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REVIEW ESSAYS

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The Victorian Mental Sciences
SUZY ANGER

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THE MORBID AND THE TRENDY

By Ann C. Colley

THE MAIN ROOM OF THE "Taxidermy: Art, Science & Immortality" exhibit at the Morbid Anatomy Museum, Brooklyn, NY, was upstairs. To reach the staircase, I maneuvered my way through the museum's coffee shop, where customers comfortably sipped exotic teas among a group of eye-catching taxidermy specimens: a stuffed lion, a zebra, a kudu, and an ostrich. Once upstairs, I entered a cluttered space and found case after case of animals, birds, and fish – all packed together. Some displays were perched on shelves; others sat precariously on top of each other. While winding their way through the narrow, awkward passages among these specimens, visitors were privy to a close, if not an intimate, face-to-face look at everything – quite different from the experience of viewing from the more protective distance of natural history museums.

This fall 2016 exhibit captured notable media attention. Articles about the display were to be found in *The Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Independent*, on the BBC News website, and in *The New York Times*. The attention was by no means limited to the press. In late October, when I visited the museum, a relatively small building on the corner of Seventh Street and Third Avenue, I was astonished to see the number of people coming and going. This morbid museum was paradoxically alive and bustling with activity. I was amazed, for I had thought that taxidermy was currently associated in people's minds with a "stuffy" Victorian decorative culture and regarded as being not only out of fashion but, more to the point, politically incorrect and, therefore, generally kept out of sight, often relegated to museum basements. Who, besides academics interested in Victorian culture, I wondered, in the twenty-first century would choose to come on a sunny Saturday to wander around a display of taxidermy, especially since many specimens of the art are still often visible in natural history museums? What was going on?

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"Taxidermy: Art, Science & Immortality" was guest curated by J. D. Powe and Evan Michelson, who had arranged their specimens according to the genre of taxidermy exhibited. As one might expect, there were the familiar trophies of a Victorian age associated with sport and hunting: the head of a hyena, standing examples of antelopes, gazelles, foxes, hares, otters, and badgers. Some on display had been rendered by renowned taxidermists such as Rowland Ward, perhaps the most famous of the British Victorian taxidermists; others had been prepared by the twentieth-century studio of Van Ingen & Van Ingen of Mysore, a firm in India that represents the afterlife of imperialism. The firm's work on the big cats (particularly tigers and leopards) recalls a time when British officers and civil servants in India enjoyed "bagging a tiger" and, as proof of their success, arranged to have their spoils stuffed and mounted. There were also cases of other Victorian spoils, such as the African crested porcupine, a giant anteater, and an aardwolf.

After removing the head of an animal to create a hunting trophy, Victorian taxidermists often utilized what remained to fashion decorative, domestic objects. Feet or hooves, for example, were turned into ornate bottle openers, nutcrackers, ashtrays, inkwells, compasses, cigarette cases, brooches, letter openers, and cutlery handles. These too were on display at the Morbid Anatomy Museum. It was strange to look at these items and realize that they – an actual baby elephant foot cigarette case, a bear foot ashtray, and a rhinoceros foot humidor – were the real thing. The body and the object mingled in disturbing ways. One was not staring at some plastic or fiberglass imitation that nowadays can be found for sale in either novelty catalogues or interior design stores.

Another section of the exhibit displayed various fish. Most were from the twentieth century and most, as the curators pointed out, were not stuffed but were painted fiberglass replicas that use not a single part of the animal. It was almost a relief eventually to see one specimen from the nineteenth century that was composed of the actual skin and fins of the fish, even though they were damaged by age. As the curator, J. D. Powe, pointed out while escorting me around the exhibit, "There can be little substitute for the raw power of the authentic animal." His remark is an acknowledgment of the fact that without the presence of skin there can be no sense of life.

Taxidermy was a normal part of decorating a Victorian home – rather like buying another piece of furniture or purchasing a painting. Consequently, no taxidermy exhibit would be complete without incredible decorative displays of birds, many of which, in this show, were rendered in the late nineteenth century and displayed under glass domes. These cases remind the viewer that Victorian taxidermy not only was in the service of scientists (who relied on the markings of a skin for classification), hunters, and museums, but also put to use as an ornamental art. In the Morbid Anatomy Museum, visitors were able to see a splendid nineteenth-century glass container holding an artistic arrangement of 35 exotic birds as well as several late nineteenth-century cases featuring such specimens as a lyrebird, a greater bird of paradise, and the now extinct heath hen and passenger pigeon.

