

FRANCIS MARION MOSELEY WILSON

Taxidermy, Documentation, and the 'Liveness' of Death

Abstract

Taxidermy is an old craft that requires a confrontation and even intimacy with dead animals; it is also a process that is not often seen or experienced by the general public in Western societies. I am an artist using the taxidermy process as the material for time-based work. My 2014 work *cuddle* involves swapping the insides and eyes of a dead rabbit and a teddy bear. One section of the work involves the display of these artefacts alongside video documentation. In this article the experience and somatic awareness of dead animal bodies serves as the cross section of ideas in posthumanism, phenomenology, and psychoanalysis. I provide an analysis of *cuddle* and examine how video documentation alongside dead animal bodies intersects with concepts of 'liveness' and presence in performance art. Using both Peggy Phelan and Phillip Auslander's concepts of 'liveness' and performance, I argue the potential of the olfactory in live performance, particularly the smell of dead animal bodies, and how our senses that have not yet been mediated contribute to our experiences of live art. This analysis of *cuddle* combines these theories of 'liveness' with Aurel Kolnai's *On Disgust*, Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, and Phelan and Herbert Blau's readings of mortality in the experience of an artwork as a live performance.

Introduction

Taxidermy is a craft much older than modern photography or screen-based media. A term first coined in 1803 derived from Greek roots *taxis* (arrangement) and *derma* (skin), traditional taxidermy is primarily concerned with making an animal appear as realistic and lifelike as possible. While preserved animal bodies have long been used for practical purposes, such as clothing, it is generally accepted that the Victorian era was when taxidermy gained popularity and began being used as mementos of places travelled. During this time, photography was in its early stages, long before video, but taxidermy was an established practice with aesthetic goals. Instead of owning a photograph of a place or animal, people could own preserved and posed bodies of animals. Traditional taxidermy aims to show a species in a natural pose, and in many cases alongside logs or fake plants indicative of its natural habitat. Taxidermy is meant to re-create a moment in time; both time and animal are frozen through preservation techniques. For hunters, that moment became the moment of the kill; most hunting trophy taxidermy resembles an animal as it has just met eyes with the hunter. Traditional taxidermy, in its quest for aliveness, erases the evidence of death through this craftsmanship. By 'aliveness,' a term that I will use throughout this essay, I am referring to how taxidermy sculptures have certain poses and expressions that give the impression that the specimen is still alive.

Technological advancement has lengthened the life of a taxidermy piece similarly to how it has lengthened the life of a photography or video (not the least significant of which being the move from analogue to digital). Through incorporating the process into my work, I bring the evidence of death back. I am most interested in how the phenomenological experience of this process changes the perception of the final objects. Viewing the process creates a somatic awareness of the animal death necessary for taxidermy. Moreover, the process provides the opportunity for such a somatic awareness to extend to a realisation of similarity between animal body and human body. Traditional taxidermy itself can be regarded as a form of documentation, whether of the existence of a certain species, such as in science and history museums, or of the conquering of an animal, such as in hunter's homes. My 2014 work *cuddle* subverts traditional taxidermy and uses the sensorial experience of the process, particularly the olfactory, combined with video to explore distinctions between mediation and liveness as well as performance and documentation.

For *cuddle*, I used taxidermy and video documentation to create a three-part work. For the first section, I exchanged the innards of a teddy bear and a dead rabbit for one another, filling the teddy bear shell with organs, teeth, and eyes of a rabbit, and filling the rabbit with stuffing, plastic eyes, a voice box, and a small fabric heart that is included in all purchased plush animals from the popular chain Build-a-Bear Workshop. For the second section of the piece, I slept overnight in the space with the altered teddy bear. By sleeping with the teddy bear, I created an intimacy between my body and a dead body that is at once meat and once-living being. Both these sections are carefully documented with video. Through these first two parts of the work, I subverted both traditional taxidermy and perceptions of plush (or 'stuffed') animals as comfort objects; the teddy bear is bloodied with actively decaying real organs, and the rabbit, with decaying skin, is filled with cotton stuffing rather than realistic Styrofoam moulds. Finally, for the third section of the piece, these videos were projected next to the table, bed, and tools used in the prior sections along with the two artefacts (rabbit and teddy bear) displayed on plinths in the space. Video documentation is an essential part of the final work; objects and video projection serve as evidence of actions passed, my performing body removed from the space. Documentation allows for a simultaneous experience of the process and the results, rabbit and teddy bear, both grotesque and actively decaying throughout the piece. For example, though the olfactory aspect of the live process is absent on video, the smell of the process is present in the space in which it was being projected.



