

ANY
SHARP
KNIFE
WILL
DO

lee henderson
seema goel

+

the dunlop art gallery
the rooms provincial art gallery

curated by jeff nye
and bruce johnson

Any Sharp Knife Will Do
Seema Goel and Lee Henderson

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Foreword

The Dunlop Art Gallery of the Regina Public Library and The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery are pleased to present this installation by Seema Goel and Lee Henderson entitled *Any Sharp Knife Will Do*. Such a co-production offers viewers in Saskatchewan and Newfoundland & Labrador a unique opportunity to engage with issues of mortality from an aesthetic perspective. In many ways these artists are continuing a cultural tradition of *memento mori* (“remember you must die”) that dates back to ancient Rome. The taxidermic dogs and mice, wall text and photographs featured in the exhibition also serve up a carefully orchestrated commentary on how Western society ultimately seeks to manipulate the natural world.

Both Goel and Henderson are to be commended for such a thoughtful endeavour and well-crafted treatment of space, while the exhibition curator Jeff Nye has done a wonderful job in organizing this joint presentation. The essays that follow by Nye and Bruce Johnson, as well as the discussion by Ian Carr-Harris, provide points of greater consideration for viewers. The position they establish for *Any Sharp Knife Will Do* speaks to the potency that installation-based practices have gained in contemporary art on a global scale. In this regard the support received for the exhibition and publication from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Saskatchewan Arts Board furthers a healthy critique of social and political conditions that affect us all.

Dr. Curtis Collins
Director
Dunlop Art Gallery
Regina Public Library

Sheila Perry
Director
The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery

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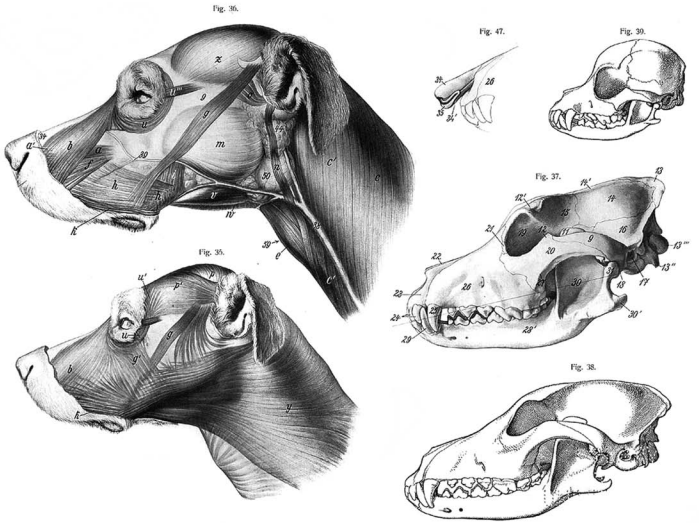
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OVERVIEW



Mediating Stillness by Jeff Nye

As a woman turns a corner into a dimly lit room, she holds within her gaze three unbreathing bodies. She stills herself, not blinking, and waits to see the slightest inhalation.

Nothing.

Her heart begins to pound as she questions, “Can I really be seeing this?”

...

Our dead are usually quickly hidden from view. After the brief rituals of viewing a body, it is buried or cremated and it passes from sight. Before their disappearance, however, the dead confront us with an uncanny stillness—one that is entirely real and ultimate. The dead do not flinch and from their silence they call to those who view them, “This is your fate, as well!” As a result, there is something undeniably unsettling about an encounter with the remains of a formerly living being. In cultures like ours where youth and vitality are exalted virtues, death seems virtually unnatural.

Though the deceased presented in *Any Sharp Knife Will Do* are not human, they are creatures that exist in close relationships to us. Dogs play the roles of companions, tools, and sometimes weapons. The death of the family dog is sometimes as traumatic as the loss of a human family member. Mice, on the other hand, are at once phobia-inciting pests, prey, and laboratory test subjects. The sound of a mouse scratching somewhere in the wall during the night is enough to drive the humans in the building to murderous deeds. And so the encounters between viewers and the taxidermic dogs and mice in *Any Sharp Knife Will Do* are emotionally heightened, if not traumatic. The responses that are communicated by viewers of the installation include a spectrum of fear, grief, and revulsion, and they involve a complex intersection of art, ethics and personal experience.

We are accustomed to seeing hunting trophies of wild animals in places like Calgary's Lougheed House, in natural history museums, on the walls in the homes of avid hunters, and even in pubs. We know of lab mice, and that various pet stores and websites sell feeder animals for reptiles. One site advertises, "Fuzzy mice on sale... \$.14 each!"¹ Why then is the mounted head of a mouse so absurd when the mounted head of a moose is commonplace? Why is the display of a taxidermic dog so transgressive? What line have we drawn between mice, dogs, and game animals, and with what prejudice do we draw that line?

The ethics that normalize the transition of an animal from wildlife to specimen, art work, or trophy are here brought into sharp focus. As Seema Goel has suggested, our emotions get the better of us when considering art works of this kind—works that confront or disturb our normalized expectations regarding the kinds of species that are suitable for taxidermy, or which animals are okay to kill. Reason dictates that a taxidermic dog is as much a piece of upholstery as it is a dead body. Still, despite that knowledge, the mind wanders to the moment of the kill. Was this animal killed for this art work? Is the viewer subsequently implicit in this animal's death? The artists followed strict ethical guidelines. The animals were not killed by the artists, nor were they killed with the intent of being exhibited as art; their remains were transfigured into works of art some time after their deaths. They function as *objets trouvés*. Because those facts are not explicitly stated in the space of the installation, however, viewers are free to wonder. Using various visual and literary devices, *Any Sharp Knife Will Do* does implicate the viewer. The viewer is called to act, to press glowing buttons (the triggers) that illuminate the mouse trophies, to read the text, to question, to open curtains, to peek, and finally to round the corner where conscious attention is usurped away from rational intellection by a visceral encounter with three shockingly still dogs and three dramatically composed large-scale photographs.

From medieval memento mori paintings, which were literally made to remind the viewer of his or her own inevitable end, to Andres Serrano's Morgue photographs from the mid-1990s, artists have long been in dialogue with mortality. With the introduction of photographic processes, such as the Daguerreotype, in the mid-19th century, post-mortem photography became a means for people to remember their lost loved ones. The stillness of the dead is echoed in the stillness of the

photographic image. Lee Henderson's *Still Life with Thanatotic Animals* series brings the viewer into contact with the moment of shooting a digital photograph. We see, in Henderson's photographs, a simulacrum of what the shooter sees and we can imagine taking the shooter's place. The metadata of autofocus brackets/targets, aperture size, and shutter speed hover between the shooter's eye and the subject, trophy, or prey. This buffer is a comfort, a prophylactic against direct experience.

The juxtaposition of photographic images and taxidermic reconstitutions of animals invites the viewer into a deeper consideration of the ways that various apparatus—photographic, predatory, and even museological—affect our interactions with the natural world. Goel and Henderson situate the viewer in a space between the visual contemplation of still images and the visceral encounter of "the real thing." The viewer is invited to compare the two orders of experience, and to realize that he or she is implicated in the victimization of animals—often without being aware of it.

