

'Museums are the treasure houses of the human race. They store the memories of the world's peoples, their cultures, their dreams and their hopes.' (Ambrose & Paine, 1993, p.6)



Image 1: *Hummingbird*, Photographer: Sarah Edwards.

Between 1885 and 1869, Museum Victoria acquired 4,000 birds from English ornithologist John Gould. Among these specimens were examples of New World hummingbirds of which 203 species were chosen for display. The study-skins were taxidermied, attached to branches, and placed into an elegant handmade cabinet to highlight the iridescence of their wings. At five years of age, I stood on the cool marble floor of the museum peering into this very same display case brimming with tiny, brightly coloured birds. Although their lives were stilled, I could see them hovering and hear their characteristic hum. In this moment, my lifelong interest in natural history museums was seeded.

Using the hummingbird display case as a point of reference and departure, my practice-led research considers the natural history museum as a contemporary art medium in order to visually highlight the critical role the museum plays in mediating our relationship between the environment and collected specimen. As my research is in its preliminary stages, I propose possible methods to generate artwork in response to my role as an artist working within a natural history museum facility. Given the

scope of this paper I do not cover the history or etymology of museums, or discuss any scientific or artistic attributes of the hummingbird.

By adopting a range of multimedia as my art medium: sound, light, and consequent shadow, my research considers ways in which to trigger wonder and surprise that characterised 16<sup>th</sup> Century natural science collections. I engage objects as a mapping device to consider how they connect self to place and provide a forum in which to discover patterns of relationship between people and things. By experimenting with the range of processes a specimen undergoes in the process of collection – from discovery in-situ, extraction, preparation, articulation, storage, cataloguing, and display – I have the opportunity to discover alternative ways of conceptualising the natural history museum in order to raise awareness about our increasingly fragile natural environment and the vital work the museum plays in preserving it.

### **Thirteen Ways**

The title of my research project references Thomas McEvilley's *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* (1991), that attributes methods to describe the content of an artwork including 'verbal supplements from the artist', 'medium', 'scale', 'temporal duration', 'the work's relationship with art history' and 'content rooted in biological or physiological responses.' McEvilley explicates that the thirteen categories are like 'a series of sample sightings... the categories overlap and interpenetrate... and the possible networks and meta-networks of relations among the thirteen listed ... proceed toward infinity.' Thomas's *Thirteen Ways* ... provides my research with a method to frame and facilitate an open-ended number of interconnected responses and outcomes.

### **Art and Natural Science**

Art and natural science have long shared a direct association. Both are driven by curiosity and the aspiration for new knowledge. Well before photography, artists were essential to science. They provided an empirical eye and the capacity to accurately record images of the natural world. By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century, scientists working within natural history museums actively employed artists to illustrate the unique and diagnostic features of new species enabling the scientific community to publish and readily disseminate their findings to colleagues around the world.

## Contemporary art practice

My research builds on museum-inspired artistic practices that highlight the critical role museums play in preserving our natural heritage. Looking to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Surrealists – perhaps inspired by the idiosyncrasy of 16<sup>th</sup> Century natural history collections or in reaction against the conservative characteristics of the ‘modern’ museum – juxtaposed disparate objects in order to trigger unexpected associations. Signing an object and placing it on a plinth considerably shifted the status of Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917); and compiling objects into a small suitcase rendered the museum portable in his *Boite-en-valise* (1941). The placement of objects into apothecary jars in Joseph Cornell’s *Museum* (1944-48) nostalgically responds to the work of the natural history museum.

A plethora of contemporary artists have engaged directly with natural history museums in response to the environment including Christian Boltanski (*Vitrine de Reference*, 1971), Annette Messager (*Boarders at Rest*, 1971-2), Anne Hamilton (*Between Taxonomy and Communion*, 1990), Damien Hirst (*The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991), Christine Borland (*Small Objects That Save Lives*, 1993), and Fiona Hall (*Cell Culture*, 2001-2) to name a small but important, internationally-recognised selection. Three visual artists who have directly influenced my own artistic practice are Janet Laurence (Australia, b.1952), Gregory Pryor (Australia, b.1962) and Mark Dion (America, b.1961).

In *Stilled Lives* (2002), Laurence worked with Museum Victoria’s curators to select a range of natural history objects and re-present them as art. Although this work may be considered a pivotal artistic influence in my research, our practice differs in that Laurence selects and presents museum specimens *per se*; I utilise the ephemeral materials of sound, light and shadow that are a consequence of working with the specimens. This may include the projection of a bird’s wingspan being measured, or light projected onto etched acetate discs that move in the air current transferring shadow onto walls.

In responding aesthetically to curatorial processes, my art practice is more closely aligned with the work of Gregory Pryor. In *Black Solander* (2005), Pryor collaborated with botanists at the Western Australian Herbarium to create five thousand ink and graphite drawings in reference to the catalogued collection of extinct or at-risk botanic specimens. His edge-to-edge, floor-to-ceiling installation envelops the viewer in the demise of these innumerable plant species and the role we have played in the destruction of their habitat.

