

# MULTIMEDIA TAXIDERMISTRY

*Andrea Roe's work uses taxidermy to examine the nature of human and animal biology, behaviour, communication and interaction within specific ecological contexts.*

*Interview by **Eric Frank***



**Andrea Roe**

Blackbird-Menagerie, blackbird, table, interactive control system, DVD. Bird mechanics, Darren Cox interactive control system, Richard Brown, 2007 ©

Several residencies have introduced Andrea Roe to different types of institutions, ranging from the Wellcome Trust to the Crichton Psychiatric Hospital, Dumfries, where she learned about and responded to research projects and collections. Through photography, film and installation, Roe translates scientific research on the psychology of animal behaviour into artworks that are experienced physically as unfamiliar, visceral sensory encounters.

In 2005, Roe was awarded a 12-month Leverhulme Trust residency at the National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh, where working among scientists she has become interested in capturing the critical moments of the process of taxidermy, a practice often thought of as macabre or gruesome. Roe, however, believes there is something poetic, if not beautiful about transforming dead animals into specimens that appear to be alive. Her particular interest lies in the sensory experience of taxidermy which she argues is a mixture of scientific process and art form. Her aim was to bring this to a wider audience via film, still photography and interactive displays through the use of animatronics. 'Each specimen represents a combination of the taxidermist's knowledge and aesthetic judgement. I want to reveal the hidden skill and process of taxidermy and to show some of the research behind the temporary exhibitions at NMS.'

Andrea's work attempts to entice the viewer and to share her understanding of the animal's life. This is in contrast to the usual display of animals, which focuses on the finished specimen.

***Your work examines the nature of human and animal biology, behaviour, communication and is designed to awaken experiences of wonder in nature, science and folklore. What role does taxidermy play in all this?***

I use taxidermy in my work as it enables me to create a gallery specific context (as opposed to museum) where the spectator is confronted with an animal at close quarters displayed in a way that they would not normally encounter.

For instance with Blackbird Menagerie, an animatronic, taxidermied bird perches on a mahogany table stand, and although it's static at first, it comes to life when it sees itself being cut open as part of the taxidermy process. The video dramatically unfolds with the music of Wagner's Tristan and Isolde, climaxing at the cutting open of its breast with a shriek and a tail flick from the animated blackbird.

The elements of the work interact with each other and the viewer - the video, the taxidermied bird on its table and the evocative sound track combine to perhaps move the spectator through a range of emotional states; sentiment, anticipation, shock and

release. We suspend our disbelief and care about what happens to the bird, even though everything is artifice.

***Your installations are experienced physically as unfamiliar, visceral sensory encounters. Why?***

I use recognisable natural elements, such as animal skins, but re-present or recombine them sometimes with technological parts, the combination then producing a sensory experience. The resulting effect is rather odd, as it mimics in a mechanistic way the very sophisticated systems that give an animal life and individuality.

Cat Whisker Corridor was made during an art residency in a psychiatric hospital, where I observed how some people avoided open spaces and stayed close to walls. The installation resulted from combining this observation with how cats gauge whether they can fit through narrow spaces with the nerves in the ends of their whiskers.

The installation is experienced walking along the corridor between the two lines of planted cat whiskers, avoiding touching the whiskers, you become aware of your own physicality and body width.

In other works it is the arrangement of the natural elements that produce a sensory and visceral experience, such as with 60 wrens, a tight feathered mound of cabinet skins systematically stacked, producing a claustrophobic mass of wren.

***You worked on a Leverhulme Trust residency at the National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh, researching among scientists in order to capture the critical moments of the process of taxidermy. Since when have you been interested in taxidermy?***

My Mum says since I was a kid! She first took me to the Natural History museums in London and Kendal and around the animal collections in Yorkshire's stately homes and parks. Then later, whilst studying at Edinburgh I opted for a Natural History class led by John Busby. He organised weekly minibus trips to remote places, which included a behind the scenes visit to the taxidermy department at NMS. A memorable moment was when the taxidermist opened a filing cabinet of assorted glass eyes and a whole shelf of glowing, pink albinos were exposed, and then another, with eyes designed to be forever caught in a headlamp beam.

