Animal as object: taxidermy and the charting of afterlives

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ABSTRACT

When is it that an animal becomes an object? In the case of a taxidermy mount, is it when the animal is set in a rifle sight, or at the moment of death? When it is mounted, or added to a collection? Or perhaps when it is put on public display? The taxidermy specimen differs from certain orders of museum object in that it was once animate. Like almost all museum contents, it is possible to chart its object biography and to talk of its after-life (Kopytoff 1986). This paper considers the afterlife of one particular taxidermy mount: the Leiden Blue Antelope. By exemplifying recent research charting the complex object histories of the blue antelope, theories of the animal as object and the distributed agency of museum objects are scrutinised, and an argument is made for a 'geobiographical' approach to museum curation, where wider stories of collection, practice and display are told *through* the mount. A spatial study of taxidermy specimens would consider the mechanics enabling dead animals to be trafficked across different sites and states. Movement from the field to the workshop to the museum (and from life to death and back again) required differently placed people and their skills in various sorts of operation and arrangement. The work undertaken here is part of a larger collaboration, enlisting an artist-in-residence, geographers and a museum curator in efforts to re-map, re-label and re-present the blue antelope and its museological remains. Such a project introduces diverse possibilities to re-frame and re-tell taxidermy collections – and all museum collections for that matter - where the status of object may not contain all that the animal still has to offer.

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INTRODUCTION

Garry Marvin, in a recent paper[1], offered some thoughts on the journeys or passages that some wild animals make between the contested terrains of 'nature' and 'culture', and 'life' and 'death'. In his paper – *Transforming the beast: the cultural life of dead animals* – he tries to develop some ideas about 'taxidermy and to think about what sort of animal/object the taxidermised creature might be' using the example of a taxidermised polar bear[2]. On wondering what sort of animal the taxidermised animal might be he poses the questions: How is it an animal? Is the polar bear in the museum a *dead* polar bear? How much of an animal has there to be for it to be a dead animal? In response to James Ryan's claim that taxidermy animals are 'a recreation of nature as apparently authentic yet utterly docile', the word *docile* struck Marvin as crucial (Ryan 2000: 206). The word suggested a body receptive to social/cultural imposition and social/cultural control, or in his words 'a body that is utterly domesticated... one we can approach without any danger to ourselves'. I would like to explore the notion of taxidermy as 'docile' a little further.

To achieve this I would like to move away from polar bears to consider the case of Blue Antelope – and the 'Leiden' Blue Antelope specimen in particular. On a recent visit to view this 'animal' at Naturalis in Leiden we[3] were able to approach the Leiden 'BlauBok' without any danger to ourselves. However, this did not mean that it did not have the power to effect us; the power to make us reflect upon it as a once living/animate creature. The fact that it happened to be only one of four mounted specimens known to be in existence added to our sense of wonder and awe. Of course, we came armed with the knowledge that we were about to witness

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[1] The paper was given at a 'talks event' which accompanied the installation 'nanoq: flat out and bluesome'. The project 'nanoq: flat out and bluesome' (2004), led by artists Bryndis Snaebjornsdottir and Mark Wilson, set out to amass and document all taxidermic polar bears currently in the UK. According to Snaebjornsdottir and Wilson, "the bears remain a legacy of two hundred years of enterprise and attitudes with which, in many ways, we are now uncomfortable" (www.valand.gu.se/personalen/bryndis/index.html).

[2] Taxidermy is the preparation and mounting of animal skins to a likeness of living creatures.

[3] 'We' are the "Blue Antelope" collective: Kate Foster (artist-in residence) Hayden Lorimer (Human Geography lecturer), Maggie Reilly (Huntarian Curator) and myself Merle Patchett (PhD student).

a rare relic of a long extinct grazing Cape antelope, which was also 'type'[4] specimen for the species *Hippotragus leucophaeus*, and that fact, of course, anticipated a sense of knowing. And yes, had we not come with that prior knowledge it may have just blended in with the thousands of dead animals in storage at Naturalis. This said, the vast quantity of taxidermised animals stored in Naturalis' purpose built twenty-storey specimen storage building - what we affectionately came to term 'the tower of dead animals' - had a profound effect upon us in their own right. Encountering these 'anonymous'[5] animals, forever frozen in their various poses on rows of what seemed to be never-ending shelving could do nothing but affect us. While no obvious narrative accompanied these creatures, their looming and spectral presence worked on the imagination. For some, taxidermy is enchanting, and encounters with it bring out a compulsion to touch. For others, or often at the same time, such encounters unsettle, repulse and unnerve. Such conflicting responses exist at one and the same time precisely because of taxidermy's ability to unsettle perception – like Garry Marvin suggests, questions are raised about the status and liveliness of such 'creatures': are they animals? If so, in what way are they animal? Or are they objects? If so, what class of object are they? Such questions bring into focus ideas about the agency of these curious animal-object hybrids.

But again, let us return to the Blue Antelope. Coming face-to-face with the precious remains of a zoological specimen of such rarity one is forced to reflect upon: what it was like as an animate being? What were the processes/practices/people through which it came to be a taxidermy specimen in a large European collection? And if it was ever, in fact, blue[6]? Such effects and responses suggest the possible agentive qualities of a taxidermy mount – perhaps not an ability to act in and of itself but that it can activate, by being caught up in relational networks of distributed agency. This idea is supported by the object history of the Leiden specimen. A patchwork history of the animal's afterlife was (painstakingly) pieced together by two curators at Naturalis, A. M. Husson and L.

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[4] I.e. the specimen exemplifying the species, formally described by Pallas in 1766.
[5] Anonymous to the novice at least.
[6] The animal-object we encountered was, if anything, a dusty fawn colour – not remotely blue.

