Angela Singer’s work calls into question the unnecessary violence humans subject animals to, as well as the notion that people are inherently separate from and superior to other species. For years, her work has blurred the boundaries between decoration and death, altering by using a process she calls ‘de-taxidermy’, the meaning of the trophy and the Victorian diorama.

Questions and Text by Giovanni Aloi
Angela Singer is an extremely coherent artist. Over the years she has developed a solid reputation built on a body of work that fearless of aesthetic conventions has challenged us all to look at animals with different eyes. In her continuous attack to our preconceived perception and understanding of animals, Singer does not allow herself to work with living animals, nor have living creatures killed or otherwise harmed for her art. All the animal materials used in her art are old, donated and/or discarded as refuse.

Over her career, the concern with hunting and our moral and ethical approach to animal has clearly played a pivotal role. “Working with the history of each particular animal”, she says “I aim to recreate something of its death by hunt.”

As a result, her work is difficult but immediate; as abrasive as it is seductive. Her interventions on the taxidermied animal bodies are sometimes subtle, other times brutal, usually unpredictable and often arresting. At times her recycled taxidermy drips blood, at others the original animal skin has been stripped altogether to reveal the taxidermic support underneath it.

A keen animal rights activist, Singer has always effectively used her work, capitalizing on the abrasiveness of its botched forms, in order to raise awareness of animal sufferance as caused by human hands. Her recycling of taxidermy that was once trophy kill, is to Singer a way to ‘honor the animals “life.”’ Ultimately, for Singer, the main purpose of her works to “make the viewer consider the morality of our willingness to use animals for our own purposes.”

Recently, Anita Guerrini, Professor of Environmental Studies and History at University of California stirred up a range of reactions in response to a thread she launched on H-Animal (the online-resource website for Animal Studies Scholars). Her question was: “does Animal Studies necessarily imply animal advocacy? The point of Animal Studies seems to be to advocate a certain political point of view, and this influences the kinds of work that have appeared thus far. Is there room in Animal Studies for people who, say, think eating meat is not wrong? Or that experimentation on animals in some circumstances is somehow justified? As someone who has written about animal experimentation quite a lot, but who has not unreservedly condemned it, I am not sure that I have a place in Animal Studies as it is currently defined.”

What is your take on this subject?

Angela Singer: As an artist concerned with the ethical and epistemological consequences of humans using non human life, I look to the field of animal studies to engage in discussion with those open to examining their practice from different perspectives, but discussion alone isn’t enough. We live in an era when so many animals are endangered; we all need an urgent wake-up to do what we can to stop the oppression, exploitation, domination and torture of animals. I acknowledge we all have to come to awareness on our own but that doesn’t stop me hoping for animal studies academics to call into question the aggressive cruelty with which scientists treat animals.

I followed the Guerrini/H-Animal discussion with interest, in particular the marvellous response from Steve Best (academic and editor of the Journal for Critical Animal Studies):

“Of course theories are crucial for understanding the world, and a politics without reflexivity, study, and theory is no politics I want to advance. But I think it is pretty clear what the evil is, what the forces of destruction are, and what we have to do to fight, struggle, and resist the global juggernaut of capitalist, carnivorism, and speciesist omnicide”.

One may argue we are not obliged to give up theory, research, and writing in order to spend all of our time in political meetings, demonstrations, actions, and litigations. But can scholars any longer be as isolated from politics and advocacy as they typically are...It is with such concerns in mind that a growing number of serious scholars and academics are forging a new path within animal studies, a critical animal studies. This is a distinction with a profound difference. Critical animal studies doesn’t shy from openly stating normative assumptions and commitments, it doesn’t run from the complexities of mediating theory and politics and politics and theory, it doesn’t wear rose-colored glasses when looking at the systemic forces of domination and oppression that control life on this planet, it doesn’t believe veganism and animal liberation are accidental or superfluous to doing animal studies in good faith, it doesn’t seek only to “study” animals but to work toward their emancipation, and it doesn’t fear taking controversial positions.”

Where does your interest for animals originate and which is to you the most interesting?

The privatized notion of love is very odd to me. I felt love for every animal I ever knew, saw or otherwise encountered from an early age. That adults such as our local butcher, who had a cat that sat on the shop counter, could feel love only for a specific animal, usually an adored pet, was something I found hard to comprehend. I was and am very moved by the injustice of speciesism.
Angela Singer
Caught, 2007, recycled taxidermy, mixed media ©
Is there a specific event that triggered the production of work concerned with the killing of animal?