In the Victorian era and into the twentieth century, pets were and still are, to a lesser degree, subject to the taxidermist's skill. The show at the Morbid Anatomy Museum featured several examples: a terrier, a Chihuahua, a Doberman pinscher, a Great Dane, and "a beloved hunting dog"; some sit on velvet pillows. When the people around me focused on this corner of the exhibit, I noticed they were disturbed and averted their eyes, for these stuffed pets trespassed across the borders of their emotional spaces and approached too close to home. This genre of taxidermy belongs not to the wild spaces but to the intimacy and

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familiarity of domestic interiors. Visitors to the museum, consequently, felt uncomfortable gazing at these renditions. Nowadays one rarely has an opportunity to view such pieces.

I was reminded of a time I visited the storerooms of the Science Museum in Buffalo, and much to my surprise, spied shelves of dogs and cats in all sorts of affectionate poses. Supposedly, grieving owners had years ago brought their deceased pets to the museum's taxidermist to be transformed into a lifelike image that the owner planned to take home so it could continue to be part of the household. Many of these owners, however, never took these surrogates of lost love back to their residences. One look at their stuffed pet was enough to make these owners realize that taxidermy, though it might replicate the departed's appearance, could never reclaim what Rachel Poliquin in *The Breathless Zoo* speaks of as the little quirks and changing expressions that make a pet a uniquely loveable character. Stuffed and made still, the adored animal had become "a thing." This experience interested me because when researching my recent book, *Wild Animal Skins in Victorian Britain*, I ran across Victorian taxidermists' advertisements which stated that if a *pet* is going to be stuffed, the owner must pay for the work beforehand.

Taxidermists have also been responsible for preserving and mounting freaks of nature. These have often filled cabinets of curiosities. Examples from this genre were prominent in the Morbid Anatomy Museum exhibition. People gazed at two-headed calves, kittens, and piglets, as well as at a 4-tusked walrus, and a three-legged chicken that once shot marbles with its third leg. Among these freaks of nature, were examples of malformed taxidermy pieces, some the result of a lack of skill, but others the product of purposeful malformation: "Neville, the Goggle-Eyed Dog" had been shaved, and a faux mermaid had been assembled from animal parts – in this case, a monkey grafted on to the back and tail of a fish, and once sold by sailors. The one on display, the Fiji mermaid, had been widely exhibited by P. T. Barnum in 1842; it was supposed to have been caught in the South Pacific. Harriet Ritvo's *The Platypus and the Mermaid* contains a lengthy discussion of this curiosity.

As fascinating as these pieces were, however, the centerpiece of the Morbid Anatomy Museum's show was "The Kittens' Wedding" (ca. 1890) by Walter Potter (1835–1918), a Sussex taxidermist best remembered for his anthropomorphic tableaux and his village museum that displayed many such pieces. As late as 1930, bus loads of tourists used regularly to travel from Brighton to visit his place. More recently the piece was on display at "Inventing New Britain: The Victorian Vision" at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2001.

"The Kittens' Wedding" belongs to yet another genre of taxidermy: comic or anthropomorphic taxidermy, a form of the art that stuffs, arranges, and dresses animals to resemble human postures and perform human activities. Potter was not the only practitioner; rather, he followed a genre already alive and well in Germany and Austria before it became popular in Britain and was featured at the 1851 exhibition in London. In the Morbid Anatomy Museum, other examples, not executed by Potter, surrounded "The Kittens' Wedding." Therefore visitors could also glance at "The Squirrels at Tea"; "The Frog Spanking," in which a youthful frog gets punished for misbehaving; "The Drunk Monkey"; as well as arrangements of squirrels boxing and playing cards, and industrious mice working at a paper factory (Germany c. 1820). Because of their size and availability, each of these animals, considered expendable and a nuisance, could easily be garnered and arranged into detailed

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Figure 30. Walter Potter. "The Kittens' Wedding." Courtesy of Joanna Ebenstein.

tableaux. Painstaking care went into the scenery so that, for example, the pair of squirrels drinking tea sit politely next to a cupboard displaying miniature handmade cooking pots and utensils; the squirrels playing cards converse in a carefully rendered rural parlor; and the industrious mice in the paper factory work among intricately handcrafted miniature book presses, a metal stove, water tanks, stools, ladders, buckets, clocks, and manuscript signs in French. For a thorough discussion of the genre, see Patrick A. Morris's *A History of Taxidermy*.

In the Morbid Anatomy Museum exhibit, "The Kittens' Wedding" was what caught most people's attention (Figures 30 and 31). Postcards of it were for sale. The case features twenty stuffed and meticulously dressed and bejeweled kittens attending a wedding – each is even wearing underclothes beneath its suit or dress. The text from Potter's museum reads:

> Twenty little kittens are taking part in this colorful ceremony. The bride is wearing a dress of cream brocade, with a long veil and orange blossom, the six bridesmaids are dressed in pink or cream, the chief bridesmaid and the bride are probably sisters, and the little "boy" wearing the sailor suit is their younger brother for they all have the same fair colouring. Under the watchful eye of the parson, the bridegroom, with head on one side, has just placed the golden ring on the bride's finger. The tiny prayer books are open at the "marriage service," but the parson, who possibly does not need a book anyway, has failed to turn the page.

