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Diary of a Vulture

Introduction.

Roadkill lies (quite literally) on the threshold between wilderness and technoculture. It is one of many phenomena that form the complex web of human-animal interaction; unlike hunting or farming, however, roadkill is an accident, an unintentional byproduct of predator extirpation and automobility. In *Diary of a Vulture*, I take on the role of scavenger through the act of collecting and skinning roadkill. This act requires that I first confront the once-living body in all its materiality, flesh and blood; afterwards, I am left not with bodies, but objects. Indeed, a well-prepared roadkill hide creates objective value from a fatal accident; but in doing so, it also memorializes these unlucky creatures. Like the bones of Catholic martyrs kept safe in sacred spaces, my pelts of rabbits and raccoons remind us that these small animals did not die in vain. Rather, they died fighting an involuntary battle for mobility with the ever-burgeoning human presence.

The *anthropocene* is a scholarly term defining the contemporary age of human dominance over Earth's systems, including its geology, ecosystems, and atmosphere.¹ Roadkill is one

comparatively insignificant effect of this epoch; however, it serves as an easily understood analogy for the ubiquitous damage inflicted by the human species on nonhuman life. This thesis explicitly addresses just one of the many effects the anthropocene exerts upon other animals, but latent within the story of *Diary of a Vulture* lie broader unanswered questions of resource, waste, and above all, the value of nonhuman bodies and lives.

Context: Animal as art, as object, as animal.

The history of human-nonhuman relations is, naturally, as long and complex as the history of humanity itself. The prehistory of art is one such testament to this relationship. The earliest known figurative artwork depicts a man with the head of a lion²; Neolithic cave paintings and petroglyphs are known for their illustrations of species such as deer, cattle, and horses³. Moving through time, images of other animals reach a new complexity as they become symbols in a variety of contexts, from religious deities to family crests.

In the essay *Chardin's Fur: Painting, Materialism, and the Question of Animal Soul*, art historian Sarah Cohen argues that 18th-century painter Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin's portrayal of dead game, specifically in *Hare with Powder Flask and Game Bag*, parallels the then-growing philosophy of materialism⁴. Popularized by Julien Offray de la Mettrie's 1747 essay *Man, a Machine*, materialism responds to the widespread beliefs of human exceptionalism. La Mettrie denied René Descartes' earlier proposition that man alone has been granted an *immaterial soul* by referring to the anatomical similarities between human and nonhuman animals.⁵ If all species, including our own, are borne from the same base materials, then whatever manifestation there is of a human soul is paralleled in other animals. According to Cohen, Chardin's paintings of dead game have a notably material and sensual quality, where thickly laid brushstrokes stand in for blood and fur rather than simply depicting them.⁶ She also notes the "implication of human drama" in these still-lives: the chiaroscuro lighting and the carefully posed game are reminiscent of paintings of dying heroes or martyred saints.⁷ Chardin's dead-game still lives

differ from similar works of his contemporaries in that, with their stark drama and materiality, they seem to consider the existence of nonhuman souls.



Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin,
Hare with Powder Flask and Game Bag,
(Source: Cohen, p. 41)

While Chardin's painted fur evokes the material quality of the animal body, I choose to use the animal body itself to further confront the viewer with the death and creative rebirth of a roadkilled animal. The use of other animals for material purposes is,

of course, widespread; leather and fur have been used for centuries in both practical and creative contexts. Contemporary artists, however, have used the animal body in unconventional ways, displaying it in fine arts settings. Damien Hirst's 1991 sculpture, entitled *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, drew attention from art critics and animal welfare advocates alike.⁸ The sculpture consists of a dead shark, suspended in a tank full of formaldehyde, staring ahead with open jaws; the shark was caught and killed specifically for the piece.⁹ Decades earlier, German-born artist Joseph Beuys exhibited a variety of performance pieces using animals both dead and alive. In *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965) the artist cradled the dead animal and whispered muffled explanations of the art hung in the gallery he stood in.¹⁰ His later performance, *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), involved a live coyote whom Beuys shared a room with, performing symbolic and spontaneous gestures as the confused animal moved about him.¹¹

Few contemporary works, however, use the physical animal as more than a metaphor for a separate concept or discussion.

