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## Summary of poster presented at the 2016 NatSCA conference: *The 'Greater Koodoo' diorama at the American Museum of Natural History.*



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### Abstract

This paper is a summary of a poster presented at the 2016 conference of the Natural Sciences Collections Association (NatSCA). It compares two ways of looking at, and interpreting, a natural history display: the 'Greater Koodoo' diorama at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH). The first is as a 'literal' representation of an African landscape in which animals inhabit their natural habitat, and the second is as a 'socially constructed' representation of the natural world that carries within it the cultural assumptions of the time and place where it was produced. In the final section, I look at other recent critical perspectives on the interpretation of diorama displays.

**Keywords:** American Museum of Natural History, taxidermy, diorama

### Contemporary views of the 'Greater Koodoo' diorama

The 'Greater Koodoo' diorama was planned as a part of an ambitious series of 28 "habitat groups of...African fauna with typical accessories and panoramic backgrounds" (Akeley, 1924, p252) by Carl Akeley, a naturalist, taxidermist and explorer, together with his employer, Henry Osborn, the president of the AMNH at the time. Osborn believed that the purpose of the AMNH was "to instil into the urban people a respect for the truth and beauty of nature" (Wonders, 1993, p170), and in order to achieve his aim, he encouraged Akeley to combine artistic values with scientific facts in diorama displays that could "create beautiful, compelling" exhibits and "communicate the order and splendor of the natural world while at the same time disseminating information about it" (Anderson, 2014). Osborn praised Akeley's sculptured manikins because they depicted animals as they 'really' were, and not as they had been presented in

fictional accounts.

In his proposal to Osborn, Akeley envisaged:

"a great hall devoted entirely to Africa which should put in permanent and artistic form a satisfying record of fast disappearing fauna and give a comprehensive view of the topography of the continent by means of a series of groups constructed in the best museum technique." (Akeley, 1924, p252)

He was confident that with the improved realism of his manikins and the "best museum technique", his dioramas would be "scientific, natural, artistic" and "satisfying" to visitors (ibid, p253). To ensure all details were authentic, Akeley studied the animals he collected at first hand, and even took death masks of them. His aim was to achieve an authentic realism that matched his original experience of the African wilderness so closely that a visitor might believe that the animals he or



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## Reframing Taxidermy

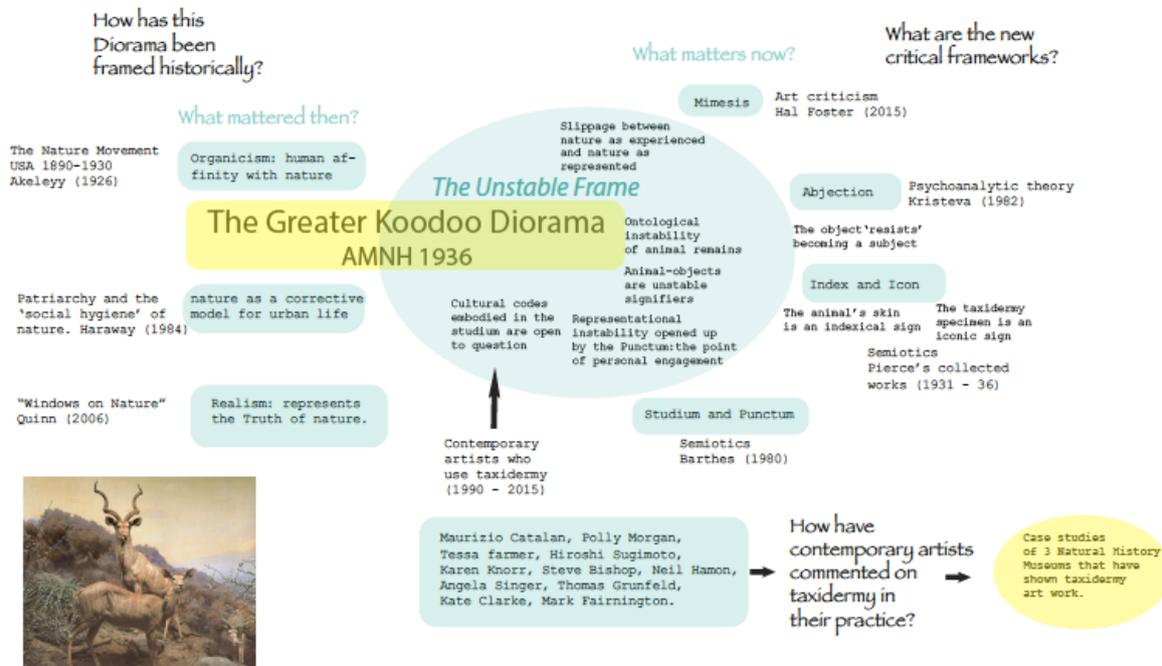


Figure 1. Poster on the 'Greater Koodoo' diorama at the American Museum of Natural History, presented at the 2016 NatSCA Conference.

she was seeing were alive and living in their own natural habitat.

In 1937, a year after the Hall of African Mammals was opened at the AMNH, William Hornaday could claim that “as a result of beautifully executed realistic, painted backgrounds”, the habitat group had reached its “fullest development” (Wonders, 1993, p147). Super-real dioramas could offer visitors a glimpse “into an African out-of-doors” (Akeley, 1924, p257): an illusion of the real thing.

Contemporary interpretations of the 'Greater Koodoo' diorama suggested that it could be read 'literally', as an authentic copy of African animals in their original landscape. More recent interpretations have pointed out the cultural assumptions embodied in the African dioramas.