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Figure 31. Walter Potter. “The Kittens’ Wedding.”

> It is a pity that such a happy occasion should have a jarring note, but the scowl of disapproval on the face of the “man” in the row next to the back seems to indicate that he thinks the wrong “man” is marrying the bride!

Demonstrating my (and I think most people’s) assumption that taxidermy is generally unsettling to the contemporary eye, reactions to this tableau often registered visitors’ disgust (yet fascination). Viewing the anthropomorphic taxidermy was particularly fraught, for the tension between the cute and the aberrant was difficult to reconcile. Standing next to “The Kittens’ Wedding,” I heard a number of negative comments: “This is horrible – and how did Potter get so many kittens and did he kill them?” “Did he skin these kittens?” At this point a curator, the present owner of this tableau and an enthusiastic collector of taxidermy (pieces crowd his New York apartment – he exudes the thrill of a collector), stepped up and explained that in Victorian rural communities, farm kittens were considered a nuisance, so were often drowned: “At least some use was made of them,” he added.

On the surface, these visitors’ disapproval seemed to register a more general shift in attitudes toward taxidermy in our contemporary culture. We think of ourselves as no longer being a part of a nineteenth-century culture that, even though it was expressing a growing sensitivity to the treatment of animals, found the art of taxidermy both attractive and necessary. For the Victorians taxidermy was “normal” and instructive. Nineteenth-century scientists

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relied on animal skins to help them classify the animal world at home and around the globe; museums displayed stuffed skins to coach the public about places beyond its regular scope and now available through the reach of empire. Taxidermy was also fashionably decorative. Selections of stuffed birds under a glass dome graced the rooms of both the working and middle classes – taxidermy crossed class boundaries. For the most part, to the Victorian eye, taxidermy was appealing, and occasionally amusing.

We tend not to think this way. After World War I (perhaps there had been too much death) and definitely by the end of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the present century, taxidermy went out of style. It was disapproved of and thought to be intolerably cruel, as well as vaguely unhygienic, vulgar, and toxic – taxidermists used arsenic to preserve skins. For some, taxidermy is distasteful because it is tied to the spoils, violence, and privilege of British imperialism. For them, consequently, mounting wild, exotic animals is a controversial, embarrassing, and unsettling phenomenon.

Much of this shared disapprobation is reinforced by a growing sensitivity to the threat to wildlife everywhere. Now that, for example, there are only five thousand wild tigers left in the world and elephants are on the brink of extinction, it is difficult to admire or approve of a stuffed example of these species and even more grim to see an ashtray made out of an elephant's foot – what were the Victorians thinking of? How often nowadays does one walk by an exhibit in a museum and find an apologetic sign prefacing an older taxidermy display that has not yet been thrown into a rubbish heap, burned, or sold to an auction house?

Adverse reactions to taxidermy are connected to environmental anxiety, to our sense that we need to protect, not stuff, living specimens. Recently in Nova Scotia I picked up a young thrush that had tragically flown into a window. It was no longer alive, but still warm. I had not the heart to let the insects consume it, nor did I wish to throw it away. I gently picked it up, put it in the freezer to kill the insects, and called a taxidermist to see if he would mount it for me. The bird was beautiful. I did not want to let it go – I suppose it was my way of resurrecting its life. Without any hesitation, the first taxidermist I phoned refused, for, as he sternly explained, it is against the law to stuff any songbird – a regulation that now attempts to protect the wild life around us. Moreover, taxidermy also seems unnecessary, for with new technologies, we are no longer dependent upon killing and stuffing to be able to see a wild beast. Documentaries, CCTV cameras on bird feeders, and exquisite color photography allow us not only to see an animal in detail but also to watch it move, day or night.

With all these reasons running through my mind, I was amazed, as I remarked at the beginning of this essay, to see people swarming through the exhibit at the Morbid Anatomy Museum. Here I was surrounded by an urban culture (Brooklyn, NY), standing among a crowd of Millennials, and wondering what was attracting these people; why had they come out to look at this collection? After some thought and searches on the internet, I soon began to realize that there is, among a significant number of young city people, a fascination with taxidermy that carries with it an unexpected afterlife of Victorian culture – a return with a difference and one that is not straightforward but rather complex. It is "urban taxidermy."

No longer are urbanites necessarily interested in looking at exotic species that were once viewed for the first time by a general public, for these are readily available through the media and travel. They are, instead, motivated by other factors. They are driven by the fact that they inhabit a bustling metropolitan setting that, except for the presence of pets, is cut off from anything wild; yet, the magnetism between humans and animals survives. When it is lacking,

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it is sought. I had a feeling that many who came to the museum that afternoon were in search of an alternative to their daily dose of concrete sidewalks, cars, and crowds. I sensed that there was something comforting about drinking tea downstairs in the museum while sitting next to a stuffed lion. Furthermore, tired of manufactured, mass-produced goods, many, I believe, found it refreshing to gaze at something that had once been alive and then worked on by an individual rather than a machine. I am sounding like Ruskin here.