B. Holthuis, in 1969. Their paper – written largely in response to Erna Mohr's monograph (1967) on the species which questioned the authenticity of the Leiden specimen as 'type' – was an account of the specimen's career pieced together from various records, fragments of skull, photographs, old illustrations and especially the advertisement and receipts documenting the sale, purchase, and transportation of the animal from an Amsterdam auction house to Naturalis. It not only proved the specimen's authenticity as 'type' but also charted what Marvin would term 'its cultural afterlife' from 1764 until the 1890's. The story told of the Leiden specimen in Husson and Holthuis's paper and in the up-dated object history file kept in the Museum, was as enchanting an object as the 'animal' itself. Such detailed object histories, even in such historic and well-managed collections as those at Naturalis, can be considered as 'gold-dust' in the museum world. Prompted by this case, Naturalis even organised an international conference entitled 'Lost, stolen or strayed', to discuss the problem of the loss (sometimes deliberate) of collections and their records. Pat Morris's paper at the event noted that even if specimens survive, 'separated from their documentary context they loose much of their significance'[7].

Therefore, on a second viewing of the 'Leiden' Bluebuck the significance of it as the material evidence of a distinct species – but also, I would like to suggest, as an exemplar of the possibilities for researching the cultural afterlives of taxidermy specimens and collections – was *not* lost on us. As Steven Jay Gould's account of the bluebuck argues, if preciousness were to be defined by rarity then 'by this criterion, hardly anything in natural history can be more valuable than a scrap of blaauwbock'. The 'Leiden' Bluebuck being one of the oldest examples of taxidermy, and with one of the most detailed object histories[8], seemed to embody the rich potential for researching the cultural history of taxidermy collections: from hunted live animal in the colonial field - where it was shot and then shipped

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[7] 'Lost, stolen or strayed: the fate of missing natural history collections' took place at Naturalis Museum, Leiden, The Netherlands from the 10-11th of May 2001 and was organised by the Society for the History of Natural History. An abstract for Pat Morris's paper entitled 'Lost found and still looking: tracing some examples of ancient taxidermy' can be found at http://www.shnh.org/MTG_past_LSS_abs_K-M.html#Morris.

[8] It is important to note here that the 'Leiden Blue' had such a detailed object history not so much for its cultural significance and rather for its scientific significance as the 'type' specimen of an extinct species.

as a skin - to Amsterdam, where it was then recorded by science as the type specimen (a claim which has been contested in more recent scientific discourse[9]), to be then sold at auction to a taxidermist, set-up and displayed in an institutional museum (Naturalis[10]), where it has remained to witness the evolution of the museum itself with its changing site and politics. The specimen's various movements and stop-offs' from field to museum and its accompanying shifts in meaning (ascribed and generated) illustrate how colourful and contested the cultural after-life of a dead animal can be.

Yet, what the 'Leiden' Bluebuck also alerted me to was the potential power of a spatial analytic for exploring animal afterlives/biographies. The possibilities for charting the movement of such curious animal-objects from field site to the museum site, also provides a space for considering and working through theories of the animal as object and the distributed agency of museum objects. As part of my PhD research I am currently working through theories of

1. the animal as object and,
2. the distributed agency of museum objects,

whilst developing,

3. a spatial analytic in the exercise of (animal) biographies.

In the remainder of this essay I would like to offer a review of my current lines of inquiry and in so doing raise wider questions of curatorial practice. As I mentioned earlier, on encountering taxidermy mounts questions are often raised about the status of such 'creatures': are they animals? If so, in what way are they animal? Or are they objects? If so, what class of object are they? Such questions bring into focus

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[9] See for example van Bruggen 1959; Klein 1974; Roomaaker 1992; Groves and Westwood 1995 and Robinson et al 1996.

[10] The mount was first housed at Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Histoire before being re-located along with most of the other specimens to the new purpose built site re-named Naturalis.

ideas about the agency of these curious animal-object hybrids and it is to this line of questioning I would like to turn to now.

BECOMING OBJECT

First I would like to ask: When is it that an animal becomes an object? In the case of a taxidermy mount, is it at the moment of death? When it is added to a collection? Or mounted? Or put on public display? And is it even useful to think of a taxidermy mount as an object?

The taxidermy mount can be differentiated from other orders of museum object in that it was once animate. Crucially, actual parts of original animals form a prominent and necessary feature of the mount, a characteristic James Griesemer has cleverly captured in the term 'remnant model' (Griesemer 1990). Indeed, Lynn Nyhart (2004: 308) in her study of natural history museum exhibits, which interrogates the notion of authenticity as a guiding principle of such display, argues that in comparison with other museum models, the key quality of such models is not 'their analogical power, their manipulability, or their ability to render things on a human scale, but rather their authenticity'. She continues by stating that, 'no matter how complex the process of reconstruction, this experience of authenticity depends on the fact that the skins and feathers of the animals displayed once covered living creatures' (Nyhart 2004: 308). This characteristic is of crucial importance when considering the status of a taxidermised animal. In her examination of the processes through which dead animal bodies are manipulated taxidermically, Jane Desmond is in agreement that the presence of actual animal skin makes a fundamental difference:

'Throughout this taxidermic process of dismemberment and reassembly, the presence of the animal's skin, and sometimes appendages such as claws, hooves and tails, is absolutely essential. This outer covering, is what meets our eye and must never be fake. Soft tissue – eyes, nostrils, tongues – can be glass, wax, plastic, but

only the actual skin of the animal will do. In the skin, in the "dermis" of taxidermy, lies its authenticating ingredient.' (Desmond 2002: 161)

