

DOCUMENT AND LOCATION

MORE AKIN TO THAT OF AN INTERLOPER

LIZZIE LLOYD ON
SOPHIE HAYES, STORAGE,
2004 ONWARDS

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Foreground

More Akin To That Of An Interloper
Lizzie Lloyd on
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2004 Onwards

*Life is full of strange absurdities, which, strangely enough, do not even need to appear plausible, since they are true.*¹

Luigi Pirandello

We find ourselves in a series of sizable clean white-walled spaces with light grey polished floors. Exposed, industrial-grade ventilation systems hover just shy of the ceilings which are fitted with strip lighting. Frozen troops of stuffed animals gather, tentatively hugging some rooms' peripheries, spilling more boldly into the centre of others. More white rooms follow: these are partially lined with dark

metal grids from which the heads of a miscellaneous assortment of bison, ibex and goat – though I'm no expert – are affixed in rows. A faded gold-framed painting of a couple of lions lies propped against the wall behind one of these grids, but upside down. You'd be forgiven for mistaking these photos for documentation of a contemporary art exhibition of quirky taxidermy sculpture. But something is a little off: the red fire extinguisher in among the hanging bovid heads; the casual, sometimes throwaway composition of the images; an open door pushed into the face of a nonsensically placed lama, its expression vacant; the bloody carcass of an unidentified animal and bin bags strewn across an industrial freezer floor.

These images are one part of a project called *Storage* by Sophie Hayes which is made up of sequences of images taken within different museum storage facilities



across Europe. The images described above are the first iteration of the series taken at the National Museum, Prague, during a time in which the museum was transferring its holdings to a new purpose-built storage facility out of town. Other locations in the series to date include Reading Museum and the Natural History Museum, London. In each case Hayes is permitted limited access to areas of the museum not usually open to visitors. The images reflect the distinct feel of each location, signalled by changes of lighting, the scale of the facility, with different degrees of organisation (and financial backing) clearly evidenced. The conditions by which Hayes is allowed access is important, partly for the way in which her time there is strictly limited. She quickly roams the spaces armed only with a medium format analogue camera, a tripod and a light meter. Doors can be opened to her for just a few seconds at a time, resulting in shots that are momentarily glimpsed, rather than carefully composed or refined. These conditions bleed into the images in specific ways. Often shot at speed in mixed light sources, Hayes' images are haunted by strange green and yellow tones that can render her work

peculiarly out of time. There is an intentional acceptance of imperfection that smacks of the illicit – a feeling of having been taken by stealth – which in turn appears to lend them the promise of an unfiltered visual record of a particular time as well as place.

The idealised, romantic allure of museum archives as dust-covered, low-lit basements lined with shelves filled with rows of taxonomised objects of

significance is compelling. The draw of these spaces is linked to the presumed originality of the objects as previously touched, made, found, used by people long gone and imbued with lived experiences now passed. They have, what Walter Benjamin might call, an aura, 'A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be.'² Within the confines of museum storage this aura is compounded – the objects are near, their origins far, they are physically touchable yet we know better than to reach out our naked hands. Aura amasses in places like these. Each object emanates its own magnetic allure, while reflecting the weight and presence of its neighbouring objects too. Museum storage facilities function, in theory at least, to contain objects, unselfconsciously before they are put on display to perform a particular duty or illustrate a particular narrative. This custodial role lends the objects in this context a seductive naivety and openness; objects lie temporarily dormant, in waiting, their full potential momentarily frozen. Moreover, of course, objects in storage remain relatively inaccessible, unavailable to the gaze of a general public thereby amplifying the distinctiveness of the objects themselves through the particular 'special' conditions of their viewing.

Though in fact the matter has become more complicated. Since the first iterations of Hayes' *Storage* increasing directives for publicly funded cultural institutions like galleries and museums to encourage greater and more general accessibility has led, for example, to increased online cataloguing of archival material and organised public tours of behind-the-

scenes areas, allowing the impression of the democratising of access to the otherwise privileged inner working of the museum.

With this increase in public access to collections, the apparent role of museum storerooms has changed. Where their sole purpose was once to gather, taxonomise and preserve, now there is half an eye on the public perception of areas of the museum which were previously largely inaccessible. As Ebony Andrews argues, this has led to a range of previously unconsidered issues: ‘on the one hand institutions continue to work to delineate the public-facing and internal structures of the museum in order to enhance the efficiency of their activities, while, on the other, the same institutions are expressing a need to close, or otherwise bridge this public/private divide in order to enable visitors to see and experience the ‘behind-the-scenes’ areas of museums.’³ Andrews argues that the now hybrid areas of museum store rooms are particularly knotty when it comes to taxidermy – objects that are historically and ethically problematic – giving rise to ‘the concept of ‘open-display’ or ‘display-storage’

areas which are also curated, that is, through their material display and organisation, they ‘enunciate’ on behalf of the curator(s)’.⁴

Where the store room might once have seemed to offer the most unmediated and functional experience of historical objects, there is now the perception that these areas are in fact stage managed for public digestion. Public access tours of behind-the-scenes areas are often highly choreographed interpretive events

of areas explicitly organised for this purpose.

