Ann Hamilton's Haunted Animal Archives

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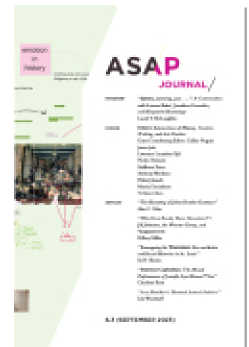

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Lily Woodruff

ANN HAMILTON'S HAUNTED ANIMAL ARCHIVES

As the number of publications on the Anthropocene has proliferated during the last two decades, exhibitions on extinction and its anthropogenic causes have begun to haunt otherwise lively displays of skeletons and taxidermy. Contemporaneously, decolonial activism at natural history museums has led to the removal of racist monuments, the repatriation of sacred objects, and reframing of ethnographic displays. Among these currents, ANN HAMILTON'S *2014 installation,* the common SENSE*, assembles a collection of found animal-based materials that indicates the sublime scale of animal and cultural losses under modernity while placing the moral imperative to react with care in the hands of the viewer. The resulting exhibition is a complex assortment of beautiful, clever, desirable details that when assembled tells the story of its own devastation. While the culprit is unmistakably U.S. colonialism, the fix that* HAMILTON *offers appears to be a spooky interspecies universality, which emanates from the fact that we all die, and the shared*

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sense-experiences through which we live. At stake in the common SENSE *is the need to reveal how the archive of the natural history museum hinges on the devastations of colonialism and mass extinction so that they emerge as the foundations of museum conservation.*

the common SENSE presented nearly two hundred separate flat-bed scans of amphibians, birds, and mammals from the collection of study skins in the University of Washington, Seattle's Burke Natural History Museum collection (see fig. 1). The images were printed in multiple and hung in stacks of newsprint that covered the university's Henry Art Gallery walls from floor to ceiling in a salon-style display (see fig. 2). Somewhere between still life and animal portraiture, the blown-up details of feather, claw, fur, and beak rendered in the shallowest depth-of-field invited the visitor to view the animals with a level of intimacy that is optically uncommon in the natural world. This had the effect of conjuring a sense of closeness with each animal (see fig. 3). At the same time that this perspective was gained, however, it would be accompanied with a feeling of loss as the folded talons and loosened skin made the death of the animal

Figure 1.
the common SENSE *(2014) detail. Photo credit: Jonathan Vanderwelt. Image courtesy of Ann Hamilton Studio.*

undeniable—a ghostly tension reinforced in the warm mauve and cool blue of Hamilton's digital palette. As though in a gesture of compensation for the loss of life, the exhibition invited the viewer to "collect" as many images from the walls as one wished by tearing them away and saving them in dedicated folders.

As Hamilton commented in her statement on this work, "The Museum is an institution of sight, a house of looking and seeing, a place where we behold with our eyes. We may be stirred, moved, or touched by what we see but we rarely touch the thing seen. I lament this distance."[1] The theme of touch is common across Hamilton's body of immersive installation work, which she has been making since the 1980s and which she describes as "materially obsessive."[2] For Lynne Cooke, Hamilton's often dreamy shifts in scale and displacements of objects and textures create "states of liminality in what at first appear to be sanctuaries or preserves," a reading that takes on zoological interest in the context of animals and their remnants.[3] A trained fiber artist whose work became increasingly intermedial as she extended her practice to the body and then to architecture, Hamilton has created tactile surfaces from vegetal materials, metals, foodstuffs, skins, and hair to produce theatrical, dreamlike installation spaces that are often inhabited by people and live animals. Yet, like happenings of the 1960s, her installations evade the storytelling elements associated with theater in favor of open-ended invitations to association with evocative materials and situations. Her work *privation and excesses* (1989), for example, housed live sheep beside a field of

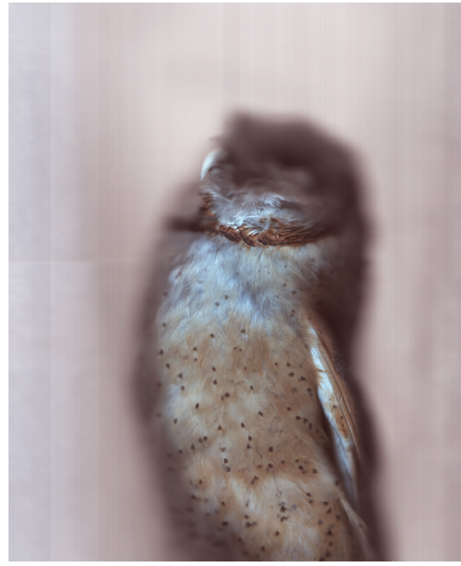

Figure 2.
the common SENSE *(2014) detail. Photo credit: Ann Hamilton Studio. Image courtesy of Ann Hamilton Studio.*

