

GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE II

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COVER CREDIT:

Model IV, 2017

Artist: D Rosen

Cast Aluminum (Original Objects: Buck Antler and Stomach (Decorative Model), Camel Mask

(Theatrical Model), Whip (Didactic Model), Stiletto (Decoy Model), Goose Neck (Decoy Model),

Nylons, Bra Underwire, Calvin Klein Dress, Facial Mask, Necklace, Wax

21 x 25 x 12 in.

Photo credit: Jordan K. Fuller

Fabrication: Chicago Crucible

WEB DESIGNER:

Michael Belcher

Giovanni Aloï, *Speculative Taxidermy: Natural History, Animal Surfaces and Art in the Anthropocene*
(New York: Columbia University Press, 2018)

Josh Grant-Young

Can the seemingly inert—all that lacks agency and is relegated to the closed spaces of galleries, museums and dioramas—aid us in reimagining or articulating human/animal relations? How might the very material of taxidermy—rendered immobile in the eyes of spectators and cast (in some cases) to represent a ‘realistic’ picture of Nature—*move* in a manner which begets bold new debates and conceptions of relations between human, animal, and environment? In reappraising and reimagining taxidermy’s past and present, Giovanni Aloï’s *Speculative Taxidermy: Natural History, Animal Surfaces and Art in the Anthropocene* (2018) draws on such questions to examine the role of speculative engagement within material culture and artistic practice. Aloï’s goal, in parsing a form of ‘speculative taxidermy’, is to provide ‘an ontological mobility’ and ‘awareness’ that can open the eyes of artist and viewer alike to seek ‘different and more sustainable futures’ (p. 255).

Of what use is taxidermy, a craft predicated on the harvesting and re-working of dead animals, to positing new futures? Are not the pieces of taxidermy we often see in natural history museums but static representations of what once lived or is now extinct? Readers already skeptical of the philosophical or ethical value of taxidermy might heed Ron Broglio, who asserts that artistic practice ‘has a particular investment with surfaces that are useful in unhinging philosophical concepts and moving them in new directions’ (Broglio, 2011: p. xvii). For Aloï (who regularly cites Broglio), the Western philosophical canon’s past engagement with animals has often reduced them (like the stretching of animal skin over fabricated non-living artistic forms) to mere surface, flattening their existence by claims that they have no internal life (consciousness or thought) or value and making their exploitation and destruction justifiable. While taxidermy aided this picture of flattened animal life in the past, Aloï posits a ‘speculative taxidermy’, which he argues provides the novel movement and directions Broglio suggests in his own critical scholarship in animal studies, often acting as critique of representation rather than mere representation itself.

There is considerable horror and a chilling sense of the eco-gothic in such practices of taxidermy. Aloi cites Jeffrey Niesel's 'The Horror of Everyday Life: Taxidermy, Aesthetics and Consumption in Horror Films', an essay in which it is argued that taxidermic practice is motivated by the twisted and fetishistic desire of serial killers. Niesel notes:

'[...] taxidermy, because it takes the fetish to its logical end (murder), exposes connections between consumerism, aesthetics, and patriarchy and shows these systems contribute to creating relationships of violence particularly in the effort to render feminine subjectivity silent [...]' (1994: p. 61).

Such an interpretation of taxidermic practice pairs well with the horrific implications of 'flattening' proposed by Broglio, where the very life and existence of a living thing can be effectively stripped and crafted into a lifeless, fetish object for mere voyeurism. If taxidermy is to provide something beyond the revulsion of horror itself, if it is to expose instead the horror of ecological devastation and species death, a more speculative mode in taxidermy is needed to confront and address this challenge. This mode is exactly what Aloi, drawing on Broglio, in this work sets out to achieve.

In chapters 1, 2, and 3 Aloi confronts the scientific and political visions of taxidermic practice (prior to its contemporary movement into the world of art). Both of these analytic lenses present historical problems for this revitalisation of the practice as a critical means for reshaping our relations with the animal. On one hand, the scientific objects which taxidermy produced in the Early Modern and Victorian ages were ones to be taxonomised: contained, restricted by type, bound to certain epistemic spaces for viewing, and designed to convey a certain conception of 'realism' via static pictures of nature (pp. 118-123). On the other, in a political sense, taxidermic pieces of the Renaissance stood in as symbols of white colonial masculinity, theological power (pp. 60-64), discipline and the conquering of nature—what Pauline Wakeham (2008) refers to as 'spectres' of the fantasies of 'white male supremacy' and 'colonial mastery over nature' (pp. 5-6). In short, any mode of 'alternative' taxidermy must reckon with preconceived conceptions of the trade as one that not only strips animals of life and agency, but through scientific/political use of these pieces propagates constraint and violent fantasies of humankind's dominance.

Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 see Aloi operationalise post-structuralist philosophy (chiefly, speculative realism and new materialism) to move past problems of the trade and introduce mobility to the static objects of taxidermy. In an effort to avoid historical efforts to reduce animals to objects of rational study and collection and as symbolic representations of various ideologies, Aloi employs speculative realism's ontological decentring of the human subject as the rational mode of being par excellence through critical interrogations of Kant (who ascribed animals no reason and little ethical import in themselves) and Descartes (who viewed animals as mere automata and material resource). The object-oriented scope of certain veins of speculative realism opens up the practice of taxidermy, rejecting reductive visions of objects, to create 'contentious objects'. Contentious objects problematise notions of realism in representation as well as ontologically blur the lines between materials and explore the depth of objects—not merely their surfaces (p. 139).

Engaging with contemporary art's political critiques through taxidermic practice, Aloi's work is influenced by new materialism's conception of nonhumans as 'actants' to express alternative modes of nonhuman ontological movement/agency¹ and speculative realism's object-oriented conception of realism.² Here, like Stephanie Turner (2019), I am concerned that even with some recognition of tensions, Aloi moves all too easily between new materialism and speculative realism (Aloi, pp. 198-199).³ With these two schools of the object-turn growing in popularity as modes of thought for thinking and making-with in the art world, it seems worthwhile to acknowledge crucial differences between the fields, despite all their shared commitments.

¹ 'Actants' is a term that new materialism borrows from *actor-network-theory*, a form of social theory which proposes that everything in the world (the social or natural) is bound up in constantly evolving relations to produce knowledge, decisions or action. Objects, animals, ideas, and processes are all understood to be as equally important within said networks as humans. In this sense, ontologically speaking, all actants are treated equally in terms of their importance to and participation in the network – suggesting a non-anthropocentric set of relations and ethics.

² Speculative Realism, particularly in terms of object-oriented ontology/philosophy, challenges the privileged position of human existence (which speculative realists claim is a product of Kantian thought—the 'Copernican Revolution') over that of nonhumans on metaphysical and ontological grounds. Treating all entities as objects, speculative realism posits that all objects exist equally in terms of reality.

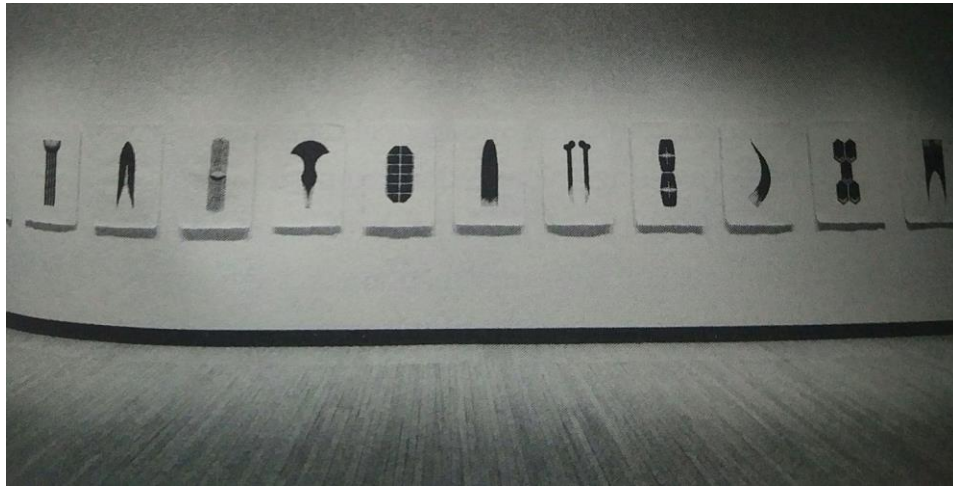
³ For example, per the *New Materialist Almanac*, new materialists claim that speculative realism aims to 'partly do away with the tradition of critical theory' and maintain the independent reality of objects while new materialism wishes to affirm critical theory in relation to questions of who accesses/connects to the 'real' of realism. Further, new materialists often invoke actants and actor-network-theory, which object-oriented ontology refers to as 'overmining'—an attack on social constructionism's claim that no independent reality exists outside of power, language, networks, or discourses. Such distinctions, while perhaps of little importance in the art world, hold considerable weight in philosophical discourse.

In a familiar vein with the ‘eco-Gothic’, *Speculative Taxidermy*’s blending of speculative realism and new materialism interrupts binary thinking and provides dark (perhaps, at times, even seemingly morbid) challenges for human desires to objectify Nature. Executed well, speculative taxidermy (on Aloi’s account) would encourage viewers to see even these objects fashioned from fur, skin and bone, as more than mere material.