The result is a haunting installation that confronts the viewer visually, psychologically and corporeally with a space of contradiction that is not aggressive, but confusing, beautiful, transgressive. *Any Sharp Knife Will Do* examines the human relationship to death and the natural world through an intelligent arrangement of sculpture, photography and text. It calls into question the nature of how we connect to the creatures around us and the roles we thrust upon them.

1 <http://www.rodentpro.com/?gclid=COO2zYLTvakCFU5qKgodWHKUhg>



Fixing Death / The Cull of the Wild by Bruce Johnson

*Memory has altered the image,
according to memory's needs.*

Susan Sontag

The referent is both there and gone.

Roland Barthes

Goel and Henderson present us with fixed moments amidst secular shrines. In their inner installation, three hunting dogs pose frozen in the chase as they face the photographic trophies on the wall, each taut with potential energy that will never be released or realized. Modern dogs, like the Harvard mouse¹ or Stuart Little, are human creations, designed to exist entirely for our use. Each represents a cull of the wild. They are set pieces, players in a human game, distinct from nature. The artists' tableau is as purgatorial as their media; charged as any altar or stage, where human ideals of design and control conspire to place our quarry at safe-distance. *Any Sharp Knife Will Do* questions our penchant for mediation and control. Are our trophies signs of mastery or masking? Do they display a desire for control and commemoration, or do they exist to tame our fears?

In 1625, a Jesuit friar and astronomer named Christoph Scheiner looked through the back of a human eye stripped of its scleral coat and saw an image of the world reversed and in miniature. Reality became doubly filtered, distanced through the lenses of two eyes, one living, the other dead. The eye was suddenly a machine; its gaze a work of apparatus.

Two centuries later: another lens, another secular miracle. In 1839, Purgatory was officially incorporated.² Previous claims had been staked,³ but it was Jacques Louis Mandé Daguerre who managed the deed, providing millions with limitless property within which to safely set their dead. Carol Mavor, recognizing the condition, later labeled the photograph as life and death pictured utopically at once.⁴

In retrospect, and despite best efforts, it seems that the dead are not so easily fixed in their place. Instead, they continually call upon us to be quickened, to reintegrate their fixed, photographic worlds back into the flux of narrative; into an active field of operations. They may even question our desire to contain them.

We use photography's translation of the world into a field of frozen silver, or a barrage of digital bytes, to replace a daily, direct visual language with another. With it we render life, distilled and chilled. As Roland Barthes offered: we bring the 'there-then' into the 'here-now', leaving ourselves to consider the riddle.

In the tradition of the Catholic Church, 'translation' holds an alternative meaning: the transfer of human remains from the place of interment to a site of veneration, to a shrine.⁵ It is an act of ennoblement, creating a saintly relic through a change of context. Containing the mystical, making it physical.

Photographs have always held appeal for voyeurs, trophy-hunters and armchair travelers. Recently, while reading a travel guide,⁶ I found an account of religious tourism. In Padua, stationed around the tomb of St. Anthony, are photographs offered to his remains by the thousands who visit. Many of these snapshots show the wreckage of cars, mangled in accidents. They are pinned to bulletin boards which frame the Saint. They are testaments of survivors who believe that Anthony saved them.

For more than 750 years, the faithful have made pilgrimage to Anthony's shrine. By busloads they continue to come, seeking whatever presence remains of a 40-year life, long confined to another time. I can imagine myself in this room; see its cold stone gilded by religious statues and the flicker of votive candles. Which relics claim me most, I ask myself, the store of dust and bone (once human), or these pictures of twisted metal and rubber?

I try to resolve these dual pulls and attractions by proposing a single, shared source of gravity. The equation itches in some wordless part of my brain. I fumble with formulae. Then I remember the words of André Bazin, a fragment I once read and somehow filed to memory: A photograph embalms time, rescuing it from its proper corruption.⁷

Bazin had a point, but so did Sontag, when she focused away from photography's mechanical nature to consider our once mystical relationship with it: What defines the originality of photography is that, at the very moment in the long, increasingly secular history of painting when secularism is entirely triumphant, it revives—in wholly secular terms—something like the primitive status of images.⁸ She reminds us of a magical nature, one largely lost to contemporary, over-accustomed eyes.

A splinter of Anthony's bone offers the believer a contract: Here is he whom you once only held in your mind. It may offer no other revelation. Like a relic, a photograph (forever dancing with its referent) offers us certification, but not certainty.⁹

Unlike other relationships, our engagement with photographs operates within a field defined by an inverse rule: their lack of a fixed context (despite rigid ties to the referent) moves us to weave a world in which to set them. Their mechanical clarity guarantees an immutable ground-text to be scanned by our ever-adjusting, refocusing eyes. The amputated world, cut away by the photograph's frame, offers a microcosm, contained and self-complete. This fragment leads us to propose a larger, parent universe, existing beyond its edges. We offer photographs, and the dead within them, our phantom limbs

1 Trademarked by DuPont as the *Oncomouse*, this creature was designed by Harvard's Philip Leder and Timothy A. Stewart for medical research and was subsequently patented.

2 The French government issued the patent for the Daguerreotype on August 19, 1839.

3 Others, including Bayard, Niepce and Talbot hold similar claims

4 Mavor, Carol. 'Pulling Ribbons From Mouths: Roland Barthes's Umbilical Referent', in: Richard Meyer, editor. *Representing the Passions: Histories, Bodies, Visions*. The Getty Research Institute (2003)

5 This ritual act traces back to 17 June, 386, when Ambrose opened the grave of a Christian martyr and translated his bones to the high altar of a church.

6 Rufus, Anneli. *Magnificent Corpses: Searching Through Europe for St. Peter's Head, St. Claire's Heart, St. Stephen's Hand, and Other Saints' Relics*, Da Capo Press (1999)

7 Bazin, André "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," *What is Cinema? Vol. 1*. Trans. Hugh Gray, Berkeley: University of California Press (1967)

8 Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (1977)

9 A miraculous tale is told of St. Anthony. While dining at the home of a churchgoer, a chalice of wine was accidentally dropped and smashed by Anthony's host. The Saint whispered a prayer and the shards of glass, reversing in time, reassembled. Photographs, it seems to me, perform similar temporal gymnastics.



Nature Morte: Any Sharp Knife Will Do by Ian Carr-Harris

Bring me the head of Alfredo Garcia!

Director Sam Peckinpah, released 1974

Garcia's head is worth a million bucks because Garcia, it turns out, has impregnated the daughter of a rich Mexican industrialist. The millionaire is almost a caricature of macho compulsiveness; he simultaneously puts a price on the head of the culprit, and looks forward with pride to the birth of a grandson.

Roger Ebert, review August 1, 1974

Any sharp knife may indeed do—whether to bring home Garcia's head, or as is more deeply clear in Peckinpah's film, cut into the gossamer layers of discretion that shield us from our unwilling admissions of lust, terror, greed and control that are the subjects of Seema Goel and Lee Henderson's at once disturbingly queasy and delicately framed project.