Figure 3.
the common SENSE *(2014) detail. Photo credit: Ann Hamilton Studio. Image courtesy of Ann Hamilton Studio.*

honey-soaked pennies; *tropos* (1993) included a floor of undulating horsehair; live peacocks roamed freely under a room-size sail of orange silk in *mattering* (1997); live pigeon coos echoed through *the event of a thread* (2012); and canaries flew and perched freely at her previous Henry Art Gallery exhibition *accountings* (1992) (which drew the attention of animal-rights demonstrators).[4] Her installation *between taxonomy and communion* (1990), which included a floor made of glass tiles laid over sheepskin, and a table layered with oxidized iron powder atop which laid fourteen thousand intermixed human and nonhuman teeth, was described by Kenneth Baker in terms of touch and environmental awareness (see fig. 4): "[U]ncertain footing forced visitors to alter their ways of moving, a bodily sensation" he writes, "that seemed to express the difficulty we have in identifying with other forms of animal life, a difficulty now known to have global ecological implications," and while "the array [of teeth] seemed to calibrate degrees of human identification with other animals and with other people, living and deceased: the extracted (or excavated) tooth is a symbol of pain and thus, potentially, of sympathy."[5] *the common SENSE* continues this uncanny immersion where the suspended potential of the preserved threshold becomes a form of haunting. The animals and histories included in *the common SENSE* appear in a stage between life and death as the envelopes of dead animals are presented for the viewer in their material and rhetorical intensity. The archived images and objects are suspended in time and available to be reanimated by critical interpretations attached to clutching hands.[6]

"**the common SENSE *continues this uncanny immersion where the suspended potential of the preserved threshold becomes a form of haunting.***"

Hamilton has argued that touch reciprocally connects people to each other, to animals, and is a vital part of our public sociability.[7] It has primarily positive associations in her work, yet in the reality of her exhibition at the Henry, touch also became destructive. At the opening of the exhibition, the audience engaged in what Hamilton later described as a "feeding frenzy" as visitors depleted nearly the entire stock of images within reach, consuming them in the same way that we do the many dematerialized, digital images that surround us in our daily lives—that is to say, with a rapacity that caused Hamilton to use an expression that likens the audience members themselves to wild beasts. Inviting visitors

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Figure 4.
Between taxonomy and communion *(1990) detail. Photo credit: Ann Hamilton Studio. Image courtesy of Ann Hamilton Studio.*

to tear the prints away created a confrontation between the artist's generosity and the greed and destruction of museum visitors, who enact an allegory of the violent histories of collecting animals from the colonial museum of the nineteenth century to neocolonial practices such as hunting, poaching, and habitat destruction. Within a few hours of the exhibition opening, an abundant population of images was reduced to broad empty patches of wall and meager torn edges, creating a spectacle of plunder that brings to mind the billions of animal populations that have died during our current period of massive species loss known as the sixth extinction. If the exhibition attempted to inspire a moral awakening and commitment to conservation by creating sympathy based on an appeal to the senses, then the image it revealed of violent consumption indicates the challenges of seeking a "common sense."

The exhibition title capaciously encompassed the possibility of commonality among audience members. "Common sense" implies something like the self-evident or unexceptional good of conservation efforts or, perhaps wishfully, a consensus around protecting biodiversity, which itself might be included among

those resources we refer to as "the commons," an understanding that extends to art spaces. Steve Lyons and Kai Bosworth of the activist group the Natural History Museum argue that museums are not ideologically neutral but are instead "protectors of the knowledge commons," and that as such, they should represent their communities' interests, which include environmental degradation and biodiversity loss.[8] To this problem of neutrality, Dominic O'Key proposes a posthumanist solution that calls for museums to both acknowledge institutional culpability for environmental harms—for example, when they are complicit in supporting big game hunting or have ties to oil companies—and curate exhibitions that counter their "habitus of anthropocentrism" and "dissolve the boundaries between human and nonhuman."[9] Fiona Cameron likewise supports a materialist and phenomenological approach to conceiving posthumanist exhibition practices, especially as a way of addressing subjects like the Anthropocene and the effects of global warming. "[P]eople, objects, materiality and the discursive do not operate in ontologically distinctive realms," she argues; and museums can reflect this by presenting objects as the history of the materials and techniques from which they are composed, as well as in their relation to other objects as formed (and deformed) by environmental factors and in relation to their physical and cultural sites.[10] In a very different context, Benjamin Buchloh similarly describes the aesthetics of accumulation and categorization in photocollage and archive-based art practices as posthumanist for the ways they can replace histories based on "sequence[s] of events acted out by individuals" with "the simultaneity of separate but contingent social frameworks and an infinity of participating agents."[11] Cameron's ecologically minded posthumanism based on a centripetal force that generates an "inclusive vision of a shared world" counterbalances Buchloh's centrifugal critique of modernity through fragmentation of image and reference.[12] This dynamism describes the open range of reference that Hamilton assembles to offer a field of fluid commonality.