This rationale for the popularity of the exhibit, however, is not enough to explain the phenomenon. I believe an even more compelling reason for the crowd's presence was the fact that taxidermy, of a certain kind, has become trendy, if not "hip." After speaking with people and going on various websites, I soon learned that young urbanites are now rummaging through antique shops, flea markets, and eBay sites to find and buy samples of taxidermy with which they decorate their apartments. In a sense, it is another form of buying vintage clothing. From their point of view, purchasing an antique piece of taxidermy does not compromise their ethics, for the animal or bird was not recently killed. It belongs to another time. They, in other words, are not participating in the slaughter. There is a certain advantageous detachment, therefore, in what they purchase. Given their sensitivity to a shrinking wild life presence, they might share my impulse to have the young thrush stuffed. They too desire to extend the presence of what had once been alive.

This phenomenon brings me to yet another reason why many Millennials (perhaps not exclusively Millennials) are drawn toward taxidermy – and that is its shock value. Because it carries with it a sort of stigma, displaying taxidermy in one's living space not only has the advantage of being decorative, even reassuring, but also is fun and novel, perhaps even ghoulish. (Cafes and restaurants are also exhibiting this impulse.) Among some Millennials, one rather extreme expression of this trend is a growing interest in buying and displaying what is called "crap taxidermy," stuffed animals that are badly and purposely stuffed so as to look like "crap"; they are grossly distorted. (There is now a glossy book showing photographs of Su, *Crap Taxidermy*.) The animal becomes a sort of ironic plaything and contributes to the experience of shock. These creations cease to be real and are, thus, far removed from a living being.

The Morbid Anatomy Museum was a most appropriate place to house the exhibition, for it periodically offers taxidermy courses that in a modest way, imitate what, in the late Victorian period, Potter had done to create "The Kittens' Wedding." Each course is a full day's instruction on how to skin a mouse, then stuff and dress it. Later, on YouTube videos, I vicariously watched this class at work. I gazed at earnest participants sitting around a table, skinning their mice. Some initially pulled faces – the process is not pretty – there is blood as well as other bodily fluids. Members of the group were creating their anthropomorphic mice under the instruction of female licensed taxidermists who are part of a resurgence in taxidermy – that is urban taxidermy. Throughout there was the assurance that these mice had not been necessarily euthanized for the workshop but rather had been raised for pet shops and zoos for feed. As discards of that food industry, they were said to be "ethically sourced." The students were also reassured that they would not come in contact with harsh chemicals and that all animals would be disease free. Strangely they were warned not to bring in any raw dead animals to class (road kill perhaps?). The impulse to restore the illusion of life through taxidermy is still present.

After clicking on supplementary sites, I soon learned to my astonishment that similar classes were also being offered in other large urban areas such as Los Angeles, Houston,

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London, Berlin, and Sidney. A few were even held in chic, upscale boutiques. I also began to realize that a majority of the participants in all these urban classes were not only composed of Millennials but also were almost exclusively female. In my experience, young women (probably young professionals or hipster art majors) significantly outnumbered the men. In one video from the Morbid Anatomy Museum, there were thirteen women and only two men. The predominance of young women at these workshops fascinated me. Does the museum offer a safe space for them to learn this art? The plot thickened when further searches online put me in touch with "The Morbid Girls," an organization (one can buy a tee shirt) devoted, in their own words, to bringing "girls and women together everywhere who are attracted to the morbid and macabre." Is this a new crinkle in "feminism," which asserts and insists that what is predominantly a man's art is also a woman's? (I hasten to add, that there were female taxidermists in Victorian Britain.) Or is the interest only trendy or Goth? Or is it somehow connected to a desire to revitalize what is dead, or perhaps to do something daring?

When I first traveled to Brooklyn in order to see the exhibit at the museum, I expected to revisit examples of Victorian taxidermy that I had spent much time researching for my book on animal skins in Victorian Britain, but, as my previous commentary suggests, the opposite happened. I came face-to-face with an unexpected afterlife of Victorian culture. My visit was an unexpected introduction to twenty-first century trendy urban taxidermy – something, I admit, I really had no clue about, except perhaps through contemporary art that sometimes features taxidermy in sculptured pieces. What was going on in Brooklyn and other urban centers had little to do with what takes place outdoors in rural areas. In a small village outside of Westfield, New York, I recently visited the home of two bow hunters, a man and his wife. Their living spaces were cluttered with stuffed and mounted polar bears, grizzlies, black bears, elks, caribou, cougars, deer, moose, antelopes, mountain goats – and the list goes on. All these large, imposing specimens pose in every room of their house, including their bedroom. These are no playthings or campy decorations. In these rural areas, taxidermy honors macho big-time hunting; taxidermists are predominantly older males. It belongs to another era. With its trendy stuffed domesticated mice, hip Brooklyn seems a long way away.

