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Taxidermy as Knowledge

Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*. College Station: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012. 272 pp. \$34.95 hb. 29.95 pb.

It comes as no wonder that The New York Times included Rachel Poliquin's *The Breathless Zoo* among its best coffee table books of 2012, calling it one among a privileged selection of titles that "make an impression." And in the case of Poliquin's book, this is an understatement. Along with a rigorously researched and written text, *The Breathless Zoo* offers up an aesthetically enviable book design, which includes a collection of sumptuously colored images that often amaze, as frequently unnerve, but always leave the curious mind wanting more. The only thing truly bad about *The Breathless Zoo*, in my humble estimation, is that I didn't write it. Scholars and popular readers alike will envy Poliquin's clear, page-turning prose and the range of her references, from William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to Roy Rogers's sidekick Palomino Trigger.

What really makes this book an absolute requirement for anyone with an interest in animals, however, is Poliquin's command of taxidermy as a complex site of knowledge; in understanding the "who, what, when, where, why, and how" of taxidermy, we inevitably come to some essential, and often uneasy truths, about the relationship between human and non-human animals. Her deeply insightful study of the cultural and material values of taxidermic fauna illuminates a range of powerful desires that humans have about both living and non-living animals. Moreover, as the author herself argues, "Far more than just death and destruction, taxidermy always exposes the desires and daydreams surrounding human relationships with and within the natural world" (6). This is not, then, just a story about human and non-human animals. Rather, their relationship to one another speaks metonymically about the larger cultures of nature, about the ways that all animals, human and otherwise, find themselves ever-more entwined in ways rarely made visible by human culture.

Poliquin organizes each chapter to address the various reasons that humans preserve non-human animals, from rare objects included in Renaissance Wunderkammern to memorials of deceased family pets. To flesh out, so to speak, each of these carefully researched chapters that contribute to the larger narrative of curating a persistent and embodied animality Poliquin identifies seven unique expressions of human longing:

Wonder, Beauty, Spectacle, Order, Narrative, Allegory, and Remembrance. Poliquin organizes each chapter to speak to an aspect of human desire, and tells often-incredible stories about animals stuffed and otherwise preserved. Situated in nineteenth-century England, and specifically the Victorian era where, as the author argues, “taxidermy achieved its apotheosis” (10), *The Breathless Zoo* stands apart from other recent studies of taxidermy, such as Pauline Wakeham’s *Taxidermic Signs: Reconstructing Aboriginality* (2008), whose geopolitical center lies in North America.

While both Wakeham’s and Poliquin’s books investigate the relationship between taxidermic animals and human animals, Poliquin’s could go much further in exploring what animal studies scholar Cary Wolfe described in his *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (2003) as, “The trope of the animal in the history of philosophy, and in contemporary popular culture, as the figure that is not merely below or beside ‘the human’ but actively constitutive of the human” (xiv). I found it startling that any discussion of taxidermic animals in natural history museums failed to address the “stuffed” humans, or mannequins, of indigenous peoples. Poliquin does account for the multiplicity of animal subjectivity, or at least the range of ways in which taxidermic others are read, often metaphorically and in daily life, albeit through a human lens. But *The Breathless Zoo* often seems to assume, as Wolfe has argued of “most ethical and political discourse,” “that the subject is always already human” (1). Poliquin’s book focuses more on *our* relationship to *them*. While there are many areas where the power of these non-human animals on us is registered through such concepts as their ability to mesmerize with their aesthetic and magical forms and concepts, it would seem that these are still largely human concerns. What I will grant is that this new space of the biopolitical animal, the non-human animal that is mutually constitutive of the human animal, has not fully found its way into academic scholarship yet (including my own). The fields of animal studies, art history, political science, history, literature, and philosophy welcome Wolfe’s approach in his *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (2012).

Any weakness I have described here, however, is offset by the rich treasure trove of research, stories, images, literary allusions, and popular culture references Poliquin delivers. While I do not want to provide a chapter-by-chapter excursus of her book, I found several moments in her narrative particularly resonant and worth observing here. *The Breathless Zoo* reveals some rather astonishing images and accompanying narratives, ones often reminiscent of nineteenth-century zoo displays and those on view at the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia, PA — though these here are non-human

animals. A kitten with eight legs and two tails, an anatomically monstrous ocelot, and the artist Tinkebell's *Popple* (2008), a taxidermic dog and cat stitched together to form a reversible purse, alternately feline handbag or canine pocketbook. These images serve different purposes depending on the interests of their makers, consumers, and other various audiences. Some, such as the kitten, stand as wondrous marvels. Others, like the ocelot, exemplify technical errors and "bad taxidermy" of a period before good taxidermists regularly achieved specimens demonstrating verisimilitude and/or notions of postmortem beauty. Still others, as with Tinkebell's *Popple*, challenge our sensibilities about which animals are deemed proper for certain roles in society (e.g. those that become our food, those we feed as pets, and those we deem proper to wear).

