

VCO 403.3 Individual Experimental Practice - Evaluation  
Trevor Brown 9700459

## **The Surreal Psychogeographies of Fantasy and Semiotics.**

### ***Psycho-sur-reality of taxidermiology***

'a photograph is not only an image, an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real; like a footprint or a death mask' 1

John Berger, 'About Looking', 1980

The image and sculpture work produced this semester is suitably surmised by John Berger's observation above. In particular his reference to 'an interpretation of the real' and 'like a death mask' have proven to be central to my explorations and motives in the construction of the fantastical psycho-sur-realities of my subjects and their locations.

The original concept for the work of using the Hungarian Bauhaus painter and photographer Moholy-Nagy's psychological transformative eight 'ways of seeing' [see appendix] to reimagine and re-represent the darker surreal psychogeographies and surrealities of the subject and locations used was, although a very useful starting point, powerfully redirected by the Berger quote above.

The initial and principal source material for the image works was a visit to antique taxidermists. The physical location, the room [its inherent psychogeography] and of course its 'exhibits' resonated powerfully with the two lines picked out of the quote above; first hand interrogation of the exhibits, the display cases, the 'odds and ends' of un or disused animals parts, became the dominant stimuli for the series of image works and sculptures; subsequently Moholy-Nagy's eight 'ways of seeing' became of less relevance and in fact began to have a restricting effect on the investigation. However the overarching concept of producing a 'psychological transformation' in the what the viewer was seeing still had a vital bearing on the work produced, as the images and sculptures exploit not only the concepts of how and what we are seeing by challenging the 'reality' of the scenarios produced, but also

1. John Berger, *About Looking*, 1980

the way we separate and distinguish what we perceive as 'living' from what is not, and as later discussed, a subtle psychological transformation of the contextual 'view' of the subjects themselves in relation to what 'they' are seeing.

Although Berger's comment does not directly relate to a 'dead' subject, it implies that the act of photography produces a lasting imprint of the subject; a metaphorical shroud that absorbs all or parts of its original context and intent, and in relation to the actual undertaking of taxidermy and the subsequent images, it can now read more literally as a direct re-interpretation of what was 'real' and that these exhibits are a precise 'death mask' from a now altered 'reality' – an observable and tangible coating of fatality and finality.

The animals, birds, butterflies and insects offered many opportunities for 'interpreting' this new reality, and the exhibits presented an ideal vehicle for psycho surreal investigations into not only the animals' previous lives but also of those that may have hunted them, made them, coveted them, dreamt them or even have conjured them from their imagination. The series of images and sculptures have been developed under the umbrella title of 'taxidermiology', a self-coined phrase to combine the undoubted artistry and inherent 'uncanny' impressions of the encased taxidermic exhibits with the later discussed use of 'live' but still 'captive' animals. This is not only to juxtapose the perceived 'realities' of the living with the dead and the inanimate, potentially reanimate and the animate, but with, again discussed later, the connotations of both of these when enigmatic archival images of children are incorporated – creating the b-'iology'.

Although the concept of 'stuffed' animals seems, and for the most part is probably true, a repellent past time, there was a genuine beauty and serenity about the poses, expressions and settings... producing an eerily calm and contented ambience.

The intense act of closely observing the once wild but now taxidermal animals became a 'fantastical' experience as one was unable to not 'fantasize' about their original 'reality' and their now imprisoned and forever muted one.

'The life of a wild animal becomes an ideal, an ideal internalized as a feeling surrounding a repressed desire. The image of a wild animal becomes a starting point of a daydream: a point from which the day-dreamer departs with his back turned.' 2

1. John Berger, *About Looking*, 1980

Although not 'wild' in the taxidermic context, the inflection of the quote above still holds resonance. The animals, even in their evident state of paralysis, conjured up a myriad of illusions. One could not but visualize their original animation as the staged poses capturing stunted but aspirational movement, along with their obvious 'life' [less] – like finishing often led you to look harder to detect any suggestion of a breathy heave of the chest or twitch of an eye. The more one looked at the exhibits, the more they seemed to threaten spontaneous reanimation at any time and this Freudian 'uncanny' sensation, which I will discuss later, was a tangible psycho-surreal experience that had a profound effect on the work.

