

Where Do We Go From Here?

Maria Whiteman

Keywords: animality, taxidermy, biopolitics, visual scientific practice, photography, culture, human-animal relation, nonhuman

The subtlety of nature is greater many times over than
the subtlety of the senses and understanding.

Francis Bacon

The phrase “wasting nature” doesn’t make an empirical claim; nor does it constitute a conceptual intervention—at least, to me this is not its main function. It is, first and foremost, a phrase that makes a normative claim—a claim about an appropriate way of being or relating. “Wasting” is a judgment call. It can name a form of excess that tramples the utilitarian and technocratic ethos of the age under foot in the hope of generating new possibilities and imaginings; one might see Matthew Arnold as celebrating the “waste” and purposelessness of culture as just what the doctor ordered in the era of Philistines and Barbarians. When it is paired with “nature,” however, waste names a trauma and constitutes an indictment of the practices and principles by which we live. How could wasting nature possibly be good? Or appropriate? Doesn’t it suggest a mode of living that—given the absolute limit named by nature—is irrational and unjustifiable? A way of behaving that will produce an irresolvable crisis?

What emerges strongly and clearly here are the dominant ideas we have about nature—a concept whose apparent solidity belies its very real complexity. It is an abstract noun (like justice or democracy) masquerading as a concrete one (nature: you know, the content of Banff National Park, or everything in the world that is other than human, or ...). My artwork deals with nature. But in saying this, what I mean to say is that it participates in an interrogation of the solidity with which we treat it and the normative judgments to which it gives rise. I worry that we are “wasting nature”; I would be worried, too, if my art didn’t try to trouble the claims and beliefs nested in this phrase, without,

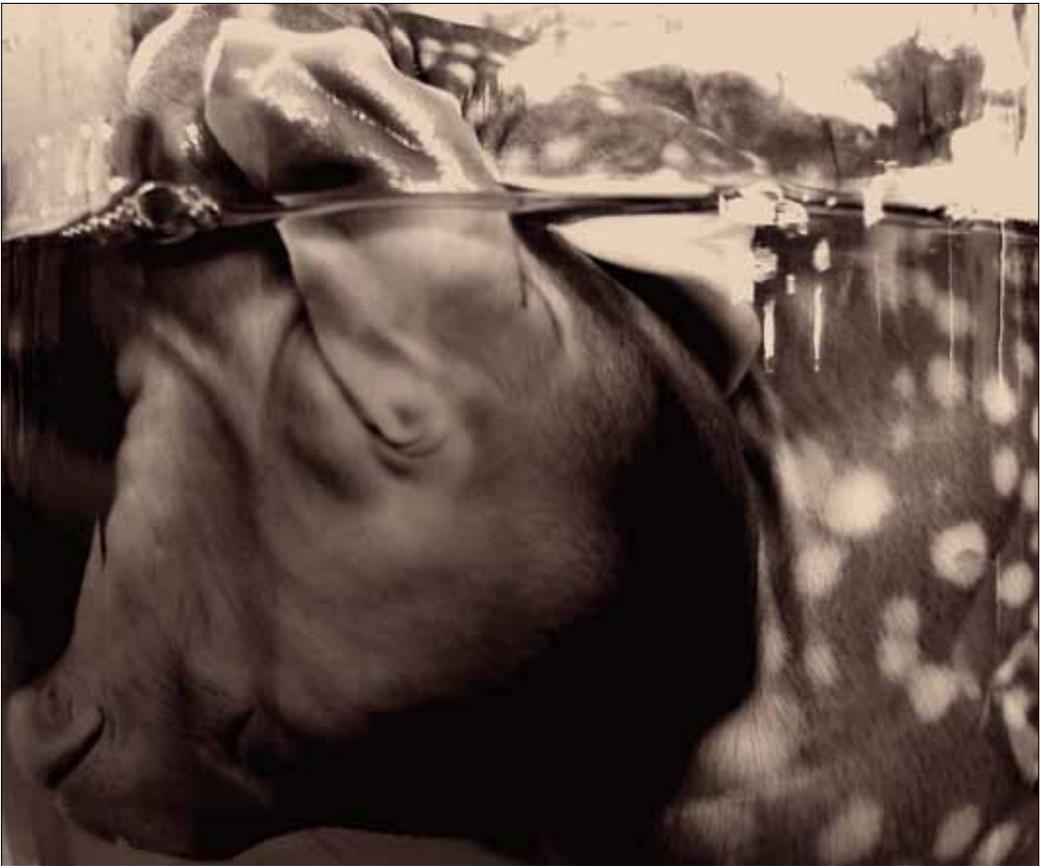


Fig 1 Maria Whiteman, *Pickled Animal Series 1*, digital photograph (2010).



Fig 2 Maria Whiteman, *Pickled Animal Series 2*, digital photograph (2010).

however, such critique being a substitute for difficult political or ethical questions that we have to raise about how we are living today, why we live this way, and what its consequences are for us and for others inhabiting the planet.

