

The Place of Martyrs

About the Artistic Recycling of Taxidermied Animals

Sergio Dalla Bernardina

The “cabinet of curiosities” is *en vogue*. Aesthetes, designers and interior magazines are suggesting the use of taxidermized animals for decorative purposes. In the contemporary art world, the use of these “readymades” is extremely common. Does this mark a return of paganism? Triumph of animalism? Posthumous homage to the living? This is all very plausible. Yet, the sacrificial hypothesis indicates other directions. From a message from the Drouot auction house concerning two works by the artist Pascal Bernier:

“He is best known for his hunting accidents: mortally wounded, stuffed animals whose wounds have been carefully bandaged by the artist. By this symbolic and redemptive gesture, he saves them from a second death”.¹

Behind the motives evoked by the artist (“With this work I wanted to signify that ...”), are we allowed to imagine motivations that are irreducible to his claims? Can we explain the success of an installation, of an artistic tendency, by factors that do not appear in the official comments? It’s an obsolete question, it’s true. And the response is clear and well-known: yes, we are allowed – and the massive irruption of stuffed animals in contemporary art, in trendy cafés and even in private homes, from which

1 <https://drouot.com/l/15438946-pascal-bernier-ne-en-1960-acci> last accessed 30.03.2024.

they had been banned in the name of ecological morality, provides the opportunity to revisit this old debate.²

Curiosity and voyeurism

For a while, having worked extensively on the anthropology of hunting, I sought to compare the display of trophies with the achievements of artists who exhibit the same “cadaver pieces” in other venues. Hunters too, in the past, defined their practice as “art” (and taxidermy, from this point of view, could even be described as bio-art before bio-art). So I wondered: if I question the hunter’s explanations, why should I take the artist’s literally? To interpret the hunter’s occult motivations, I based myself on the descriptions of hunting rituals reported by James Frazer in *The Golden Bough*. Ambivalently, the hunter-gatherer exults at his victim’s death (in this case a bear), wreaks havoc on his lifeless body, savors the violence of his deed, and at the same time feels regret. He finally sympathizes with the dead body and devotes a veritable cult to it. At the same time, he lies to it: “Who killed you? It was the Russians. Who cut off your head? It was a Russian axe.” These words were spoken by a hunter from a Siberian indigenous tribe, hence why he accused a Russian of the misdeed instead. Likewise, indigenous bear hunters in North America would beg the killed animal not to be angry, and even try to appease him with such words: “Cherish us no grudge because we have killed you. [...] Is it not glorious to be eaten by the children of a chief?” (Frazer 1894: 111, 113)

Sigmund Freud was not unaware of this ambivalence and, in *Totem and Taboo*, used these examples to support his largely hypothetical the-

2 I started looking into the rehabilitation of stuffed animals in my study on *Le retour du prédateur*. For the German equivalent of this phenomenon, see, for example, *Le Point*: “Les trophées de chasse, comble du kitsch devenu tendance déco en Allemagne”, <https://www.lepoint.fr/insolite/les-trophees-de-chasse-comble-du-kitsch-devenu-tendance-deco-en-allemande> (last accessed 29.03.2024).

ory of the “totemic banquet”.³ Today, in the age of the “ontological turning point” (Keck/Regehr/Walentowitz 2015), there is a tendency to focus on the reconciliatory aspect of these rituals, interpreting them as evidence of the feeling of proximity and interdependency that links humans to non-humans. My attention was drawn to the first part of the sequence, when violence precedes sanctification: the trophy not only repairs things, but it also perpetuates the “delicious” memory of a kill.

The artist as pornographer

So it would be reasonable to imagine that the same might be true of contemporary artists who manipulate the bloodless remains of other people’s victims (in most cases, they “recycle” already dead and tanned animals) for a good cause. Their function, in this perspective, would be to allow an externalization of humans’ empathy for other species as well as our sadistic and destructive tendencies. A painting or a sculpture would certainly suffice. But what makes the experience particularly appealing in this archaically-rooted “body art”, is that the dead being put on spectacle is a real dead being. A flesh-and-blood *ex-vivo*.