SUNY College at Buffalo

WORKS CONSIDERED

"Taxidermy: Art, Science & Immortality." Curated by J. D. Powe and Evan Michelson. Morbid Anatomy Museum, Brooklyn, NY during the fall of 2016. Due to a lack of funds, the museum, which opened in 2014 and was privately run, unfortunately had to close its doors in December 2016.

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OSCAR WILDE AND THE QUEER TIME OF IMPRISONMENT AT *INSIDE: ARTISTS AND WRITERS IN READING PRISON*

By Gregory Salter

THE FIGURE OF OSCAR WILDE was a palpable presence in *Inside: Artists And Writers In Reading Prison*. The exhibition was staged across the three floors of Reading Prison, which closed in November 2013; cells and corridors were used to display work by a range of contemporary artists, as well as *Letters of Separation* – recordings by nine contemporary writers of letters to loved ones from whom they have been separated by state enforcement. The exhibition was commissioned and produced by Artangel, a London-based arts organisation that is known for its emphasis on combining art and specific locations in powerful ways – Rachel Whiteread's concrete cast of a condemned house in Mile End (which won the Turner Prize in 1993), Michael Landy's destruction of all of his possessions in an empty Oxford Street branch of C&A in *Break Down* in 2001, and Jeremy Deller's re-enactment of the Battle of Orgreave in the same year.

They have brought the same aims to *Inside*. In amongst the cells occupied by the installations is Wilde's own cell, C.2.2., on the middle level of the prison. It is presented with very little fanfare – just one more cell alongside the others. For the first three months of a sentence, prisoners were permitted only a bible, a prayer book, and a hymn book in their cells. After this, they were allowed to borrow one book a week from the prison library, an arrangement that Wilde, understandably, found "perfectly useless" (*Inside* 6). After a while, however, he was allowed to receive extra batches of books from the outside, and copies of these books are displayed in the cells adjacent to his own. They range from *The Confessions of St Augustine* to texts by Pascal, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Rossetti, and Wordsworth, as well as books on the Renaissance, the Middle Ages, Christianity, and Egyptian art.

The sheer number of books conveys the time of Wilde's imprisonment – you realise how they were accrued, slowly, over the period of his imprisonment and imagine the many hours spent in reading. They also feel akin to fleeting moments of hope and escape. Wilde forms the starting point for *Inside* as a whole; indeed, the exhibition guide states that his "shadow falls over the entire exhibition" (*Inside* 4). The powerful resonances of his cell – the relationship between confinement and escape, perception and monotony, and the distinctly queer time of imprisonment – are reflected on and expanded by the contributing contemporary artists and curators.

In Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* – a hundred-page letter composed to his friend and lover Lord Alfred Douglas from his cell in Reading Prison in the first three months of his incarceration in 1895 for "acts of gross indecency with other male persons" – he wrote of the devastating and soul-destroying experience of imprisonment, where time seems to slow and flatten into dispiriting monotony:

> Suffering is one very long moment. We cannot divide it by seasons. We can only record its moods, and chronicle their return. With us time itself does not progress. It revolves. It seems to circle round one centre of pain. . . . For us there is only one season, the season of sorrow. The very sun and moon seem taken from us. . . . It is always twilight in one's cell, as it is always twilight in one's heart. (Wilde 64–65)

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These reflections on the time of imprisonment frame it as a time that is explicitly different from the regulated though changing time outside the prison walls: Wilde contrasts the immobile time of prison to the "ceaseless change" of "seed-time or harvest, of the reapers bending over the corn, or the grape gatherers threading through the vines, of the grass in the orchard made white with broken blossoms or strewn with fallen fruit" (Wilde 65).

This sense of a flattening or an interruption of time is palpable as you make your way around the exhibition. The prison space bears traces of past inmates – from the nineteenth century all the way up to 2013 – including its most famous inhabitant. In the chapel, for instance, is Jean Michel-Pancin's sculpture, *In Memoriam*, which consists of the original wooden door of Wilde's cell mounted on a plinth, the dimensions of which replicate his cell. On Sundays during the exhibition, full readings of *De Profundis* were given by figures like Ralph Fiennes, Maxine Peake, Ragnar Kjartansson, Patti Smith, and Ben Whishaw. Throughout *Inside*, social and personal histories of imprisonment are intertwined with the figure of Wilde as well as art works, explicitly at times and quietly at others, so that the exhibition feels like a communal and frequently unsettling meditation on the unsteady time of imprisonment. This interweaving of present and past feels particularly appropriate, given that the exhibition was staged just before the fiftieth anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales, an anniversary which has been marked at museums and galleries all over the country with exhibitions and interventions, including Tate Britain, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, and the National Trust.