Hirst's shark was meant to confront the viewer with death itself¹²; Beuys was interested in shamanism and the avant garde¹³. But beyond a fine arts context, the contemporary use of fur and hide is a philosophical battlefield. Organizations like PETA utilize scantily clad women combined with gruesome photos of skinned coyotes and bloodied fur seals to advocate against fur farming.¹⁴ Meanwhile, faux and real furs are a consistent trend, from fast fashion to haute couture. Where does the fur of a roadkilled raccoon or rabbit fall into this fight?



Supermodel Suzanne McCabe models for a PETA anti-fur ad. (Source: PETA)

The answer is not black-and-white from either end. Roadkill dies in vain, only to be salvaged by scavengers, whether they be microorganisms, buzzards, or human beings. Animal studies scholar Mike Michael posits that roadkill emerges not as a “perpendicular” intersection of nature and technoculture, but a wavering in the parallel existences of human and animal movement.¹⁵ Thus, the context of fur changes drastically with the realization of its roadkill origin. It is not the product of a being trapped in a farm with a predestined death; nor is it the byproduct of wild game, shot dead in the name of a family’s subsistence. Roadkill is an unintentional casualty, and the use of its fur cannot be singularly argued as violent or disrespectful.

Methodologies and processes.

In high school, I started to drive. When I needed to think, relax, or cry, my beat-up red Subaru was my refuge. I took to the road in search of nothing in particular. I learned the name and placement of the sixteen townships in my county, gridded into a near-perfect square. Crossing them east-west and north-south were

rural county roads with nondescript names; on these I found a strangeness, a ghostly presence of decrepit farmhouses and broken-down tractors. At certain times of day, on certain stretches of road, I saw no other vehicles and only fragmentary evidence of human activity. Punctuating this strangeness were the other bodies with whom I shared road-space in such lonely moments. Dead deer, raccoons, possums, rabbits, squirrels, and once, a swan, all in various states of disfigurement. Sometimes, in morbid curiosity, I would pull over to get a closer look.

As my thesis developed a leaning towards the field of human-animal studies, I began to explore with material and imagery. In an attempt to bring my simple illustrations into a more material dimension, I started creating appliqué patches of different wild animals: rabbits, cranes, freshwater fish, a smirking vulture. This last one was the most striking. Why a vulture, patched onto the back of my shirt? In discussing the presence of the vulture, trying to understand what drew me to such an ugly bird, I recalled the extensive time I spent driving, and the dead bodies I found on the sides of country roads. In warmer seasons, I would sometimes

come across a small group of turkey vultures picking at roadkill. They would fly up as my car approached, then ground themselves again after I passed and return to their meal. Vultures are not simply the garbage trucks of wildlife, but the veritable recyclers: repurposing roadkill, an ecologically purposeless death, into something of value. Wearing my vulture shirt, I wondered if I might take the role of vulture upon myself. It occurred to me then that roadkill might be the perfect intersection in which to explore of a variety of my ideological and ethical concerns: sustainability, ecology, animal studies, the anthropocene. But simply *depicting* roadkill would not be enough; already set on material exploration, I understood that actual fur and skin were far more compelling than photographs or illustrations alone.

My rusty red Subaru no longer exists, at least not in the form it once did. It sits in some automobile graveyard, perhaps crushed into a cube of scrap metal, perhaps mutilated as its parts were ripped off and recycled to repair other cars. But the spirit it instilled within me never left, and in a slightly newer Mazda, I set out to collect the same fragments of human activity I collected before.