Hamilton intended the title *the common SENSE* to refer to the senses of perception that offer commonality between human and nonhuman animals since we negotiate our relationships to shared space and resources through perception and aesthetic experience. O'Key's dissolving boundaries and Cameron's multidimensional exhibitions reverberate in Hamilton's material experience of the animal body, where touch not only is common across species and experiences but serves as a point of contact across boundaries. Within the space of the exhibition, Hamilton gave clues to her thinking on commonalities in handouts with

samples of philosophy, history, fiction, poetry, and journalism from the ancient world to today that address themes such as interspecies intersubjectivity, ruminations on time, artistic process, and the sense of touch. A photograph snaped from a page of a dog-eared copy of Aristotle's *On the Soul* addressed the various senses to argue that while the ability to hear sounds, to see color, and to smell are means to "well-being," because animals are mobile and must pursue their own food, "the body of the animal must have the faculty of touch if the animal is to survive."[13] Meanwhile, a fragment from Jean-Louis Chrétien's *The Call and the Response* contends that the first evidence of soul is in touch, the "most fundamental and universal of all the senses," which "delivers us to the world through a unique act of presence." "Whatever I contact by means of touch," Chrétien writes, "comes into contact with me."[14] Whereas sight can fix others in a gaze while the viewer remains unseen, touching an animal, even a dead one, means being touched by it in return. Likewise, the array of visual textures with which Hamilton reproduces the written language of the text fragments creates its own tactility, as though the information and arguments that they impart reach back to meet the eyes of the reader halfway. The texts appear through a variety of fonts and material supports: as photographed book, newsprint, handwritten note, or as multicolored computer pixels complete with squiggly underlines offering feedback in the form of grammatical and orthographic doubt. The typographical plasticity of the reproduced texts in *the common SENSE* indicated the range across which the archive of ideas about touch has spread through authors, audiences, and annotations over time. Against strict division between the aura of the unique original and the mechanical reproduction, Hamilton's aesthetic and textural range shows processes of reproduction, from the hand-drawn to the digital, to diversely index the imbricated epistemologies in which they flourish in the commonplace of the archive.

The process of scanning the animal skins from the Burke collection was itself an attempt to offer museumgoers an approximation of the auratic experience that Hamilton had as she removed the skins from their crates, held them in her hands, and marveled at their beauty for the first time. Visitors to *the common SENSE* could not touch the fur, feathers, or permeable skin of the animals, whose likenesses hung on the walls, but the flatbed scanner created haptic images whose high resolution captured pebbled webbing and translucent talon, stiff rachides and fluffed barbs, inviting visitors to stroke the skins with their eyes. The impression of closeness to the animals was enhanced by the fact that

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many of the scans were enlarged significantly beyond the animals' natural scales such that small amphibians like the American bullfrog or Nile monitor lizard would appear as large as, as imaginatively apprehensible as, species humans typically considered more charismatic like the scarlet macaw. Moreover, a veil of visual noise was lifted as flakes of the sawdust in which the skins were packed were digitally brushed out along with most of the tags that remained attached to legs during the scanning process.

In the last several decades, photomechanical processes of reproduction have played a central role in much of the art that uses the archive as content and form to address subjects like memory, trauma, and loss. As Okwui Enwezor has observed, photo-based reproductions carry the rhetorical weight of evidence and history due to their indexicality, making them common media for artists working with the form of the archive.[15] Roland Barthes famously argued that the camera captures death by preserving an image of life "that-has-been," while life itself is preserved as "the Intractable," or the subject that persists in the photograph despite the gap between the time when the image was taken and the moment of its viewing.[16] In contrast, the scanner (a tool of archival reproduction) creates a flat duplicate of the skins that have already been separated from their ecological context and then reimages them as evidence of their separation from life. By scanning each animal's underside to show "where the animal touches the ground," Hamilton evokes the animal as subject that touches reciprocally, and that touches the ecosystem in which it was once embedded.[17] And as an indexical medium, the scanner offers an effect of presence, yet the isolations and absences produced by the institutional processes that it enacts shift the balance so that what appears intractable is death. This death appears as a fragility in the image itself where the animal recedes into the blur, or as Hamilton describes, "where it goes soft," thereby creating a sentimentality by which the viewer might additionally be touched metaphorically, if not literally.[18]

The point of origin for *the common SENSE* was the historical archive of animal-skin garments in the Henry Art Gallery's textile collection (see fig. 5). Hamilton was initially drawn to the collection's eighteen thousand examples of fiber arts and clothing, many of which include, or are entirely composed of, animal pelts.[19] In the final exhibition, many of these garments from the settler-colonial culture of the region were included alongside garments from Indigenous cultures. Fox stoles, mink collars, rabbit muffs, otter, moose, monkey,

Figure 5.
the common SENSE *(2014) detail. Photo credit: Dan Bennett. Image courtesy of Ann Hamilton Studio.*

and karakul coats bearing labels from local furriers like Borgersens and foreign ones like Chanel were worn by Seattle's upper classes, which expanded as Seattle's economy boomed as a transfer point during the Klondike Gold Rush. These furs were gifted to the Henry Art Gallery and bore the estate names of the women who wore them. Meanwhile, moose-skin leggings, a buckskin jacket, seal mittens and pants, a caribou coat, pants and mittens, sacks made of bird's feet, fish-skin mittens, reindeer and grizzly bear parkas, and a transparent raincoat made of harbor seal intestines are attributed to the Inupiaq, Alutiiq, Inuit, Yupik, Sioux, and Ahtna peoples from the same period and were donated to the ethnographic collection of the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture by colonizers and their descendants.