When Angela Singer shows her hinds covered in blood or her foxes wearing funeral wreaths on their backs, it’s for moral and philosophical reasons: “She is concerned with the ethical and epistemological consequences of humans using nonhuman life and the role that humans play in the exploitation and destruction of animals and our environment”.⁴ But her work may also offer, by indirect and sophisticated means, the same exciting and macabre experience formerly reserved for hunters.

3 There was a time, according to Freudian conjecture, when the young males, excluded from relations with the women of the family group, banded together against the father, killed him and, seized by recognition and remorse, began to venerate him. In this scenario, murderous violence and posthumous rehabilitation coexist as a kind of paradigm structuring our unconscious. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*.

4 <http://www.thephotophore.com/angela-singer/> (last accessed 29.03.2024).

When Andres Serrano captures the audience's gaze with his decapitated cow, it implies the edifying commentary of his exegetes: "It's the nerve of an Andres Serrano to impose his bloody cow head in 2008, with its fixed gaze demanding vengeance and forcing us to recognize violence we'd like to do without".⁵ But this bovine head, elegantly placed on a marble pedestal, is also reminiscent of other decapitations and that it renders "consumable", through the intermediary of an animal, the violence anonymous members of a voyeuristic public indulge in watching.

The catalogue for the *Cabinets de Curiosités* exhibition, organized by the Fonds Hélène et Édouard Leclerc pour la Culture in Landerneau in 2019, may provoke the same suspicion: are the testimonials of those involved authentic? Introducing his collection and announcing a change of perspective, arts patron Antoine de Galbert writes "[...] In the end, I only selected works denouncing [...] the sad destiny that our world reserves for animals: Rabbit slippers by Wim Delvoye, Snake with legs by Joan Fontcuberta, Dripping octopus by Thomas Feuerstein ... All objects of contemporary cabinet". Referring to Mahatma Gandhi, Galbert claimed that the greatness of a nation can be judged by the way animals are treated (Fonds Hélène et Édouard Leclerc 2019: 197). Contemporary art is thus a committed art, and if it dramatizes animal suffering, it is to display our inhumanity. But an unwilling observer might see this argument as a mere pretext and reply: "Wasn't there something morbid about the *curiosities* of the old times? And have we really changed from the past?" He might even compare the ingenuity of the contemporary artist and collector to a recent version of the "Comedy of Innocence" (the concept owes much to the Swiss classical scholar an ethnologist Karl Meuli), the ambivalent staging typical of archaic hunting rituals that caught the attention of the father of psychoanalysis (Dalla Bernardina 2020b, 15–17).

5 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CeDdgCM15jh/> (last accessed 29.03.2024).

“Hottentot Venus”

The “curiosities” of yesteryear display a discrepancy between their prosaic background and the nobility of official explanations. Earlier societies infatuation with the bizarre and scabrous was not confined to inanimate remains. Take the case of Sarah Baartman (1789–1815), the so-called “Hottentot Venus” who made headlines when, some twenty years ago, the French state was obliged to return her mortal remains to South Africa. Her story has been researched: in 1810, the unusual morphology (hypertrophy of the hips and buttocks and protruding genitalia) of this Khoikhoi woman was noticed by a naval doctor who, after promising her emancipation from slavery and a brilliant career, took her to London, where she was exhibited in a “human zoo” in Piccadilly Street. After Londoners’ interest wore off, Sarah Baartman ended up in Holland, then France, exhibited by an exotic animal showman in cabarets (3 francs to see her, more to touch her).⁶ Her physical characteristics caught the attention of scientists: to increase the knowledge of the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle, the zoologists Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (1772–1844) and Georges Cuvier (1769–1832) meticulously studied her physiology, subjecting her to all sorts of measurements. She died in 1815, but her vicissitudes continued: Cuvier had her genitalia and brain preserved in jars of formalin. Her skeleton, along with her body’s painted plaster cast, were installed in the Jardin des Plantes. Later, they were moved to the Trocadero, before landing at the Musée de l’Homme. The status of the “Hottentot Venus” changed: from a monster to be laughed at, to a museum object and even a “scientific attraction”, a source of study for specialists and information for amateurs. The audience’s curiosity is still there, after all, even if its causes are no longer the same.