Francis Marion Moseley Wilson in the first section of *cuddle*, 2014. Photo: Eastman Presser

Theatre scholar Peta Tait analyses the major differences between the representation of animals on stage and the use of actual live or dead animal bodies. She argues that the use of an animal replica of a dead animal body lacks the somatic power of a real animal body, limiting its use to entertainment that may 'negate reactions to deadness' (2013: 76). To Tait, 'Live animals standing on stage might seem like objectification for human voyeurism or at least a sensationalist gesture, but an animal body on stage is a truer depiction of a species and invariably takes the complete focus away from the human performers (2013: 77). She also uses Merleau-Ponty's philosophy to articulate the experience of dead animals, specifically in the 'Animal Inside Out' exhibit by Gunther von Hagen: 'It might be argued that the viewing of dead animals stimulated sensory responses in the viewer that were then internalised in a 'circular course'. A live body to dead body encounter involved a perceiving sensor body responding to preserved dead flesh' (2013: 70). Theorist and anthropologist Jane Desmond writes that taxidermy 'call[s] for a compelling intimacy between human bodies and animal ones' (2013: 71). She has written on the differences in the treatment of animal bodies and human bodies after death. Death is sanitised in many aspects of western culture, including the purchase and consumption of meat and the limited display of dead human bodies. The public display of animal bodies as taxidermy is deemed acceptable, in part because of the removal of the evidence of death.



End of first section of *cuddle*, 2014. Photo: Eastman Presser

One aspect of posthumanist thought is the relationship between human, animal, and cyborg. Calling upon Donna Haraway's seminal work 'The Cyborg Manifesto' (1983) in which she proposes implications of the blurring of human and machine (the 'cyborg'), posthumanists, in a similar vein, have proposed the blurring of human and animal. Performance theorists, including Jen Parker-Starbuck and Laura Cull, often use Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of 'becoming-animal' and 'affect' in the relationship or boundaries between human and animal. For Haraway and for Deleuze and Guattari, these concepts 'propose a fluidity and openness that, if rethought, could unsettle the anthropological machine' (Parker-Starbuck, 2006: 653). To Deleuze and Guattari, affect is concerned with 'what a body can do, what is in its power, or what it is capable of in relation to other bodies' (Cull, 2012: 192). Cull notes, however, that these powers are not fixed, but are constantly changing 'depending on to what extent the other bodies we encounter "agree" or "disagree" with us' (2012: 192). Though much discussion on animals in performance is on live animals in performance or human performer's attempts to become animal, my work is concerned with the power of dead animal bodies. However, again, taxidermy is a craft concerned with the appearance of aliveness. The transitional states in the taxidermy process reflect this changing of power. My work's subversion of taxidermy through displaying decay or using plush animals or toys is an attempt to challenge our comfortable and understood relationship to animal bodies and to question why in western culture we have become so uncomfortable with the actuality of these bodies. The art objects and bodies I create defy categorisation, in part because of my use of the process of their creation as the primary

experience of the art; they are somewhere between animal corpse, object, sculpture, and taxidermy.