It is the space and the experience of Reading Prison that is perhaps the most immediately powerful aspect of *Inside* – the exhibition guide even underlines that "the prison itself is the first exhibit" (4). The building was designed by George Gilbert Scott and opened in 1844. It was conceived with the intention of not just locking prisoners up, but also reforming them – its cruciform shape and individual cells were a break with old prison models, where inmates slept in dormitories that were thought to be "schools of crime" (2). In this new model, prisoners had their own cells and spent almost all of their time on their own: there were twenty-three hours of solitary confinement a day, with breaks for exercise and chapel where they were still largely kept in isolation from each other. Strict silence was enforced in order to encourage reflection amongst the prisoners. This was a space of reform, but it was also highly regulated – the Governor's Office is located at the centre of the three wings on the middle level, meaning he could look clearly down each of the walkways of the wings around, above, and below him. This kind of design was modelled on the philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. The experience of the space is unsettling, as you pick your way along the walkways, jostle with other visitors to squeeze in and out of the cramped cells, and walk, disquietingly, by the suicide nets which still hang in between the levels.

You have to make your way through a series of more modern additions to the prison before you get to the Victorian section, which you enter via a long, disconcerting corridor. On the left hand side are a series of cells where condemned men spent their last night before being led to the gallows. Wilde documented his response to one, relatively rare instance of a hanging at Reading in his poem "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." One of the first exhibits in the main body of the prison is a display of photographs of prisoners discharged from Reading Prison between 1885 and 1901. These were drawn from a series of albums held by the Berkshire Record Office and give a startling sense, immediately, of the demographics of inmates in the prison, including men, women, and children as young as ten. These photographs record the

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most marked inmates – those who were perceived to be at the highest risk of re-offending once they were released. Some appear in their “liberty clothing” about to be released to freedom, while others wear their standard prison clothes, which suggests that they are merely being transferred to another prison. All adopt frontal poses (some are shown in profile too) and hold their hands up in front of their bodies, as hands were considered to be important identifying characteristics should they commit another crime. Names, numbers, and dates are scrawled above each one. These photographs seem to undermine the reforming aims of the prison more generally – these are the faces and hands of those who perhaps did not repent or reflect quite enough, and the departing inmates are reduced to anonymity when displayed in such large number. Wilde, however, is not present: he was considered to no longer be a threat to society upon his release in May 1897.

It is this sense of the anonymity of the prisoners, bar the ever-present figure of Wilde, that is particularly striking about the experience of this exhibition. Those nineteenth-century inmates are photographed before moving on to another prison or to freedom, perhaps to offend again, perhaps not – what we get is a sense of their number, a brief look at their faces, but nothing, inevitably, of their stories. There is a relative lack of voices from within the prison system in this exhibition or even works that think explicitly about the experience of prison in the present day (see McLean). There are, however, striking, less explicit traces of the prison’s more recent inhabitants. Before it closed, Reading Prison had housed young male offenders between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one. Due to overcrowding in the prison system, they slept two and occasionally three prisoners to the same cell – metal bunk beds remain in some of the cells, as testament to the way the use of the prison had changed. There are graffiti in a lot of the cells, ranging from the humorous, to the angry, to the hopeful: “Room Service” is scrawled above a button used to summon the guard in one cell, “Fuck HMPS” in another, and “Free with my dreams” on the upper part of another cell wall. A small crucifix shape is inscribed above one cell doorway. Fragments of posters and cuttings that had been stuck to the prison walls remain in many of the cells, simultaneously creating strange patterns on the walls and reminding you that these spaces were lived in until relatively recently. Most strikingly, as I was making my way around, I passed one family who were seeking out a cell that had been occupied by one of their relatives just before the prison closed. These moments of glimpsed humanity within this otherwise unsettling space were most powerful, though far from straightforward; they felt vicarious and disquieting, continually shaking you out of usual, detached art gallery behaviour. There was much to remind you that you were occupying a space resonant with untold, though just glimpsed, personal histories.

The majority of the artworks on display approached the idea of imprisonment, beyond Wilde and the nineteenth century, and some inevitably struck a more appropriate tone in this particular location than others. Several artists addressed Wilde specifically, and often built on themes and histories of queerness and constraint in the process. There are portraits by Marlene Dumas of Wilde (based on a well known photograph of him taken by Napoleon Sarony in New York in 1882) and Douglas hung together on one wall in a cell. Wilde is made vulnerable in Dumas’s depiction, with his hands painted yellow and his skin rendered in a pale, sickly green, while her slightly blurred technique lends his expression an air of uncertainty (Figure 32). Alongside Wilde, Dumas creates a cropped likeness of Douglas, who is made to look over at his lover in a cunning and seemingly untrustworthy way. Wilde, tellingly, looks away, towards the cell door.

