

THE UNNATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM: MEDIATING NATURE IN THE SIXTH MASS EXTINCTION

Programme 2022-23



IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

Event Programme

We are at a crucial historical moment, in which the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List has announced a catastrophic decline in global biodiversity. Museums have an important role to play in communicating the value of nature. Yet nature is, necessarily, interpreted in museums, through taxidermy dioramas and skeletal mounts; virtual tours and digital databases; image, text and film. This event series brings together museum professionals and academics across disciplines to encourage vital conversations about the museum mediation of the natural world during the sixth mass extinction.

Each session will be hosted on Zoom to allow for international participation, and will take the format of short papers around a specific theme, followed by a roundtable discussion.

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Organised by Dr Verity Burke as part of the Irish Research Council-funded project, *Still Lives: Organic and Digital Animals in the Natural History Museum*, in the Department of the History of Art and Architecture at Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin.

Image credit: Blaschka model, courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland: Natural History.

Extinction

5pm Irish Time on 19th October 2022

<https://www.eventbrite.ie/e/the-unnatural-history-museum-extinction-session-tickets-424064487297>

Chair: Verity Burke (Government of Ireland Postdoctoral Fellow, Trinity College Dublin)

Contesting Uncertain Futures in El Museo del Bucardo

Adam Searle

This presentation builds upon qualitative research in El Museo del Bucardo – The Bucardo Museum – an exhibition space in the village of Torla, high in the Spanish Pyrenees. The bucardo was declared extinct on 6 January 2000 and rose to international fame three years later when scientists in Zaragoza delivered a bucardo clone; this event is commonly portrayed around the world as ‘the first de-extinction’. Taxidermic remains of the last bucardo were absent from public view for years, yet they finally returned to Torla in 2013 following years of campaigning from local activists, and El Museo del Bucardo was founded. I draw upon interviews and archival material to present an environmental history of the bucardo as told through the lens of the museum, one which sets out to ‘recover memory’ and institutionalize the bucardo’s legacy. In the museum, bucardo afterlives continue to shape understandings of situated Pyrenean wildlife. I examine El Museo del Bucardo’s role in generating meaning in an epoch characterized by mass extinction and the spectacle of technofixes in the form of de-extinction science. In addition, I explore tensions of local/global in the context of the digital ecologies of extinction, through examining the Museum’s online presence and use of digital mediation in its extinction storytelling.

Adam Searle is a cultural and environmental geographer whose research broadly examines the relations of humans, other species, and technologies. He is a co-founding member of the Digital Ecologies research group and the co-editor of *Digital Ecologies*, which will be published by Manchester University Press in 2023.

The Inevitable Dinosaur Extinction: Mesozoic Storytelling with the Asteroid of Damocles

Will Tattersdill

This short paper invites listeners to think about the ways in which museums display one of the most famous mass extinctions - the one caused (at least, in part) by the K-Pg impactor. Hitting the Yucatán Peninsula roughly 66 million years ago, the impactor marked the end of the Cretaceous period, the extinction of most dinosaur species, and the beginning of the long ascent of the mammals. Images of this event are now a standard “last page” to any dinosaur history, including in museums, where panels about asteroids and deep space often form the final few paces of what is otherwise a natural history gallery.

Why do we do this? Dinosaurs were extant for many millions of years prior to the impact, and during this time a whole raft of species came and went without any astronomical intervention (*Stegosaurus*, to take one famous example, died out 84 million years before the asteroid hit; *we* are closer in time to the impact than the last *Stegosaurus*). Yet virtually any lay understanding of the dinosaurs is tied up with the fact that they are always-already gone, doomed, departed. The asteroid hangs over the heads of a preponderance of dinosaur storytelling, and its position in many museum galleries colours some of our most fundamental suppositions about these creatures and their extinction.

Will Tattersdill is Lecturer in Popular Literature, Liberal Arts, and Natural Sciences at the University of Birmingham, UK, where he is lead of the Lit Sci Lab and teaches genre fiction, Victorian studies, and interdisciplinary theory.

Is it real?