This notion of authenticity, or 'physical truthfulness', brings back into focus Marvin's earlier questioning of 'what sort of animal is the taxidermised animal?'. The process of taxidermy, as Desmond has identified, is one of dismemberment and reassembly. In traditional methods of taxidermy presentation it is only the animal's skin (with accompanying appendages, which includes, in some cases, bones and skeletal structure) that is used for the mount – organs, muscle and connective tissue (basically anything which might decompose) are disconnected from the skin and discarded[11]. It is then the taxidermist's job to replace that which he/she has discarded and essentially 're-animate' the skin. This involves taking measurements of the discarded body parts to find or create accurate replacements. It is important to note here that compared with other artefacts made of skin or feathers taxidermy mounts are reconstructed *mimetically*: i.e. they are crafted to reproduce, as faithfully as possibly, a likeness of living creatures. The taxidermist is therefore required to have an intimate knowledge of the animal in question, in life (as in behaviour and attitude) and in death (as in anatomy). Quite literally, then, a knowledge of the animal from the inside-out. The process of reassembly therefore becomes, as Desmond has pointed out, a process of 'creation and re-creation' (Desmond 2002: 162). It is the taxidermist's goal to rearticulate the animal, as nearly as possible, into a 'lifelike' state and to therefore 're-create' the essence of the once living creature.

However, at this point a paradox emerges, which could unsettle the notion of taxidermy mount *as* animal. While the taxidermist employs various techniques to 're-animate' the *particular* animal, the end result sees 'the transmutation of that individual animal into an 'example' or 'specimen' standing for a whole species' (Ibid: 160). Garry Marvin is also acutely aware of this problem, acknowledging that due to the nature of their historical recording as scientific information 'each animal

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[11] It is at this point that I would like to thank Peter Summers (taxidermist) and Andrea Roe (Artist-in-residence), of the Royal Scottish Museum, for their instruction in the practice of taxidermy.

becomes an example, a type, a token, rather than a unique individual'. This is especially the case when it has been registered as 'type' specimen. In the case of the 'Leiden' Bluebuck, for example, its record has mainly been constructed around its status as 'type' specimen for the species and, as result; its written record predominantly exists in scientific literature[12]. In such scientific literature there is a removal of *the* animal and, instead, a symbolic animal emerges that is representative of the species. Taxidermy manuals from the 19th century to the present day, greatly influenced by the requirements of both Natural History and Biology, reinforce this notion of creating a 'typical' specimen (ref's). Classical poses were developed and standardised, or as Jane Desmond puts it ''typical' arrested-motion stances, became associated with different species of animal' (Desmond 2002: 160). These arrested-motion poses suggest two levels of fixity: firstly they 'capture, or rather index the now lost capacity of the (once living) animal to move' and secondly, they fix the animal as an 'exemplar' of its species (Ibid). This fixity would seem to suggest an objectification of the animal, and it is at this point I would like to consider the process of objectification in more depth.

Anthropologist Christopher Tilley recognises that 'a focus on materiality necessarily involves consideration of objectification processes' (Tilley 2006: 71). The concept of objectification within the discipline of anthropology can be traced back to Durkheim and Mauss' writings on collective representation ([1903] 1963). Tilley neatly summarises their argument:

'Classes of things in the world reflect pre-existing social groups. Material forms, such as the arrangement of houses in a village, are objectifications that serve the self-knowledge of individuals and groups. They are 'isomorphic' with a 'true' or desired state. Objectification in such a perspective is {thus} the concrete embodiment of an idea. The idea comes first and becomes realized in the form of a material thing' (Tilley 2006: 60).

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[12] Thanks to Kate Foster's detailed research, we have been able to chart this record from the writings of 18th century naturalists to present-day DNA analysis (see for example van Bruggen 1959; Klein 1974; Rookmaaker 1992; Groves and Westwood 1995 and Robinson et al 1996)

However, this perspective has been widely criticised for privileging mind over body, and consequently, subject over object. Much attention has since been given to disrupting the dualisms of mind/body, subject/object set up by Durkheim and Mauss. For example, Tilley notes that accounts by Hegel and Marx, in contrast, 'situate objectification as a temporal moment in a much broader dialectical process' (Ibid: 60). In their accounts objectification is implicated in action: 'in the physical production of things which are therefore active in the self-construction of identities, and interactions between people', and therefore object and subject can be said to be 'indelibly conjoined in a dialectical relationship' (Ibid 60, 61). Miller (1987), greatly influenced by Bourdieu's 'theory of practise' (see Bourdieu 1977, 1984, 1990), has extended this argument by suggesting that things are not just objectifications at the point of their production but throughout their life cycles. Tilley has identified the three central tenets of Miller's general theory of material forms:

1. Objectification, considered in the most general way, is a concept that provides a particular way of understanding the relationship between subjects and objects, the central concern of material culture studies.
2. It attempts to overcome the dualism in modern empiricist thought in which subjects and objects are regarded as utterly different and opposed entities, respectively human and non-human, living and inert, active and passive, and so on.
3. Through making, using, exchanging, consuming, interacting and living with things, people make themselves in the process, i.e. without things, material culture, we could neither be ourselves nor know ourselves. (Tilley 2006: 61)

Crucially the point that Miller makes is that culture and material culture 'are two sides of the same coin... related didactically, in a constant process of being and becoming: processual in nature rather than static or fixed entities' (Ibid). This point is also crucial when considering the status of taxidermy objects, as although there are elements of 'fixity' in their production, Miller's conceptualisation of

objectification suggests that even when things and objects are 'finished' they still continue to 'circulate through people's activities and can contextually produce new types of activities, objects and events' and are therefore open to changing interpretations and uses (Ibid). Museum scholars Gosden and Knowles (2001: 4) are in agreement here, arguing that objects are in a 'continual state of becoming' through not only processes of production, but also, processes of consumption and exchange. They argue that an object's meaning, and therefore status, changes through these processes and that, therefore, the status of the object is never fixed. Gosden and Knowles apply this argument specifically to the museum object, urging that:

'The apparent singularity of objects when sitting in a glass case or museum storeroom should not mislead us. Their complexity derives from the fact that objects are always in a *state of becoming*, and this is true not just when produced and used in their original cultural context, but once collected and housed in the museum. The physical circumstances of the object change continuously, but so also do its sets of significance as it accumulates a history. It is possible when records are made, to reconstruct this history, which carries with it the lives of those involved with the object. An object is best viewed as an indicative process, rather than static relations, and this process is ongoing in the museum as elsewhere, so that there is a series of continuous social relations surrounding the object connecting 'field' and 'museum''. (Gosden and Knowles 2001: 4-5)

Not only does this quote emphasise that objects should not be viewed as singular entities and instead as indicative processes of social relations, it also stresses that these relations are not static. This relates to Miller's assertion that objects circulate through people's activities and can contextually produce new types of activities, objects and events. As a geographer, these sentiments bear particular significance as they suggest the potential power of applying an overtly spatial analytic to such arguments, and specifically to the study of museum objects like taxidermy mounts. I will, however, develop this point later. For the moment I want to apply to

taxidermy Gosden and Knowles' assertion that objects are in a 'continual state of becoming'. Basically, I want to undo the notion of the taxidermy object as 'fixed'.

While a taxidermy mount may be fixed in position and, to an extent, fixed as a 'typical' representation of a species or even as 'type for the species, I would like to argue that something of the original animal remains to transgress this stasis. Garry Marvin recognises this in his exploration of the polar bear as 'taxidermised' creature, noting that 'out of the corpse the taxidermist resurrects the bear – it emerges, literally as a disembodied bear – its 'bearness' somehow hovers close to the skin'. When encountering a taxidermy mount, even in full knowledge of the mount's contextual and history, the ambiguous quality of the mount allows the viewer to conceive of it as in some way 'animal'. The playful deceptiveness of taxidermy – by representing the animal both physically, with actual animal parts, and mimetically, by reproducing its attitude, – allows for a vestige of the original animal to survive/resist the 'fixing' process.

This is bound up with what Desmond terms the taxidermist's quest for 'aliveness' (Desmond 2002:162). Taxidermists from as far back as the 19th century sought to impart a 'look of life' into their mounts. For example, O. Davie, a taxidermist writing in the late nineteenth century instructed that not only must 'every detail of the body be perfectly wrought, but if the head and face be poorly finished, the chief beauty of the specimen is lacking: *the life expression is gone*' (Davie in Star 1992: 262 – emphasis original). According to Ann Desmond, the development of taxidermy from the 19th century could be read as a narrative of progress, 'from less 'realistic' to more 'realistic' renderings of the living through manipulation of the dead' (Desmond 2002: 163). It is here that another paradox emerges, this time between deception and authenticity. A taxidermy model is authentic in that it is made of the skin of a once living animal, yet is deceptive, in that it is supposed to trick the viewer into believing that it is once again, or could be, animate. You might also argue that the viewer is implicit in this deception as they allow, however momentary, their disbelief to be suspended. The ambiguous status of taxidermy, or the suggestion of 'aliveness' implied through (technically accomplished) taxidermy,

therefore departs from the notion of 'generic' animal, and is once again suggestive of the possible agentive qualities, albeit relationally, of a taxidermy mount. It is from this point that I would like to consider in more depth theories to do with agency and the object.

AGENCY AND THE OBJECT

In order to work out whether taxidermy mounts can have agency, theories of agency must be scrutinised: 'if things become problematic in so far as their meaning is often shifting, ambiguous and contested, then it has to be appreciated that the same is true of the notion of agency' (Tilley 2006: 9). Agency, according to anthropologist Laura Ahern, is the 'socially and culturally mediated capacity to act' (2001: 110). Her definition is deliberately open and is not restricted to merely people, but can also be applied to other elements of the material and immaterial world. However, as fellow anthropologist Janet Hoskins has identified, an open definition raises the question of what exactly is meant by agent? (Hoskins 2006). She goes on to ask:

- Does the capacity to act imply individuality and distinctiveness?
- Can it also apply to relatively generic classes of objects?
- Can the agency of objects be dissolved and decentred (as certain structuralists and post-structuralists have argued) or does the notion of agency by itself imply an idiosyncratic power to change the world? (Ibid: 74)

These questions make the obvious point that agency is a highly contested notion, meaning different things from one person or group to the next and from one context to the next. Diverse ideas have been put forward, from various strands of scholarship, about who and what is capable of acting. The inception of the idea that 'things' might have agency can be traced to Appadurai's 1986 influential edited collection *The Social Life of Things*. The collection developed the notion that things, or objects, have 'social lives', 'drawing attention to the ways in which {seemingly}

passive objects were moved about and recontextualised' (Hoskins 2006: 74). Appadurai, in his introduction to the volume, justified such a (at the time) controversial position:

'It is only through the analysis of these trajectories {object 'paths' and life histories'} that we can interpret the human transactions and calculation that enliven things. Thus, even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context'. (Appadurai 1986: 5)

This notion of things-in-motion ties in with Miller's (1987) statement cited earlier about the circulation of objects; that it is only when we view an object in the entirety of in its contextual web of relations that it is possible to interpret its capacity to act. Viewing the object as processual, or relational, Appadurai argued, would allow academics to 'tract' objects' shifting meanings throughout their 'life-paths' and recognise, according to Nick Thomas (1989: 49) the 'mutability of things in recontextualisation'. Thomas' idea about the 'mutability of things' has resonance with the work of Alfred Gell and I think it would be advantageous at this point to elaborate on his strong body of work concerning agency and the art object (1974, 1992, 1998).