This threat of unprompted rejuvenation was enhanced by their frozen, posed motion within the often intricately modeled settings to include trees, shrubs, rocks, prey and insects. This paradoxically 'static movement' served to potentially reanimate them further but now only within the confines of their display cases; this had become their 'reality'; their world; they had ceased to offer the 'other' once vital reality; now only existing in a closed, cyclical narrative lacking spatial or temporal quality. They had in fact become a three dimensional photograph... ironically the act of photographing them in practice added nothing, they were already frozen in a specific time and place, they had already been 'stenciled off the real' and they had been given a tailor-made, perfect-fit death mask.

The taxidermic impressions of the animals were perfect examples of 'the interpretation of the real' and the 'death mask' quoted earlier from Berger, and the fictions experienced led me to seek a source of opposition; footage of 'live' but still 'imprisoned' animals. This would not only offer a source of vitality to contest those taxidermic animals so tightly and irrevocably incarcerated in the cases, but would also allow interrogation into the act of looking at 'real' animals. I was intrigued to see what [if any] actual differences there were to the way they 'look' and the way we 'look' at them. Was a motionless but live captive animal that different? What effect does the physical 'captivity' have on the way they 'look' and 'look back' ?

'the purpose of zoos is to offer visitors the opportunity of looking at animals. Yet nowhere in a zoo can a stranger encounter the look of an animal. At the most, the animal's gaze flickers and passes on... look blindly beyond... scan mechanically... nothing can anymore occupy a central place in their attention.' 3

The similarity here with the taxidermal animals was clear. Visits to a zoo and safari park had compounded my initial belief that apart from the obligatory notion of movement and our 'knowing' they are alive, once looked at intensively enough, and the 'wonderment of nature' and their animation is filtered out, they offer nothing more. Not only in their seemingly impenetrable lack of cognitive awareness of the 'other' but also in them being 'incarcerated' in an equally restrictive, narrative-less and temporally broken 'exhibition' case [although admittedly a little larger]. Even if they are looking at you, only a foot away from the glass 'you are looking at something that has been rendered absolutely marginal' 4. They had become not only representationally interchangeable with taxidermic animals but conceptually too, their essential qualities when 'looked' at were inherently the same.

This concept led me to many of the images produced subtly adapting real and dead animals, and exploring the conceptual reality 'space' that lay between. The placing of real animals into the dead space of a display case, or displacing dead animals [encased or not] into real habitats, or juxtaposing real and taxidermic animals into alternate spaces created many interesting conceptual and contextual debates. The arrangements and facial appearances of the taxidermal prey and the 'natural' expressions of the live animals altered significantly when taken out of their original context. In their original context they seemed utterly appropriate but when lifted and reassigned these expressions offered alternate emotional readings. Depending on their new setting they could display a transformed air of genuine surprise, shock and fright [the birds in the sink], smug contentedness [the camel grazing in a bluebell wood], maternal life, love and misplaced safety [badger in the bath], tranquil inevitability [goat on the rack], triumphant pride [lizard and the boxed butterflies] and so on. The new 'composite photographs' had created new 'realities' for the subjects, yet their original 'real' contexts were still having a tangible effect on defining the motives of this new 'other' reality.

'Photographs do not simply render reality – realistically. It is reality which is scrutinized and evaluated' 5

Both the live and taxidermic animals existed in their own realities, their own 'worlds'. However after interrogation the taxidermic animals' motionless, stark reality was not all that different to the 'live' ones.

'every animal has a world... it is sometimes extraordinarily limited... animals react to very few things' 6

4. John Berger, *About Looking*, 1980

5. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 1978

6. Gilles Deleuze, *A for Animals - L'abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*, 1988

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's quote above was certainly evident when observing the live animals. Both the zoo and the safari park had rendered many of the 'exhibits' inactive; their worlds had almost become as stagnant and as narrative-less as their skinned and re-arranged taxidermal counterparts; their 'live' but socially altered and limited worlds demonstrated 'the poverty of those worlds... a reduced character' 7. Their, both the taxidermal and live animals', once overriding desire to stake claim to their territory had been eroded beyond repair or recognition, their once proud displays of colour, smells, sounds and postures used to create then reinforce these patrolled borders had been stripped away. Ironically the only 'realistic' trace left of these territorial rituals, were those restaged poses found reflected in the glass of the display cases.