Isla Gladstone

As museums consider their responses to climate and ecological crisis, what role can taxidermy displays play? Drawing on the first question many children ask when encountering these displays: 'Is it real?' this talk considers the complexities of what is presented, what is untold, and why it matters to engagement with extinction crisis. My focus is the traditional taxidermy displays at Bristol Museum & Art Gallery. I will share learning from current work exploring their contemporary relevance to extinction crisis storytelling, including cultural and colonial contexts. As part of a shift from product to process, from answers to questions, I will touch on how to create space for under-represented voices and new creative practice. What challenges and possibilities does this shift in practice bring to mediating nature in the sixth mass extinction?

Isla Gladstone is Senior Curator for the natural science collections at Bristol Museum & Art Gallery. Her current work focuses on the contemporary relevance of these collections in the context of environmental crisis. Isla led intervention *Extinction Voices* in 2019 and is now leading a project called *Extinction Silences 2022-24* exploring intersections with decolonial practice. She is current Chair of the Natural Sciences Collections Association (NatSCA).

Playing with extinction

Dolly Jørgensen

Natural history museums often hold the last tangible remains of extinct animals. The histories of those extinctions are tragic and horrible, and are often told in environmental history scholarship as such. But can those histories also be told in engaging, even playful, ways to reach new audiences? In this contribution, I examine the augmented reality exhibition *Revive*, a temporary exhibition at the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle in Paris to interrogate how an exhibit might play with extinction. In such museum experiences, the history of extinction and the bodies of the extinct literally come to life through AR. I argue that putting skin on the bones of extinct animals and animating them in lively ways puts visitors into an embodied relation with both extinction and history.

Dolly Jørgensen is Professor of History, University of Stavanger, Norway specializing in histories of environment and technology. Her current research agenda focuses on cultural histories of animal extinction, and she recently published *Recovering Lost Species in the Modern Age: Histories of Longing and Belonging* (MIT Press, 2019). She is co-editor-in-chief of the journal *Environmental Humanities* and co-directs The Greenhouse Center for Environmental Humanities at UiS.

Digital Media

5pm Irish Time on 16th November 2022

<https://www.eventbrite.ie/e/the-unnatural-history-museum-digital-media-session-tickets-425195680727>

Chair: Finn Arne Jørgensen (Co-Director of the Greenhouse Center for Environmental Humanities, Universitet I Stavanger)

Bringing the Dead Zoo to life

Paolo Viscardi

The exhibition building of the National Museum of Ireland – Natural History (NMINH), affectionately known by many as the “Dead Zoo”, has remained largely unchanged for over a century and is often considered a “museum of a museum”. For locals this apparent stasis offers a continuity of shared experience that spans generations, making the Dead Zoo much loved; however, the restricted physical access and poor environment provided by historic building pose significant problems. The old displays also offer little opportunity for engaging audiences with the large scientific collections held by the NMINH and the narratives that they can support.

Engaging audiences with issues such as biodiversity loss in a largely static exhibition space requires the use of alternative channels of communication. Blogging offers opportunities to build dialogue around objects and can help foster the development of engaged communities. Online tools such as navigable 3D building scans can help support access to inaccessible historic displays, while social media platforms facilitate the hosting and sharing of narratives about museum objects, research activities, and key concepts in biodiversity. These digital tools took on additional importance during the global Covid-19 pandemic and, as familiarity has increased, they will undoubtedly remain vital in a post-pandemic world.

Paolo Viscardi is Deputy Keeper of Natural History at the National Museum of Ireland (NMI). He has over 20 years’ experience of engaging people with natural science using museum collections through a range of approaches, including exhibitions, performance, traditional media and online platforms.

Socially Mediating Animals in Exhibiting Digital Animalities

Matthew Brower

This presentation looks at the complex structures of animal mediation involved in the linked exhibitions *Digital Animalities: Rendering* (CONTACT Gallery 2018) and *Digital Animalities: Mapping* (Aird Gallery 2018) as well as the related book *Exhibiting Digital Animalities* (Public Books 2021). These projects were part of a larger SSHRC funded research project, also titled *Digital Animalities*, led by Jody Berland at York University in Toronto.