Today, these causes and reasons are no longer enough. The debate surrounding the repatriation of Sarah Baartman’s remains in 2002 has raised new questions. Even the motives of a scientist like Cuvier, who

6 I obtained all this information from Wikipedia: https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saartjie_Baartman

worked for the “advancement of human knowledge”, have become increasingly dubious: by exploring the intimacy of this African woman, searching for who knows what difference, wasn't he playing doctor, like children who, under the pretext of a medical examination, hide motivations of a different nature? And in any case, how could he have conceived the idea of “taxidermizing” the “Hottentot Venus”, when this treatment is reserved for saints, kings and animals? It seems like a practice from another time, incompatible with contemporary sensibilities.

Venus from our home

In Landerneau, however, as part of the Leclerc exhibition mentioned above, I have met the equivalent of the “Hottentot Venus”. This “item's” description reads: “Woman with beard. Life-size mummified bust of Germaine D., Delmas-Orfila-Rouvière Collection”⁷. Here is the account of my encounter with this “scientific attraction”, whose museal use did not raise the least objection, in contrast with what happened to its South African counterpart:

In this vast assemblage of heteroclite collections, there was no shortage of trophies. Inspired initially by the poetics of simulation, I let myself go into animist fantasies: ‘How many souls are in this place? I feel presences everywhere’. There were indeed ‘cadavers hanging on the wall’, there were plenty of them, but the deadly effect was balanced, I'd even say exorcised, by the comic nature of their presentation. The same enigmatic taste was evident in the next room, which hosted contemporary artists' works. Not far away, visitors with inscrutable expressions silently contemplated a display case. It contained the mummified remains of Madame Germaine D., ‘Bearded Woman’. I thought several things at the same time 1) It must be terrible to be here, for the soul of this lady whose pilosity is being perpetuated. 2) This poor woman must have suffered so much. Now it's all over. 3) That beard, though... It happens sometimes.

7 Listed as a historical monument in 1992. Faculté de Médecine de l'Université de Montpellier, page 192 of the catalogue.

It happened to her, bad luck... Knowing the controversy sparked by the posthumous tribulations of the “Hottentot Venus”, I expressed my astonishment to a young security guard who was explaining the contents of the room: “Nobody says a word about this lady?” ... “Well yes, there are some who have doubts. But tests are underway to prove that the beard is really hers.”

Figure 1: Bearded woman



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In the traditional mind, if you have an exuberant beard and you're a woman, you're classed as a prodigy or a freak. And since you're a freak, you can be exhibited. A woman's beard, as a transgression, as a 'mess', is both a fault and a punishment. What is Madame Germaine D. guilty

of? Of having a beard, of course. In short, we're displaying the stigma of someone who, throughout her life, has been stigmatized. If we can do this with little apprehension (here referring to the imaginary operations, which are not always politically correct), it's because of her theriomorphism, midway between human and animal, between mummy and trophy (Dalla Bernardina 2020, 38–39).

Bio-crafts

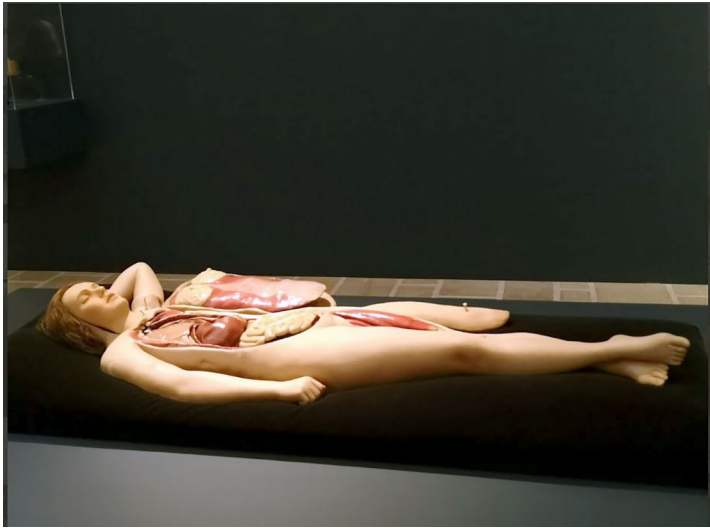
We talk about the “art” of taxidermy. Is it art or craft? That's an important question. In any case, aesthetics plays a central role. The same applies to moldings that reproduce flesh-and-blood individuals identically, or simply copy parts of them.