I saw a head once some years ago—in a medical specimen museum. I found it easy at the time to remove myself, to see it as a curious object. It was only subsequently that I realized my mind lingered on it, as though that head refused to let me go, as though my mind was forced into some other realm of the imagination where that head as an identity, a sentient being, refused to be consigned to mere object.

In 1998 the Lacanian psychoanalyst and cultural critic, Julia Kristeva, curated an exhibition at the Louvre—*Visions capitales*—on decapitation. Kristeva's subject is the necessary intersection between the body and language, and she views the image as our link to the sacred: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God. That link is rife “with the terror that provokes death and sacrifice, with the serenity that follows from the pact of identification between sacrificed and sacrificing,

and with the joy of representation indissociable from sacrifice, the only possible crossing.”¹ Which brings us back to Peckinpah’s film, and Garcia’s head as trophy—now wrapped in a dirty fly-trap canvas bag and befriended by its captor in that bizarre pact of identification Kristeva raises. Ebert again:

Somewhere along the way Oates, as Bennie, makes a compact with the prize he begins to call “Al.” They both loved the same woman, they are both being destroyed by the same member of an upper class, they’re both poor bastards who never asked for their grief in life. And slowly, out of the haze of the booze and the depths of his suffering, Bennie allies himself with Al and against the slob with the money.

The complex of associations I am drawing here involves the link between representation—whether Peckinpah’s film or Goel and Henderson’s installation—and our fascination with terror. Strikingly, *Any Sharp Knife Will Do* deploys our relationship to the staged animal figure through a conjoinment of the museological devices of taxidermy and the diorama with the semantic relations between photography and the trophy in its investigation of the sacred and the profane. It is an accepted trope that the animal represents aspects of ourselves, and when Kristeva suggests that the particular body we inevitably hold in awe is that of the mother—she who knew us before we knew ourselves, it seems clear that in their specific connotations these familiar animals—mice and dogs—represent our conflicted attachments to the origin of our very existence, a conflation of awe and abject rendered visible in the feminine gender ascribed to Mme La Guillotine.

It is of course common experience that the body of the other invites a vertiginous impulse in our own. This is the very meaning of the sacred, and the alienation of the profane. Sensing the draw of the abyss, we draw back. In *Any Sharp Knife Will Do*, Goel and Henderson play with this in dividing the installation into two parts, a smaller reception space through which one passes before turning a corner to encounter the final mise en scene. The play involves the dialectic of text to image: in the anteroom, text rules the image. A series of various writings—stories, instructions on taxidermy, musings on decapitation—entirely cover the black walls, providing commentaries loosely keyed to five small inset vitrines, three of which contain trophy-

mounted mice heads, the other two a vintage photograph of a young man and a close-up shot of a dog’s nose. Inevitably one is seduced by the written word, whose presence dominates the space. The effect is to slow down, draw out one’s thoughts. Here one is in the preservational presence of the archive, in the presence of death’s suspension of purpose.

As a consequence, entering the large room beyond, the shift to the immanence of action is profound. No longer in the archive of the Dead, we stand riveted before the scene confronting us. Three dogs of various breeds have assumed the attack position, the intensity of their gaze directed towards a group of three large framed photographic images of animal trophy heads, images whose content is itself inscribed with the absent gaze of the camera viewfinder. Despite ourselves, this nature morte resonates with anticipated explosive purpose as we in turn look intently at the dogs, coiled, waiting for the pounce that we also know will never occur. We look, again despite ourselves, for the smallest twitch, the tremour in the fur that precedes the rush. We are in the presence of the image, in the realm where the image rules the text, in the realm—to close the loop—of the sacred. We are where Benny finds himself driving across Mexico talking to Al’s head, oblivious to the separation of life and death because we, the audience in Peckinpah’s film, cannot ourselves sustain that separation, cannot sustain the separation of the living body from the suspended moment of the image.

And why is that? Perhaps because just as we cannot separate life from death—we cannot imagine the void that is death itself—we cannot separate what we have come to call the sacred from its complement, profanity. This is edgy territory, the domain of what Lacan calls the Thing at the heart of The Real—that terrain that marks the fundamental disconnect between what we say and what we feel. And the Thing? It is that place beyond words, beyond image, beyond signification itself where awe and wonder are crossed with fear and trembling—in a word, with terror. Where words fail. Where we babble to a stinking head, or with Henderson and Goel return to the image and the word in quiet desperation to simply stay alive

¹ Julia Kristeva. *Visions capitales*, p. 11. English translation from the French quoted in “Psychoanalysis, aesthetics, and politics in the Work of Julia Kristeva.” Ed. By Kelly Oliver and S.K. Keltner, p. 6.



How I Became a Cannibal by Seema Goel

As a young girl I took care of my brother's doves. Over the years they escaped to be mauled, one by one, by the neighbour's cats. I didn't learn.

Chicken Tikka: Rub the dead bird with garlic and marinate in yogurt. Fry the spices first. The meat will sizzle when it touches the pan.

If I am willing to eat an egg then why not a chicken, if a chicken then why not a cow, if a cow then why not a horse, if a horse then why not a dog? When my husband travelled to China he carried a slip of paper that he presented at restaurants, "I do not eat dog. I do not eat cat."

The first taste is familiar. Frog's legs taste like chicken, but more tender.

I found them in the frozen food section at the super market in Montreal.
A package of 10 is only 3 dollars.

At the taxidermist's a line of deer skulls spans a shelf, each tagged with the name of the hunter who bagged it. In the back room a bear skin is soaking in brine. There is no sign of the bear's body; steaks in a new freezer maybe? A dog sleeps beneath a table.

My dog was hit by a car. She was 7 or 8 years old. My parents gave her away to a farmer one summer without telling me. She used to come running if you called my name. The farmer said she became a highway dog when the other dog died. I always thought she was trying to come home to me.

A piece of taxidermy is a bit of clever, complicated upholstery, a skin stretched over a form recreating an image of life.

When I see the deer head I don't imagine the skinned-out body of the deer, but it is there in the background. I don't ask what the taxidermist did with the dogs' bodies.

The trophy head is a decorative ornament. At Christmas someone crams a Santa hat onto the beast. At St. Paddy's day the pub owner places green, shamrock spectacles over its eyes. Immortality doesn't have the glam promised by Tutankhamun. A forest up North waits for the call of a bull moose, receives the sound of an ATV.

A mouse will desiccate in the freeze drier in 2 weeks. Mummified into position it remains complete except for the eyes. The eyes need to be replaced first with fakes.

I use glass headed pins. Just push them through the real eyes until they click into the socket and reposition the eyelids accordingly.

Remember that albino mice have red eyes.

On the 3rd day of medical school a severed human head with the top of the skull sliced open to reveal the inner cavity was placed in front of me. I have no memory of what I was supposed to learn from this.

On the adjacent table was a single leg.

The Whitehead Institute houses perhaps 20,000 mice at various stages of research. The smell is overwhelming, not exactly disgusting, but animal.