The two exhibitions brought together works by 12 artists and artists’ collectives that foregrounded various ways in which digital technologies intervened in contemporary human-animal relations. In this presentation I focus on the re-use of social media representations of animals by two artists’ collectives in the Mapping exhibition: Neozoon and Julie Andreyev + Simon Lysander Overstall. In *MY BBY 8L3W* (2014) and *Good Boy-Bad Boy* (2011), Neozoon uses found footage from video sites to create a crowd-sourced eco-feminist critique of contemporary Human-Animal relations. In **glisten) HIVE* (2010-2018), Andreyev + Overstall algorithmically process an archive of tweets about birds and recorded bird calls to make a generative

installation that offers space for reflective engagement. Thinking through the different ways that Neozoon's humorous and confrontational work operates in contrast to Andreyev + Overstall's contemplative practice offers an opportunity to reflect on the importance of affect to exhibiting animal mediation.

Matthew Brower is the author of *Exhibiting Digital Animalities* (Public Books, 2021) and *Developing Animals* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010). In addition to co-curating *Digital Animalities: Mapping* and *Digital Animalities: Rendering* with Giovanni Aloï, he has produced several significant exhibitions of contemporary art including *Through The Body: Lens-based works by Contemporary Chinese Women Artists* (Art Museum University of Toronto 2014), *Mediated Memory* (National Art Museum, Beijing 2015), and *Threatened, Endangered, Extinct: Contemporary Printmakers Confront Species Loss* (Open Studio, 2014). Currently, he is the Governance and Programs Officer for the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto.

Collecting the Anthropocene: On a digital and multi-perspective collection experiment *Elisabeth Heyne*

The Anthropocene and its immediate concomitant of massive biodiversity loss are related to a complex structure of interdependencies of different dimensions: Between the local and the global, between Earth time and human time, between the cycles of the Earth system and human intervention, between technosphere and biosphere. The feedback effects and interdependencies of these dimensions are dynamic, network-like and connected to different scales. For this very reason, digital media have an evident advantage when it comes to representing Anthropocene effects. In the face of the sixth mass extinction, it is therefore worthwhile for conservation institutions to ask what role digital media and especially digital collections can play in knowledge production for our present. How to collect, digitize or visualize loss? How can conservation institutions facilitate and produce transdisciplinary and multi-perspective knowledge for our present through digital collections? How to include different voices and new narratives of our changing nature in traditional conservation institutions such as Natural History Museums? Addressing some of these questions, the joint project "Changing Natures. Collecting the Anthropocene Together" by Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, Germany and Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle in Paris, France is taking an open science approach to collection development. Members of the public are invited to contribute their own perspectives to a digital collection on the subject of environmental change and biodiversity loss by sharing personal objects and the stories and memories linked to them. The aim is to encourage experimentation with new collecting practices, narratives and representations of the Anthropocene and open opportunities for a broader dialogue that engages actors from society and science. In my presentation, I will briefly introduce the project in order to reflect on the opportunities and limitations of a digital collection of the Anthropocene.

Elisabeth Heyne is currently leading the project "Changing Natures. Collecting the Anthropocene Together" at the Natural History Museum in Berlin, a collaborative project with the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle Paris. Until 2020, she was a postdoctoral research associate at the professorial chair for media studies and modern German literature at Technische Universität Dresden. After studying Comparative Literature and French Philology in Berlin, Paris and Córdoba (Spain), she received her PhD in 2018 from the University of Basel, Switzerland and Technical University Dresden with a thesis on Science of the Imaginary. Visual, Experimental, Reading and Collection Practices of Roger Caillois and Elias Canetti (DeGruyter 2020). Her research focuses on the interface of biology, ethnology and literature, history of science, on concepts of nature and culture in the Anthropocene and the imaginary of the Amazon. She occasionally translates French fiction and non-fiction.