### Interpretations of the Diorama in the 1980s and '90s

Moving on to the 1980s and '90s, recent interpretations have characterised the AMNH African dioramas as cultural constructions, rather

than literal representations:

“No visitor to a merely physical Africa could see these animals. This is a spiritual vision made possible by their death and literal re-presentation. Only then could the essence of their life be present. Only then could the hygiene of nature cure the sick vision of civilized man.” (Haraway, 1984, p30)

Haraway denies the literal truth of realistic representations, seeing realism as a way to cloak what really took place in that distant location:

“Taxidermy was about the single story, about nature’s unity, the unblemished type specimen. Taxidermy became the art most suited to the epistemological and aesthetic stance of realism... what is so painfully constructed appears effortlessly, spontaneously found, discovered, simply there if only one will look. Realism does not appear to be a point of view, but appears as a ‘peephole into the jungle’...” (ibid, p38)

This is such a powerful attack on literal representation that it is hard to see ‘realism’ as

anything other than a constructed point of view, just another culturally determined interpretive perspective. Karen Wonders, however, points out the power of realism as an affective mode of presentation. She sees the Africa dioramas as a heart-felt response to an environmental crisis: a call for public attention to what was going on in places that were once wilderness. She sees dioramas as an “analogue for field experience” (Wonders, 1993, p226), but she concedes that by using perspective painting, écorché manikins, posed specimens, etc., “what began as a desire to produce exact copies of the natural world leads ironically to its precise opposite: namely to scenes that are wholly imaginative and pure phantasy” (ibid, p226). Realism is no more than a style of storytelling.

### 21st century interpretations

In the 21st century, both interpretive approaches to taxidermy displays are still actively employed and debated.

Steven Quinn, for example, extols the realism of the ‘Greater Koodoo’ diorama as its greatest virtue. Akeley’s dioramas are “superb examples of the fusion of art and science...they set out to educate us about nature and science and to engender wonder in and stewardship of the natural world” (Quinn, 2006, p6). They are more “complex, accurate and entertaining” than displays of specimens (ibid, p15), and allow the visitor to “lose himself in communion with nature” (ibid, p18): in other words, to suspend disbelief for a few moments and to believe that the realistic display is, literally, real.

Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, on the other hand, disagrees that the Akeley dioramas can only be seen as literally ‘real’. Many interpretations can be equally as valid as the literalist reading:

“The diorama of the “Giant of Karisimbi,” featuring a gorilla killed in 1921 by the well-known explorer and taxidermist Carl Akeley, has been read in multiple ways. The dominant figure can be read as male, aggressive, exotic, and colonial and has been brought to audiences beyond the museum through popular stories and film. It has become an icon for critiques of colonialism and the exploitation of Africa as well as for feminists concerned about the gendered nature of museum displays.” (Kohlstedt, 2006)

Because dioramas are open to many different interpretations, Sam Alberti has noted that

museums are in the habit of ‘naturalising’ realistic interpretive frameworks in order to stabilise the meaning of a specimen or display:

“a conservative reaction to the instability of object significance is the process of “naturalisation” of meanings that can obscure the artificiality of an object’s signification within a particular discourse...Natural history museums are factories for producing a particular kind of nature” that may appear as “authentic, uncontested and natural” but are “highly political.” (Alberti, 2008, p83)

Recent museum interpretive practices have acknowledged the political nature of a ‘naturalised’ realist interpretation of nature. The new practices have been seen as ‘reflexive’, and they can extend the subject of a natural history display beyond the representational function to include the museum’s own interpretive frames. Thus in a reflexive display, a realistic taxidermy diorama could be interpreted as ‘about’ many aspects of the animal specimen: nature, taxidermy craft, conservation and perhaps animal welfare issues all at once. As Alberti has commented, they can be read as ‘polysemic’ (ibid, p80).

Literal realism may still be found in museum displays but, increasingly, taxidermy is being used in displays that consciously construct more open, reflexive interpretive frames. The above examples demonstrate that, as Andrews has noted, “in talking about taxidermy, it is easy to be provocative when considering its materiality and hybrid nature/culture status” (Andrews, 2012). Polysemic displays are questioning rather than didactic.

### Other critical readings of historical diorama displays

Gregory and Purdy (2015) note that diorama displays employ ‘iconic’ signs, like lifelike taxidermy, to represent animal ‘aliveness’, but also have to incorporate ‘indexical’ signs, like the animal skin:

“the use of the animal’s skin guarantees the authenticity of the reality effect, collapsing the distance between the signifier and referent and eliding the cultural mediation of the signified.” (Gregory and Purdy, 2015, p79)

Rachel Poliquin has noted that taxidermy specimens provoke the viewer just because they can never be wholly object or wholly animal subject:

“...the endless interplay between materiality and

meaning is the essence of encounters with taxidermy whether in museums or galleries.” (Poliquin, 2008, p132)

Even highly realistic taxidermy can appear unsettling, or what Julia Kristeva would call ‘abject’ (Kristeva, 1982). I find the glass eyes of the specimens at the AMNH disturbing, for instance; other viewers may find something else that bothers them, such as their stillness.

### Conclusion

In this summary, I have applied a critical and reflexive interpretive framework, taking into account museum practices, as well as the ostensible animal subjects, to the ‘*Greater Koodoo*’ diorama at the AMNH, noting that it can be seen as both ‘realist’ and as ‘culturally constructed’. I have tried to indicate some of the ways in which the ‘*Greater Koodoo*’ diorama has been interpreted since it was first put on exhibition in 1936. It remains for each viewer to make meaning come to life in diorama displays for themselves.

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