The animals in the 'taxidermology' series, as previously discussed, had been 'reassigned' to new territories and therefore, to use another Deleuzian theory, been 'deterritorialised' and then subsequently 'reterritorialised'; not only in 'reality' as far as the 'live' animals are concerned, but also retrospectively after the taxidermal animals' deaths. This theft of their boundary marking powers and the physical, actual act of removing them from their original territories offered another insight into the psycho-surrealities of animals. The aforementioned shifting of their 'emotions' [albeit a human referenced simile] from utterly appropriate, within the original context, to paradoxically just as appropriate, but with subtle differences in tone and gestural values, when found in their new territories, correlated to an abstracted notion of Deleuze's theory. The 'reterritorialisation' to 'somewhere else' resulted in a noticeable difference in their body language and perceived mental motivations towards their new territory – a conceptual but equally 'real' re-action to their reterritorialisation – made possible through the act of photography; transposing the 'trace' to another place and creating a brand new, but seemingly genuine, reaction to the territory.

This conceptual theory of a 'fixed' impression in an image being malleable when reterritorialised had an equal bearing on the second source of material to heavily influence the work; archival formal portrait photography of children from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Their inclusion was not only directed by the already discussed potential to remold the subtlety of their original expressions or to again confirm the central concept of photography acting as a 'death mask' of what was once 'real', but equally by the Freudian theory of 'the uncanny', alluded to earlier, and its perceived relationship to childhood, and the psychological habitual correlations between children and animals suggested by Aristotle in his 'History of Animals'.

7. Gilles Deleuze, *A for Animals - L'abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*, 1988

The 'Uncanny' nature of the taxidermic experience was evident on many levels and had a fundamental effect on not only the style and form of the work, but also the narrative that operates through them. According to Freud an 'uncanny' sensation can be triggered by many factors, but principally for this project's explorations, as mentioned earlier, his theories concerning 'whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate' 8, lies at the heart of the exploitation of the taxidermal themes, and as you will read later, the inclusion of the child images. Equally the 'unfamiliar' can create an uncanny sensation, and although the animals in the cases are 'familiar' in form and 'familiar' in their plastic yet oddly 'naturalistic' environments, the inert but frequently gravity defying poses, the unblinking and soulless plastic eyes, the unnatural proximity to you, the undeniable knowingness of their death that you are scrutinizing unabated [staring at something that is dead is not a normal activity] coupled with their often utterly convincing 'realness', creates an uneasy tension between what is recognized as real and what is not. In relation to taxidermal animals I believe it is this recognition of the 'deadness' that ultimately creates the uncanny; 'the primitive fear of the dead is still so strong within us and ready to come to the surface at any opportunity' 9, and although the concept of death is again familiar, the eagerness and inclination of gazing at it from such close proximity is not natural or readily available. The final uncanny theory that applies to not only the taxidermy but also the inclusion of the child images is the link to infantile sensations. According to Freud, children have an no inherent fear of inanimate objects coming to life, in fact they often fantasize about it; a child has 'no fear of its doll coming to life, it may even have desired it' 10. The adoption of irrational fears as adults conjured by uncanny sensations occur 'when repressed infantile complexes have been revived by some impression, or when the primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed' 11. The theories of the proximity of death, the conceivable reanimation of inanimate objects and the 'unfamiliar' have been principal concepts used in the work and although they often can and do result in an uncanny reaction, on their own these are not always enough to be truly uncanny in most the unsettling way: 'something has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar to make it uncanny' 12.

By adding 'something else'; another layer; be it familiar or not; unexpected or merely out of place, I believe the 'uncanny-ness' is enhanced.

The use of the archival portrait photography of children in some of the work was designed to add this extra layer, not only forming a narrative, which I will discuss later, but also to emphasize again the already mentioned 'stenciled off the real', and the quite literal 'death mask' concept. There is also a clear reference to the 'uncanny' theory of a child's lack of fear

8 - 12. Sigmund Freud, *The -Uncanny*, 1919

of potentially inanimate regeneration and also to our [as adults] general inherent human fear of death and finally, as Aristotle refers to in his 'History of Animals'; 'for in children we observe the traces and seeds of what will one day be settled psychological habits, though psychologically a child hardly differs for the time being from an animal' 13. Therefore by using images of children who are, according to Aristotle, similarly psychologically developed, hopefully the link and pertinence of the settings and their new relationships with the taxidermal and live animals are amplified.