As I mentioned, from a young age I made the connection between the dog I loved that lived with us as a member of our family and the dead animal flesh on my plate. I felt killing of animals to be as wrong as killing of humans and to my Mother’s annoyance subsequently refused to eat meat. It was this family dog that was my first personal experience of killing. My parents decided to emigrate from England to New Zealand, instead of giving the dog to my aunt as was promised my parents had her killed. The dog was not sick, just inconvenient. It was an unnecessary death. In New Zealand we lived rurally, the killing of animals, mostly by hunters, was a weekly occurrence. Witnessing animals being routinely hunted, killed and butchered made me determined to challenge a culture in which hunting is readily accepted.

Have you ever taxidermied an animal yourself?

I am not a taxidermist. I do not taxidermy the animals I work with, I recycle old trophy kill taxidermy that is often donated because it is damaged. The process is what I call ‘de-taxidermy’, a stripping back, layer by layer of the animal and the taxidermist’s work. I have put some effort into learning correct taxidermy practise so I can subvert it. The taxidermist has put effort into making the animal look alive, I often do the reverse.

The process begins with my removing fur, feathers and skin, then the ‘stuffing’, sometimes the final step is to sculpt a mixed media form and flesh. Depending on the age of the taxidermy the animal may have a form inside; if it is very aged it might contain shredded clothing or sawdust and toxic surprises such as arsenic. Taxidermy is shaped into serene poses; we sentimentalize nature to keep from thinking about the human assault on it. In stripping back the taxidermy and exposing the bullet wounds and scars I make visible evidence of the aggression we inflict on animals.

In 2003 you curated ‘Animality’, an exhibition addressing questions about morality and our relationship with the natural world. What were the criteria for inclusion of works and how successful do you think the exhibition was in fulfilling its aim?

With the Animality exhibition I set out to explore the connections between our understandings of animals and the cultural conditions in which these understandings have been formed. I invited artists whose works radicalise the use of animals and animal imagery, whose work might generate debate.

Contemporary artists working with the animal occupy varying ethical positions, to reflect this some of the work in the exhibition was from animal advocates, some wasn’t. I didn’t want a predictable show nor did I want to be guilty of being dismissive of art that deserves consideration.

There was criticism of my inclusion of Catherine Chalmers; her responsibility for the death of the insects and mice she uses drew very strong emotional reactions. Interestingly I saw a form of speciesism; those that did accept Chalmer’s use of insects objected loudly to my use of a (seemingly) dead skinned deer. That Chalmer’s art in particular sparked heated discussion around the ethical issues of the show made it for me a very successful exhibition.

What would you answer to John Simons (author of Animal Rights and the Politics of Literary Representation, 2002) claim that “When I see a work of ‘botched taxidermy’ ... I do not see an epistemological problem. I see a dead animal”.

My answer would be to prefer he saw a question. Why is this animal dead? What am I asked to see other than its dead body? Engaging directly with botched taxidermy should invite the viewer to reflect on the wider cultural and ethical implications of animal art practices.

When I look at the flawed dead animal of botched taxidermy I don’t see an animal separate from myself; there is permeability to the boundaries separating other species from us. The body intensifies my emotional engagement with the work. Far from repulsing me, it draws me closer because it’s not beautiful, not sentimental, not what animal art is meant to be, not what the animal is meant to look like and I want to question why.

Has your commitment to animal rights changed since your involvement in the mid-1990s?

No it hasn’t, it remains strong. In the mid 1990’s I was very involved in the Animal Liberation, Victoria (Australia) anti-vivisection campaign. When I moved to New Zealand I spread my involvement across a number of animal rights groups. As in Australia I am supportive of direct action especially when it involves freeing animals (I’m not the fearless type, nearly getting caught or arrested gives me the he bees). It was natural that something I am passionate about should become a major theme in my art. I think of my art as inserting dead bodies into art galleries and forcing audiences to engage with unnecessary death.
In your recent work ‘My Dearest, Dearest Creatures (2006)’, you have left behind the subject of trophy in order to focus on the Victorian diorama. What does this shift represent?

The diorama works came out of my concern for the recent rise in the popularity of taxidermy. The last period when taxidermy was fashionable was the Victorian age. It wasn’t a good time to be an animal. Unlike traditional taxidermy diorama, where the emphasis is on the serene animal in natural settings, I used botched animals in un-natural settings, frozen in the moment of being killed or having just been killed.

For these works I deliberately turned away from the magnificent trophy animals we have deemed worthy of respect and turned my attention to the animals normally considered unworthy; rats, stoats, sparrows and rabbits, animals we choose not to have in our homes; animals that collectors of taxidermy are not pursuing.