Now, though, this act of collection becomes physical. A large grey bin with a bright orange lid sits in my trunk, lined with black plastic trash bags. I'm wearing a second-hand navy blue jacket, embellished with reflective strips of red and yellow. A friend accompanies me with a camera, and together we scan the roadside, passing dead fields and grey forests. Finally, a lump of grey on the road ahead, and this time it's not a chunk of dirty snow. It might be a raccoon, or a rabbit; if the body is too mangled, utterly destroyed, we pay our respects and move on. If it is fresh and furry, though, I pull over and wait until the coast is clear (I've confirmed the legality of this collection process, but I want to avoid being interrogated by a stranger). There are bright blue latex gloves aptly placed in the glove compartment. I pull them on and pop the trunk; my friend hops out and begins to snap candid shots as I quickly but carefully grab the dead animal, determine its freshness, and place it in the bin.

Skinning the animal is both the easiest and most captivating part of the process of preparing a hide, at least for my purposes, which don't require the precision of a professional furrier. The knife

slides easily between the flesh and skin, and once the cuts are made, it is a repetitive and reflective process. I am caught between the animal as body and the animal as object; when the knife slips, or I come to the point of vehicle-induced trauma, deep red blood makes a stark appearance against the pink-blue-white of muscle and flesh. My focus is then broken as I think of my own red blood and my own animal body. Still, I continue to cut the membrane until I have separated fur and skin from body and flesh. With a friend's help, I take shovel and skinned body to the woods, and in a manner somewhere between serial killer and funeral gravedigger we bury the dead animal. The grave is marked with whatever we can find: a rock, a piece of wood. We stand in silence, unsure what exactly to say and even less certain if anyone is listening. Finally I might mutter words of gratitude, along with an apology for the death I didn't cause. It is still a death I find myself complicit in, as a vehicle owner; or, more simply and honestly, as a human being.

An animal hide must be defleshed and salted immediately, then stored in a cool, dry place as the salt draws the moisture from the skin.¹⁶ The salt is changed daily, for one or two days, and

intermittently I cut and pull whatever pieces of flesh still stick to the skin. When the salt has done what it can, and the hide is as flesh-free as I can manage, it is washed in warm water and dish soap. I hang it to dry for a day. Finally I can apply the tanning solution that I bought from Cabela's. It's caramel-colored and sticky and comes in a blaze orange bottle. The tanning process takes place over a few days. At least once a day, I pull and stretch the hide to keep it soft and pliable as it dries. Eventually I am left with a crude leather on one side, fur on the other: here lies the animal as object.

Creative work and display.

After I completed my first hide--a crudely cut portion of a cottontail's back--I folded and twisted it in my hands, wondering what its next life might be. This wondering ultimately led me down many dead-end roads in the days leading up to my project deadline. I was still stuck on creating a singular *piece*, believing that somehow, in some way, the ultimate realization of my questions lay in sewing, embroidering, and/or patchworking this animal's skin into

a traditional artwork. Part of this, no doubt, sprung from my continuing desire to explore fiber arts. I spent considerable amounts of time designing quilts, only to discover that, like any craft, quilting requires time and effort that do not fit into the schedule of an undergraduate senior with a part-time job. I considered, and finished in varying degrees, various patchwork wall-hangings depicting a variety of subjects: my old red Subaru, a pair of hungry vultures, a somber vista of a country road. Each one came with its own variety of roadblocks, but the biggest obstacle of all was where and how to appropriately use the hides of roadkill.

I thought I would solve this problem by using pieces of fur to stand in for trees and bushes in each patchwork scene. Eventually it became clear that this would be difficult; but the difficulty of craft was not the biggest source of my frustration. This project started to feel like a waste, not only of time, but of roadkill hides. I had more or less abandoned the context and moral ambiguity of these objects in order to make aesthetically pleasing artworks. The materiality of the fur was lost in the materiality of patchworked fabric, and the stories of roadkill seemed trite when sewn together in a mishmash of bright

