

Snaebjornsdottir, Bryndis and Wilson, Mark (2012) Animal matters. [Show/Exhibition] In: Animal matters, 11 May - 24 August 2012, Sverdrup Gallery, University of Oslo.

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in relation to different forms of scientific instrumentation, such as microscopes, but taxidermy is certainly among the most significant of these instances where ‘the thing comes to represent itself’: It is both real fur and bones and an elaborate cultural and technical construction at one and the same time. Both nature and culture, and something unique in between.

It is perhaps one of the great successes of Naturama that it is possible to imagine its taxidermy collections being used in different ways than the way in which they are currently arranged. Naturama is open enough to culture to entertain a much larger number of questions than the original scientific questions that inspired the creation of the collection some 75 years ago. What if an exhibition at Naturama could explore the existential part of its own user experience? Who would you work with and what kind of interdisciplinarity would you need?

EXPLORING THE EXISTENTIAL PART OF USER EXPERIENCE

You might need a group of academic researchers working in animal studies, which is a burgeoning field of cultural studies. Researchers such as Donna Haraway, author of *When Species Meet* (2007) and *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (1989).⁹ Researchers such as Steve Baker, who published *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity, and Representation* (2001) and *The Postmodern Animal*



(2000). You might set up a research group to explore what it means to prepare and display specimens, such as *Cultures of Preservation* and *Activating Stilled Lives*, which recently took place at the History of Art Department of University College London.¹⁰

You might need to work with artists who have collected materials that other natural history museums have thrown away. Artists whose work is exploring the existential aspects of these cultural productions, such as Angela Singer and Karen Knorr.¹¹ And you might want to work with people who have been studying the very subject of the relationship between existential experience and taxidermy, such as Rachel Poliquin with her book *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing* (2012).¹²

ANIMALS AS OBJECTS AND SIGNS

Exemplary interdisciplinary work on these subjects is being affected in Nordic countries and cultures. At the University of Uppsala, there is a department of animal studies researchers, as one could expect from a town steeped in Linnaeus.¹³

In Oslo, a research project in the university's Faculty of Humanities entitled ‘Animals as Objects and Animals as Signs’ culminated with an exhibition co-curated with artists.¹⁴ Those artists were participants in the project, and they are the collaborative team Mark Wilson and Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir.

One of their most successful works involved an incredibly meticulous five-year research project to locate and identify the origins of all mounted taxidermy specimens of the polar bear in the United Kingdom. Bringing all the bears together at Spike Island Gallery in Bristol was a way of exploring the deep strangeness of both taxidermy and trophy culture, and also of giving back some semblance of community, of inclusion, to the remains of the dead bears. It is both like Naturama in appearance and completely different in effect.

There was much more to this project, which is reflected in the publication *Nanoq: Flat Out and Bluesome* (2006).¹⁵ Each bear, once located, was photographed in its current position – a kind of post-mortem portrait. The provenance of each of the bears was carefully researched following a range of sources, returning the dignity of specificity to each specimen, and turning a post-mortem portrait into a portrait of a cultural practice with a deep history.

This project has interdisciplinarity at the level of the individual artist's skills and interests, and a high level of collaboration with a range of museums and collections. It is a project where the subjectivity of the co-creators and the subjectivity of the audience members are both explored, and the notion of animal subjectivity is addressed.