I'm given surgical booties to place over my shoes. A post-doc takes me to a lab, filled floor to ceiling with cages of mice along one wall.

They're labelled according to generation and lineage. He performs a delicate surgery on a mouse, inserting a genetically altered blastocyst into the uterus.

Later, I check the Institute's web site. The word "mouse" does not appear.

The dog was hit by a car. Its body is recognizable as that of a dog, but its character is gone. The taxidermist makes a guess at what it might have looked like.

Together we take the gory mess and turn it into a playful pup.

The dogs, freed from their crates, sit in the living room. My cat hesitates at the threshold.

They do not move.

She sniffs the air.

They do not move.

She comes to the smallest one and touches her nose to its nose. It's dry.

Burn the body. The body is just a vessel.

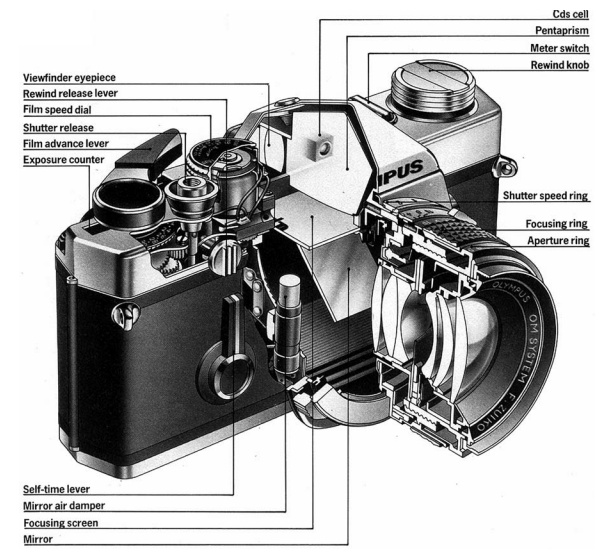
Non-human primates are now being consumed
as never before. Monkey meat, gorilla meat,
chimpanzee meat cooked any way you like.
The great apes have made it to the culinary
delicacies list.

Come and get it while it's hot.

At first, I was afraid.

But you know, after a while, it becomes familiar,
easier, until eventually it just seems normal.

After all, the dead don't need us, any of us



An admission that my pursuit of photography
grows from a suspicion of photography
by Lee Henderson

- 1 The great Japanese photographer Masahisa Fukase once published a photo-essay
entitled "Ravens: The End."
It is about birds, and about death.

Fukase says: "all shooting is stealing"
is this about identity?
or is it rather about a thing-event being moved
out of the locomotive world
and into a still and dead photoscape?

Expanding the act of theft to its eventual outcomes
—to view it as a gateway drug—

might we not also say:
"all shooting is killing"
"all shooting is confessing"
"all shooting is suicide"

If the work of culture is the site of confrontation between the maker and the viewer
the camera is the site of confrontation between the shooter and the world.

Fukase's body and head,
in the end,
were the site of confrontation between a staircase and the ground;
he now exists in a torporic, comatose state,
between living and death,
not unlike the photographs he spent his life making.

- 2 Photographic language is remarkably astute
even if it arrived there by accident.

We say that a person "photographs well"
with no real indication of whether they are in front of the camera
or behind it.

This helps to divide photography from other disciplines

because we cannot help but be definite and clear when we say someone
paints, sculpts, writes, or dances well.

This means
that the person doing the shooting is also the person being shot at
that the individual who does is also the object to which the thing is done.

Daguerreotypes, the earliest photographs, were thought of,
not incorrectly,
as occult objects.
“The mirror with a memory”, they were called, for they were photographs
made *of*,
(not *on*)
pieces of highly polished silver.
—notice, here, because it will come in handy later, that silver kills werewolves,
but not zombies—

Only one person could look at a Daguerreotype at a time,
if they wanted to make out any image at all,
and, squaring it up to their eyes,
they could not help but see themselves
—living, mobile—
superimposed on the subject
—dead, static, stuck.

The darkroom continued a metaphysics of photography.

In its ritualized confines,
the crypto-spiritual and alchemical practice of photography was made manifest.
From a thin strip of plastic
images were séanced into being
thanks to a mixture of chemicals
and a light shining directly downwards
through an enlarger’s giant, Cyclopiian eye.

Although practically different,
the digital image emphasizes this liminal space
between life and un-life;
a flicker of energy runs across the body of a chip
like lightning through a Frankenstein’s corpse
when a button is pressed.

3 Photography magazines are deceptively technical.

Reading them, you might not be blamed
for thinking that photography is cold and mechanical
That what matters is number and precision.
“We want to know what f-stop you used,
we want to know what shutter-speed you used.
We want to know what film speed you used,
we want to know what flash-bulb you used.
We want to know what brand you used;
give us the numbers that made your image so that,
when the planets align properly,
we, too, can make exactly the same image of an entirely different subject.”
A fun party game:
the next time you meet someone
who claims to be a photographer
ask:
“what do you shoot?”
Your innocent and ambiguous question will likely not be answered
with a discussion of subject.
Instead,
you are likely to get an arcane formula that means nothing to you:
“I shoot a Canon EOS” - “I shoot 35-mil, with an Olympus OM-1”
—or, if one is especially precious—
“I shoot only medium-format, with my grandfather’s Hasselblad”

There is some wisdom in this, at least,
as the photographer secretly recognizes that the practice is not craft;
that it is not the photographer’s hand, eye, or body that strikes the subject,
but the camera instead.

4 Photography is not a craft, but it is not an art, either.

On painting’s field-trip through impressionism, modernism and post-modernism,
photography was at the side of the road
arguing with the teacher about whether it should be allowed on board at all.
So it is now a hitchhiker, trying to catch up.
trying so desperately

that it no longer cares to make distinctions within itself
about whether it should be there or not
or about whether some of it belongs
and some does not
or that there are other busses
with other destinations
to which it may be more suited

Some photographic acolytes
are stuck with the dubious distinction of “fine art photographer,”
an apology before the fact
in the same way that one may describe another as an “exotic dancer,”
or may describe a body of work as
“classy stuff—
strictly tasteful nudes.”

5 Henri Cartier-Bresson
is important for two reasons—
neither of which is his imagery.

His friends used to get frustrated with him because,
in conversation,
the French photographer would move his head about
ever so slightly
side to side and up and down.
He was trying to compose you into a hypothetical shot
that he wasn't taking (but could have been)
as he talked to you.
Moving slightly, he could prevent the tree behind you
from growing out of your head
Or cause you to turn so that your face was lit properly
by the adjacent window

Of course, this was only from his point of view.

He was also known for carrying his camera
at his side
(35mm Leica rangefinder, for those of you keeping score)
and automatically adjusting it to take in
more light
(when he passed under an awning or a tree)

or less
(when re-emerging into full sun).