The use of digital media in a narrative space

Marijke Besselink

Naturalis is a family-oriented museum with a 200-year history background. After a complete renewal, the museum reopened in 2019. The new Naturalis brings together museum, collections and research, but above all wants to touch the hearts of visitors. In developing exhibition concepts we faced some challenging issues. How to make an exhibition on Death? Or Evolution? These are both themes in which processes are vital.

Like any other natural history museum, Naturalis is packed with dead plants and animals: preserved, mounted animals, fossils, or specimens in jars. To make an exhibition on Death however, is quite a challenge. Death is a condition, a fatal, momentary phase in a process of ageing that starts with birth. And then, Evolution, the process by which species arise and change; how can you build an exhibition around fossils that aren't even recognisable as life forms? How can you create an experience that places the visitor in a narrative environment, closely related to the theme of the exhibition? By using digital media, stories can be revealed and difficult topics can be explained in a compelling way.

Marijke Besselink is Scientific Content Developer in Naturalis Biodiversity Center in Leiden, The Netherlands, with a long record of exhibition making. She translates science into stories that connect the museum collections to the audience. For the new Naturalis (2019) she developed concepts and themes for the exhibition halls: Life, Death and Evolution.

Animals

5pm Irish Time on 22nd February 2023

<https://www.eventbrite.ie/e/the-unnatural-history-museum-animals-session-tickets-425209592337>

Chair: Tim Stott, Associate Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History, Head of Department of the History of Art and Architecture

The Post-Mortem Mediation of Knut the Polar Bear

Verity Burke

If you visited the Berlin Zoo between 2006 and 2011, maybe you even saw him – an endangered polar bear cub who became an animal celebrity. The media coverage of ‘Knut’ during his lifetime revealed tensions between ‘natural’ wild animals and the ‘unnatural’ existence of zoo animals; but when the bear unexpectedly passed away, the complexity of locating the ‘real’ animal continued in the polar bear’s museum afterlives. A taxidermy of Knut is displayed in the Museum für Naturkunde, but his body was also CT-scanned by the 3D Lab at the Institute of Mathematics at TU Berlin, and 3D prints made of his head and skull. These objects were displayed during post-mortem press conferences and subsequently in an exhibition, *Near Life: The Gipsformerei – 200 Years of Casting* at the James Simon Gallery in Berlin, from August 2019 to March 2020. These three-dimensional representations of Knut provoke questions about the kinds of objects we expect to encounter in our natural history museums; whether our concepts of animal authenticity are additionally complicated by digitally-derived representations; and of the co-construction of animal representations through media and museum narrative.

Verity Burke is an interdisciplinary scholar working at the intersections of literary analysis, the environmental humanities, and museum studies. The Irish Research Council funds her current project at Trinity College Dublin, *Still Lives: Organic and Digital Animals in the Natural History Museum*, which examines the dialogue between analogue and digital technologies of animal visualisation in their museum context. Its major aim is to reveal the intersections between such technologies and the cultural construction of the animal body during the sixth extinction. Previously, she has worked as research associate on funded projects which investigate intermedial storytelling in the display cultures of our natural history museums, including *Building the Book of Nature: the Poetics of the Natural History Museum* (SSHRC, Mount Allison/University of Birmingham), *Narrativising Dinosaurs: Science and Popular Culture, 1850-Present* (AHRC, University of Birmingham) and *Beyond Dodos and Dinosaurs: Displaying Extinction and Recovery in Museums* (NFR, University of Stavanger).

Mediating Gender and Genre in the Blaschka Models

Pandora Syperek

Taxidermy often takes centre stage in critical natural history museum research and practice, yet this tendency risks perpetuating the longstanding bias towards land-based mammals, or ‘charismatic megafauna’, as well as the aesthetic realism which forms the epistemological foundations of the museum. In contrast, I will focus on glass models of marine invertebrates made by Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka from the 1860s-90s and their recent revival. Jellyfish, anemones and their ilk evade anthropomorphism and its pitfalls, such as reinforcing heteronormative sexual relations and nuclear family structures. Meanwhile, brittle glass seems an incongruous material for simulating such watery and gelatinous creatures. Combined with their uncanny illusionism and intriguing oscillation between art and science, the models’ radical

anatomy accounts for the resurfacing of these subtle objects of resistance in recent years in natural history museums and contemporary art exhibitions alike. Beyond the models' (mixed) media – blown and powdered glass, glue, pigment and wire – this paper will consider model-making itself as more-than-representational mediation, as well as the medium in which such creatures and models exist, from the ocean to the dry museum air, and how these constitute the natural history museum's ecology of display.