Five years on, during a drawing trip to the Bass Rock I came across a magnificent fresh dead gannet, which I carried home and after borrowing a friend's freezer to store the bird, I rang the taxidermists at NMS for advice. It was soon after this that I joined the UK Guild of Taxidermists and volunteered at NMS as a bird preparator, cleaning and making up cabinet skins for the



Andrea Roe  
60 Wrens, Cabinet Skins, National Museum of Scotland, 2006 ©

museum collection.

It was an interesting time to be in the department as they were preparing for what was to be an extraordinary exhibition, *Cats...the ultimate predators*. The taxidermists were producing displays to capture unusual or momentary behaviours that demonstrated particular behaviours or adaptations and this was fascinating. As were the strange deliveries, for instance a packed box of leaves for the display of an African Golden Cat posted direct from Gabon!

It was around this time that I applied for a Leverhulme Trust Award so that I could formalise and identify a new role for myself at the museum.

### **How did you find being an artist amongst scientists?**

I think I was fortunate that I'd had time prior to beginning

the residency, to build close friendships with the taxidermists. Thanks to their extraordinary kindness I gained access behind the scenes to the rooms where animal skins and eggs are stored in purpose built cabinets, each room with its own distinctive smell. The vast underground store and the vivid conversations I had with the curators and taxidermists created an interest beyond the animal collections, to the collectors who donate personal diaries and field studies along with their lifetime collections to the museum.

It was a privilege to be based in the Natural Sciences department and to peer in on a research team where individuals would pool their knowledge, compare photos, watch videos of animal behaviour and argue over artistry and accuracy of pose. The cross-wind conversations were most enjoyable, often rich with species-specific detail and always splattered with black humour.



Andrea Roe  
Cat Whisker Corridor, cat whiskers and glue, 2007 ©

### **What did you learn about taxidermy at the National Museum of Scotland?**

I learnt how difficult it is to do it well. In setting up an animal for a particular pose the taxidermist has to have a deep knowledge of the behaviours and anatomical adaptations of animals as well as being aware of the aesthetic appeal of a pose. It became clear that I wanted to work with and expose the process of taxidermy and not necessarily create finished mounts. I was aware of the advantage of looking in on the process as an outsider and able to identify areas of interest rather than seeing the process as a means to an end.

The preparation involves assessing the specimen, measuring wing, tail, leg and bill and much note-taking. Then when the bird is cut open, more note-taking and remarkable things are sometimes revealed...on one occasion I discovered a fully developed egg inside. The information stored with the cabinet skins became

fascinating reading as it identifies where the animal was found and the cause of death, which would often reveal something about the animal's life. It was noted for instance that a green woodpecker was killed by two gibbons at the zoo!

### **How does the multimedia-approach of your art practice address taxidermy?**

I use a variety of multimedia approaches across a range of media, including video, photography and sound. I address taxidermy using multimedia in both a factual documentary fashion, as reference material and as a creative medium in its own right.

The documentation approach is used to reveal hidden and behind the scenes aspects of the taxidermy process including the personalities and characters of people working in taxidermy.

Creatively I have used video to reveal the factual aspects of the taxidermy process, which I then extend into a fictional narrative.

In the museum birds are stored frozen in a deep freeze until ready to be worked on. When the bird is defrosted via a microwave it feels warm to touch like a living bird. I created a video narrative "Frozen Bird" of a bird from a chest freezer being taken out of the microwave and using stop frame animation, the bird comes to life as it lies cupped in my hands.

Another example is "Kingfisher" where I isolated particular stages of the taxidermy process, showing the preparation of a mount, capturing the moment the bird changes in appearance from a formless skin to a recognisable bird. An interesting change happens when the eyes are inserted and the skin still attached at the beak, goes back over the head. It is this particular moment when the raw material is transformed into a believable live animal. The footage is set to an acoustic piece of music by Goldfrapp where the melodic rhythms seem to intensify the transformation.