colors and plaids. Somewhere in between dead animal and art-object-that-uses-dead-animal is a piece of the dead animal itself; a pelt, processed and displayed but without explicit functional purpose, existing only to be touched and remembered. I always wanted to work in this in-between, but the pressure of a Project and an Exhibition had pushed me into the realm of art-object-that-uses-dead-animal. At this point I might have created a still-life painting or an illustrated children's book; all interesting ideas with merit, perhaps, but as much about craft and media as roadkill. However, the true craft of this project has always been the process of skinning an animal and tanning its hide. Over the course of my Integrative Project I skinned a total of six animals: four rabbits and two raccoons. I am by no means an expert, but I am not especially proficient at sewing, either. Reconsidering all of this, I willed myself to sacrifice the glory of a big and shiny Art Project in favor of something more interactive and direct.

In the final exhibition, the piece takes the form of an old wooden dresser accompanied by a map of Washtenaw County made of tied yarn. The map's red and orange threads connect

drawings and photographs of live animals, roadkill, and scenes of highways and out the windshields of automobiles, mimicking the trope of a mad detective with a wall of red string and newspaper clippings. Atop the dresser, three of my processed hides lay with an invitation for the viewer to touch and explore this “wunderkammer” of sorts. The skull of a deer -- a buck -- that I found once while wandering the rural roads is spray-painted a bright orange, not unlike the orange yarn bordering each township of Washtenaw County in my mad detective’s map. Adjacent to the skull and laying atop two soft rabbit furs is a box of Condor brand latex gloves. A label, also blazing orange, gives the viewer the option to use the gloves as they peruse the installation, and to recycle them in the bottom drawer of the cabinet. The frequent occurrence of blaze orange corresponds to interconnected ideas of animal mobility and automobility: the color warns of danger and construction sites on the road, and is worn by hunters on vests and caps to distinguish themselves from the brown-grey of the autumn woods.

While blue latex gloves, not unlike the ones I used while skinning roadkill and tanning their hides, spill out of the bottom

drawer, the two top drawers contain memorabilia -- paraphernalia, even -- of my experience as a roadkill collector, Skinner, and perhaps, animal lover. In the second drawer, an early experiment from my Integrative Project lies in contrast to the hides, feet and tail of a roadkilled rabbit. This experiment is a machine-embroidered patchwork piece, depicting myself holding a (very much alive) wild rabbit.

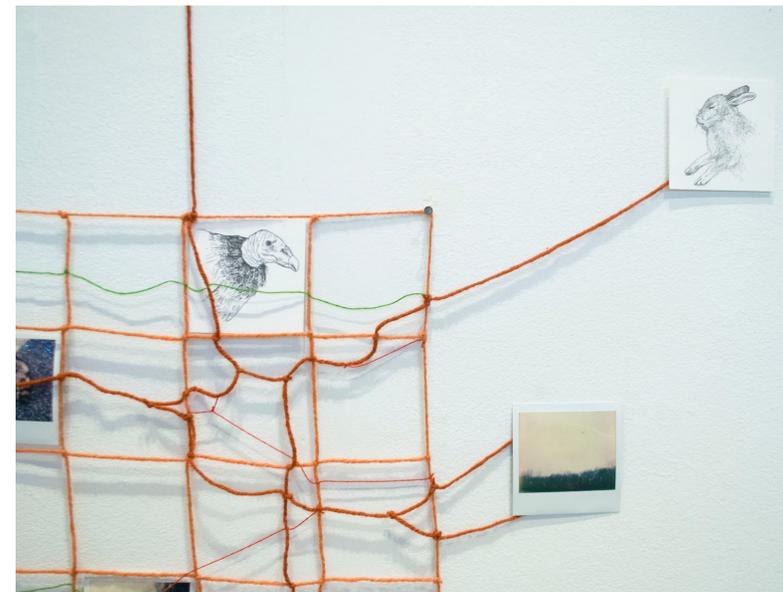


The contents of the second drawer of my roadkill “wunderkammer.”