Dr Pandora Syperek is Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the Institute for Design Innovation, Loughborough University London, and Visiting Fellow at the V&A Research Institute. Her research examines the intersections of science, gender and the nonhuman within modern and contemporary art and cultures of display. She has published numerous book chapters and journal articles and is co-editor of *Oceans* (Whitechapel Gallery/MIT Press, forthcoming 2023) and a special issue of the *Journal of Curatorial Studies* on 'Curating the Sea' (2020), both with Sarah Wade. From 2016-2017 Pandora was postdoctoral fellow at the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, and she holds a PhD in the History of Art from University College London.

What is Taxidermy? An intimate relationship between death and maker.

Jazmine Miles Long

For taxidermy to exist an animal must have died. This brutal truth creates unease and leaves the viewer to ponder how the death occurred, and secondly how the death and the body is managed. A fluffy rabbit, cute and cuddly in life, suddenly becomes hideous and untouchable in death. There is an assumption that the process of taxidermy is grotesque and dirty, sifting through layers of gut and flesh. However, skinning is only a small part of the Taxidermy process, which is a delicate and highly skilled craft. It is a relationship between the animal's body and the maker. This relationship can, of course, be harsh and heavy handed but it can also be tender, meaningful and beautiful depending on the approach. Well executed taxidermy is not produced from hate or misunderstanding of the animal, it is made through a love and dedication to the study of that species and years of honing one's craft. We present and categorise taxidermy within museums as science objects, however these objects themselves are clearly more than just natural history. A painting, sculpture, ceramic pot or item of clothing created by human hands constitutes as art, design, craft, fashion; all objects of anthropological importance and are therefore elevated and categorised as such. A piece of taxidermy is only categorised in this way when the object value is higher than that of natural history, either within a fine art context, or when the skin has been used for a practical, musical or wearable use. Why do we undervalue the craft of taxidermy and those who create it?

Jazmine Miles Long is a taxidermist, artist and educator. Only working with animals that have died from natural causes. Working with museums to create ethically sourced bespoke taxidermy for institutions including The Wellcome Trust, NHM London, National Museum of Ireland, UCL, RAMM, Brighton & Hove Museums, Manchester Museum and many others. Jazmine has lectured for UCL, NatSCA, The Open University, British Art Network, Tate, Towner Art Gallery, Cambridge University Museums, Reading University among others. In 2021 Jazmine was awarded an Arts Council England grant to explore and develop stable, ethical and sustainable alternative materials for use within taxidermy manufacture. Jazmine presented her research at SPNHC 2022.

Decolonising

5pm Irish Time on 22nd March 2023

<https://www.eventbrite.ie/e/the-unnatural-history-museum-decolonising-session-tickets-425211989507>

Chair: Poul Holm, Director of Trinity Centre for Environmental Humanities

Displaying Power: Towards decolonial interpretations of natural history museums

Subhadra Das

In September 2019, my colleagues and I at UCL Museums curated an exhibition at the Grant Museum of Zoology entitled *Displays of Power: A Natural History of Empire*. The Grant Museum is London's last surviving university teaching collection. The museum displays are designed to educate university students and the general public about the study of biology and the wonders of the natural world. But there are other stories there too. *Displays of Power* peeled away layers of the existing displays to uncover the colonial histories that shaped the design and use of these historical collections. In this talk, I will present a selection of the stories that featured in the exhibition to illustrate how the traditional narrow focus on animal biology erases stories about how those animals came to be in a museum in the first place, and the local people whose expert knowledge we still count on today. There are stories about race, Empire, and colonialism in any natural history museum, if you know how to look. Once you start to look for them, you'll never look at a natural history museum in the same way again.