Hamilton worked in collaboration with Sven Haakanson, a member of the Sugpiaq tribe and the Burke curator of Native American Anthropology, to select objects and devise a mode of presentation with the concern that they be responsible to the living descendants of the groups from which they originated.[20] Each article of clothing was presented in a vitrine that was mounted on casters and shrouded by white curtains so that as visitors walked among them, they would be required to again reach out and intentionally lift back the curtain in order

to confront each object individually. Like relics of saints mounted in ornate monstrance, the framing emphasized the materiality of the skin and fur and the presence and proximity of the animal from which it was taken. Unlike in the scans from which Hamilton digitally removed the identification tags hanging from the animals' bodies, here she mimicked archival inscription by attaching labels identifying each object and the culture from which it originated. Doing so underscored the cultural inscriptions of animal death, as it was doubly abstracted by language and by having its body refunctioned. The deadness of the animal was reinforced, and the viewing became a visitation.

"The deadness of the animal was reinforced, and the viewing became a visitation."

Applying the same mode of display to all the fur garments regardless of use, sourcing, and signification risked equating them and flattening the histories from which these objects emerged. As Haakanson argues, however, the virtue of this display strategy was that it formally undermined institutional classifications that divide Native objects from an otherwise capacious and flexible category called "art," as well as the audience biases that interpret art in terms of "beauty," and prioritizes it over Native objects that it reads in terms of "practicality."[21] The shrouded vitrines undermined the principle of immediate visual availability upheld by standard exhibition models that allow an entire room of objects to be taken in at a glance, and they offered a strategy for creating museological practices that do not simply assemble large collections of unrelated objects so that they can be compared and contrasted under the bright lights of a supposedly neutral gallery setting. The result invited viewers to consider inventive and meticulously crafted cultural achievements singularly and to focus attention on the fact that an animal had died so that their skins could be worn over those of human animals.

Although Hamilton's accumulation is massive and ranging, her focus on a world made of animals pictured by humans is vivid and desirable; and although it may appear as disposable as an illuminated pixel, the depletion shows it to be finite. The conflict between the desire and permission to take versus the regrettable consequences of doing so is made tender and intimate when one reaches out a human hand as though to touch the paw of a skin and then tear it away. The

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archive of loss is reanimated in acts of losing. Hamilton's work underscores the conservation function of the archive, yet as a place for protecting absences. This simultaneity of presence and absence is a constitutive element in the interpretive motif of "haunting" that has recently been developed by theorists of the Anthropocene in edited volumes like *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (2017) and the Extinction Studies Working Group's *Extinction Studies: Stories of Time, Death, and Generations* (2017).[22] Haunting describes the feeling, for example, when the disappearance of a species ramifies down the food chain, or when living animals from species in rapid decline appear as "specters" of their future extinction, or, again, when animals live in a state of suspended animation under restrictive conditions such as those at the zoo.[23] With *the common SENSE*, the museum archive does not appear as a state of neutralized rest; it instead emerges as an activated tension in which the skin appears as an image of the animal, antiseptically preserved from the entropy of decomposition, suspended in death. The skin scans have a ghostly quality that allows the visitor to perceive an intimacy that feels lifelike in one moment, yet that registers as inert, dead matter the next. This tension between proximity and inaccessibility frustrates the desire to bring something close that in its death is lost, even if physically present as a fragment.

FEELING OUT THE SIXTH EXTINCTION

Hamilton's exhibition responds to some of the same concerns with public education that arose during the Progressive Era, and its forms offer critiques of the display conventions of natural history museums that were established at that time to promote conservation. The elegiac tone that Hamilton sets resembles the more recent phenomenon of extinction exhibitions, which have recently been staged in these museums, often as temporary addenda to their permanent displays. Natural history museums were founded across Europe and its colonies during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as they transformed Wunderkammer display practices from the sixteenth century into public exhibitions with the goals of promoting scientific research, general education, and the morality of the masses. As Susan Sheets-Pyenson observes, the development of these museums spread with the railway networks and the wealth that they made possible in colonial hinterlands.[24] She describes the curators of these institutions as bringing a "missionary zeal" to the practice of amassing and organizing specimens to bring "order, method, and law" to the populations they were seeking

to edify on the colonial frontiers.[25] In line with this model, the Burke Museum, where *the common SENSE* was first exhibited, began as a collection of the Young Naturalists' Society during the 1880s as Seattle was growing rapidly, first with the timber industry boom and then as a hub for transporting wealth from the Klondike Gold Rush in Alaska. Like the establishment of other colonial museums at the time, the Burke's coincided with the industrialized destruction of the natural world and the forced displacement of the Duwamish.