### **Could you talk to us about 'The Isle of Groans'?**

In the Isle of Groans an animated hybrid rabbit is seen exploring the natural world of woodland, fungi and cliffs to a soundtrack of bird-song and rustling leaves. It has affinities with the nature documentary, tracking a single day in the life of its animal protagonist who appears to be searching for something, safety, food or others of its own kind.

The Isle of Groans is one of two dvds produced in 2005 with Richard Brown for Big Dreams, commissioned for the BASIS project. The scene is set on the Isle of May where rabbits live underground with puffins and a Fire-Blower. The idea came about after visiting the island and hearing deep groans coming from



Andrea Roe

Kingfisher, kingfisher, dvd, taxidermy: Peter Summers, 2006 ©

the rabbit burrows, not realising that this was puffins, I imagined and scripted a character the Fire-blower, who could be creating these sounds.

In this work small scale models were filmed and combined with footage of existing places, people and animals, to produce a surreal contrast of nature and artifice, an alteration of perspective and scale, merging the real and the imaginary.

Robin Arseneault devised poetic text plates which divide the narrative and lead us into a dreamworld inspired by ideas of memory, time and place.

***'60 Wrens' is a particularly striking work. Could you tell us how the idea for it came about?***

It was after reading an article on Birds of Britain, a web magazine, which described that although wrens are unsocial during the day they pack into communal roosts during severe weather. It described how they arrange

themselves systematically inside a nesting box with heads to the centre and tails to the sides. I was imagining how sixty roosting wrens would look, lying three layers deep, and decided to re-enact this behaviour by counting out cabinet skins and stacking them within the defined space of a nest-box. The wrens have identification labels so although together they form a mass of wren I like the idea that it is individual wrens collected from all over Britain that meet for a final communal roost.

***Historically there are different styles in taxidermy, each allowing the taxidermist to convey a substantially different interpretation of the animal. Which is your preferred taxidermic style and why?***

I'm not sure I like taxidermy when presented as an isolated animal within a vitrine case - I find the objectification of the animal macabre and the motives



Andrea Roe

Paddling Gull, herring gull, motor, Meccano, power supply  
bird mechanics, Darren Cox, taxidermy, Peter Summers  
photo credit, John K McGregor eca , 2006 ©

somewhat questionable. When looking at a representation of animal behaviour presented in taxidermic form I am also aware of the leap of imagination I have to make so as to believe it represents something living.

In terms of style I prefer seeing animals within a version of their natural habitat, as in a diorama, revealing forms of behaviour which occur when they are relaxed and away from humans. I actively dislike dramatic action poses which are prevalent and popular in American taxidermy and are associated with hunting and trophy heads.

**Where did you learn your taxidermy technique?  
Are there techniques that are better than others?**

I count myself extremely lucky to have watched and learned from the master taxidermist Peter Summers, who has a lifetime of experience and knowledge in the

field. I began by filming him working at the NMS in order to capture particular moments of taxidermy, where his deft handling of a bird seems to replicate the bird's technique of preening or organising its own feathers.

I was amazed to hear from him that there is no definitive way to prepare a mount, opinions differ at all stages of the process and each taxidermist spends time developing his own style and technique which identifies his work from another craftsman.

I noticed that Peter explains bird movement and behaviour in relation to his own body, at times not appearing to differentiate between the animal and himself. His knowledge of animals and his ability to represent them in a natural pose are in my mind unmatched in their delicacy and superfine accuracy. So having watched Peter at work, I would say his technique is superior to that of others.

**Why is taxidermy back in fashion?**

Media attention resulting from celebrities such as Kate Moss and her acquisition of taxidermic artwork from Polly Morgan might be a contributing factor in making taxidermy appear more fashionable.