He became both light-meter and camera, and he is celebrated for this;
automation
predictability
accuracy

6 I don't know how many people know this,
But all images are religious;
we can trace this etymologically as well as ritualistically.
Paintings, obviously, are Christian
(with bodily, lascivious, bloody, violent, traditional oils being Catholic,
and affordable, cheap, capitalistic, pseudo-secular acrylics being Protestant)
Photographs are Greek
they are conceptual, not physical
—the products of Athenian ideas,
as opposed to Roman acts
or German techniques—
photographs are democratic and apathetic
and eschew devotion and hierarchy
photographs believe that the luckiest Greek soldiers
were those killed fighting the medusa;
those soldiers escaped the oblivion-death of living organisms and
discovered the preservation-death of the record, the archive, the object

Paganistic Greeks that they are,
photographs worship in a pantheon;
but it is Thanatos, not Eros, that they follow.

Thanatos' photo-followers pay tribute to the god of death and stasis
by shooting, capturing, dodging, burning, and firing.

Photographs kill by sustaining, they freeze into gelatine,
they zombify

Eugene Atget,
sipping Beaujolais,
in a French café,
would sometimes say:

"We should speak of making pictures, and not of taking them"

{Actually,
that was probably Ansel Adams,
but sometimes
a rhyme forces us to bend things a little
in constructing the record}

This, it would seem to me, proposes that we lie about photography
That we should put ourselves under the illusion that it is Erotic
rather than Thanatotic—

were photo Erotic instead of Thanatotic,
we wouldn't frame a subject, we would caress a partner
we wouldn't shoot but consume
the shutter, now a sphincter, would gape or yawn rather than fire
we would seduce a creation rather than capture a negative
gone would be the violent dodging and burning;
we would correct our images, instead,
by teasing and pinching

7 No photograph is narrative.

This is an illusion
that must be put to rest.

It is reliant on our view that the photograph is a mimic of the world,
an objective observer,
and that therefore the images it records are directly connected
to the locomotive world.
But it isn't
because they aren't.

The before-and-afters are nowhere to be found in photographs.
Only shutter-time exists in photographs
and shutter-time is incompatible with real time.

8 Early photographic subjects included:

~seemingly uninhabited buildings
(shutter time can eradicate
moving bodies)

~severed leaves, branches, and flowers
~dead babies
(it was common practice
to photograph infant mortality
with the child posed and dressed
as though it were merely sleeping
forever)

Worshipping Thanatos,
photographs cannot help but be a part
of our Freudian death-drive.

The death-drive is misunderstood;
we often assume that it means
a will to kill or die, destroy or ruin
But it is much worse than this.

The death-drive
compels us to lock
to preserve in a half-life
to zombify, to vampirize, to immortalize

To be photographed is not to be granted a death,
but rather is to be granted an un-life.

It is to be stuck on a wall after being congealed and distilled
into a symbol of status
or of culture
or of technical prowess
or of athletic acumen.

It is to be locked into an archive
that denies change
so that people will not say,
"oh, that thing or person is gone"
but will instead say,
"look how masterful we are over time,
that even the thing that should have vanished,

remains

UNDER
GLASS

Exhibition Texts

~

"We used to say that Josiah Marker was born part machine and part wild animal, although being born rich afforded him the privilege of eccentricity and that didn't hurt him any, either. He had built a camera when he was a boy and he used it to make pictures almost non-stop, firing that shutter whenever the locomotive world would stand still long enough for him to capture it. Of course, as a young man of considerable means he could afford to shoot anything he wanted, and though many

were annoyed by his incursions they would stop and pose, and I do believe they secretly liked the idea of being immortalized by that young man.

Now when he grew up something happened and a darkness came over him; he abandoned his camera, and instead took to carrying his pistol with him, hidden in his coat pocket. I think he treated it as a kind of security blanket and he couldn't bring himself to part with it. He wrote to me once,

'I reckon I'd never have been able to feel fully clothed and civilized without that gun. A gentleman always keeps his weapon against his body, until he needs to shoot it.'

To be clear, I never saw the flash of his pistol in town. But I could tell that he meant what he said, and he'd adjust it from time to time so as to be always ready to shoot. If ever a general tension descended onto some social occasion or another, he would reach into his coat and pull out a silver matchbox... but I swear on my honor that before his hand re-emerged I always heard him pull back the revolver's hammer. Why, he used that hand-gun to hunt elk, strange as it may seem, but he grew up close to the land and he could move through the bush undetected, as quiet and sombre as a cemetery. I asked him why he didn't use a rifle and he told me:

'When shooting with a device like this you need to line everything up just right. You've got to get up close and you've got to have a relationship with the animal ~ you've got to know how he behaves alive to know how he ought to look dead.'

I suppose I should have realized that a man so quick to arm himself would meet his end by the firearms of another. Tempers were running high that winter, and a homesteader named Edward James was convinced that Josiah had been taking liberties with his wife. Well, he walked right up close to Josiah one day and shot him through the eye, and that bullet must have moved around inside his skull something fierce because Josiah just stood there afterwards, staring straight ahead with the one eye he had left.

Eventually, someone laid him down on a cot in the middle of the street, and Doc Richards and some of the men then carried him into my office and set him down next to the press. After looking at him for a while the Doc said,

'You know, Hans, this is the damndest thing... he's a pulse and he's breathin', but there's nobody there.'

Hans Pfinder, *Memoirs of a Newspaperman, 1882-1897*,
"Chapter 7: The Taming of the Land"

~



*One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.*

Lewis Carroll, *Jabberwocky*

*The sibilant rush of the blade dropping and then the thud as the head is severed from
the body. Soon someone will display it on top of the city wall – every misery available
for perusal.*

Anonymous, *Musings on Madame la Guillotine*

Begin at the back of the head, just behind the ears, and saw straight through.

Russell Tinsley, *The Complete Illustrated Guide to Home Taxidermy*

The caput, or bean or noggin as they say – the head, that is – that is the important thing. Bring it back whatever you do. Medusa or moose, the head tells the world it was caught. All the vital forces flow through the thing. Every nerve ending in some greater or lesser part of the cranium electrified by the juice of life. The marks mean more than authority or tribe, they say, “I was alive, and now I am dead. I am conquered, I am subdued, my majesty is no longer mine.” What would hoof or hand tell us? Only which grasses were roamed through or what trade was plied. But the whole story? Ah no – for that – you need the old noodle.



The image of the animal is false, a construction, a facsimile at best. It's not the animal we preserve, caught in unending repose, but rather what we imagine the animal to be. The individual creature scampering over the forest floor no longer exists. We reconstruct the animal's gaze in the hopes of conveying a fondness for walks and new fern and dew on the meadow grasses, but these windows are blank. The personality is

imposed or absent. What we are making is an animal in our minds, the type-species by which to categorize, not to recollect; their perspective is silenced.

The skin does not slip from the flesh like a hand from a glove. Even in death it fights against relinquishing the self, the thing that knew hunger, thirst, desire, fear. The muscles develop from movement, are sculpted through exertion. The muscles mould the bones, pulling at them. They are an accumulation of gesture, a physical accretion of action. The bones remember even when we seek to anonymize. But it is no matter. They are absent here. It is a skin stretched over a frame similar to the fabric covering a chair... a pillow, stuffed taut, that we will lean into.