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Figure 32. Marlene Dumas. *Oscar Wilde* (2016). Oil on canvas. Installation photograph. © Marcus J. Leith/Artangel.

Dumas has other works displayed in adjacent cells, which explore several other tragic queer figures. There is a portrait of Jean Genet in one cell, then, in adjacent cells on either side, portraits of his first long-time lover Abdallah Bentaga (a circus acrobat who committed suicide in 1964) and his last lover Mohamed Ek-Katrani. The simultaneous distance and closeness between these representations of the three men, separated but also bound by constraint, time, and each other, is powerful. Further down the wing, portraits of Pier Paolo Pasolini and his mother hang in one cell alongside the text of his poem "Prayer To My Mother," which tells of the constraint of his deep love for her: "You're irreplaceable. And because you are, / the life you gave me is condemned to loneliness." These initially unremarkable portraits are made moving by the simple though careful curation; connections are made between queer love in the past and imprisonment with complexity and subtlety.

On the other side of the wing, Nan Goldin installed a series of works that also take some inspiration from Wilde and the criminality of homosexuality, and builds this connection into her wider reflections on queer experience. Goldin has emphasised the influence that Wilde had on her, particularly as a young woman, claiming that she took from him the idea that "you can remake yourself completely. That idea drove my desire to create myself through art" (O'Hagan). The idea that Wilde offers a model for "remaking" yourself has been a common one amongst queer artists, writers, and audiences more generally since the 1980s

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(see Cook 286). He also appears to have been a figure of mutual obsession for Goldin and her close friend, photographer David Armstrong (who died in 2014). Wilde's influence is present in her work, which is displayed across several cells: in the two edited sequences from an early hand-tinted film of his play *Salome*, in her videos that focus on those marginalised for their sexuality (such as young boy in contemporary Kiev and a 91-year-old man convicted, like Wilde, of gross indecency with another man), and in her extract from Genet's film *A Song Of Love*, which depicts the erotic relationship between two prisoners in adjacent cells.

Elsewhere, Goldin makes direct links between Wilde's biography and her own. In one cell is a work titled *The Boy*. Here the walls are plastered with photographs of another close friend, a German actor called Clemens Schick whom she met and slept with in 1996, discovering later that he was gay. They remained friends, and she photographed him constantly until 2012; the often highly intimate photos on display here show him dressing, undressing, showering, masturbating, striking sexual poses, lounging on a bed, or with friends. Of this work, Goldin says:

> I'm trying to suggest Wilde's obsession with Bosie. I wanted to evoke that sense of Oscar falling hopelessly and obsessively for the wrong person. We've all done it, but for him it had such devastating consequences. (O'Hagan)

Goldin's very personal identification across time with "Oscar" – this queer figure from the past – is a familiar tactic to many queer people. The queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman has argued for a conception of queer time that works differently from ordinary state-sanctioned time. She views queer time as exposing the "already wounded" nature of time and creating strategies that "refuse to write the lost object into the present, but try to encounter it already in the present" (Freeman 14). Goldin's identification with Wilde could be considered as a moment of this kind of "temporal alignment" that, according to Freeman, has the potential to open up other possible worlds (16). This identification does, at least here, create some kind of connection across time. This is underlined by the presence of two identical, fading photographs of an unidentified Victorian man alongside the photos of Schick. One is placed under the cell window and he seems to glance across to the wall of images of Goldin's nude friend. The identification across past and present is made to move in both directions. There are, of course, dangers here – of grafting a contemporary conception of sexuality and identity onto Victorian figures in the search for queer connections in the past – though Goldin's work, in its focus on the seemingly eternal fact of obsessive desire and its playful installation, retains a sense of possibility without lapsing into ahistoricism. This attention to the discrepancies, connections, and failures of time links Goldin and Wilde – Goldin seems to hint at the potentiality of queer time, while Wilde, as *De Profundis* attests, was painfully aware of the different kind of queerness of prison time (and his oeuvre does exhibit an interest in the disruption of ordinary definitions of time, most notably in *The Picture Of Dorian Gray*, 1890).

Time is a concern of other artists included in the exhibition. Prints of the night sky by Vija Celmins are displayed in cells alongside several of the *Letters of Separation*. Celmins works from scientific photographs of star-fields, spending extended periods of time working on single images. The works on display were mezzotints, where the white marks of the stars emerged as "traps of space and time," according to the artist (*Inside* 7). A similar process of

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working goes into paintings by Peter Dreher, which were taken from a series titled *Day by Day good Day* and displayed through several cells on the upper level of the prison. These paintings were all of the same subject – the same single glass of water standing on the same table in his studio in Germany. Dreher has been painting a life size image of this glass of water since 1974 and each image includes subtle changes of light and reflection. The exhibition guide describes Dreher's studio as "his own cell" and certainly this constraint of behaviour, activity, and space is reflective of imprisonment in that we are made to notice the smallest changes to a mundane object over an extended period of time. Crucially, however, this is a constraint that Dreher has chosen.