Taxidermy and botched taxidermy have become increasingly popular in contemporary art. Do you think that too much exposure may reduce the shock factor attached to the almost unbearable sense of realism that the early works possessed?

As long as people don’t want to question how humans use animals, don’t want to think about animals, they will be shocked by the art of those that do because what they see is too real. Botched taxidermy embraces reality; it is not attempting to escape it. By seizing and holding the viewer’s attention with art that is often un-beautiful, the viewer is forced to consider animals that look alive but are not, forced to question how and why the animal died. Botched taxidermy will never be easy to ignore as long as the artist expresses their truth and the work remains honest; shock for shocks sake is pointless. The aim should be to create botched works that are transformative, that shock the viewer into a new way of seeing and thinking about the animal.
Your most recent work, Brand New Wilderness (2007) strikes a relatively new balance between the abrasive presence of the dead animal and a certain beauty rooted in the use of colour and composition. Is it part of a new strategy?

Sometimes a soft voice finds more listeners. The element of beauty certainly increases the audience for the work and I've been careful to make sure the animals aren't insipid. Wishy washy art that lacks substance is currently endemic; I see it as escapism from the harsh realities of our time. It's cowardly.

What do you consider to be the most extreme piece of botched taxidermy you have created and why?

Sore, an old trophy head stripped of its skin that has had a new 'flesh' carved by myself from blood red wax. In Sore, reality and taxidermy have been manipulated, forcing the viewer to do a 'double take' of the artwork. Sore came out of a conversation I had with the hunter who shot the trophy. He explained that after he shot and skinned the stag the antlers were sawn off. Antlers contain a blood reservoir, when cut blood spurts forth drenching hunter and stag. I wanted to achieve an animal form inspired by the way the stag died but never seen before in nature.

Frightening and difficult to look at Sore is a powerful work that asks questions about power. Why do humans need to constantly reassure ourselves of our supremacy over other species through the exclusion of that which is not?

I discovered that stripping back the skin of the trophy the eye becomes prominent and the work becomes about the gaze; who is the subject watching and who the object? Sore appears alive and stares accusingly at us. Can trophy kill protest against us in any other way than by accusatory gaze?
Angela Singer
W Button, 2007, recycled taxidermy, mixed media ©
Taxidermic manipulations are open to a variety of readings. How do you feel about the openness of your work considering that the underlying political message involved is at the core of your practice?

The exploitation of non-human living beings by humans is one of the core issues raised with my work. I do not kill, have killed or taxidermy animals. I recycle old discarded taxidermy in my practice, much of it trophy kill. I subvert the hunting trophy but I can’t stop the viewer from subverting my subversion. I resist the temptation to have explanatory information at my exhibitions because I want the audience to come away with questions not obvious answers. I aim to create art that has enough depth to speak to a range of viewers, even those with very different opinions, that’s of enough interest to the viewer to think the work through and feel sympathetic toward it.

From what I’ve seen of political art, work that seeks to persuade viewers to take a specific form of action can be quite awful. It can also be sanctimonious and literal. Trying too hard to show the issue you’re addressing can lead to dull passionless art of little interest to anyone except those concerned with the same issues. For me the best art is difficult to ‘read’. Returning repeatedly to an artwork that does not give up its meaning easily is a great joy. A great infuriating joy.

Botched taxidermy was the perfect vehicle for messages that art had willingly ignored till the 90’s. Do you think it has anything more to say that it hasn’t said already?

The time for art offering only sensationalistic one-liners is gone. In our era botched taxidermy has this to say: that the exploitation and destruction of animals and our environment, is in the end all our fault. Until humans stop destroying our planet artists need to keep finding way to express this. For me I see no better vehicle than animals that have been exploited, hunted and discarded.

What do you think of Damien Hirsts’ use of animals in his work?

I get the impression from his comments that Hirst isn’t interested in the consequences and responsibilities of, and political and ethical issues raised by, taking life for artistic ends. While some of his comments suggest that he likes animals, his actions show he holds the conventional view that all non-human life exists for human needs and desires. He summed up his position with his statement that the, ‘idea is more important than the actual piece.’

What will your next work entail?

I was recently donated an ex-museum diorama of full size trophy kill. They have mini steel girders inside requiring a degree of strength to manipulate so I’m exhausted. They are making for unusual, confrontational works.

Angela Singer
Dripsy Dropsy, recycled taxidermy, mixed media
210 x 170 x 170 mm 2006 ©


For more information about the artist, please visit www.angelasinger.com

Angela Singer was interviewed by Antennae in February 2008 ©