The other star of the Fonds Leclerc exhibition was the “double inverse” of Germaine D.: an “anatomical Venus”⁸ in wax dating from the Napoleonic era. The lighting in the room emphasized dark tones, leaving Germaine D. in penumbra and underlining the mortuary charm of the Anatomical Venus with a luminosity that contrasted with the surrounding blackness. The contrast was striking: on one side, a bearded lady dressed up to the neck (she hid it behind a lace); on the other, a naked, perfectly waxed young girl. She lay in the middle of the room, offering visitors much more than her nudity. Her Pygmalion had created her to help medical students understand the location of our various organs. The aestheticism of the project was obvious, as the scientist and waxwork expert Abbé Felice Fontana (1730–1805) had chosen an exemplary creature rather than just any specimen marked by age and life's torments. The feeling of being in the presence of a real person, having truly existed, gave the simultaneous sight of her angelic face and her wide-open belly additional poignancy. The darkness of the place set the imagination free, inviting fanciful comparisons: Snow White in the evil plans of the Queen Witch? Iphigenia sacrificed to Artemis to allow

8 This is how these artifacts are termed.

Agamemnon's ships to sail? The protagonist of Boccaccio's story "Nastagio degli Onesti", set to pictures by Botticelli, pursued like a deer in the pinewoods of Ravenna and gutted by her pursuer? (cf. Didi-Huberman 1999) A victim of Jack the Ripper? The human equivalent of the game animals with gaping wounds that hunting painters – Frans Snyders (1579–1657), Alexandre-François Desportes (1661–1743), Jean-Baptiste Oudry (1686–1755) ... – immortalized in sensual poses, or in their icy rigidity? In any case, it was a powerful projective medium, able to arouse a broad spectrum of emotions ranging from pity to concupiscence, from compassion to macabre pleasure.

Figure 2: *Anatomical Venus*



© Sergio Dalla Bernardina

Focusing on the strange, the exotic and the baroque, the installation also played on the “sacred” effect, creating an environment halfway between the temple and the morgue. There was no lack of liturgical ob-

jects, both Christian, like the numerous reliquaries concentrated in the adjacent chapel, and pagan, like the majestic trophies borrowed from the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature. Can we speak of ritual to define the stereotyped behavior of the public in front of these artefacts charged with death? Anthropologists have little sympathy for “profane” uses of this notion. They point out the distance that separates a recurring collective action, devoid of any transcendent intention, from a practice defined as ritual by the actors themselves. Observation of behavior, however, bears a resemblance to the conduct of a faithful pilgrim. Visitors penetrate the site. As the pilgrims pass through the hall, their gestures become uniform, they speak softly, they decode the legends and make their exegesis. The participant asks about the identity of the person being “shown”, the reasons for his or her exceptionality, about his or her eventual tribulations and the circumstances of his or her death. At the exit, visitors buy a souvenir that maintains a metonymic link with the “idol” (“figure, statue, material object that is assumed to be inhabited by the divinity it represents, and which is worshipped as the divinity itself”, according to the Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales).⁹ This purchase captures a little of its charisma and brings it home.

In museums and art galleries, this attitude is the norm: confronted with the spiritual, visitors rediscover the reflexes of a community that, for two millennia, has gone to church every Sunday. Putting collective events (inaugurations, commemorations, etc.) on a religious level is part of its habitus. Once internalized, this disposition doesn't need to be conscious. Nor does anyone feel any need to, since the very essence of ritual, through its recourse to the symbolic, is to authorize psychic adventures that remain inaccessible to consciousness and, to function, must remain so (Dalla Bernardina 2020b, 9–25).

What, then, is the implicit meaning of these museographic adventures centered on encounters with taxidermized ex-living beings? This recalls the initial question of this chapter about the artist's intentions: do anthropologists have the right to imagine motivations behind the artist's and his public's evoked motives that are irreducible to their