With what, then, do we start once the animal is on the table? The first task is to remove the narrative of its life, replacing it with polystyrene, clay, sawdust, and stitching.

In a mount you are attempting to capture the creature's physical characteristics, not its personality. Begin by skinning the head of the animal to remove the scalp. Insert the blade point in the nose, parallel with the eye, and cut straight back, through the eye socket on both sides.

Russell Tinsley, *The Complete Illustrated Guide to Home Taxidermy*

What we're doing here is not pretty.



Marx dissected the commodity form into the doublet of exchange value and use value. But what happens when the undead but always generative commodity becomes the living, breathing, rights-endowed, doggish bit of property sleeping on my bed, or giving cheek swabs for your genome project, or getting a computer-readable ID chip injected under the neck skin before the local dog shelter lets my neighbor adopt her new family member? *Canis lupis familiaris*, indeed; the familiar is always where the uncanny lurks. Further, the uncanny is where value becomes flesh again, in spite of all the dematerializations and objectifications inherent in market valuation.

Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*





~

Slipping a curl of hair behind her ear she lines up the traps across the back door. Each mouth a gaping horror to capture its prey, the grey metal jaws are beguiling in their silence. They can wait.

She hears the scritch scratch of nibbling late at night. Sometimes when she comes slipper-shod into the kitchen she delays turning on the light in hope of siting her quarry. Her blood flushes her neck and her heart quickens at the soft sound of a stray popcorn kernel being consumed.

She dreams they are upon her, their tiny tails flicking over the coverlet, their glossy coats smelling of old insulation and stale oats. She shivers and shakes the blankets. In the morning she airs the linens and beats the mattress.

One night they chew on her fingers.
One night they lick at her toes.

She awakes shrieking.

~ snap





There is a hair in my soup:
a conversation between Seema Goel and Lee Henderson

LH Any beginning I can think of feels forced, or maybe performative, because our collaborative process has been roughly two years long—that’s two years of talking about it and hammering through ideas and so on. Perhaps the best way to start, then, is in response to the show itself... In short, what is *Any Sharp Knife Will Do*?

SG The exhibition feels to me like something familiar that has gone askew—a song sung out of tune, or a mouthful of salt. We know these things, just not in this form. We can decode and understand them, but at the same time it’s completely foreign.

Creating an experience where the viewer is concurrently attracted and repulsed, we have set up a space of cognitive dissonance. It is an uncanny space where we overtly consider the filters placed over experience by pushing how sense-data is mediated. Encountering a hunting trophy is very different from standing in front of your images in the show. With a “real” animal trophy, the narrative of the hunt is implicit. There is authority and domination in the viewer’s gaze. The animal is conquered. I am much more aware of the living animal that was, and of the violence of its death. I am always impressed by hunting trophy mounts and tend to see them as powerful.

Interior, day. A garden is seen through a window. Zoom out to reveal a sitting room with fireplace and several comfortable-looking stuffed chairs.

On the side wall, a slide projection of the word “HEAD” appears.

Cut to a medium shot of a side table supporting a silver tray of jewel-bright fruit. Slow zoom in. The fruit is revealed to be rotting. Fruit flies form a halo above it, buzzing drunkenly (*note: add flies in post*). Zoom out to where the fruit returns to looking edible.

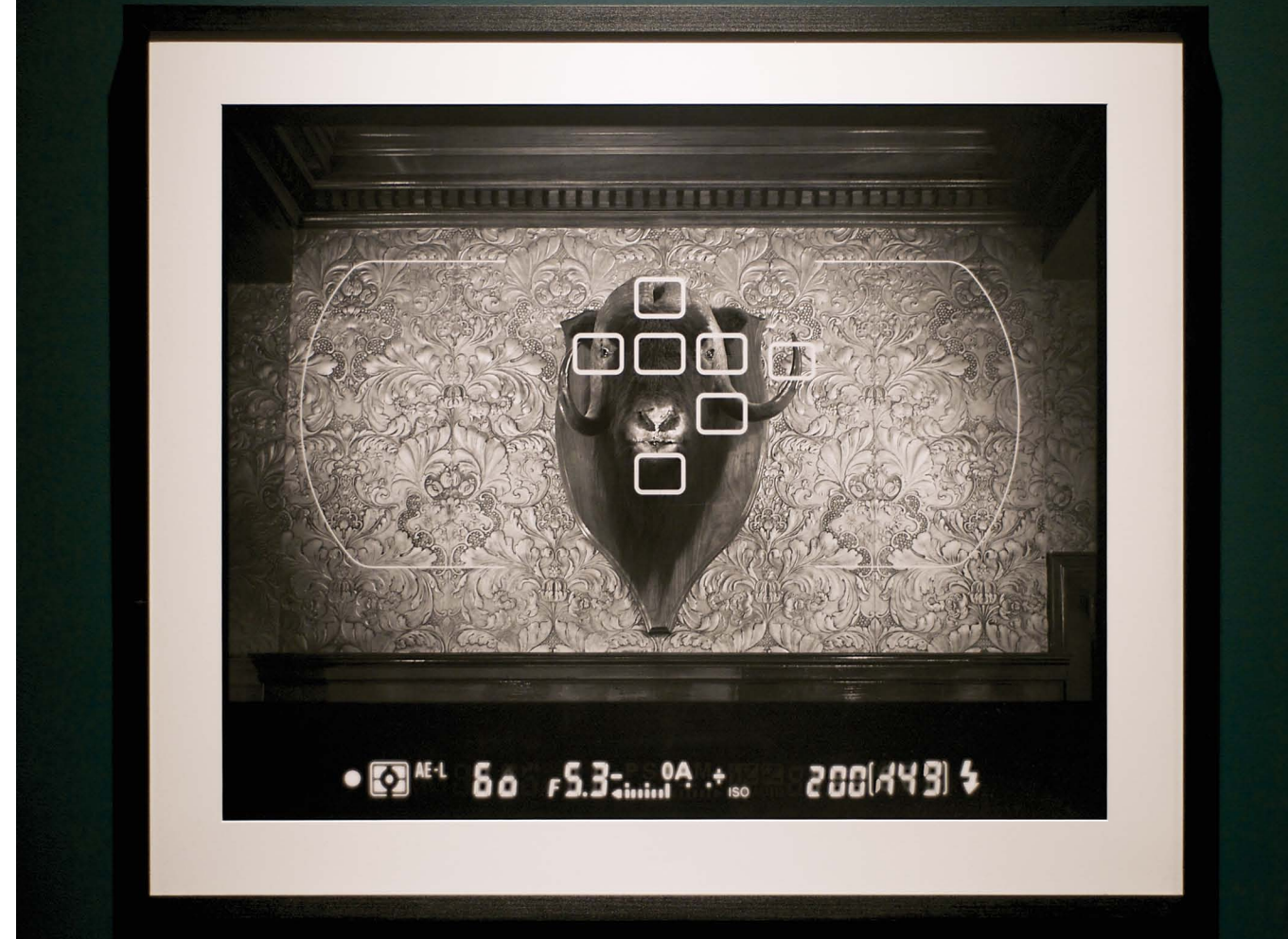


With the photos, on the other hand, the lens information places the viewer in front of the camera and allies them with the photographer/shooter. The perspective is chosen for me. The mediation of the camera makes it safer for me to look without fear of attack, but it also makes me look closely at the whole image. The creep factor shifts from the heaviness of killing the animal to the reduction of the animal. There is suddenly room to take in the surroundings. The animal is also out of place more in the photos. With a real trophy I don't usually think, "how bizarre to encounter this in my Dad's study." I just think, "this was the strangest wedding gift of all."