The mutability of objects, or rather what Hoskins terms as their 'malleability', are 'linked to what Gell might call their 'instrumentality' or even – in his provocative new use of the term – their 'agency'; the ways in which they stimulate emotional responses and are invested with some sort of intentionality of their creators' (Hoskins 2006: 75). The theoretical frame Gell develops around the agency of art objects is directly inspired by his earlier (1974) ideas about the 'technology of enchantment and the enchantment of technology' (Hoskins 2006: 76). Gell contends here that works of art have a 'magical' effect on our minds, in that they produce effects, i.e. 'they can cause us to feel happy, angry, fearful, lustful,' etc (Ibid). More than merely producing a reaction, this assertion also has a

political dimension in that an art object should disturb the received ideas of the viewer. The ability of the object to cause such an effect, is, according to Gell, a form of 'enchantment' and that therefore art objects are 'technologies of enchantment' (Gell 1998: 68).

This is also related to Gell's notion of 'captivation'[13]. Hoskins explains that Gell's argument here is that an object acts like an agent 'when the artist's skill is so great that the viewer simply cannot comprehend it and is therefore *captivated* by the image' (Hoskins 2006: 76 – my emphasis). Following on from Gell's assertion that his notion of 'captivation' is a form of 'instrumental action', it could be argued that art works, and other objects, have agency in that they have the ability to initiate thoughts and actions, and/or sensual responses in others. Gell's theory suggests that objects 'embody complex intentionalities' in the way that they *interact* with those people (and other objects) involved in the processes of production, consumption and exchange that such objects are caught up in. Things are, therefore, significant, according to Gell, not so much for what they *mean* but what they *do* (Tilley 2006: 10). This distinction sees a departure from semiotic readings of agency, and proposes a more phenomenological one which is attentive to a understanding that 'things do not just reflect, or 'ideologically' invert, persons, social relations or processes' and that instead 'things play an animated role in the formation of persons, institutions and cultures' (Ibid). Harnessing a phenomenological perspective in the consideration of subject-object relations is part of Gell's commitment to blur the Western distinction made between subject and object.

Hoskins' argues that Gell's devised theory about the creation of art objects can be applied to the study of *all* forms of material culture. Gell's proposition that art objects are technologies of enchantment, could, for example, be applied to taxidermy objects. As I demonstrated earlier, taxidermy objects can, at one and the same time, unsettle comprehension and captivate the viewer, and therefore it might

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[13] I think that 'captivating' is perhaps the better term in that it doesn't necessarily suggest a positive engagement with the work – it allows for a response that could be, at one and same time, one of compulsion *and* revulsion.

be advantageous to think of taxidermy as a 'technology of enchantment' – of which more later. For the moment, I would like to return to the idea of 'things-in-motion' and objects as processual. Hoskins argues that Gell takes this argument a stage further by 'arguing that anthropological theories of art objects have to be primarily concerned with social relations over the time frames of biographies' (Hoskins 2006: 76). The manner in which Gell understands persons and things to be linked (i.e. relationally) allows for Tilley's contention that 'just as persons have biographies and life-cycles, the same notion can be applied to things' (Tilley 2006: 9). In the next section I would like to consider this contention and develop it further using a spatial analytic.

ANIMAL/OBJECT BIOGRAPHY AND DEVELOPING A SPATIAL ANALYTIC

Carl Knappet (2002: 98), in a recent study of the agentive qualities of photographs, skeuomorphs and marionettes, argues that while the assertion that 'objects have social lives' has become 'axiomatic' in the field of material cultural studies, the statement has not received the full and direct attention it deserves. Knappet's paper attempts to address this and argues that scholars have too readily used Appadurai's statement as a metaphorical tool, without working through the implications of such a statement. Christopher Steiner (2001) goes further to suggest that scholars have also misinterpreted Kopytoff's seminal idea in his essay 'The cultural biography of things', also from Appadurai's 1986 volume. The idea that 'things' can be afforded a metaphorical 'life' or 'career' has been very seductive to scholars seeking to find a vehicle to explore the mutual implication of people and things (Bradley 1990; Mackenzie 1991; Tilley 1996; Keane 1997; Arnold 2002; Saunders 2002; Meskell 2004). However, Steiner claims that scholars who have focused on the agentive elements of objects have attributed too much power to the things themselves and that 'in so doing have diminished the significance of human agency and the role of individuals and systems that construct and imbue things with value, significance and meaning... the point is not that 'things' are more animated than we used to believe, but rather that they are infinitely malleable to

the shifting and contested meanings constructed *for them* through human agency'
(Steiner 2001:210 – own emphasis).

It is at this point that I would like to suggest that thinking about an object's biography need not be defunct, and that instead the application of a spatial analytic to the telling of an object's biography would move away from a focus on the object itself to viewing an object in the entirety of its contextual web of relations. Alberti, for example, in a recent Focus in *Isis* (2005) has attempted to reinvigorate the notion of object biographies. Building on the work of Kopytoff, he considers the 'movement of things' and the accompanying shifts in status these movements can exact. Here he stresses that objects gather meaning through their association with people and their institutional or social settings. Alberti is particularly concerned with objects within the context of the museum and addresses the status of objects once they have joined collections, emphasising that within this setting the status of an object is not fixed as the changing politics within a museum ensures that they are open to changing interpretations and frameworks. From this premise he seeks to explore some ways curators and academics alike might approach the study of collections through the trajectories of specific items and through the relationships they form with people and other objects. According to Alberti there are three phases in the life of a museum object that must be considered:

1. Consider the mechanics of the movements of objects from their manufacture or growth through collecting and exchange to museum (along with accompanying shifts in meaning and status).
2. Consider the use of the item once it joined a collection, whether classificatory, analytical or in display.
3. Consider the role of the object in the experience of visitors to the museum and the nature of the relationship between object and viewer.
(Alberti 2005: 561)

The method Alberti advocates lies at the intersection of various fields of scholarship and is keen to stress that the category of 'museum object' is broad and

flexible: 'artificial, dead or alive, human or animal, organic or inorganic, unique or representative' (Alberti 2005: 561). Furthermore, while Alberti is also sensitive to the significance of an object's contextual setting, it is clear from the following quote that his approach, in my opinion does not go far enough in this regard:

'We can trace the careers of museum things from acquisition to arrangement to viewing, through different contexts and the many changes of value incurred by these shifts. In doing so we study a series of relationships surrounding objects, first on the way to the museum and then as part of the collection. These are relationships between people and people, between objects and objects, and between objects and people. We encounter, collectors, curators, and scientists but also visitors and audiences. In this conception, the museum becomes a vessel for the bundle of relationships <u>enacted</u> through each of the thousands of specimens on display and in store.' (Alberti 2005: 560-1).

While Alberti considers the importance of the contexts an object might move through, his focus is on the networks of relationships that constitute the career of a thing. Here Alberti, like Steiner, does not want to attribute too much power to the things themselves, as he argues to do so would 'diminish the agency of the humans in the story' (Alberti 2005: 561). It is Alberti's contention that objects prompt, change, and act as a medium for relationships but are nonetheless 'inanimate', and concludes that 'we are looking from the standpoint of the object, but we are looking *at* people' (561). While I do not want to attribute too much power to the objects themselves, I also do not want to view objects as merely passive vessels for human appropriation.

  Alberti's words here highlight again the dichotomy that still exists in western scholarship between people and things. While, as Knappet (2002) has noted, much has been made of Kopytoff's observation that 'objects have social lives', in large part this has remained a mere metaphorical tool. Things are said to have biographies (Kopytoff 1986; Gosden and Marshall 1999) or to help tell people's biographies (Hoskins 1998) yet little further attention has been paid to what this

actually means. Museum Studies scholars, Gosden and Knowles (2001) recognise this and wonder if such metaphors are useful tools for understanding the relationship between people and things, arguing that:

'We need to be aware of the metaphors we use and channels down which we send our thoughts. We have not quite found the right language to express the mutual implication of people and things. On the one hand we are wary of making things too active: things are not agents in their own right, and the material world is only given force and significance through human activity, On the other, things are not a passive stage setting to human action.' (Gosden and Knowles: 22)

Science Studies scholar Bruno Latour has been particularly critical of the narrow distinction between people and things (or what he terms humans and non-humans) (See Latour 2000; 2005). Knappet, influenced by Latour's writing contends that there are surely many '*processes* through which objects come to be 'alive'' (Knappet 2002: 98). But even in acknowledging that objects can be agents and agents can be objects, a dualism between objects and agents remains. Knappet asks why is it even necessary to identify any particular entity as agent or object anyway? Following this line of thought, Knappet usefully states that:

'Agency clearly needs rethinking, if no useful distinction can be made between a 'pure' human mind and body (subject) within which agency resides, and an external world of objects onto which agency is projected. ... An alternative perspective is emerging in which mind, body and world are seen as *codependant*. That is to say, an idea 'in mind' is rarely fully understood without some form of tangible expression (cultural representations brought forth from 'concealment') and, vice-versa, an object cannot be properly grasped independently of how it relates to the body and indeed to its underlying idea.' (Knappet 2002: 98-99).

Knappet employs Latour's idea of a 'network' to suggest the many interconnected active participants (agents) in a technology, be they person or thing, human or non-human. As such, agency comes to be distributed across a network, inhering in the

associations and relationship between entities, rather than in the entities themselves. As Knappet argues 'the agency of an artefact is contingent upon the nature of its interconnections with other nodes in a network' (Knappet 2002: 101). This suggests that agency does not reside in one substrate, but is instead scattered spatially and temporarily. As a geographer Knappet's attention to the spatial dimension in which 'inanimate' objects come to be socially alive is alluring. While a Latourian network approach would suggest the spatial dynamics of an object's social life and the distribution of agency across it, I would contend that an attention to the actual spaces an 'object' moves and is produced through (and of course the people and other agents it comes into contact with in such spaces) would overcome the level of abstraction a network approach seems to necessitate.

What I am suggesting here is an approach to object biographies which is both attentive to the contextual setting, as in Alberti's work, and to the Latourian idea that agency is distributed across the contextual setting and the relations that happen within and between it. It is my contention that these two modes of scholarship need not be oppositional. When considering the afterlives of taxidermy specimens (and any other object for that matter) I would argue for a 'geobiographical' approach to telling wider stories of collection, practice and display. A spatial study of taxidermy specimens would consider the mechanics enabling dead animals to be trafficked across different sites and states. Movement from the field, to the workshop to the museum (and from life to death and back again), as I mentioned earlier, required differently placed people and their skills in various sorts of operation and arrangement. Developing a spatial analytic in the exercise of object/animal biographies would not only allow for an exploration into the places and spaces an object resides and moves through, and therefore also the people, institutions and other objects it comes into contact with, but also how agency is spread, exchanged and sited across such transactions.

Take, for instance, the Leiden Bluebuck. Mapping the animals' afterlife in the manner I have outlined above required a consideration of the animal/object in

context and up-close[14]. This way, not only do you get to be in close physical proximity to the object itself – and therefore experience power/enchantment of object - but also viewing the object within its contextual setting of the museum or collection can yield a wealth of archival and 'geobiographical' information. From our time spent at Naturalis we were able to meet three generations of mammal curators, all possessing varying degrees of intimacy with the object history of bluebuck. This included a brief meeting with L. B. Holthuis[15] co-author of the 1969 paper detailing the specimen's general movements from 1764 till it was established in the Leiden collection on 18th April 1842[16], which charts the specimen's designation as type, mounting, and acquisition. The paper not only details the movement of the animal in this period, but also offers biographic detail of the people orchestrating such movements.