Not coincidentally, as technology has advanced, dead animal bodies have become less a reality of everyday western society. This is due in large part to advances in industry. Yet in spite of all the technological advances of the last century, the olfactory sense has yet to be captured, documented, reproduced, or widely disseminated through machinery and data. The phenomenologist Aurel Kolnai focuses on the olfactory sense in his work *On Disgust* (2004) for its immediacy and intimacy not achieved by other senses. According to Kolnai, 'through [the nose], small particles of the alien object become incorporated into the subject' (2004: 50). Additionally, when speaking specifically on decaying flesh, he describes it as putting 'itself forward as a continuing process, almost as if it were another manifestation of life' (2004: 53). This phenomenological viewpoint is related to Martin Heidegger's assertion in *Being and Time* (1927) that the acknowledgement and acceptance of death is the means by which we become free from anxiety of life. That anxiety is due to the certainty of death combined with the impossibility of the experience of it, and through this, there is an attempt to deny death. This denial might relate to the disappearance of dead animal bodies in everyday life.



Francis Marion Moseley Wilson sleeping with the teddy bear in *cuddle*, 2014
Photo: Eastman Presser

Julia Kristeva, a psychoanalyst, in *Powers of Horror* (1982) refers to the state between subject and object state as the 'abject.' 'If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes is a border that has encroached upon everything' (1982: 3). Kristeva also notes that 'It is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abject but what disturbs identity, system, order' (1982: 4). We can also see our aversion to these decaying organic materials as abject and therefore

threatening to self-preservation: 'as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live' (1982: 3). For Kolnai, Heidegger, and Kristeva, the experience of an animal corpse is, in Kristeva's terms, 'death infecting life' (1982: 4). Given Kolnai's power of the olfactory, it is not surprising that there has been a mediatizing of the senses and favour given to what can be seen and heard.



Teddy bear displayed alongside documentation in *cuddle*, 2014. Photo: Eastman Presser

While documentation is typically thought of as evidence of something that has occurred in the past, the blurring of lines between visual and performative arts raises questions of what documentation is, how it differs from live performance, or if that distinction is important or even possible. For Philip Auslander, the conversation around documentation goes hand-in-hand with that around the concept of 'liveness.' In 'The Performativity of Performance Documentation' (2006), Auslander separates performance documentation into two categories: theatrical and documentary (2006: 2). The difference between these two, according to him, depends on whether the performance documentation is primarily a record of the event (documentary) or if the event was staged in order to be filmed or photographed (theatrical), which is partially determined by the presence of an initial audience at the event. Throughout the course of the article, though, he begins to break down any real distinction between the two; to Auslander, all performance documentation is ultimately both documentary and theatrical.

because the presence of an initial audience becomes irrelevant in the later consumption of the documentation by the 'secondary' audience. While Auslander's point about documentation versus performance is based almost entirely on the audience's role, there are other aspects of performance to consider, such as the sensory experience of a work. Auslander is arguably most well-known for his writing on the concept of liveness in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (1999); he goes so far as to say that the playing of an analogue tape or video is 'live' because of its ever-so-slight change in quality due to repeated playbacks. While theoretically this is true, I would argue this concept of liveness is shaky given a viewers' lack of sensory awareness that there is, in fact, a change in back-to-back viewings of a video. Presence and liveness requires some degree of immediacy not accessible audibly or visually in consecutive viewings of a VHS.

Another theorist working in contrast to Auslander's idea of 'liveness' is Peggy Phelan, who maintains that theatre/performance is unique in comparison to photographs and video because of the presence of a live body. To Phelan, 'Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance' (1993: 146). However, there is great validity to Auslander's description of the role mediatization of our senses plays in a modern concept of liveness. Roger Copeland uses Broadway shows as an example of this in 'The Presence of Mediation' (1990); the shows are miked in order to achieve the kind of quality and timbre of sound our ears are familiar with. Our eyes and ears are mediatized senses, meaning our perception of the world around us is as accustomed to, if not more so accustomed to, the kind of sensory experiences provided by video and audio. In *cuddle*, the added layer of the present decaying flesh makes this section of the work not simply the showing of documentation of a past event; it uses video as an integral part of a live event. There is an awareness of the change happening in a decaying body in an immediate, sensory way, distinctly different from recorded media.