The archival images used are formal posed portraits of young children dressed in fine clothes. The often somber, yet contemplative looking facial expressions again added another layer of meaning, as the original instructions given by the photographer for the subjects to convey an austere, often emotionless, 'proper' appearance [the convention of the time] adds an incongruous poignancy and peculiar inflection in relation to their new location and alternate context, mirroring the 'deterritorialisation' of the animal images mentioned earlier. As they are formal portrait images the subjects are looking directly at the camera and this again creates an unusual tension between their original 'reality' [and their mental processes at the time of the photograph] and the newly perceived motivations displayed in the taxidermal environments. When taken out of their original mise-en-scene [not only the location and context] but also the actual frame of the original print, then sepia hue is negated, and they are placed in close proximity to the animals, their facial expressions and posed bodies alter to display a curious sense of victorious satisfaction; as if they are showing off their quarry. They have the appearance of being perfectly at ease, almost conceited, as if in their trophy rooms, unperturbed by the deathly vibrations of their macabre prizes and clearly not fearful of the adult uncanny fear of hypothetical sudden reanimation. Finally this surreal motionless 'zoo' they have been re-historised in to, echoes the reaction 'real' children [although they are/were 'real' too] often have to the previously discussed 'institutionalized' [and therefore reterritorialised] animals found in actual zoos, as even a captive lion, let alone a lowly lizard, are often disappointingly lethargic, if not utterly static for long periods of time, offering only insusceptible, banal or wearied movement at best;

'as frequent as the calls of animals in a zoo, are the cries of children demanding: Why doesn't he move? Is he dead?' 14

The presence of children in the work came very early on in the process and was used to create a narrative that had a bearing on many of the subsequent images. The series is designed to be fantastical in nature, a dream-like sequence inspired by the illusions imagined

13. Aristotle, *History of Animals*, - quoted by John Berger, *About Looking*, 1980

14. John Berger, *About Looking*, 1980

by the child characters; perhaps stimulated by a visit to a taxidermist, a storybook they had read, a game they had invented, their family business, their imaginary friends or just a dream world of their choice.

'Dreams... set the imagination free from its chains so that it may throw into confusion all the pictures of everyday existence and break into the unceasing gravity of grown men with the joyful play of a child' 15

As mentioned earlier, Freud suggests that often children would wish their dolls to come to life, and this inspired the inclusion of 'live' animals into dreamlike states and the re-placement and reanimation of some of their dreamt taxidermal imaginary 'friends'. The child images chosen show they have no fear of the animals, the 'uncanny' sensations are lost on them, but hopefully experienced by us. The sequence moves on to show a rather horrific looking bath, sinister washing/drying rack, caged sink and hanging rack. These images initially represent what seems to be banal, taxidermic 'preparations', but they psychologically transform as the menacing nature becomes more apparent. With the exception of the birds in the sink image, these 'taxidermic preparation' imaginings have an overlaid, saturated layer of brightly coloured scenes from other exhibit display cases; literally 'stencilled off the real', an indication of their fate, a representation of their new 'reality', taunting them with the stench of fatality [imagine how a pig, cow, sheep feels when next in line at the abattoir]. The final series reterritorialises the 'dream-like imagined' animals into their new scenarios, assigning new signs, behaviors and 'realities' from 'traces' captured in their original 'imprints'; not only literally reterritorialising their physical bodies but equally, and oddly, their emotive responses.

The conceptual theme of literally 'overlying' the animals with the imprints or traces of their original realities, or displaced realities, or displaced 'others', becomes the focus for the sculpture work using taxidermic moulds, with the first in the series, the hare, being 're-skinned' with a blanket of exotic butterflies. The moulds in their raw state have an immediate uncanny quality, as they appear both familiar; life scale, 'natural' pose and accurate forms, yet at the same time unfamiliar; skeletal, undernourished, unnaturally 'naked'. The yellowish, off white, blemished polystyrene type material that forms their 'lifelessness' is both disturbing to look at yet oddly captivating. These models have literally been 'stencilled off the real' and leave a tangible residue of their original movement and vitality. Again here there is a psychological transformation as we look at what we know is clearly not real, yet they still hold and emit some of the creature's original realness and essential qualities.