I first started thinking about life forms and nature in relation to art practice when I was in graduate school. It started with a fascination with the otherness of marine life and an attempt to imagine what it must mean to live in the heaviness of a liquid rather than the lightness of gas. I became fixated on barnacles. I produced multidimensional works in which the barnacles clung to and took over the work, though I designed them in such a way that they eroded over time. The biographical link is an unexpected one. At the time I was nursing my son and couldn't help but meditate on the formal repetitions that occurred in nature. Barnacles are marine crustaceans that live in tidal waters and survive in an environment that relentlessly works to erode their physical bodies. Beyond the clingy, barnacle-like behavior of my nursing son, I wanted to insist on parallels that highlighted our own life activity. We also inhabit the thinnest segment of our environment, a place of ceaseless struggle against the decay of quotidian experience as our bodies carry on toward the granular decomposition of death.

It was only much later that I started to once again think about nature in relation to my practice. It was my return to photography as a medium that precipitated engagement with the environment around me. I'm not troubled by the politics of photographic indexicality: I don't feel as if photography insists on an engagement with the Real that is any different (or any more troubling) than other modes of art practice. Nevertheless, as soon as I once again began to work with photography (especially digital photography), I felt a strong need to directly confront and to figure the spaces and environments in which I was living. I had recently moved to the industrial city of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, a place marked

by the visual language of both industry (its visually anachronistic though still economically vibrant steel mills) and nature (the abrupt cleft of the Niagara Escarpment that slices the city in two). I was troubled by the all too easy disassociation of industry from nature that we tend to operate with today—a relationship in which one negates the other, and does so in a way that prevents a more critical interrogation of our tendency to imagine nature too easily as the good Other of industry; more than two centuries into the industrial age, our relationship with nature struck me as uncritical and overly romantic, as a place we occupy only by negating the (for better and worse) techno-industrial beings we most certainly are. This is the first place in which I tried to trouble the values that we connect to nature, and the ways in which we can use nature to indict our aspects of the human without fully thinking through its implications (can seven billion people do without steel?).

My work at that time was not “about” nature, but an attempt to engage it as a concept or figure, as this is expressed in art but also in (the history of philosophy). I started with a series of large-scale digital photographs (displayed singly, in diptychs or triptychs, or as fields of multiple photographs) of banal landscapes and factories printed on backlit film. The landscapes were printed in over-saturated colors to represent the four seasons (blue = winter, red = fall, brown = spring, green = summer). These photos probed the visual, social, and environmental encounter zones between natural and industrial landscapes in the contemporary world, in an attempt to render unfamiliar categories into which we position industry and nature, and to raise challenges to the affect we associate with each of them respectively. A dominant gesture of these pieces was to juxtapose images of unruly, twisted nature with aestheticized views of urban industrial factory landscapes in decline (at sites around the world), in order to bring to light the wild spaces of both nature and industry that (for instance)

ideas of urban renewal seek to domesticate—either to make spaces safe for recreation (e.g., a walk through “untouched” nature) or to boost property values by making aesthetically pleasing spaces without the taint of industry.

I’ve since moved in a new direction (as represented in the photos here), while still addressing the problematic named by “wasting nature.” As an artist, I am also compelled by the ways in which animals are visualized in contemporary art and in the cultural sphere more generally, and by how distinct techniques of representation afford them differing degrees of cultural significance. This is the key dynamic that I have sought to explore in both my recent art practice and my writing on art, animals, and the discourses of animality. Underlying this investigation of the spaces in which animals are present and absent (often even when they are physically present!) in the social imaginary is an affective presentiment concerning the fate of our cohabitation on this planet; as a consequence, my work cannot help but tarry with empathy and mourning.

Let me be clear here: there’s sometimes a tendency for art to too quickly embrace sentiment, feeling and affect, and to do so in a manner that blunts the critical edge in which artistic investigations most certainly engage. At the same time, there’s a danger in not properly acknowledging how affect shapes artistic production *and* the encounter of viewers with artworks. Affect need not be the other of critical theory or philosophy, both of which inform and shape my work. I follow Eve Sedgwick in recognizing much of what passes for critical thought as a form of paranoid reading that trades in the hermeneutics of disclosure, i.e., the process of demystification or *exposé* through which the (supposedly) naive are exposed to truth. Her point is not that paranoid readings are wrong, but that they constitute one mode or form of knowing, and that by assuming the position of the *only* way to know they have produced a

“disarticulation, disavowal, and misrecognition of other ways of knowing” (143). I see my art and my writing as crossing back and forth from philosophy to affect, without disavowing the importance of either in constituting knowledge and experience of the world—indeed, recognizing the necessity of both in the practice of art, and especially in art that tries to engage with animals: that essential Other against which human epistemologies and ontologies are produced.

