

walking/wounded

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Shrouded in subfusc tones and interrupted by channels of light, the natural history museum is staged as a solemn performance - a tragedy, in which characters are timelessly cast, performing their roles as generic species. This is a play with limited dialogue. Bound not only by their glass tombs, but also by their choreographed arrangement that best depicts speciation taxonomy, specimens rarely extend beyond their limited conceptual frame. This view of the natural world is one of tidy containment, in which everything has its place and exhibits tend to meet constituent expectation by reinforcing a sequential, progressive view of evolutionary development, as well as presenting species as distinct, defined entities. Contemporary curated exhibitions, however, have nothing of this taxonomic order. They are fundamentally chimerical creatures, developed and conceptualised with multiple agendas and with multiple expectations. They evolve unseen over long periods, and are then unleashed into the public realm in their imaginative and sometimes monstrous form. Despite all good intentions, here public perception can never be predicted.

It is possibly for this reason that most museums of natural history still rely on a mode of display that has remained largely unchanged for the last 150 years. Deferring to a system based on Linnaean taxonomy and an iconography based on Darwinian tree schema of evolution, the experiential space of the museum is one of order, authority and discipline, which has, in many ways denied public participation in active learning. While it has been suggested that these Foucauldian spaces have been replaced by museums that are responsive and experiential, I would argue that the experience, particularly in South African museums, merely reinforces a linear, albeit augmented, reading of nature. These linear modes of representation and analogy emerged in book form and found their way into museum display as typically, museums echo the book by presenting objects as discrete entities, within temporal or spatial sequences and supported by textual labels. While the sensory experience presented in new exhibits may scatter the viewer's attention, in physically traversing between cabinets, the viewer becomes complicit within a sequential articulation of species.

Subtle Thresholds, my exhibition presented at the South African Museum between July 2009 and August 2010, transgresses the typical display order of Cartesian inheritance, and allows manufactured collections and objects from the South African Museum and Adler Museum collections to be reattributed and redirected. The exhibition appeals to an encyclopaedic inventory that, in its visual complexity, creates a sense of disorientation. The system of cross-referencing necessitates an active (and physical) engagement with the layout of the exhibition in a search for linkages. The following pages are an attempt to suggest the experience of the exhibition within a two-dimensional form.



*A series of numbers (after Fred Wilson)
images from Subtle Thresholds
2009 - 2010*



The positive form of the screen is found orthogonally across the hallway, separating these binary print values over 30 metres. 'Angelic wings' are constructed from silhouettes of art historical and popular images of healer's hands and while the shape formally references a schematic tree or set of lungs, it thematically refers to the religious binaries of damnation and salvation associated with disease and healing. The layout and visual iconography enable the gallery to be simultaneously read as both a cathedral and a laboratory. Quatrefoil and trefoil windows run along the walls, side chapels are invoked by the rest of the museum (rock art, penguins, early vertebrates and indigenous cultures) and the central nave is filled with light. Museum cases are invariably connected to reliquaries and remind the viewer of the parallel enterprise of museums and the church: to rely on objects in the mobilisation of faith and meaning.

5

30 METRES

Reflected in the sandblasted tree is a low stage housing two steel cabinets, a collection of sterilisers, and a large screen concealing six taxidermied animals. The two medical cabinets from Groote Schuur hospital contain ducting that, while reminiscent of bacterial forms, is simultaneously an agent of extraction and cleansing. Smothered in black Rockwell typeface with synonyms for pain and disease, the cabinets become 'contaminated by language' or, to extend the metaphor, significance is contaminated by the deterministic force of the museum label. Tethered or anchored to the cabinets are autoclaves filled with remnants of chalk, setting provisional knowledge against the authority of the black typeface. This 'stage' resists the visual appeal of the rest of the exhibition. Lacking in seductive values and surrounded by barrier tape, it is suggestive of an operating table – a symbolic site of damage control within the museum and a conscious point of opposition. It is thus fitting that the 'infirmary' is within reach. Librated from their dusty, glass vitrines in the old mammal room these bandaged animals occupy an ambiguous space somewhere between a zoo, a hospital and a confessional. Caught between the canons of the museological past and an uncertain future in a digital age, they speak to the 'wounded' museum object that is in a transitional state of (unknown) recovery. While this points to the endemic illness of an institution that is paralysed in its ability to respond to contemporary debates, the confessional sets up a divide at which the personal and the scientific intersect – a moment of conscience and self-reflection, for both the museum and its practices. Behind these animals the typically realistic diorama has been replaced by a chalkboard rendering of the Human Genome, reorienting the panoramic vista towards an interior view that in its material manifestation contradicts precision. This recessed cabinet also functions as an 'ex-voto plague altar', with its six surrogate plague saints, and is paired with the winged form across the hallway. Plague doctor silhouettes run across the top of the screen, making further connections to the bird as a prevalent and ambiguous metaphor within the visual iconography of disease.