It was from this paper and our discussions with the curators that we began to gain an understanding of the web of socio-spatial mechanics that initiated, facilitated and sustained the afterlife of the Leiden Bluebuck. Yet what was clear from the discussions, the paper and the up-dated object history file on Bluebuck at Naturalis, was that while the record was extremely detailed from 1764-1892, the record before and after this time was less well documented. This is partly to do with the reasoning behind the compilation of the object history between these dates. The detailed curation between these dates can be attributed to the focus of Husson and Holthuis' paper: that of legitimating the Leiden specimen as type. Their paper was a response to Mohr's 1967 monograph on the species *Hippotragus leucophaeus* where she disputed Naturalis' claim that their mounted specimen of the species was 'type'. Therefore their paper, and consequently the most detailed chapter of the specimen's object history, was driven, primarily, by a need for scientific legitimation rather than by a desire to emphasise the specimen's cultural significance.

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[14] I recognise this may be impractical in some instances, but where possible this is best practice.
[15] Dr Holthuis, although in his nineties, still works for the museum.
[16] The paper even details the receipts of the antelope's transportation on this day from the auction house to the museum by barge: "for the towbarge f 2._, for the Antelope f. 0.60. For delivery f. 0.85. For consumptions f. 0.75." (Husson and Holthuis 1969: 151).

A 'geo-biographical' approach, however, must not only look to emphasise the specimen's cultural significance but also open out its wider socio-spatial context. This would go beyond Husson and Holthuis' relatively localised paper, which records the specimen's acquisition to the collection, to include a consideration of the specimen's movement from the Cape of South Africa to Amsterdam and the wider cultural, political and economic mechanisms facilitating such a movement. Here the specimen is not just being viewed as a singular object but as part of wider cultures/practices of hunting, shipping and collecting happening in that period. Also a consideration of the specimen's history within the museum itself, with its changing site and politics, exposes how wider socio-political forces have shaped the specimen's display, reception and curation at the local level of the museum.

Through this process of 'opening-out' the bluebuck's histories, time must also be taken to attempt, where possible, to colour wider narratives with the intersecting biographies of people and other objects involved in the specimen's afterlife and thus depict the relational matrix the object is caught up in. It is also important that the specimen is considered in its own right. That way it ceases to be, as I argued earlier, 'a specimen' and can instead be understood as in a complex state of becoming. This understanding promotes an understanding that that the animal/object is part of a continuing relational matrix, which means that the animal/object is open to new interpretations and therefore new modes of display. At this point it is important to reiterate Alberti's sentiments about considering the 'role of the object in the experience of visitors to the museum and the nature of the relationship between object and viewer' (Alberti 2005: 561). If museum practise is to be effective, curators have to assist in the 'activation'/'animation' of such objects by opening-out such stories and narratives, like the Leiden Bluebuck's, *through* the object instead of building a narrative *around* an object[17]. That way the audience are not

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[17] This idea has been inspired by Tim Ingold's review of animic ontology (Ingold 2006, see also Hornborg 2006). According to animic ontology 'beings do not propel themselves across a ready-made world but rather issue forth *through* a world-in-formation' (Ibid: 9).

only aware of their participation in the continuation of such a narrative, but no longer view it as static prop in a wider narrative but as an active element.

Placing the bluebuck within the entirety of its contextual web of relations, then, from the large scale cultural, economic and political motivations behind its inception, to the practices and processes that brought it to a museum collection and the variously scaled politics governing its display and curation within the museum itself, demonstrates the interconnected, relational and agentive qualities of a seemingly static object. While I have exemplified the Blue Antelope, and the Leiden Bluebuck specimen in particular, it is my contention that this approach could be applied to other taxidermy mounts and collections, and in fact *any* museum object or artefact. Also, applying a 'geobiographical' approach to curatorial practice in general is, in my opinion, worth pursuing. Such a perspective necessarily involves engagement with issues to do with object provenance, the fundamental question of 'geobiography' being: where did it come from? This in turn, leads to questions to do with reparation and how to deal with the vast amount of 'acquired' goods European collections house. Applying a spatial perspective to such cases can tease out the complex geo-political nature of such acquisitions and ask of the museum's situatedness in such networks. Therefore, far from being merely a 'novelty' approach to *doing* 'one-off' object histories, a 'geobiographical' perspective could act as an ethical frame for curatorial practice. Making more salient the museum's involvement in wider geo-political projects and its role in reproducing cultural norms and values can help to change public perception of the museum as a 'benign storehouse' and act to activate the museum itself.