9 <https://www.cnrtl.fr>

statements? The gap between “the view from afar” of the anthropologist and the perspective of actors involved in his observation can be considerable: leaving the exhibition with a satisfied mind, the visitor would find it hard to recognize any aggressive or funerary disposition in the experience he/she has just undergone. Instead, he/she would likely discuss the cultural and recreational aspects of the visit. I can imagine the visitor’s astonishment if I were to share with him/her my conjectures about the analogies between the archaic rituals described by Frazer and the contemporary passion for the taxidermized living: “You emphasize the historical value, the didactic aspects, the artistic gesture, but the spectacle of these patched-up animals, these wide-open bellies, has enabled you to identify with the persecutor and his victim, projecting your sadomasochistic fantasies onto a legitimate object.” It’s a typical case of the Comedy of Innocence: confronted with the body of the vanquished, the victor gets excited, lashes out, lets off steam, repents and recollects himself. He even ends up sympathizing with the dead and resenting his executioners. The visitor might reply: “You’re quite eccentric! Where do you see all these infamous intentions? You have to be perverts to imagine such things... And, what’s more, you only focus on one aspect of the exhibition. Read the catalogue, which perfectly sums up the minds of the organizers as well as my own. For example – and the list of motivations is long – the aim was ‘to use surprise as a poetic factor, via an aesthetic of shock, contrast and *wow*, with numerous conceptual and material changes of scale’ (Fonds Hélène et Edouard Leclerc 2019: 9). The idea was to show that the whole world is now a huge cabinet of curiosities, and that these curiosities are not just the ones you’re pointing to. There is no need to look for latent motivations: if I’m here, it is to document myself while having fun, to educate myself through wonder.”

Not quite sure I’d be able to convince him, I’d reply: “It’s true, I wanted to emphasize the mortuary atmosphere, because it seemed central to me, and the ritual dimension, because its function, although not in the foreground, is decisive.¹⁰ Ritual is both a ‘setting in tradition’ and

10 “And, I would add, I don’t pretend to exhaust all the meanings of your participation in this event, I’m just offering a perspective. Should we refuse it a priori?”

a ‘setting in common’. In this sense, it allows the individual to suspend his or her critical exercise and transfer moral responsibility for his or her views to the collective. From this perspective, the artist is a delegate.¹¹ His area of expression is an autonomous field whose legitimacy he manages. What is comforting about the objects he presents is that they come with their ‘prescription’, their ‘instructions for use’. This is the function of the catalogue.”

Travelling cemeteries

To summarize the above described dynamic: the public is shown a stuffed corpse, they contemplate its condition, empathize with it in the etymological sense (suffering with it). At the same time, the audience profits from his spectacular death. This is not automatic. Sometimes, as with the pieces by Damien Hirst or Gloria Friedmann, it works. Sometimes it doesn’t (thus relativizing the generalizations previously proposed). In some cases, in fact, behind the fascination for stuffed remains, the extra-artistic and extra-didactic motivations are so obvious that they make the censor want to act.

From February 12 to April 21, 2009, the exhibition “Our Body – À corps ouvert” in Paris opened its doors. It took place at Espace 12, boulevard de la Madeleine. The public came to admire 17 wonderfully preserved, flayed human bodies.¹² Chess players, runners, archers, rendered in their usual posture, with muscles taut and blood vessels in full view.

Previous versions of the show have attracted over 30 million visitors worldwide.¹³ Its origins lie in Gunther von Hagens’ discovery of plastination or polymeric impregnation, a sophisticated technique that replaces

11 On the mechanism of delegation, I refer to Sigmund Freud’s classic “Mass Psychology and Ego Analysis,” in Freud 2001, pp. 129–133.

12 This was not my case, as the pre-logical component of my mentality led me to perceive, in these frivolous contacts with the dead, something contaminating.

13 That’s how important the study of anatomy is to us.

body fluids with silicone. No more stuffing, embalming or formaldehyde. Just polymerize and voilà: the flayed animal retains its translucent freshness for many, many years to come.¹⁴ The German anatomist began exhibiting his specimens in Japan in 1995. He continued in the United States, Europe and Asia. The artistic-didactic enterprise was clearly very appealing. At first, it was a success, even in France: 100,000 visitors in Lyon, 35,000 in Marseille. Show producer Pascal Bernardin, known for organizing Michael Jackson and Madonna concerts in Paris, was asked to take care of the Parisian version. The official motivation for this initiative was not far removed from the Promethean impetus that drives the experts at the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, but the focus was on body care: "to make accessible to the general public what until now has been the exclusive privilege of the medical profession, to enable greater self-knowledge and to raise public awareness of health" (Evin 2009).