The use of these moulds clearly echo the themes of the print work; the original deterritorialising of the animal's form from the actual animal itself and the subsequent denial of the reterritorialising that would have happened if they had been 're-installed' into their new hosts [along with links to the uncanny concepts of reanimation, the unfamiliar and death]. The use of butterflies in the hare's case for example, came from not only the butterflies association with childhood; memories of summer holidays and the youthful excitement and endeavour of holding one for a fleeting moment, and the Victorian lust for catching and collecting them, often commissioning small boys to 'hunt' for rewards, but also for what the butterfly symbolizes;

'butterflies are symbols of freedom, the embodiment of the living life to the full. In many cultures they represent human souls; in medieval Ireland, white butterflies were thought to be dead children' 16

Using the butterflies as visual metaphors for the 'embodiment of living to the full' transferred onto a model that is not only a mold of a dead animal but also originally destined to be inserted into another one, coupled with the fascination butterflies hold, in particular, for young girls as the perfect expression of the feminine, the sweet, the beautiful, happiness, vitality and innocence [becoming an icon for young girls' jewellery, dresses, wall paper, duvets, dressing up wings and so on], is hopefully a pertinent paradox that again encourages a psychological transformation in the viewer. The actual butterflies are 'skin tattoo transfers', again most commonly used by children; the subversion of using them not on human or in fact any "real" skin, but using them as a metaphorical new skin on a representation of a dead animal that would have been assumed into a 'real' skin again adds another conceptual layer to the 'taxidermiological' theme. Lastly the hare sculpture has purposely been left 'incomplete', in so much as the detachable leg has been left unfixed to the main body, yet it has still been decorated with the butterflies. This is further reference to the animal's distance from its original 'reality', the hare now is a 'reconstitution of the real', its incompleteness is not only witnessed in the moulding [stencilling] of its death form but also in its now utter separation from any reality.

As you will have read the work shifted from its original proposed outcomes, sidelining the exploration of Moholy Nagy's prescriptive 'eight ways of seeing' yet retaining the fundamental principle of a 'psychological transformation' of seeing. The work operates on many philosophical and psychological levels that ultimately plays with this transformation from not only the audience's perception, but more interestingly from the psychological transformation of what the subjects are 'seeing'.

16. Patrick Barkham *The Guardian*, 2012

'he deceives us into thinking that he is giving us the sober truth and then after all oversteps the bounds of possibility. We react to his inventions as we should have reacted to real experiences; by the time we have seen through his trick, it is already too late...' 17

The work's intention is to, as the quote suggests, explore the viewer's interpretations and responses to the 'reality' of the scenarios presented and the 'realness' of the reactions portrayed by animals and children featured, whilst offering a degree of 'uncanny-ness' that is not only tangible through the concepts presented via the imprint, the trace and the death mask of photography, but equally through the probing of our potential Freudian vulnerabilities of reanimation, the unfamiliar and death itself.

The conscious choice to use images of animals and children that appeared 'at ease' and unthreatened, and to similarly choose locations and environments that were not initially menacing, was designed to juxtapose the themes of death, the somewhat grisly art of taxidermy and the sensations of the uncanny – the work allowing for a 'transformational' space that the viewer hopefully fills with their own perceptions of what they are looking at.

There was a temptation to be far more aggressive with the images; more horrific, more openly disturbing and literal. However this would have decreased the space for the psychological transformation to have taken place, the space needed for this is in the ambiguity faced on initial contact with the work; the 'contented' subjects, their curiously appropriate but markedly 'misplaced' expressions, the seemingly banal locations and the beautiful, often brightly coloured exotic animals that are then subsequently contradicted by the slow, deliberate, accumulative sense of unease, the uncanny and misperception. To quote Freud again; 'by the time we have seen through his trick, it is already too late...'