2



4 METRES EAST

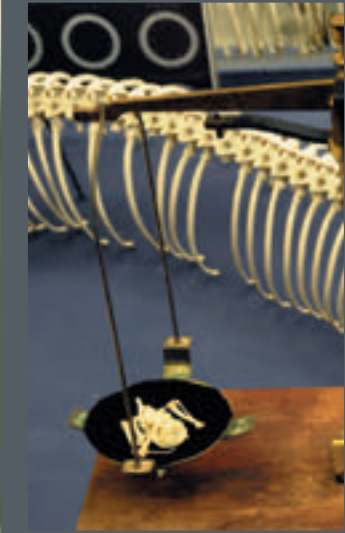


The reflection behind the bottles draws the invested viewer to an opposite cabinet measuring 63 x 56 x 130 cm. Here lies a stillborn foal, donated by Boswell Wilkie Circus in 1922. Its provenance makes a fortuitous connection between animals as performers, both within the circus and as ideological performers within the natural history museum. Furthermore, this foal is a metonym. Suspended between birth and death it stands for the paused life – the arrested, taxidermied specimen caught mid-movement and enacting a set of interspecies roles. This point is emphasised further by the mass of stainless steel anaesthetic masks, set on sepulchral black satin behind the skewbald foal. Anaesthesia is a transitional state between health and illness, malady and cure. Conflated with the foal, the masks suggest bits or muzzles and emphasise the stillness of the sleeping creature – fixed in a liminal moment behind the glass vitrine. In contrast to this, the foal is surrounded by aural and ophthalmic devices – probes of the sensorial world that are evidence of life. Within this highly reflective, highly symbolic, sombre frame, the viewer is again invited to contemplate their own mortality.

10 METRES SOUTHEAST

4

8 METRES WEST

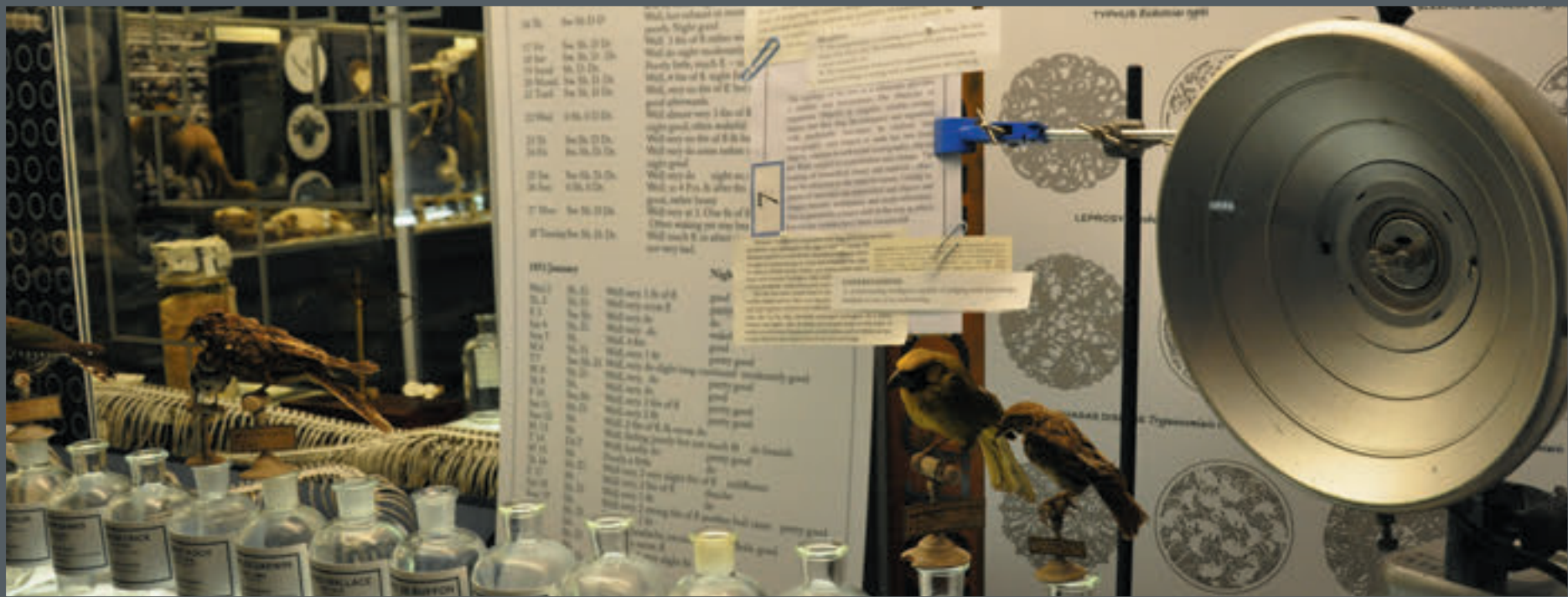


In a glass cabinet measuring 63 x 56 x 190 cm 14 reagent bottles are evenly spread along a light box. The bottles are empty and each labelled in the style of chemistry, yet with the names, dates and causes of death of naturalists, geneticists and microbiologists. In the midst of an exhibition prioritising infectious disease, evidence of overt human presence is distinctly absent. These bottles, however, are a centrally located humanist moment. Within an alienating, depersonalised space these bottles foreground the viewer's own relationship to disease and mortality, providing a site of self reflection within the exhibition. More than memento mori, the bottles point to the multiple ways in which museum objects speak.