'Live' is a word that, in its adjective form, has multiple definitions, two of which are relevant to this essay. According to the Oxford Dictionary, there is 'having life' (Def. 1) and 'of or involving a presentation in which both the performers and audience are physically present' (Def. 8.a). In a performance work that involves dead animals, this distinction becomes uniquely important compared to other kinds of theatre or performance. Phelan, along with theorist Herbert Blau, both describe performance in terms of mortality or its relationship to death. In *Mourning Sex* (2007), Phelan states that 'theatre and performance respond to a psychic need to rehearse for loss, and especially for death' (2007: 3). Blau's critiques of Auslander focus on the lack of mortality of video or virtual performers such as chatterbots, which are computer programs designed to simulate human interaction via online messaging. While they are both referring to the actor's capacity to die at any moment, *cuddle* refers to this most literally; as Blau has stated, 'theatre stinks most of mortality' (1982: 132). It is a work that operates

under Phelan's theory of performance: the decay of these animals cannot be saved or recorded. It is a time-sensitive event, which we particularly lack the technology to document considering the richness of other senses. Documentation via video, audio, or photograph is for the senses of seeing and hearing. Indeed, modern society favours these two senses. Yet the smell of these decaying animals, changing dramatically over the roughly twenty-hour duration of the whole performance, cannot be saved, only experienced in the moment. Moreover, the video documentation becomes an entirely different experience when viewed away from these animals. By re-inserting the abject and unpleasantness of decay into the work (particularly through smell and touch), I attempt to maintain a presence unachievable by video or documentation alone.

If we accept what Kolnai writes about decaying flesh as another manifestation of life, then *cuddle* achieves performance through the presence of a live dead body as opposed to live living body. In discussions with audience members after the work, there were some who saw the rabbit body as a reminder of a pet; others saw meat or were reminded of some animal death they witnessed earlier in life. Some audience member's experience prompted them to leave the performance. As the performer, I developed a strong emotional attachment to the altered teddy bear as I would have as a child with a toy. I spent such an extended amount of time with these animal bodies – nearly 24 hours – that the smell of decay was not as present and aggressive as it would be with a shorter encounter, such as the audience's experience. Using Kolnai's ideas on the olfactory sense, I believe with this length of time, this smell became a part of me. It was incorporated into my embodied experience. When I first created this work, I described it as part installation and part performance. I saw my performing body as the distinction between these two things. But the two abject creatures I create and their trajectory through the total work has made me re-think this classification of the work. The animal/teddy bear bodies are the centre of the work, not my living body. They serve as performance that does not simply signify Blau's and Phelan's mortality of theatre; they have a sensory immediacy. It is not a coincidence that Kristeva calls this experience true theatre, similarly to how both Blaus and Phelan describe live performance in terms of its mortality. Additionally there is the subversion of taxidermy as well – it is an abandonment of representation. For Phelan, an 'economy of representation' makes live performance and theatre seem ill-fitted for a mediatised, capitalist culture (2007: 3). In a similar way, Tait is interested in the somatic power of these bodies, rather than the older theatrical representations. Taxidermy techniques are used to achieve a representation of life, and in *cuddle*, they are used to show the irreversibility of death. The use of death animal bodies in performance, particularly through taxidermy methods, can provide a liveness and presence to a work even absent of a moving, 'performing' human body, and simultaneously challenge the mediated experiences of contemporary society.

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Biography

Francis Marion Moseley Wilson is an American artist currently working in Ohio, USA. Her current work incorporating taxidermy into live art focuses on the experience of 'between-ness' and exploration of the boundaries between life/death, human/non-human, and sanitary/unsanitary. She has a Bachelor's of Music from Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio, USA, and a Master's of Arts from Brunel University in London. She is planning for a return to the UK next year to begin her Ph.D research on how performing taxidermy intersects with complex ethics surrounding human-animal relations, death rituals, and disgust.