed 'human' character of slyness/cleverness and it would be great to work with the wealth of stories that surround an animal so uniquely bound up in the culture here in the UK.

What are you currently working on?

We are working on two projects at the moment. One is in Lancaster, a commission by the Storey Gallery in which we have worked with the pest control authority exploring the less charismatic animals that encroach uninvited on 'our' territories. This work is to be realized in two stages – a public art work in the form of a radio station called 'Radio Animal' will be in Lancaster and the surrounding area this autumn and an exhibition drawing on material from earlier research and *Radio Animal* will be in the newly opened Storey Gallery early in 2009. The year and is using the seal to investigate further the

other work is due to be realized in Gothenburg later this 'eclipse' of the 'real' animal by freezing the moment and circumstances of encounters between the human animal and this non-human animal.

Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson have been collaborating since 2001. Their work, characteristically rooted in the north, explores issues of history, culture and the environment in relation to the individual and his/her sense of belonging or detachment. Recent projects use the relationship between humans and selected animals, as a springboard to posit questions on cultural and individual location between 'domesticity' and 'wilderness'. Their work is installation and process-based, utilizing photography and video.

*For more information please visit:
www.snaebjornsdottirwilson.com*

Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson were interviewed by Antennae in winter 2008 ©