These new colonial museums were animated by the Enlightenment mission of providing general uplift through democratizing education, combined with eugenicist social anxieties about the urban masses and national identity, and recognition that industrialization had detrimental effects on resource-rich land. Already during the nineteenth century, museum officials were aware of the eradication of species in the U.S. landscape due to commercial hunting, and within their museums, they sought to raise conservation consciousness by collecting and mounting animals that were critically endangered, such as California condors, monk seals, and eastern elk, in increasingly dramatic displays. Dioramas of large taxidermied animals set behind glass in painted landscapes, such as those pioneered at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, were based on the commercial design of department store windows. They were expensive to mount and required the expertise of painters, sculptors, modelers, wildlife illustrators, photographers, and theatrical set designers, as well as teams of wealthy Western hunters and local assistants.[26] In the words of American Museum director Frederic Augustus Lucas, this method promised "to hold the mirror up to nature and let it reflect an image of nature as she looks when alive, not as she appears when dead and shriveled."[27] Carl Akeley, the hunter and taxidermist who shot and mounted numerous animals on display in the American Museum wing of African animals (which is named after him), was himself concerned about the effects that his wealthy friends were having on the animals he hunted and predicted that "[t]wo hundred years from now, naturalists and scientists will find in such museum exhibits as African Hall the only existent records of some of the animals which today we are able to photograph and study in their forest environment."[28] Yet American Museum ornithologist Frank Chapman believed that habitat destruction and extinction were not inevitable byproducts of U.S. economic development and that conservation would be possible if only Americans could "visualize the inherent dignity and romance of

wildlife."[29] As Donna Haraway argues in her study of Akeley, the diorama represented a major shift in the ability of the American Museum to attract visitors and solicit their sympathies for a colonial and ruggedly masculinist conservation through its illusions of penetrating deep vistas and animal groupings based on the nuclear family that presented clear narratives and encouraged anthropomorphic associations.[30] While creating an air of dignity in the animal remains a necessity of extinction exhibitions today, display strategies for doing so replace human triumph with various combinations of culpability, responsibility, and/or companionability.

It is commonly understood today that the loss of biodiversity that we are witnessing is taking place on a global scale in record numbers and that it is driven by the anthropogenic changes that have defined the Anthropocene. Although its everyday impacts may not be visible to the naked eye, we are in the midst of the most significant loss of global biodiversity since the dinosaurs disappeared at the end of the Cretaceous Period 66 million years ago. In the same year that Hamilton was completing her exhibition, journalist Elizabeth Kolbert published *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, a book that Hamilton cites as important to her thinking about the issue.[31] In it, Kolbert narrates the development of human understandings of extinction since the late eighteenth century and the ways it can be seen across species and environments. Actual percentages of loss are impossible to calculate due to our limited count of extant species, especially among those less "charismatic" such as fish, insects, fungi, and plants. To address doubts, a 2015 study by Gerardo Ceballos et al. used "extremely conservative assumptions" about background and modern rates of extinction of vertebrates that would minimize evidence of a mass extinction. Even so, the study concluded that extinction rates for mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish had gone up by eight to one hundred times—rates that the authors describe as "unprecedented in human history and highly unusual in Earth's history."[32]

In response to this historic loss of animal life, natural history museums have recently begun mounting exhibitions that address death and extinction directly. In contrast to the lively conservation-minded dioramas of the previous century, extinction exhibitions tend to create environments that curators and scholars consistently describe as producing wonder in order to activate mourning, grief, and feelings of loss, stimulate care, and displace anthropocentrism. For

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example, *Once There Were Billions: Vanished Birds of North America* (2014–2016) at the Smithsonian included a passenger pigeon study skin, its eyes stuffed with cotton, laying before a historic illustration of the mass hunts that drove them to extinction. *Extinction Voices* (2019) at the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery shrouded taxidermy examples of endangered and extinct animals in black chiffon veils in the style associated with Victorian mourning so that visitors could receive, in the words of Dolly Jørgensen and curator Isla Gladstone, a "clear and elevated message" when they "look into the face of extinction."[33] The National Museum of Scotland's Survival Gallery walks viewers through the human causes of extinction, triggering "despair and horror" then "hope and optimism," in what Anna Guasco describes as their "elegiac narrative mode."[34] The Museum of Natural History in Paris's virtual reality experience *Revivre* (2021–) animates holograms of dodos that graze, Steller's sea cows that swim overhead, and a passenger pigeon that alights on the visitor's hand in a "convivial immersive experience" that museum director Bruno David describes as "a little sad."[35] Viewer engagement at these exhibitions is often pursued through stories of individual animals, which extinction exhibition scholars find catalyze intimacy and therefore care. Hannah Stark recounts that seeing vulnerable thylacine pups preserved in alcohol caused her to pause and reflect on the massacre that led to their extinction and the story of their last survivor, "Benjamin"; and she expects that the guilt, shame, and grief that archived bodies might elicit in others could productively unsettle anthropocentrism.[36] Similarly, Adam Searle argues that Spain's Museo del Bucardo, which is dedicated to recovering local memories of the recently extinct Pyrenean icon, uses public participation and longing to create "ethical" histories about hunting, "affective" stories of the last bucardo's life, and "practical" approaches to conservation.[37] Hamilton's exhibition forgoes the explicit didacticism of these exhibitions while using an abundance of historical material and representation of animal bodies from a natural history archive, with the effect that they conjure an affective experience of relation. In talking with Hamilton, the importance of knowledge came up often but was always framed in terms of institutions (e.g., universities as "matrixes of knowledge"), apprehension (e.g., "the first way we want to know things is to put our hand out" and "we can't know ourselves unless we know that we're also animals"), and acceptance (e.g., "there is the question of how we let ourselves know what we know"). Like the unconventional displays of the extinction exhibitions, Hamilton's art investigates approaches to "help people

feel things that they might know but don't think about" by "finding forms that aren't about information."[38]