I share Mark Dion's artistic engagement in a dialogue between art and curatorial practices. In *Thames Dig* (1999), Mark Dion appointed himself 'dilettante' – 'lover of art and nature' – working with museum scientists to replicate a museum field trip. He collected specimens from a site on the Thames River, then sorted, catalogued and presented the objects in a museum display. Dion's artwork considers notions of 'museum' and its role in providing a forum to re-think natural history. '[N]ature is one of the most sophisticated arenas for the production of ideology' (Dion, 1997, p.9). I am directly involved in the work of 'scientist' as a regular participant on an annual dinosaur dig. As an artist amidst this experience, I am surrounded by people describing specimens and locations using a taxonomic nomenclature that to my untrained ear sounds like a foreign language. Within my research, I build on Dion's extensive work with cultural institutions and draw on my fieldwork experience in order to translate the 'foreign' work of collecting into a visually accessible observation.

### **Sound as Insight**

In reference to the hummingbird in my project title, I am experimenting with sonic elements of natural phenomenon to facilitate the re-presentation of familiar things in new ways. Sound artist Philip Samartzis recorded the "silent" world of the Antarctic in *Crush Grind* (2010), and re-presented the sound as an immersive, visceral experience that drew attention to the profound beauty of this vanishing wilderness. Again using sound, Catherine Clover recorded the cacophony of cicadas in *Greengrocer* (2009). By slowing down the recording, she revealed the mechanical construction of their "noise": the movement of the abdomen buckling in and out in rapid succession. My research will engage with similar sonic sampling methods and represent these to reveal the extraordinary knowledge that is preserved in natural history collections. This includes a unique collection of extinct frog call sound recordings that I overlay back into the built environment that aided in their demise, in order to raise awareness about and give new life to these highly susceptible amphibians.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, as Mark Dion states: '[i]n the case of the natural history museum ... there are hundreds of people in the back rooms working with specimens and artifacts ... that's where the museum is really interesting. They directly address questions like: what is the function of a collection? Why is it important to name things in the natural world? The museum needs to be turned inside out – the back rooms put on exhibition and the displays put into storage.' (Dion, 1997, p.18). By turning the natural history

museum “inside out”, I aim to invigorate new visual avenues in order to enter into rigorous dialogue about the important role we play in caring for our increasingly fragile environment.

## Bibliography

- ARMSTRONG, K. (2005) *A Short History of Myth*, Canongate.
- BLOM, P. (2004) *To Have and to Hold*, Woodstock: Overlook Press.
- BORGES, JL. (2000) *Labyrinths*, London: Penguin.
- CORRIN, L. (2002) *Mark Dion*, Phaidon.
- COOKE & KELLY (eds.) (1993) *Anne Hamilton: tropos*, New York.
- DAWKINS, R. (2005) *The View From Mount Improbable*, London: Penguin
- DONALD, D. & MUNRO, J. (eds.) *Endless Forms. Charles Darwin, Natural Science & the Visual Arts*, London: YUP.
- DURRELL, G. (1985) *The Amateur Naturalist*, London: Penguin.
- ENGBERG, J. (1999) *Signs of Life*, Melbourne International Biennale.
- EWINGTON, J. (2005) *Fiona Hall*, Sydney: Piper Press
- FOUCAULT, M. (1991) *The Order of Things*, Routledge.
- FOX, P. (1992) *Drawing on Nature*, Museum Victoria.
- GIANNINI, C. (ed.) (2006) *Installations Mattress Factory 1990-1999*, Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Press.
- GOULD, S, J. (2009) *Leonardo's Mountain of Clams and the Diet of Worms*, Paw Prints.
- HOOPER-GREENHILL, E. (1992) *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, Routledge.
- HUXLEY, R (ed.) (2007) *The Great Naturalists*, London: Thames & Hudson; Natural History Museum.
- LANDY, J. (ed) (2004) *Treasures of the Museum*, Museum Victoria.
- MCEVILLEY, T. (1991) Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird, *Art & Discontent*, Documentext.
- MILLER, J. (2010) *Every day is a good day: the visual art of John Cage*.
- PUTMAN, J. (2001) *Art and Artifact: the museum as medium*, Thames & Hudson.
- ROBINSON R & GRAVES, J. (2006) *Introducing Philosophy*, Cambridge: Icon Books.
- STEINER, G. & LENZINGER, J., (2010) *The Mystery of Fertility*, Zurich: CMV.
- STEWART, S. (1993) *On Longing*, North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- WESCHLER, L. (2008) *Mr Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, Los Angeles: Los Angeles Press.
- YAANI, C. (2005) *Nature's Museums. Victorian Science and the Architecture of Display*, New York: Princetown Architectural Press.