An example of this dark, eco-gothic engagement might be found in the materialising of Timothy Morton’s ‘dark ecology’ in speculative taxidermy. On this account, those who fashion such eco-art take seriously Morton’s proposal to reinject environmental thought with ‘hesitation, uncertainty, irony, and thoughtfulness’. Per Morton, the ‘honest’ gesture of environmental arts would be (rather than seeking purity in representation as a picture of pristine nature, or some ideological statement of dominance) ‘to linger in the shadowy world of irony and difference’ (Morton, 2012: p. 16)—a sentiment which maps well onto much of the art found within *Speculative Taxidermy* and one which opens significant terrain for eco-gothic interpretation.

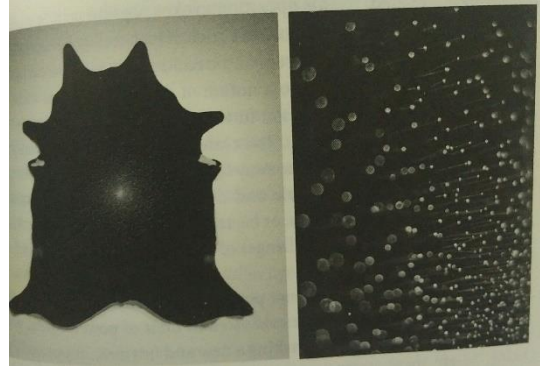
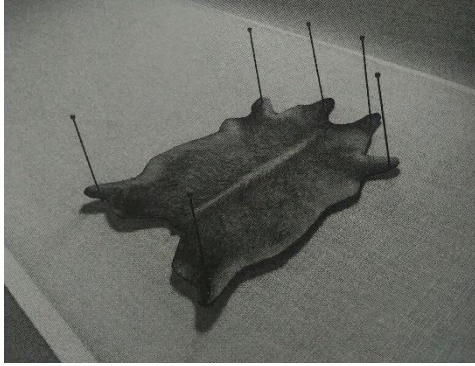
Yet, while many works within *Speculative Taxidermy* richly display various anxieties of environmental and species precarity, these works do not express an ecological pessimism. The inclusion of new materialism (Jane Bennett, for example) and Donna Haraway’s concept of *speculative fabulation* (SF)—in short, crafting new narratives and tales for survival in environmentally precarious times—helps turn this speculative effort away from merely tarrying in the shadows towards the fabulation of more affirmative visions. Such an effort is of interest in an alternative mode of ‘re-enchantment’ found in the *coda* of the book.

In the *coda* of the book, ‘Toward New Mythologies – the Ritual, the Sacrifice, the Interconnectedness’, the artwork of Cole Swanson is examined as one method of re-enchantment. Swanson’s *Out of the Strong, Something Sweet* (2015) exhibition displays various animal hides, horns, burned remains, and sounds to challenge those who walk the floor of the exhibition to rethink the human’s complicated relation to the animal. Further, various symbols familiar to the Gothic emerge in Swanson’s pieces, moving through darkness into re-enchantment, confronting violence but offering the possibility to move beyond it.



Bone Black. Taken by Cole Swanson at the Art Gallery of Guelph (2016). Sourced from *Speculative Taxidermy*.

Key highlights for Swanson's work include *Bone Black* (2015), evoking industrial chemical process, animal slaughter and waste in the re-enchanting of this sacrificial, cast-aside material. *Bone Black*, a piece with various small tapestries bearing symbols of animal bodies painted with bone char against stark white, presents these industrial processes as 'haunted', echoing within the images a material engagement of the systematic destruction of animal life in the animal industrial complex and its 'seemingly endless ability to unravel capital gain from different forms of rendering' (pp. 249-251). *Specimen Hides* (2015) and *Star Swarm* (2015) further pushes gallery-goers into dark ecological territory through a confrontation with the tiny fastened hides of animals set in a seemingly scientific taxonomy (*Specimen Hides*) or with heterodoxically (counter to taxonomic practice) placed pins forced through hide (*Star Swarm*). These pins symbolise the 'impossibility of an empathetic relationship' as the very epistemic 'tools of power, order, determination and identification' are employed in all manner of violence, shoved deeply and carelessly through flesh (pp. 253-255).



From left: *Specimen Hides* and *Star Swarm*. Taken by Cole Swanson at the Art Gallery of Guelph (2016). Sourced from *Speculative Taxidermy*.

Eager scholars might examine contemporary works, found in Aloi's text or beyond, to flesh out new discourses in Gothic aesthetics. Replete with explorations of liminality, the uncanny, transgression, and the challenge to the stability of the body, Gothic corporeality and perception might yield interesting dialogues with epistemic and ontological dimensions of the speculative project of Aloi. Finally, in terms of haunting and re-enchantment, I suspect various dark ecologies may be born from reckoning with speculative taxidermy in a Gothic vein. *Speculative Taxidermy*, a rich and winding account of past and future approaches to the craft, will entice readers to explore taxidermy beyond the skin-deep.

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