Chapters on spectacle and order present us with taxidermic tableaux of entertainment, reenactment, and pedagogical instruction. Addressing the relationship between three-dimensional stuffed animals and two-dimensional painted ones, Poliquin discusses Jules Veraux's *Arab Courtier Attacked by Lions* (1867) against the themes of exotic animals often represented by Henri Rousseau, as in his *The Hungry Lion Throws Itself on the Antelope* (1905). Both images display the bloody gore and anguish that typically accompany hunting scenes. As an art historian, however, I am not clear why Rousseau's work is better suited to this comparison than that of another French artist, Eugène Delacroix, particularly *The Lion Hunt* (1855). Rousseau's paintings are, as Poliquin readily admits, the products of a self-taught artist whose work embodies more of a fin-de-siècle dreamworld than a Romantic African hunt. Granted, the choice of either artist ultimately tells us a great deal about the role of colonialist power in circumscribing human and non-human animal relations.

The Natural History Museum in Tring, England serves as a model of taxidermic display for Poliquin's inquiry. A display of zebras spurs her exploration into the complexity of taxonomic classification schemes, taking the work as Carolus Linnaeus as a bridge between older inefficient systems of organization and the binomials more familiar to the modern world. Describing the plethora of zebra species and subspecies that emerged and confounded naturalists, Poliquin explains the role of the museum as a site of instruction, teaching the public ways in which animals were similar and dissimilar to one another according to their orderly layout in the various galleries. These animals increasingly functioned solely as didactic tools in front rooms of natural history museums, shifting the research space of naturalists and modern scientists to the backrooms of storage and research — a transformation championed by Charles Darwin. This transition has continued to leave, much like we see (or do not see) in art museums today, most of the institution's specimen collections behind guarded and temperature

controlled walls not available to the general public. Poliquin provides, as visual testimony, a sublime photograph of curators among thousands of preserved birds in a football-field sized flat storage area at the Smithsonian. The scene is enough to make any contemporary viewer shudder in simultaneous horror and delight.

A similar effect runs throughout Poliquin's examination of narrative and allegory, which includes some eye-opening sections about the distinctions between large-game hunting in aristocratic Europe and democratic America. The work of the artist Angela Singer also finds itself woven into this part of *The Breathless Zoo*, her vintage, reclaimed, and recycled taxidermic animals serving as some of kind contemporary vanitas, adorned with flies and flowers in equal measure, concurrently suggestive of nature and artifice. Small "nuisance" animals posed in elaborate, yet quaint scenes follow these historical hunting and contemporary art practices. Ermines engage in a well-mannered tea party, rabbit students practice their three R's in chalk and slate for their rabbit teacher in a village school room, and a squirrel exhibits his Western bravado atop a horse and saddle, his left paw tugging at the reins and his right waving his sombrero while he lets out mute yippee ki-yays.

Poliquin's final chapter, on remembrance, meditates on taxidermy as a site of desire and loss, of "provocative animal-things" that "offer an overwhelming spectacle of beauty, death, tribute, love, and immortal longing." The artist Mark Dion, who regularly engages the history of nature's representations, called *The Breathless Zoo* "The new benchmark on the place of taxidermy in the social history of art, science, and popular culture" (223). Dion includes a wealth of animals in his own artistic menagerie, with his recent *DEN* (2012) consisting of a stuffed brown bear hibernating in a manmade art cave atop a mound of human detritus. The sleeping bear stands as a taxidermic specimen, but also as the kind of super-sized stuffed animal children covet at carnivals. The bear is completely man-made. It is not really a taxidermic bear, but a representation of one. This piece, along with the zoological holdings of Toys R Us, warrants one more chapter in Poliquin's book. Despite this small fact, Poliquin's book remains a visually and textually rich treasure trove of knowledge, and should be required reading for anyone in the field of animal studies, as well as anyone engaged in disciplines that interrogate the history of nature and its various representations, in word, image, and practice. We are fortunate to have *The Breathless Zoo* at our disposal.

Works Cited

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