Not everyone was convinced. Associations mobilized against a form of barbarism which, in their eyes, had all the air of an irreverent farce questioning the boundaries between the human and the non-human. The Comité Consultatif National d'Ethique (CCNE) saw it as an affront to human dignity, and emphasized the commercial nature of the operation. Questions were also raised about the origin of the corpses, with Asian purveyors suspected of having sold the bodies of dead convicts (of which there is no shortage in China) to the "plastiners".¹⁵ A double fault, then: one of "commodifying" human bodies, and the other of doing so without the consent of the "donors".

The judges intervened. After calling "Our Body" an "illicit attack on the human body" and a show "contrary to decency", it ordered its immediate closure. It is curious that the first country to ban this macabre show

14 In this context, I'd like to recall the research of a pioneer in this field, the Italian Girolamo Segato, who had already achieved remarkable results by other means at the beginning of the 19th century (Dalla Bernardina 2020b).

15 In the background, perhaps, is the pre-modern idea that the body of a criminal has lost its sacredness and can be used for whatever purpose one wishes.

was France, a country which in the Western imagination is not the most rigorous in terms of censorship.

Intermediaries

In this story, Gunther von Hagens plays multiple roles. He is an educator, a scientist, a taxidermist, a businessman and a showman. He is also an artist, sculptor and choreographer. From the two bodies engaged in eternal coitus that he presented to the Berlin public, to the nonchalant poker players frozen forever in their everyday lives, all his “skinned in context” finally vacillate between different statuses. The inventor of plastination may not be an artist in the true sense of the word, but he contributes effectively to the hybridization of genres.

Equally interesting is the role of the judge seeking to re-establish the boundaries. His decision calls into question not only the motives of the authors, who cease to be “Prometheus” and reveal their nature as merchants, but also those of the public, who thus become their clients. This judge’s opinion goes beyond the “Our Body” case, and casts its inquisitorial shadow over all the cases we have examined until now.

At this stage of the thought process, without being limited to the magistrate’s opinion, I wondered: is there anything intrinsically immoral in recycling inanimate remains to make transitional objects?¹⁶ That’s debatable. In any case, it would be difficult not to consider these posthumous manipulations, even when they claim to be respectful, empathetic and restitutive, as profanations. But then, should Cuvier, whose scientific prestige indirectly authorized the indecent glances from a crowd of curious onlookers be criticized? Should the anonymous craftsman who taxidermized Germaine D. and the Fonds Leclerc who,

16 The “transitional object” (a concept we owe to pediatrician Donald Winnicott) enables children, as well as adults, to project their emotions onto something outside themselves. Such is the case with the animal in contemporary society, which in my blog *L’animal comme prétexte* (<https://lanimalcommeprettexte.blogspot.com/>) is seen as a “teddy bear for adults” (*nounours pour adultes*).

for historiographical reasons, pilloried her for a few months, be blamed? Should Gunther von Hagens and Pascal Bernardin, who treat human bodies as trophies, artworks, zoological specimens and sources of profit, inviting us to confuse the categories, be blamed? Should Andres Serrano, who puts cow heads under our noses in the name of animal welfare, be blamed? Should Angela Singer who, for the same reasons, inflicts upon us the vision of a bloodied beast and perpetuates, through media circulation, its agony, be met with indignation?

That would be too easy. Ultimately, they are merely intermediaries: the actors in a performance that, by playing on the conventionality of the venue, on the ritualization of behaviors and on the use of persuasive argumentative apparatus, allows the public to externalize their sadistic and necrophile fantasies without paying the moral consequences.

Are we all necrophiliacs?

The reference to sadism and necrophilia is easy and reductive, tells nothing about the quality of the work (the fact that Goya's "The Disasters of War" series may be shot through with necrophile latencies in no way detracts from its artistic value). It can, however, help to better understand the extra-artistic factors involved in the emergence of a fashion, a collective fervor. As Ernest Gombrich so eloquently demonstrated, the work of art is a means of externalizing socially disapproved fantasies (Gombrich 1967). In this age of animalistic awareness, people no longer have the right to rejoice at the bloody spectacle of a hound hunting, to shudder at the sight of a doe riddled with buckshot... An alternative is to shift the source of voyeuristic pleasure into the less dubious field of aesthetic contemplation: "It's horrible, but it's beautiful..."; or moral criticism: "It's awful, I know, but I have to testify, I have to denounce...". The artist, in the unsympathetic perspective as suggested here (hiding behind Gombrich and his Freudian references), becomes a pornographer. And the public his accomplice.