Oh, and of course, "OMG those are on the endangered species list now!"

LH The consideration of it as a member of a type (species) is never far away, is it? We seem to want to convert the animal into an iteration of a code.

I respond to what you say about the vicariousness of the record of a shot, and I was thinking about this in shooting and processing the images; when we talk about photographs, we often suppose that we're seeing what the photographer saw, but we're really not. We're seeing only the traces of the photons that hit the piece of film or paper (or the digital sensor) and the traces of any manipulations—intentional or otherwise—that have happened to that data since. But at the time of the photograph, the photographer wasn't seeing what we see in the photograph, but was instead seeing the inside of the camera itself... Vilém Flusser calls this "the photographer being the



functionary of the apparatus"¹ and he's right in that it's a thing with its own program that is operated by the photographer. Of course, the photographic mythos proposes that we should all be such expert functionaries of the apparatus that we don't even see it, that we're not even aware of it when we shoot, that it should become an extension of the eye... but it will always be a foreign body.

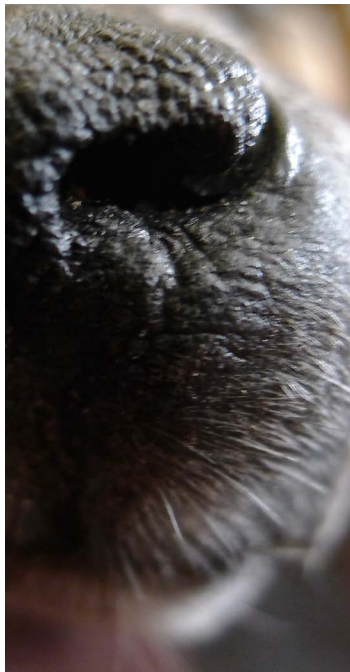
This reductive creepiness is inextricable from photography (despite an apparent technical mandate to cram as much information into every image as possible). And the reduction is part of what those

Cut to closeup of a hand holding a coffee cup; heat moves from liquid to tissue.

Cup is raised to mouth, sipped, lowered again and placed in a white saucer held by the other hand.

photographs are intended to point out, or possibly satirize. I make those photographs the approximate size of a trophy head so they could theoretically replace one on a wall or above a fireplace, so one could have the reduced, mediated version in the typical context of the “original.”

Slow zoom out; dog’s head rests on knee. Warm hand sets down the saucer and reaches to stroke the ears.



SG The size reference is interesting because real trophies feel much larger to me even though the photos are a good approximation of their size. This again calls on “sense-data” and our methods of processing what’s in front of us. The real object can elicit a primal response—faster breathing, dilation of blood vessels, adrenaline. This is less likely with the image since we know it to be safe. Unless, as you mention, the context shifts the meaning of the content; a gory scene would likely still raise the blood pressure. I’m wondering also about the idea of keeping a record, how both the physical preservation of the animal and the photographic preservation of the animal come from different desires. Photos are used so much they replace and can fabricate memory. The camera mediates my gaze and memories.

LH And the record makes obsolete the experience.

SG Yes! I love it when people take photos with a monument or celebrity. The object/objectified person is another kind of trophy.

LH In the installation, one can’t really get into an ideal or default viewing position of the photographs because there are dogs there, gazing straight at the heads in the photographs. At the opening of the

exhibition and in the talk the next day, people didn’t want to cross that gaze, even if it meant a better, closer look at the photographs; Johanna Bundon described her unwillingness to break their gaze as “more than a rule - like law”; Ian likened the ring of people outside the dog-photo interchange to a Greek chorus.

SG Rachelle Viader Knowles said she felt the photos existed for the dogs. She didn’t want to intervene.

The dogs gazing intently at the photographs, poised to interrogate the animals, brings in the present - it makes it current. The relationship between the animals and the photographs was considered from the very earliest conception of the work, but I had not thought about the solidity of their gaze and the public’s reluctance to break it. I was thinking about creating a space that held tension, was dizzying, had a precipice involved so that the viewer might slip on what they were seeing.

Pan from dog’s ears to a fire in a hearth. The screen in front has been removed so the heat penetrates the room more easily. Shot lingers on the flames.



Cut to closeup of saucer at table's edge; saucer is placed just far enough onto table to not fall off.

LH “Precipice” is a nice word choice, that’s it exactly. And I think that’s what people experience—we noted that as people rounded the corner from the antechamber to the main space, many would stop at the edge, sometimes for what felt like an eternity, unsure of whether they were supposed to continue in... of course they eventually do, as they accept the new code the space is proposing. We left a lot of room around the dogs but their presence fills it; I think because the air gets thick where the gaze is taking place.

I’ve considered some reasons for this; a) they don’t wish to interrupt the dead-dog-as-viewer’s ability to “see” the photograph, b) they don’t

want to interrupt another human-as-viewer’s ability to trace that gaze uninterrupted by another’s body, c) they’re compelled by primal nature or by training that one doesn’t get in front of an animal... there could be other explanations but those seem the most plausible to me.

SG The tacit consideration of the viewer for other viewers is not something I had thought of. It reminds me of the generous nature of viewing art and being complicit in the construction of what is happening.

LH The dogs themselves are curious objects, to say the least. When you first sent me photos of them, I opened my e-mail and for a split second I thought, “hey, Seema got a puppy!” I knew what they were and I knew they were coming but the impression of life was enough to fool me. And this speaks to photography’s reduction, since the living and the dead are robbed of time anyway when photographed. What’s clear upon closer inspection is that something about the dogs is off. They’re just a little too upright, or the jaw is just a little too thick, etc. So one becomes aware that this is not really a preservation of something in an exact state, but rather a reconstruction.

A scenographer once told me, “when you’re making a porch for the stage, you don’t want to make it the way a porch is—you want to make it the way you remember a porch to be.”

Cut to long shot of room.

A woman in a bathing suit and sash enters camera-left, carrying a sign that reads “BODY.” Exits camera-right.



Cut to a closeup of a man’s hand with long fingernails, absent-mindedly picking at a loose thread at the edge of a cushion.



SG A perfect description of taxidermy! Taxidermy is about what we think the animal looks like, not what it actually did look like. In Tinsley's manual "Guide to Home Taxidermy" he encourages his reader to mix and match parts of different skins to achieve the best results. While we know the animal is present because we have its skin, this is a very selective record of the creature, but the one we recognize. The skin is sewn up over a form that is sculpted and stuffed.