One of the benefits of exhibition is that it allows for slowed contemplation against the overwhelming speed that is both the source and the effect of our current climate problems.[39] Where short-term thinking serves the acceleration and growth of global capitalism that leads to rapid extinction, Dolly Jørgensen, Libby Robin, and Marie-Theres Fojuth argue that the slowness of the exhibition can synchronize "common time" in which the viewer brings their own life experiences to the museum and into alignment with the planetary and revolutionary timescales that it thematizes (see fig. 6).[40] Hamilton's exhibition clears a space for meditative experience in a forest of metal poles mounted with computer-controlled bullroarers that mimicked the loud whirring of the Yupik and Aboriginal wood and ivory devices on display in an adjacent gallery. Hamilton refers to the sound as "swarming," which she considers to be a form of touch reaching across time and species, like a ghostly call from the past that "sets you in your body and makes you introspective."[41] For Jørgensen, Robin,

Figure 6.
the common SENSE *(2014) detail. Photo credit: Jonathan Vanderwelt. Image courtesy of Ann Hamilton Studio.*

and Fojuth, slowness has a therapeutic effect that creates a scenario in which the viewer might "acknowledge the validity of their feelings and thoughts," specifically grief, which they speculate might offer a greater incitement to action than financial or scientific rationales.[42] If slowness fosters a confidence in one's feelings, then following Hamilton's speculation, it could also help audiences access and assess knowledge about the world we inhabit.

the common SENSE builds on the raw material of information while emphasizing ambivalent feeling. Hamilton herself refers to *the common SENSE* as "information lean," noting again that "if information changed the world, it would because we have so much of it, but there is the question of 'how we let ourselves know what we know.'"[43] Instead, it presents an array of anthropomorphizing nineteenth-century children's literature and puzzles, alongside commonplacing books by adults collecting citations about, and photographs of, animals alongside people wearing fur, all of which suggest a broadly familiar European cultural context in which animals are consumed as raw material and allegorized for education and entertainment. The effect that *the common SENSE* creates for viewers is that animal depletion appears historical and systemic, but also familiar, and therefore personal and continuous with current cultural practices, thereby telescoping between scales of experience and effect. In addition, an impressive line-up of sixty-five events were programmed by Hamilton and the curatorial team to expand its range of reference through the voices of curators, geographers, anthropologists, wildlife scientists, musicians, and a poet. The exhibition invited visitors to expand their ways of knowing by reflecting on their own acquisitiveness and the ways in which their thinking about animals fits into a narrative that has been written across history. This invitation to visitors was to explore within an open set of information and allow them to draw their own constellations of references into stories of their own making—ones, indeed, whose suspensions of closure might reassuringly allow the visitor to imagine strategies for evading, deferring, or coping with the devastation foretold by climate scientists.

Like the founding of natural history museums in the Gilded Age, the stakes in addressing extinction are rooted in anxieties regarding the future. Hamilton says she thinks that the reason that she is doing this work is because of "a future that is being lost."[44] To address this problem, she turns to the past, which in the case of the Burke's collection of animal skins is an archive of knowledge and of loss—not only the loss of animal life but the loss of the past that always exceeds

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the archive's ability to contain it. Guarding against loss, and in particular that occasioned by the seeming gains of Manifest Destiny, was foundational to the accumulations of the natural history museum. As Haraway has argued, the collection of animals at the American Museum of Natural History was intended to protect a past under threat by assuring a model of manhood that could protect against what eugenicist and hunter President Theodore Roosevelt worried were the enfeebling qualities of new immigrants and the impact that they would have on the future of the United States.[45] Transforming dead animals into life-like models of themselves in naturalistically rendered settings would provide an image of the pure past that they wished to reclaim—a time before the supposed genetic corruption of the country. "The ideology of realism essential to Akeley's aesthetic," Haraway argues, "was part of his effort to touch, to see, to bridge the yawning gaps in the endangered self. To make an exact image is to insure against disappearance, to cannibalize life until it is safely and permanently a specular image, a ghost. It arrested decay."[46]

In contrast to the realist diorama's attempt to secure the past, Hamilton's presentation of animal bodies emphasized death and contingency. An anecdote recounted by Burke director Julie Stein about the feeling that she had in seeing the way that Hamilton had positioned a marmot in a vitrine with an array of other skins and fur samples indicates the challenge that even minor reworkings of the archive posed to natural history museum conventions:

> The thing that really shocked me is . . . she had one of our marmots . . . but it wasn't laying on his stomach. It was laying on its back, and it was wrong. . . . I don't know what that means. I just know that I couldn't wait to bring them back to the Burke and put him on his tummy. . . . And I don't know why my reaction was so strong.[47]

Speaking with me several months before my conversation with Stein, Hamilton too had mentioned her encounter with the marmot. Its "little upturned hands, its articulated fingers and paws," she observed, looked like her own, and she was struck by the emotion of this recognition. "[Do] we have to kill things to know them, à la Teddy Roosevelt?" she wondered (see fig. 7).[48] Both Hamilton and Stein