Roni Horn's *Still Water* series also embraced the mundane and monotonous. This series was made up of photographs of the River Thames displayed across several cells. Underneath each photograph was a series of reflections on or stories about water and the river. One reads: "Large expanses of water are like deserts; no landmarks, no differences to distinguish here from there. (If you don't know where you are, can you know where you are?)." The repetitive, reflective nature of these works was clearly meant to evoke the constraining nature of prison time, or perhaps its contradictory sense of disorientation and sameness. The connections to extended periods of solitary reflection or the monotonous, laborious tasks given to prisoners (like removing tar from rope, as Wilde did) were clear, though it was difficult to shake off the discrepancy between state-enforced imprisonment and these artistic choices.

The artworks that combined the broad themes of freedom and its constraint with touches of hope were most satisfying. On the lower level of the prison, one wing was dominated by an installation of sculptures by Doris Salcedo, titled *Plegaria Muda* (*Silent Prayer*). These were wooden tables, topped with compacted earth with another, upturned wooden table on top of that. They are each roughly the same size as a coffin and were created after Salcedo's conversations with several mothers in Colombia, whose sons had disappeared and their bodies were never recovered. For Salcedo, this installation is meant to create "a space for remembrance, a graveyard that opens up a space for each body" (*Inside* 5). Over time, blades of grass begin to grow through the gaps in the upturned tables, as signs of life and hope amongst these foreboding, grim structures. In the prison, these tables were arranged to block parts of the corridor so that you had to weave through them, or were placed in isolation in single cells, or stood in the cell doorways across the threshold. They were cumbersome and disruptive. I had viewed these works previously in the well-lit space of White Cube Mason's Yard in 2012, and it was striking how here, in the dim corridors and cells of the prison, there was less grass growing through the gaps in the tables. This made for a slightly muted visual impression but felt appropriate – the stunted presence of hope and life in the prison setting.

A similar push-and-pull between confinement and escape occurred in other works. On the upper level of the prison, Steve McQueen's *Weight* was inspired by the artist's visit to Reading Prison and the claustrophobic experience of being in one of the cells. In this work, a gold-plated mosquito net hangs from the ceiling of a cell over the tiny window to shroud one of the prison's metal bunk beds. The effect is both heavenly and disquieting: the installation is lit by a lamp that emphasises the otherworldly connotations of the golden net, but you are also aware that the net itself is yet another instance of constraint. McQueen's work appears to suggest an escape into a utopic space within the confines of the prison itself.

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Elsewhere on this level, several pieces by Felix Gonzalez-Torres work both with and against the fabric of the prison. *Untitled (Water)* is a series of blue plastic bead curtains, hung across the doorways of several prison cells. These are discussed by the exhibition guide as "gesture[s] of openness rather than a barrier," and they certainly feel like playful, colourful, even tacky additions to the prison structure as you encounter and move through them (*Inside* 9). You do, however, walk through them into the resolutely dour spaces of the cells or the wings. They act, like McQueen's work, as temporary moments of transcendence, rooted in the fact of imprisonment. In the middle of the wing, meanwhile, is a stack of prints of an image by Gonzalez-Torres of a solitary bird in an overcast sky. You can pick one of the prints from the pile, roll it up, and take it away. It is an act of liberation and dissemination that this space and this exhibition seemed to require.

Though there are some valid criticisms that could be levelled at *Inside: Artists And Writers In Reading Prison* – the relative lack of voices of ordinary prisoners, for instance, or the unevenness of some of the interventions – I found myself consistently moved and unsettled by this exhibition. This was in part a result of the location: feelings of claustrophobia, monotony, and unease are inevitable when faced with the cramped cells and the graffiti and other traces left by the prison's previous inmates. But it was the moments when art and literature broke through, while remaining rooted to the realities of institution, that also stayed with me. The installations of works by Dumas and Goldin evoked queer histories of constraint and intimacy that, particularly in the case of Goldin, seemed to gesture to the possibility of queer kinship across time. The works by Salcedo, McQueen, and Gonzalez-Torres, meanwhile, were conceived and presented in a way that allowed the complex and intertwined contradictions of containment and escape to find a presence here. Though they may not have directly addressed the experiences of Reading's prisoners, these works felt like appropriate reflections on the experience of imprisonment itself and, crucially, allowed art to offer glimpses of transcendence. These two strands of the exhibition give some indication of Wilde's profound influence: as an enduring figure of queer culture and history, and as a reminder of the continual necessity of art and literature within – and emerging from – states of constraint.

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