LH Of course; the animal is constituted by its behavioural, cognitive, communicative traits as well as its physical... but then the physical gets further cut up and segmented and dispersed. You described it as "upholstery," which is apt.

SG The animal in this case is reduced to object, and here we become concerned because of the kind of animal. Because it is a dog, the viewer is uncomfortable with the form of representation. We don't expect the dog in the space in this way, we expect the moose there, or at least the head of the moose. Having the dog there is a bit like having Aunt Edna mummified in her rocking chair. The dog is family. When it is reduced to the species or breed type there is a confusion for the viewer. People ask me how they died, what are their names, how did I get them. They don't ask these questions of the mice or of the hunted animals. We accept a different standard of life and death for different creatures. Part of my own impulse in the work is to push the viewer to ask why this is so. Would you eat a dog? I've found recipes.



Insert voiceover:

Stewed Dog, Wedding Style

First, kill a medium-sized dog, then burn off the fur over a hot fire. Carefully remove the skin while still warm and set aside for later. Cut meat into 1-inch cubes. Marinate meat in mixture of vinegar, peppercorn, salt, and garlic for two hours. Fry meat in oil using a large wok over an open fire, then add onions and chopped pineapple and sauté until tender. Pour in tomato sauce and boiling water, add green pepper, bay leaves and tabasco. Cover and simmer over warm coals until meat is tender. Blend in puree of dog's liver and cook for additional five-to-seven minutes.²

LH I remember we had a conversation about whether this was a controversial gesture and the fact that people have no problem with museum dioramas that feature taxidermy.

SG Much of our response has to do with how we know animals in the sense of practical cognitive experience with them. If we have creatures as pets or hunt them or farm them our regard for them either elevates them to being closer to us or reduces them so that we are able to ignore their experiences.

LH This raises something that I think we've sort of danced around: our own complicity in the use of animals in art practice, specifically toward producing this show. The images of mine and the sculptures of yours wouldn't exist without the corpse of the animal.

SG The use of the animals as a mode of complicity isn't something I had thought about at the time of making the work. It is important to recognize that we are using creatures, and this use is necessary to expose the conundrums we're discussing. Fortunately both the dogs and the mice came to me dead, so I have no guilt attached to them. I do find the actual process of the taxidermy uncomfortable. But I think that's as it should be. So am I encouraging the exploitation of these creatures or am I just exploiting their deaths?

LH Well, I think you can perform something without encouraging it. That's what satire is—the rhetorical exaggeration to point out real, but perhaps

more subtle or unacknowledged, ills. What if we look at this relative to the history of Canadian art (assuming there is such a thing) and its trajectory vis-a-vis human-animal or human-landscape relationships and exploitation? There's certainly a Group of Seven kernel buried in how we (falsely) imagine ourselves as a country that lives "with" the land, as opposed to merely on it. I'm thinking also about Jesse Power; he was the controversial vegetarian OCAD student who made a video of skinning a cat as a way of "critiquing" our use of animals.³ That's not a satire, because it's embodying the thing it seeks to undermine, and doing it so completely that it's not "about" animal cruelty, it just IS animal cruelty. No metaphor = no art.

It seems to me the problem is one of proximity to the crime. While I don't feel cruel in making the work, I am aware of being a bit like a mafia wife; just because I didn't kill the animal doesn't mean I'm not complicit in its death, or profiting by it.

But then of course you reach the Buddhist problem, which is "how you live without killing or harming anything?" Of course you can't. If photographs and trophies are zombies, we're vampires.

SG While we took pains to avoid the issue of cruelty being at the centre of the work I think we engage in a form of terrorizing the viewer. We frighten them into thinking/feeling. Or at least we employ an element that is close to fear in order to get their attention.

Foley: fire crackles off camera.
Pan down and left; pull focus to closeup of woman's feet in 2" patent leather heels.

Cut to close up of man's ear.
Slow pan down a body; hold on toes, flexing. Subtitle reads: "FOOT"



We are working with the quotidian and yanking at it until the blade falls - revealing everything askew.

LH I think this is at the heart of why we set the show up the way we did. It performs, in a sense, as a museological exhibition at first, as a means both of lulling a viewer into thinking they're in familiar territory and of planting some subliminal seeds to psychologically prepare them for the horror vacui of the space around the corner.

SG The photographs become ghostly. The dogs remain entranced. We've interrupted a moment of action.

LH The photograph-as-wraith makes sense to me, though. This may be boring or pedantic, but when I make photographs I want them to be about pointing out what all photographs are doing already, or how they fail to transcend the way we think they should. I've written elsewhere on how what's compelling about the possibility of ghosts isn't that we might live forever in some fashion, but rather that we might be surrounded by remembrances of what was, in disembodied or effortless ways.

SG This might be the point where our individual practices meet. The body and the disembodied, the memory and the substance—these things emerge as central themes as we become familiar with the installation, as viewers or as artists. Like a series of harmonics the ideas grow louder, clearer and more resonant over time

Zoom left to corner of room behind chair. A butterfly lands on the glass bookcase; its wings open and close repeatedly. Cut to closeup of the dog, staring.

1 Flusser, Vilém. *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. Translated by Hubertus von Amelnxen. Reaktion: London. 2000.

2 Safran Foer, Jonathan. *Eating Animals*. Penguin: New York. 2009. pp. 28-29.

3 The presiding judge's consideration of ethics in the case is recounted in Christie Blatchford's article "A judge's struggle with a cat torturer," *The National Post*, May 29, 2003.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES:

Seema Goel is a Saskatchewan-born multimedia artist. Her work focuses on human-animal, human-place, and human-human relationships, with particular emphasis on the scale of our abilities to engage with, change, and manipulate these things. Using an eclectic range of materials to explore these themes, she draws from her dual background in the arts and sciences to produce multilayered works. Goel holds a B.Sc. from McGill, an Associate Arts diploma from the Ontario College of Art and Design, and an MFA in Sculpture from the Rhode Island School of Design. She lives in Dublin.

Lee Henderson was born in Saskatoon in 1979, and has studied art in Canada and Germany, with talented professionals including Maria Vedder, Brian Eno, and Ellen Bromberg. Since completing his MFA in Intermedia at the University of Regina, Henderson has been furthering his time- and lens-based artistic practice while teaching Media Art, Computer Science, and Conceptual Photography at the postsecondary level, in Universities in Saskatchewan and Ontario. Mortality, impermanence and the confluence of the bodily and the metaphysical continue to be the major themes of his work and his primary areas of research; through installation, video, performance and photography he negotiates the persistence of collective histories and the brevity of individual lives.

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Plates:

page 3 - Dr. W. Ellenberger and Dr. H. Baum, "Der Hund," from *Systematische und topographische Anatomie des Hundes*, Verlag von Paul Parey, Berlin, 1891
page 9 - Martin Schongauer, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (detail), mid-15th century
page 15 - Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (detail), 1611-12
page 21 - Francisco Goya, sketch of Saturn devouring his son (detail), 1796-7
page 29 - Olympus camera exploded diagram (OM System camera, source unknown)