> ***"[Do] we have to kill things to know them, à la Teddy Roosevelt?" . . .***

Figure 7.
the common SENSE *(2014) detail. Photo credit: Ann Hamilton Studio. Image courtesy of Ann Hamilton Studio.*

regard the animals with a great deal of care, but whereas Stein is perhaps accustomed to handling their skins as a matter of scientific practice and displaying them in the realist mode Haraway describes, Hamilton, who is not, paused at the fact of their death. The simple act of undermining a core convention of the museum by rotating the animal 180 degrees seems to have also exposed potential audience vulnerabilities. In the management of her exhibition, Hamilton and the gallery also diverged on the degree to which death could be confronted. Against Hamilton's intentions, the museum devised polite ways to limit the number of images that people were allowed to take, because, as Sylvia Wolf says, the opening night feeding frenzy was "terrifying."[49] It was feared that the consequences of not curbing consumption would be too disturbing to future visitors who would be confronted not with a hypothetical picture but with a concrete example of the ravages of greed.

Hamilton uses the word "lament" to talk about the distance between humans and other species and also about the loss of animal life. This lament differs from nostalgia's desire to return to an impossible origin such as that which Akeley's dioramas envisioned—a past in which nonhuman animals conform to human family structures, exemplify human moral dilemmas, and live forever. And yet Hamilton channels this lamentation through a similar set of gestures: her scans compose the animal skins in a style that resembles human portraiture, and she abstracts them away from their institutional matrices just enough so that the viewer can suspend their disbelief and imaginatively resurrect them. The result is an engaging uncanniness that overlays death's challenge to life with a presentation of the animals both as reassuringly anthropomorphized and as

human prey. For Jane Bennett, anthropomorphism presents an opportunity, perhaps counterintuitively, to escape from the narcissism of a world ruled by humans and instead become absorbed in an enchantment that can motivate curiosity about the practices and intelligences of other species.[50] Recognition that is made possible by anthropomorphism, she argues, provides access to imagining a political public composed not only of people but of interspecies confederations that share experiences of harm. Hamilton's anthropomorphism effects this enchantment; however, as it does so, it casts a haunting spell that combines delight with potential disenchantment at the lamentable recognition of our own role in the mass extinction to which her project points.

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The overwhelming consumption of images by visitors at *the common SENSE* suggests that even anthropomorphism did not sufficiently contradict the hierarchical predation that human civilizations have used to secure their dominance, however fragile it now appears in this time of mass extinction and global warming. A photo studio installed at the exhibition illustrated this power differential through what in the context of this exhibition could be considered a zoomorphic reversal. Invited to stand behind a scrim, the opacity of which reproduced the balance of blur and clarity characteristic of the scanner, visitors to the exhibition could have portraits taken that caused them to resemble the scanned animals—that is, as the victim of human collecting (see fig. 8). Hamilton called this part of the exhibition, which could theoretically memorialize every visitor to the exhibition, *ONEEVERYONE* (see fig. 9). As *ONEEVERYONE* shows, however, our

Figure 8.
the common SENSE *(2014) detail. Photo credit: Mark Woods. Image courtesy of Ann Hamilton Studio.*

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fates are not shared, since the quantity of human and study skin photographs were inversely proportional: the more people came and were photographed, the fewer animals remained on the walls.

Figure 9.
the common SENSE *(2014) detail. Photo credit: Jessica Naples-Grilli. Image courtesy of Ann Hamilton Studio.*

the common SENSE acts in the ambivalence of clarity and blur. For the editors of *The Art of Living on a Damaged Planet*, the value of haunting is that it can help us to "retain the productive horror of our civilization" while refusing to accept ruin as our new reality.[51] Hamilton's largely blurry scans retain recognition of the gap between ourselves and the animals from which we have become distanced over centuries of industrial modernization, while its reorganization of the archive from which she draws undermines perceptions of comprehensive cultural representation and the moral certainty of the realist model of the diorama. Instead, the absences that it images produce a desire for closeness that Hamilton redoubles by adding to sight the sense of touch that the work both amplifies and thwarts, since the way that it makes touch available leads to plunder. The result is a perspective on the future that is not reassuring, but nor is it strictly bleak. It is symptomatic of our own era of doubt in which global capitalist culture seems incapable of recognizing and changing the behaviors that are evidently destroying the material foundations that have made them possible; but it addresses these concerns with the suggestion that it is possible to form a new common sense that reaches across species. The tremor at the edge of Hamilton's vision traverses the gap between our moment and a future whose unknowability doubles as hope.

Notes

[1] Ann Hamilton, *the common SENSE*, *Ann Hamilton Studio*, 2014, https://www.annhamiltonstudio.com/images/projects/the_common_SENSE/AH_common_sense_package_hi_res.pdf.

[2] Ann Hamilton, conversation with the author, December 11, 2018.

[3] Lynne Cooke, "The Viewer, the Sitter, and the Site: A Splintered Syntax," in *Ann Hamilton, tropos*, ed. Lynne Cooke and Karen Kelly (New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 1995), 61.

[4] Dave Birkland, "Flap Over Canary Exhibit," *Seattle Times*, February 16, 1992, B2.