**It has been claimed that contemporary taxidermy is a 'very female business'. Or that in other words women represent the majority in the passing on of the art. What are your views?**

Traditional taxidermy still tends to be male dominated, though there are certainly more women attending the UK Taxidermy Guild conferences, and these are often young female art students who present different ways of representing animals and arranging skin. I think individuals like Emily Meyer (ex-chair of the Guild) have been fundamental in easing access for women at these conferences.

Aside from the Channel4 documentary 'Stuff the World', which somewhat damaged the image of British taxidermy, the redefinition of the craft aligns it with conservation and education rather than hunting and trading of animal skins, so maybe women now find it more acceptable as an artistic medium.

**What do you think of Damien Hirst's use of taxidermy?**

I remember the experience of walking through Mother and Child Divided and acknowledging the beauty and complexity of the animals but also the contradictory feeling of guilty unease in enjoying the spectacle.

I find I'm visually awed but still uncomfortable with Hirst's use of taxidermy, though recognise his tactics of using animals as a vehicle for jolting us into a state of



Andrea Roe  
Territorial Tendencies, robin and mirror, 2008

awareness of our vulnerability and mortality.

**What are your views of Angela Singer’s botched taxidermy?**

I really like and identify with her work. She speaks from and for the animal, using recycled taxidermy in an attempt to somehow compensate for the personal history of the animal and help reclaim its dignity.

At the same time the work shows the evidence of the animal's brutal death which acts as a reminder of the true horror of trophy hunting.

**Could you explain your ‘animatronic taxidermy’? Where did the idea come from?**

I was at the exhibition Afterlife, at Bowes Museum and saw a work by Neil Hamon of a taxidermied hare which appeared to be breathing its last breath, and then in the permanent collection I watched the Silver Swan perform. It was probably after seeing these two works that I began to think about how I might use automata in my own work. I'd previously created kinetic art works, but had always used simple and quite basic mechanisms.

I was fascinated watching gulls foot-paddle and I immediately wanted to recreate this behaviour. With the first version of Paddling Gull, I worked with Darren Cox a clockmaker at NMS who designed the leg mechanism. The Paddling Gull was shown amongst other works in an exhibition 'Out of Time' set within the collections of the Hunterian Zoology Museum curated by artist Kate Foster. I was interested to make work that could exist as an interactive exhibit in an educational context but also be shown in a gallery where its obsessive foot-stomping would be interpreted quite differently.

After making this work I began to imagine creating smaller and more subtle movements in birds, such as the blink of an eye or the tilt of a head.

I then began to investigate alternative mechanisms and was advised by cybernetician Richard Brown to look at servos and muscle wire. Muscle wire is a fantastic material that behaves like a miniature muscle, contracting under electrical current, which led me to think the effect might be used to lift a butterfly's wing. As butterflies are so dependant on sunlight I chose solar panels to power and present Butterfly.

**What are you currently working on?**

I've just read Len Howard's books 'Birds as Individuals' and 'Living with Birds' in which she writes her thoughts on the superior intelligence of great tits based on her experience of studying and recording the detail of their life histories as they took possession of her home, Bird Cottage.

The intimacy that she experiences with these birds greatly interests me as it leads to her recognising the birds as individual characters and personalities. I found these texts most inspiring and I am now thinking about the individual bird and its personal story as a way of creating intrigue rather than representing the behavioural habits of an entire species.

*Andrea Roe studied for her undergrad in sculpture at Edinburgh College of Art and later completed her MA at Chelsea College of Art. Recent exhibitions include Menagerie, Edinburgh, Out of Time, Hunterian Museum, Glasgow, Big Cat Sighting, SAC, Aberdeen, Incidental Relationships, Ateliers Hoherweg, Dusseldorf, Rabbit Run, 210 Gallery, Wellcome Trust, London and Close Shave, Mafuji Gallery, London. Andrea lives in Edinburgh where she works as a part-time lecturer at Edinburgh College of Art. She is also a member of the Guild of Taxidermists and volunteers in Natural Sciences at the National Museums of Scotland.*

*For more information please visit  
www.andrea-roe.com*

*Andrea Roe was interviewed by Antennae in Spring 2008 ©*