CONCLUSION: THE SPECIAL CASE OF TAXIDERMY

I would like now to return to the specificity of animal afterlives and explore the transformative potential of engaging with such a political project. Levi-Strauss has argued that animals are important because they are good to think with (Levi-Strauss 1969: 162). And as Chris Wilbert notes, anthropologists (e.g. Tapper 1994) have also alerted us to the fact that animals are also good to teach and learn with – 'used

for moralising and socialising purposes' (Wilbert 2000: 243). It is my contention here that taxidermy specimens, or rather, the study of their 'geobiographies' also demonstrates a way of learning *through* animals. With the understanding that such objects are always in a 'state of becoming' it is possible to not only reconstruct their history and chart their object biography, but also intervene and re-direct their future trajectories. Kopytoff suggested such potential in his original treatise on the *Cultural biography of things*:

'But there are other events in the biography of objects that convey more subtle meanings... The tangled mass of aesthetic, historical, and even political judgements, and of convictions and values that shape our attitude to objects labelled "art". Biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure' (Kopytoff 1986: 67)

Criticisms have been levelled at museum management for making obscure their involvement in the shaping of history and the objects chosen to represent it. The official ideology of the museum, has, until recently, insisted that they stand outside of time and historical process; museums and their curators have tended to 'constitute themselves as the recorders of history, rather than as committed participants' (Barringer and Flynn 1998: 4). This could also be said to be true of academic scholars. In my research on object biography little room has been allowed for considering the possibility of object future 'lives'. Bennet (2005) reminds scholars that museums are not only objects for study but are also living resources for public communication. The 'Blue Antelope' project offers an opportunity to view taxidermy mounts and other animal remnants as 'living' resources for public communication.

The 'Leiden Blue', for example, allows for interesting questions to be asked of the colonial animal-object. Barringer and Flynn argue that when such objects are removed from their original contexts, and are subjected to appropriation and exhibition, 'their meanings undergo radical changes' (Barringer and Flynn 1998: 2).

Keeping this in mind we might profitably ask:

- What are the possibilities for the display of 'colonial' objects (and animals) in the present day and how can contemporary museum practice address the inheritance of colonialism?

- And indeed, are there limits to the stories objects can tell, or be made to tell?

These are not questions I intend to answer here but rather leave open. Collaborative projects such as Blue Antelope, in re-mapping, re-labelling and re-presenting museological animal remains, introduce diverse possibilities to re-frame and re-tell taxidermy collections where the status of object may not contain all the animal still has to offer.

This idea that the status of object may not contain all that the taxidermy mount has to offer, reminds me that taxidermy objects should be viewed as a special case when engaging with the exercise of object biographies and working through notions of the animal as object and the distributed agency of museum objects. It also brings back into focus the notion of taxidermy as 'docile' brought out in James Ryan's writing on taxidermy (1997; 2000). In line with Levi-Straus' thinking, this understanding of taxidermy presents it as a passive tool for humans to think with. However if we were to run with this understanding of taxidermy as purely representational, animals more generally would become 'merely passive surfaces on to which human groups inscribe meaning and ordering of all kinds' (Philo and Wilbert 2000: 5).

Erika Fudge (2002), proposes a challenge to anthropomorphic representations of animal, like that of Levi-Strauss', however, which she argues work to reduce the status of animal. Fudge contends that the using the animal as a mere conceptual tool or form of representation means that 'the real animal can disappear' (Fudge 2002:6). In her plea for the consideration of 'a history of animals', she is not

concerned with merely writing animals into the human account of history, but with 'recognising the centrality of the animal in our own understanding of ourselves as human' which necessarily 'forces us to reassess the place of the human' (Ibid: 11). Instead of concentrating on the ways in which humans have represented animals throughout history, Fudge insists that we consider the *use* of animals by humans, i.e. concentrate on humans' material relation with animals. She argues that:

'Concentration on pure representation (if such a thing were possible) would miss this, and it is the job – perhaps even the duty – of the historian of animals to understand and analyze the uses to which animals were put. If we ignore the very real impact of human dominion – whether in meat-eating, sport, work, or any other form – we are ignoring the fundamental role animals have played in the past. A symbolic animal is only a symbol (and therefore to be understood within the study of iconography, poetics) unless it is related to the real.' (Fudge 2002: 7).

While there are obvious practical problems with such a mandate – animals are inarticulate and do not leave behind a written record – Fudge's sentiments are seductive nevertheless. Gell's challenge to the anthropomorphising process, as I noted earlier, comes from his development of a phenomenological perspective (Gell 1974; 1992; 1998). Hoskins argues that Gell's theories of the technologies of enchantment suggest that 'objects that challenge our senses or our comprehension have the most powerful effects on our imagination' (Hoskins 2006: 82). Hoskins goes on to argue that such an argument 'implies that we need to pay more attention to the *phenomenological* dimension of our *interaction* with the material world, and interrogate the objects which fascinate us as well as our reasons for feeling this fascination' (Ibid: 76 – my emphasis).

Returning to my earlier claim that taxidermy could be viewed as a 'technology of enchantment', I would like to argue that taxidermy can be viewed in this light, precisely for its ability to work on the imagination. The 'Leiden' Bluebuck, as I hopefully demonstrated at the start of this exploration, as material thing in itself

and alongside a consideration of its colourful cultural afterlife was particularly enchanting. Yet, even taxidermy without a written narrative inspires the imagination. As I stated earlier, even the anonymous rows of taxidermy specimens stored at Naturalis encouraged us to reflect upon them. The capacity to induce reflection, I would argue, is where the agentive qualities of a taxidermy object, or any object for that matter, lie. This form of enchantment could be harnessed to engage with taxidermy collections and 'reactivate' them. While it is not possible to do so for all collections, examples like the 'Blue Antelope Project', where accompanying historical records are detailed, illustrate the possibilities for *using* taxidermy collections as a tool to reflect upon human-animal relations. Also, while the right language might never be found to express the mutual implication of people and things, academics, artists and museum curators alike, still have a responsibility to be active participants in the re-narration of museum collections rather than being traditional recorders: i.e. to not let the apparent singularity of objects sitting in glass cases or museum store rooms be misleading (Gosden and Knowles 2001). Finally, in the words of Erica Fudge (2002: 14), I would like to assert that 'to question the anthropocentric view of the world – to brush history against the grain – is to challenge the status of human, which in turn is to throw all sorts of assumptions into question'. It, therefore, could be argued that a 'geobiographical' study of taxidermy collections can do more than unsettle the imagination.

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