My engagement with animal bodies and their representation grew out of experiments that I engaged in while installing these photos at various sites. At one show in Hamilton, I hung large glass bulbs in front of the photos, into which I jammed stuffed animals so that their faces were compressed against the glass. There was an uncanny feeling in seeing these animals floating in front of these landscapes (industrial and natural), rendered alien to them. The sympathy viewers expressed for these trapped faux animals was startling, except when I realized that the affect many of us connect with animals’ bodies and fur originates in the childhood comforts afforded by these complex representations of real bodies (a stuffed animal differing from the real one it represents in scale, color, bodily proportions—indeed, in every possible way, and yet no less real for those who hold and stroke it).

All of my current projects take up the issue of animal representations and their place in our social imaginary in the twenty-first century. The figure of the animal has long played a significant role in human societies as an allegory of our relation to each other as well as to the earth. If the animal looms especially large in our thoughts today—an increasingly important subject in philosophy, politics, as well as art—it is because it represents both the damage we have inflicted on the environment and our inability to fully understand our relationship to the natural world. It is the end of our connection to the animal on which we seem to be meditating, a connection that we are desperate to understand more

deeply, having only ever grasped it incompletely, incorrectly, or in fragments and scraps in the first place. Another site, another relationship, that we can see as a waste—which is to say, a relationship to investigate, but careful as a result of all the presumptions and presentiments that attend our sense of the animal as a being of and in nature.

The issue that I am currently examining in my work (from which these photos are taken) is the use of animal display to transform flesh, feathers, and bone into knowledge about nature. These photos investigate the archive of animal bodies stuffed in jars, held in place by pins, wrapped up in string, and stuffed, mounted and displayed in an effort to render the anarchy of the natural world into the strict categories of science. Knowledge of the animal world through biological taxonomy—domain, kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, and finally species—is an ancient practice, with origins in the work of Aristotle (in the ancient world) and Linnaeus (the forefather of modern practices). It is also a practice fast coming to an end, as science shifts from learning about animals through visual display to the invisibility of the double helix of DNA. In place of genus and species, traced out through shifts in the color of fur or markings of the skin, we get a sequence flashing up on a computer screen: A-C-G-T. The bodies I record in these images are less frequently found on university campuses and in scientific archives. Animal bodies of this kind are more frequently encountered in the natural history museum—spaces to which we drag our children so that they might safely encounter “real” animals. The images (still from a video piece) that show me touching and petting taxidermy specimens intended for display at the Royal Alberta Museum in Edmonton are intended to prompt a reflection on this desire for encounter and its impossibility with a dead Other who has been rendered lifelike for display only through complex mechanisms of representation that we rarely consider when we view such animals. But then what constitutes “animal” is never evident or

obvious to the senses, which is why it is essential to investigate the operations of representation rather than the reified bodies of animals. If I have most often done this through the use of photography, it is because of the photographs’ own dangerous dalliance with a contentious Real that is always already imagined into being rather than there for the taking via a snapshot.

I spoke earlier about empathy and mourning; and I spoke, too, about a relationship that we’ve never meditated on deeply enough. It is not just the gap or absence of a connection between human and animal that produces mourning, nor the fact that the rapid disappearance of these others means that this essential relationship is one that we are likely not to address with enough critical or affective force in the time still available. Empathy and mourning are both the product of the absent *temporality* named by these images. Animal temporality and our own comes together, it seems, incompletely. The bodies in my images will outlast our own, even though they are dead. And yet we know nothing about them other than their blunt physicality. When did they live? Where did they live? Somewhere in some other time this animal had a life, ran around, ate, slept, hid, pranced, and ran from danger. This animal was born into this world, had an existence, and then died. And here it lives on as this object and in my photographs; here it exists, continually. Why is it here, in its deadness that I have come to think this animal? Can I only think the animal in its captivity, in its non-presence, even when I want to make it present by probing the relationships, assumptions, and concepts that frame our connection and modes of knowing in specific ways? As Donna Haraway has asked: “Whom do I touch when I touch my dog?”

I have no doubt that these questions will continue to inform my art practice; there remains much to be learned about animals, representation, and the role played by photography as a mechanism of theory and affect. All of these

questions operate within the larger conceptual and normative landscape that the phrase “wasting nature” both names and troubles.

Note

Maria Whiteman is Assistant Professor at the University of Alberta. In addition to her studio work, she conducts research in contemporary art theory and visual culture. She is currently collaborating on *The Retreat* (forthcoming, Autonomedia) and *Refiguring the Animal: Plasticity and Contemporary Art* (forthcoming, University of Minnesota Press). A recipient

of an Interdisciplinary Course Seminar Grant from the Kule Institute for Advanced Study, Whiteman is a co-director of the 2012 Banff Research in Culture/documenta 13 research residency. She has had a solo exhibition at Latitude 53, and will be included in the 2013 Alberta Biennial at the Art Gallery of Alberta.

References

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 2003 “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You.” In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, pp. 123–51. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.



Fig 3 Maria Whiteman, *Pickled Animal Series 3*, digital photograph (2010).



Fig 4 Maria Whiteman, *Pickled Animal Series 4*, digital photograph (2010).