1

Within the context of the exhibition, the materials meet expectation: the glass labware speaks to the heart of empirical science, while the labels seemingly meet the expectation of museological deterministic display. However, there is an obvious disparity between the label and the contents as the empty, individualised bottles suggest departed spirits and absences. This allows for an ambiguous reading in which the material contributions of individuals become ineffable, existing in space. The illumination from below exaggerates this emptiness - attributing a worth to the void - and this, together with the endlessly reflecting surfaces, extends a conceit that alerts the viewer to the temporal contingency of science.



Reflection redirects the viewer back to the cabinet containing a printout of Darwin's diary of health, a representation of the 20 steel disks contained on the walls, and a sandblasted mirror representing Darwin's evolutionary tree. Illness is both experienced (individuated) and institutionalised (generalised) and Darwin's diary of health provides another moment of personal focus, where his extreme hyperchondria is thrown into high relief. The tree diagram is a reminder of speciation and that museum specimens are generic rather than differentiated samples, and so, whilst the birds have been removed from their contextualised drawers and taxonomic order, they are nonetheless synecdochal in that they refer to that system. Within the anthropocentric city, birds are one of the few tolerated wild species outside of animal companions, and the infiltration of birds throughout the exhibition speaks to this. However, unlike Oscar Wilde's nightingale and sparrow which performed the very altruistic acts of love and sacrifice, the pose of these birds on the bottles is reminiscent of Aesop's crow and the pitcher - a humanist measure of ingenuity and rationality. Perched on the empty cause of death bottles, and preoccupied with their own conversations, the birds become harbingers.

3



6



In the central nave, ten light boxes or vitrines are the source of illumination and contain representations, in pharmacological labware, of ten viral forms known to cause disease. The labels confound the uninitiated viewer, as they refer to international disease codes, taxonomy codes, medications and symptoms, without naming the diseases. The disease, by implication, can in certain frameworks, only be read through the discipline that constructs it. Within this particular museum this work stands in sharp contrast to the San trance dance across the passage, wherein healing is an integrated, performed experience. One of the recognised functions of museum display is to astonish. In order to disrupt the stigma and fear typically associated with disease, this exhibition co-opts beauty and wonder as visual strategies. Scanning Electron Microscope images of animal faeces – the ultimate feared site of contamination – become beguiling landscapes and viral diagrams become magical mandala-like cityscapes. In disrupting the typical associations with disease as a site of ugliness and fear, the intention has been to facilitate a point of contact that promotes further discussion or investigation.

7

The walls running on either side of the main hall have been layered with objects and images. In an attempt to undermine a linear reading of the exhibition, formats are repeated and overlaid in a complex visual filigree. The walls do not use the reflective strategy of the other areas and reading takes place across the surface, resulting in a more constrained space. The restricted access to labelling and reading is the critical intention of the walls. Framed mythological texts are literally inaccessible, a timeline in the form of a printed ruler circumscribes the entire exhibition area and includes a biblical concordance of disease, literally running counter to a more conventional microbial history, GPS coordinates allow coded access to sites of outbreaks, Latin species names provide a veiled clue to SEM images of animal excrement, bacterial forms are hidden within steel renditions of pharmacological and demonic images, and handwritten 'chalk texts' reflect the personal, mythical and philosophical reading of the diseased body. Without the comfort of explicatory texts, the viewing experience becomes unfamiliar and alienating. This hints at the problem embedded within museums and display that relies on a fixed reference between objects within cabinets and texts to serve as nodes of authority.



5 METRES SOUTH

56°51'N
60°36'E

Anthrax 1979

8



The persistence of the phylogenetic tree, or 'tree of life,' as an analogy has meant that popular interpretations of biological data have long been predicated on binary systems and those of implied ascendance. In addition, the oppositional nature of taxonomy, built on similarities and difference, is contrary to speciation which is both relational and contingent on space and time. This exhibition employs a strategy of layering images and iconography in order to undermine the hierarchies of binary oppositions. Wall images become elements within a complex matrix, and no layer is given privilege over the other. The exhibition establishes its own internal system of organisation and makes use of a number of elements which exist both in series and find analogues in other parts of the exhibition. Formal repetition, the use of both positive and negative shapes, material pairings and the use of the cabinets as an index to the wall and floor pieces, make the project self-referential. A deliberate decision has been taken not to include authorial texts or descriptions of exhibited material. Where text is present, it is embedded within the visual and is to be seen as much as read. Text provides visual clues as to the construction of meaning, rather than providing explanations, whereas the use of written texts held in retort stands, provide the project an opportunity for self-reflection.