Illations

There is another, less demeaning hypothesis that could explain the non-chalance with which taxidermized animals are accepted in art galleries, public spaces and the intimacy of the home. This last passage deserves a preamble. The highly hypothetical nature of this approach will have been stressed. To underline this conjectural character, and to avoid repeating the word “conjecture” too much, I have looked up in dictionaries the equivalent of the Italian synonym *illazione*, which the encyclopaedia Treccani presents as follows:

“inference art. F. [from lat. *illatio-onis*, der. d'*illatus*, past participle of *inferre* ‘to deduce’]. – Inferring by arguing, the mental process by which a logical consequence is drawn from a premise: reasoning by successive inferences. More com., the judgment itself which is inferred by deduction; conjecture (and in common usage, it means above all, with a negative connotation, an unwarranted and unjustified conjecture)”¹⁷

The term “illation” also exists in French, but its meaning is not the same: “L’illation is the term used in Christianity to refer to the transport and return of a saint’s relics to their original church”.¹⁸ This final illation mixes these two meanings, leading to the identification of relics where one sees only trophies, works of art or anatomical pieces, and to return them to their original place.

17 *Illazione* s. f. [dal lat. *illatio -onis*, der. di *illatus*, part. pass. di *inferre* “inferire”]. – L’inferire argomentando, il processo mentale con cui da una premessa si trae una conseguenza logica: ragionare per i., per successive illazioni. Più com., il giudizio stesso che s’inferisce per deduzione; congettura (e nell’uso com. s’intende per lo più, con connotazione negativa, una congettura indebita, non giustificata) <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/illazione/> (last accessed 29.03.2024).

18 <https://www.linternaute.fr/dictionnaire/fr/definition/illation/> (last accessed 29.03.2024).

For some time now, in fact, I've been noticing the religious and mystical overtones of the prevailing discourse on animal death. This is true for hunters, who make their practices sacred through ritualized behavior (neo-pagan ceremonies in honor of their victims, the proliferation of Saint Hubert masses, etc.) and who address their trophies in a respectful tone with animistic overtones. The same is true of artists who, at least since the time of Josef Beuys, have readily played on the metaphor of shamanism.

Taxidermists often speak of a veritable "presence", a very special force that emanates from stuffed animals. Their simulacra are only remains, it's true, but charged with mana, as the Polynesians would say. But remains are relics, and to explain their "magnetism" can't simply involve referring to their "realism" or "icasticity". Where does the power of relics come from? It comes from the sanctity of the individual from whom they came, from the "whole" of which they were a part. But it also comes from the way they were made. The value of relics, for the philosopher and historian Krzysztof Pomian, depends, among other things, on their proximity to martyrdom. In other words, the more the saint was persecuted, the more he suffered, the more his body was pawed and torn, the more effective his relics (Pomian 2003).

Which leads to the sacrificial device. What is the performativity of the scapegoat at the heart of the bloody sacrifice? It is the projection of mimetic violence that cyclically emerges within the community. As René Girard points out, the victim must resemble his lynchers in order to fulfill his cathartic role. They must be both similar and different (Girard 1972). This is precisely the case with the animal: a symbolic substitute which, thanks to the discoveries of ethologists and the reflections of philosophers, is becoming ever closer to the human while remaining something else. In short, the beast on the wall, this three-dimensional summary of persecution and killing, is a scapegoat. A substitute, indeed, little more than a quotation, but it retains its links with martyrological iconography. The place it occupies in the contemporary world is precisely that of the martyr. Sterilized, embalmed and socialized by its introduction into the domestic sphere, it spreads its beneficial effects throughout the community.

This analytical perspective changes the nature of fascination for artistic representations featuring an embalmed carcass. Instead of being reduced to pretexts for externalizing death pulsion, they become sacrificial acts, immolations. And the wildlife artist ceases to be a pornographer (if he ever was), to become a high priest, an officiant.

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List of figures

Figure 1: Bearded woman, © Sergio Dalla Bernardina

Figure 2: Anatomical Venus, © Sergio Dalla Bernardina