Subhadra Das is a researcher and storyteller who looks at the relationship between science and society. She specialises in the history and philosophy of science, particularly the history of scientific racism and eugenics, and what those histories mean for our lives today. For nine years, she was Curator of the Science Collections at University College London, and also Researcher in Critical Eugenics at the Sarah Parker Remond Centre for the Study of Racism and Racialisation. She has written and presented podcasts, curated museum exhibitions, done stand-up comedy and regularly appears on radio and tv. Her first book, [*\(Un\)Civilised: 10 Lies That Made The West*](#) comes out in May 2023.

How natural is it to find “trophies” in a mammal collection?

Catarina Madruga

Without the context of capitalist and colonial infrastructures and logistics, mammal collections in zoological museums would be much smaller in their numbers. Collections of skins and skulls include many objects that resonate with the aesthetic of hunting trophies and challenge any clear distinctions between scientific specimens and colonial plunder. While curators and researchers work with comprehensive series and draw crucial information from the comparison of large specimen sets, historically zoological collections of colonial contexts are representative of the extractive practices behind the establishment of European collections. Using the biographies of specific objects and shipments from colonial Africa in the period between 1880 and 1930, I will draw attention to colonial anxieties of accumulation and the tension between collecting practices and nature conservation.

Catarina Madruga is a historian of zoological collections and empire, working as postdoc researcher on the project "Colonial Provenances of Nature. The expansion of the mammal collection at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, around 1900" funded by the Deutsches Zentrum Kulturgutverluste (German Lost Art Foundation), and hosted at Humanities of Nature,

Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, Leibniz-Institut für Evolutions- und Biodiversitätsforschung. Currently developing provenance methods for colonial natural history collections, Madrugá is preparing with Déborah Dubald (Université de Strasbourg) a special issue for the *Journal for the History of Knowledge*, under the title "Situated Nature: Field Collecting and Local Knowledge in the Nineteenth Century" (forthcoming, November 2022). She is the author of a PhD in History and Philosophy of Sciences (2020) with the title "Taxonomy and Empire. Zoogeographical knowledge on Portuguese Africa, 1862-1881."

Rewriting Memory: Time and Extinction in Fiona Tan's Depot (2015)

Deborah Schrijvers

In Indonesian-Australian artist Fiona Tan's video installation *Depot*, the usual mode of viewing (nearly) extinct marine animals as 'specimens' and part of natural history collections is challenged. Through its formal strategies of slow cinema and framing, the video questions the way in which these natural history museums display their collections and the subsequent cultural narratives of Western science and imperialism it perpetuates. This is further problematised through a voice-over that juxtaposes the current state of extinct marine animals with stories about times in which they were characters in myths, folklore and the memory of the narrator himself. The video indirectly refers to a human way of co-living and culture of which these marine animals were part of that is also (nearly) extinct. The scientific and objective status of the natural history museum and the way in which it extracted its animals for science and display is not only criticised, but its histories are also reframed.

What formal strategies does *Depot* employ and how can they be helpful in conceptualizing extinction in the context of the natural history museum? I shall approach these questions through an interdisciplinary approach: firstly, through an extinction studies framework with an emphasis on time (Bastian, Jørgensen), meaning that I consider extinction as a situated, biocultural phenomenon (Matthew Chrulew et al.) that necessitates story-telling to counter an unfolding Sixth Mass Extinction. Secondly, through a decolonial and anticolonial framework in museum studies, which has tentatively been applied to natural history museums in comparison to ethnographic and anthropological museums (Azoulay). *Depot* ruptures the representation of preserved marine animals as both objects and proof of a colonial, scientific paradigm of taxonomy and recontextualizes them in a way that they become relational actants, co-shaping human histories and cultures.

Deborah Schrijvers is an Ad Astra PhD student at University College Dublin, in the School of English, Drama and Film as part of the Environmental Humanities strand. She holds a Bachelor in Philosophy and Literary Studies and a Research Master in Literary Studies. For her PhD project, she researches extinction narratives with an emphasis on gender, race and decolonisation through analysis of contemporary and transnational film and art.