To encourage this psychological transformation the work needs to be seen. Selected images have been framed and placed in the local area, not only to metaphorically 'release' the animals back into the wild, but again to force a reterritorialisation of not only the subjects themselves, but the actual artwork. How will these images operate in conflicting or at least unexpected environments? Will discovering these curious unexpected artworks create a psychological transformation of 'seeing' itself? The use of antique frames to compliment the use of [mostly] archival [and therefore antique] images along with their implied provenance

17. Sigmund Freud, *The –Uncanny'*, 1919

and authenticity, will hopefully again create a perception transformation as the viewer is challenged to make not only sense of its installation in that particular location but also on closer inspection, its '*taxidermiological*' meaning. [The details, purpose, extension projects and strategies associated with this impromptu gallery concept is discussed further in the Evaluative commentary for VCO 404.]

This particular series of work has explored the 'psycho-sur-reality' of principally taxidermy, and it was this narrowing of the field of work that led this exploration to the many conceptual and philosophical debates discussed and applied above. The admittedly self-coined phrase 'psycho-sur-realities' is utterly conceptual yet, in my opinion, totally plausible, differing from more 'conventional' surrealism in that its artistic conception is bound by tangible and profound 'real life' psychogeographic experiences. This experience in turn informs the surreal realities imagined, they are not renderings of an unleashed unconscious mind or representations of dreamscapes; they have a provable actuality that then conjures 'other' sur-realities as a consequence.

**References:**

Berger, J. (1980) *About Looking*, London: Bloomsbury

Barkham, P. (2012) *Damien Hirst's butterflies: distressing but weirdly uplifting*, the Guardian - <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2012/apr/18/damien-hirst-butterflies-weirdly-uplifting?newsfeed=true> - last updated Wednesday 18 April 2012

Deleuze, G. (1988) *L'abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze – A for Animals* - filmed by Pierre-André Boutang, location unknown

Freud, S. (1953) *The Interpretation of Dreams*, London: Hogarth Press

Freud, S. (1919) *the 'Uncanny'*, first published in *Imago*, Bd.V 1919, location unknown: press unknown: reprinted by Penguin Classics, 2003

Sontag, S. (1979) *On Photography*, London: Penguin

**Bibliography: Books & Magazines**

Bainbridge, Simon [editor]. *The British Journal of Photography – issue 159*: London: Incisive Media, 2012

Berger, John. *About Looking*, London: Bloomsbury, 1980

Elliot, James [editor]. *Artbox Magazine – issue 17, 18*: Actar Publishing, 2012

Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, London: Hogarth Press, 1953

Freud, Sigmund. *the 'Uncanny'*: London: Penguin Classics, 2003

Revelli, M [editor]. *Juxtapoz Magazine – issue 133,134*: San Francisco: High Speed Productions, 2012

Santag, Susan. *On Photography*, London: Penguin, 1979

Wells, Liz. *the Photographic Reader*, London: Routledge, 2003

**Appendix:**

**Laszlo Moholy-Nagy** – The 8 varieties of photographic vision:

*Taken from the book 'A New Instrument of Vision' [1936], extract 'From Pigment to Light.'*

1. Abstract seeing by means of direct records of forms produced by light: the photogram, which captures the most delicate graduations of light values, both chiaroscuro and coloured.
2. Exact seeing by means of the normal fixation of the appearance of things: reportage.
3. Rapid seeing by means of the fixation of movements in the shortest possible time: snapshots.
4. Slow seeing by means of the fixation of movements spread over a period of time: e.g. the luminous tracks made by the headlights of motorcars passing.
5. Intensified seeing by means:
  - a. Micro-photography;
  - b. Filter-photography, which, by variation of the chemical composition of the sensitized surface, permits photographic potentialities to be augmented in various ways – ranging from the revelations of far-distant landscapes veiled in haze or fog to exposures in complete darkness: infrared photography.
6. Penetrative seeing by means of X-rays: radiography.
7. Simultaneous seeing by means of transparent superimposition: the future process of automatic photomontage.
8. Distorted seeing: optical jokes that can be automatically produced by:
  - a. Exposure through a lens fitted with prisms, and the device of reflecting mirrors: or
  - b. Mechanical and chemical manipulation of the negative after exposure.