It illustrates an event that happened shortly before my revelation of roadkill's importance to my thesis. Riding in a friend's car, we came across a wild rabbit frozen in shock on an empty street. It appeared to have narrowly missed being run over, and sat catatonic but with its heart beating rapidly. Without thinking I opened the car door and scooped up the small animal. I held it close and it did not fight; we brought it to the safety of a large grassy yard down the street, where it promptly regained its instinct and hopped away.

Furry tails and rabbit's feet and soft hides complement this patchwork piece. Laying atop the hides are two key ingredients to the process of skinning and tanning an animal: a blaze orange bottle of Deer Hunter's & Trapper's Tanning Formula and a large blue cylinder of Morton non-iodized salt. While these objects might perplex the viewer, their significance is understood if the top drawer is opened first. Against the backdrop of a roadmap of Lower Michigan, the key to my old Subaru lies, accompanied by a handmade rabbit's foot keychain (handmade with roadkill, of course). Next to the keyring is the most substantial part of the

project, albeit quiet in its size and clandestine placement. A small handmade book alternates between Polaroid photographs of roads, roadkill, and raw hides. Between each photograph, on blaze orange paper pasted over brown chipboard, a typed proclamation reveals itself. The book reveals the true extent of the project in a few short paragraphs. Anthropocene, resource, animal life, animal death; all juxtaposed by raw photographs of death and I, its handler.



Detail, Washtenaw County road map: tied yarn, Polaroid photographs, ink drawings.

Conclusion.

This project was far more convoluted than I ever intended. While I failed in creating a single, tangible *piece* showcasing craftsmanship and artistic ability, I believe I found a different sort of achievement: one of honesty and a sometimes brutal connection with my ecological existence as a human being. Sewing needles broke and compositions went unfinished. But, face-to-face with the slimy, bluish flesh of a freshly dead animal, I faced the materiality of living existence in a way I never have before. Recalling the bleeding hip of my first skinned rabbit, I am reminded of something Julien Offray de la Mettrie wrote: that as a “gentle, peaceful animal will be opposed to blood and massacres; it will (also) be ashamed of having spilled blood.” From my viewpoint, this shame is at its worst not from simply hunting or fishing--arguably natural acts of death and resourcefulness--but from the endless, pointless cruelties we wield upon other living beings without even the slightest recognition of life. Roadkill is but one thread entangled in the ugly web of human disregard.

In lieu of any more concluding statements, I instead choose to share the contents of the book exhibited with my installation:

In what is the automobile driver complicit?

Caught in the rush-hour traffic going south on US-23, it is clear that the automobile is not separate from the human being. Each car is understood as a person, and as the mind behind the wheel, I understand myself to be my car. Staring ahead at the throngs of shiny metal exoskeletons, I experience something between self-deprecation and misanthropic disdain. What mobilities are prevented or impaired by our own?

In the flat plains of Texas and Alberta, off the coasts of Mexico and Alaska, overgrown machines move rhythmically to violate the Earth and reap from her a dwindling resource. In the event of an always-grave mistake, that resource might spill relentlessly into rivers and oceans and streams, killing countless organisms of countless species in its wake while poisoning the water held sacred by our own.

Here, now, in Michigan, the rush-hour exhaust melts Arctic ice caps and Himalayan glaciers. While polar bears starve in their inability to move across the ice, my local roads and highways impede the mobility of creatures much more overpopulated. Their numbers are left unchecked without the predators that my own species expelled. Instead, they die in the early hours of the morning, crossing pavement only to never feel grass or dirt again.

The roadkilled animal is killed without intent; like the starved polar bear or the oil-drenched stork, it is just another accident of the Anthropocene.



Diary of a Vulture, *final installation.*

Notes

1. Monastersky.
2. Dalton.
3. Dalton.
4. Cohen, 45.
5. de la Mettrie, 103.
6. Cohen, 56.
7. Ibid.
8. Hirst and Morgan.
9. Ibid.
10. Heiner, 135.
11. Strauss, 34.
12. Hirst and Morgan.
13. Strauss, 34.
14. PETA.
15. Michael, 279.

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