[5] Kenneth Baker, "Ann Hamilton: The San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art" *Artforum* 29, no. 2 (October 1990): 178–79.

[6] Mary Katherine Coffey has described Hamilton's mode of representation of public memory as haunting. Mary Katherine Coffey, "Histories That Haunt: A Conversation with Ann Hamilton," *Art Journal* 60, no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 11.

[7] Ann Hamilton, *Ann Hamilton: Habitus* (Philadelphia: The Fabric Workshop and Museum, 2017).

[8] Steve Lyons and Kai Bosworth, "Museums in the Climate Emergency," in *Museum Activism*, ed. Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell (New York: Routledge, 2019), 175.

[9] Dominic O'Key, "Why Look at Taxidermy Animals? Exhibiting, Curating and Mourning the Sixth Mass Extinction Event," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 27, no. 6 (2021): 636, 642.

[10] Fiona Cameron, "Posthuman Museum Practices," in *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 351.

[11] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Gerhard Richter: Painting after the Subject of History* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2022), 229.

[12] Cameron, "Posthuman Museum Practices," 352.

[13] Aristotle, *On the Soul. Parva Naturalia. On Breath*, trans. W. S. Hett. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 197.

[14] Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 85.

[15] Okwui Enwezor, "Archive Fever: Photography Between History and the Monument," in *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New York: Steidl/International Center of Photography, 2008), 11–12.

[16] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (1980; New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 77.

[17] Ann Hamilton, conversation with the author, December 11, 2018.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Sylvia Wolf, conversation with the author, March 26, 2019.

[20] Sven Haakanson, conversation with the author, December 17, 2019.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Anna Tsing, et al., ed., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Deborah Bird Rose, Thom van Dooren, and Matthew Chrulew, eds., *Extinction Studies: Stories of Time, Death, and Generations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

[23] Elaine Gan, et al., "Introduction: Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene," in Tsing et al., *Arts of Living* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), G1–G8; Brian Massumi, "Becoming-Animal in the Literary Field," in *Animals, Animality, and Literature*, ed. Bruce Boehrer, Molly Hand, and Brian Massumi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 275–76; John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" in *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 26.

[24] Susan Sheets-Pyenson, *Cathedrals of Science: The Development of Colonial Natural History Museums during the Late Nineteenth Century* (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), 15–20.

[25] Ibid., 13.

[26] Karen A. Rader and Victoria E. M. Cain, *Life on Display: Revolutionizing U.S. Museums of Science and Natural History in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 41.

[27] Frederic Augustus Lucas, quoted in Ibid., 40.

[28] Carl Akeley, quoted in Ibid., 75–76.

[29] Ibid., 44.

[30] Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936," *Social Text*, no. 11 (Winter 1984–1985): 25.

[31] Hamilton, conversation. See. Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014).

[32] Gerardo Ceballos, et al., "Accelerated Modern Human-Induced Species Losses: Entering the Sixth Mass Extinction," *Science Advances* 1, no. 5 (2015), https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.1400253.

[33] Dolly Jørgensen and Isla Gladstone, "The Passenger Pigeon's Past on Display for the Future," *Environmental History* 27, no. 2 (April 2022): 350.

[34] Anna Guasco, "' As dead as a dodo': Extinction Narratives and Multispecies Justice in the Museum," *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 4, no. 3 (September 2021): 1058.

[35] "*Revivre*, les animaux disparus en réalité augmentée," Muséum national d'histoire naturelle, https://www.mnhn.fr/fr/experience/revivre-les-animaux-disparus-en-realite-augmentee; Bruno David, quoted in Coralie Schaub and Adrian Chaunac-Webb, "Réalité augmentée: Les animaux disparus 'revivent' sous nos yeux au Muséum d'histoire naturelle," June 16, 2021, *Libération*, https://www.liberation.fr/environnement/biodiversite/les-animaux-disparus-revivent-sous-nos-yeux-au-museum-dhistoire-naturelle-20210616_BRIVHMB2ZRE6BIJGNGV4J6Z3OQ.

[36] Hannah Stark, "The Cultural Politics of Mourning in the Era of Mass Extinction: Thylacine Specimen P762," *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 63 (November 2018): 65–79.

[37] Adam Searle, "Exhibiting Extinction, Recovering Memory, and Contesting Uncertain Futures in the Museum," in "Exhibiting Extinction," special issue, *Museum & Society* 20, no. 1 (July 2022): 21.

[38] Hamilton, conversation.

[39] Dolly Jørgensen, Libby Robin, Marie-Theres Fojuth, "Slowing Time in the Museum in a Period of Rapid Extinction," in "Exhibiting Extinction," special issue, *Museum & Society* 20, no. 1 (July 2022): 2.

[40] Ibid., 4.

[41] Hamilton, conversation.

[42] Jørgensen, Robin, and Fojuth, "Slowing Time," 3, 2–4.

[43] Hamilton, conversation.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy," 23.

[46] Ibid., 42.

[47] Julie Stein, conversation with the author, March 1, 2019.

[48] Hamilton, conversation.

[49] Wolf, conversation.

[50] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 98–101.

[51] Gan, et al., "Introduction," G4.