In reality, however, access to museum storage spaces is still mainly the preserve of museum staff and academic specialists. Public access to these spaces is still restricted by working processes, practicalities and geography. As many museums, inevitably, have the majority of their collections out of the public eye at any one time, the deep storage of these holdings is often done far away from the public site of the museum in unglamorous



locations. Whether purpose designed and climate-controlled or average warehouses in industrial estates, these spaces are anonymous and quotidian by nature, the actions undertaken within them carefully circumscribed.

As a record of the artist’s presence in these unseen sites of deep museum storage,

Hayes' series is something of an anomaly. Her position in these spaces is unclear. Her role is ambiguous. She is not a museum specialist. She is not (strictly speaking) a photographer. These are not the spaces opened to the public for an interpretative tour. Instead, her role is more akin to that of an interloper; it lends her visual framing of these storage facilities as equivocal and renders her work tantalizingly non-committal towards its subject.

Though Hayes is in the process of extending the scope of her project to other museum departments, to date she has worked primarily with taxidermy storage units. Originally, taxidermy, as Donna Haraway has discussed, functioned to tell 'the unified truth of natural history'.⁵ It 'was about the single story, about nature's unity, the unblemished type specimen' that for Haraway was the story of 'the commerce of power and knowledge in white and male supremacist monopoly capitalism'.⁶ But the story Hayes tells, or rather alludes to, is quite different. The type of taxidermied specimens Hayes foregrounds are just as likely to be moth eaten, dishevelled and semi-observed. In *Storage (London)* she captures a hare, eyes locked on to the camera lens, its ears strung lopsidedly and ungainly together with string. In *Storage (Reading)* Hayes records stacks of animal dioramas in glass vitrines that are only partially visible due to low lighting, reflection and being held together by gaffer tape. In *Storage (Prague)* a stash of antlers is pictured covering a cleaning station along with what looks to be a bottle of domestic cleaning product. The point is that 'nature's unity', as Haraway

describes the initial purpose of taxidermy, the 'unblemished', and even the sense of a 'single story', are all but absent from Hayes' take on the prosaic life of museum specimens. Her project pivots instead on the damaged, the piecemeal, the superfluous, and on the fleeting fragments from which cultural institutions construct contested realities.

The subject matter of Hayes' work is not, however, dependent on the specific objects pictured, but the roles of these objects in a particular place and time. Hayes does not interrogate the obviously problematic colonial origins of taxidermy because her interests lie in broader questions around how we perform our relationships to the past. How do we preserve, document and visually present histories through the placement of objects that appear not to be in use, in the backrooms of museums?

This interest is borne out through her consideration of objects that are in the process of being repaired or recovered, stored or transported, chosen or rejected. As such she deals in an implicit and unarticulated cultural subconscious. Hayes homes in on the functions of objects in museum storage as unfixed, unresolved, their ambivalent relationship to the past, present and future frozen. This transition relates, on the one hand, to the way that historical objects are put into the service of museums, a means to evidence, gather knowledge or illustrate particular historical narratives – all of which is inevitably subject to change.

But this transition also manifests physically, where objects are stacked, wrapped, protected, cleaned, and labelled. In *Storage* it is not clear whether these



objects are coming, going, or confined here for the long haul. A pair of deer, lined up alongside a row of rock specimens and a step ladder, are rendered comi-tragic: part-wrapped, part-draped in protective white plastic. A giraffe pictured among cardboard boxes and wooden crates in an entrance way, could have either just arrived or be edging towards an exit. Glass box dioramas unsystematically piled up next to the bins could either be being repaired or scrapped. Removed from the formal public structures of the museum, they appear exposed, odd, unrealized, the prying eye of Hayes' camera highlighting their strangeness.

DOCUMENT AND LOCATION 2020

The pull of the objects that Hayes captures is not so much the objects themselves, then, but the absence of a geographical, historical or ecological narrative framing and underpinning of their current condition. One of the key purposes of museum specimens is education, to advance our understanding and disseminate knowledge about, say, the natural environment. But in Hayes' images this purpose is deliberately lost, cast adrift. Where many of the items pictured through *Storage* were accumulated through a quest for knowledge during the nineteenth century, we are now faced with the problem with what to do with them. How do societies manage their leftover cultural detritus? What do they do with items that haven't made the cut of the

tiny percentage of a museum’s displayed archives? The objects that populate Hayes’ photographic dioramas are contextualised not by fake ferns, artificial rocks, or stray tree branches, but by themselves; the habitats they inhabit are non-specific, generic warehouse or industrial buildings on the outskirts of cities. They have their own particular character but, really, they could be anywhere and nowhere.

This absence of clear function and specific physical anchoring is surprisingly affecting; it leads Hayes’ images to behave like provisional dioramas of objects awaiting an audience, like the characters of Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, one of whom describes himself as ‘an ‘unrealized’ character dramatically speaking’.⁷ These idiosyncratic moments of informal gatherings of museum items constitute what Hayes sees as the subconscious or ‘alter-ego of museological display’. Many of her images key into the tacit ambiguity of the role of the storage facilities she captures, her images extending the uncertainty about the degree to which the images we bear witness to are documentation or staged, practical

or set up. This tension is felt throughout the series, but there are moments when it rises to the surface, such as the appearance of a lone white dog pictured, doe-eyed, in a corridor, between racks of zebras and mountain dogs. It is clearly out of place, but is it placed there by Hayes herself? Or is the action of a museum worker, evidence of a job left unfinished? Or an insider prank? The images taken in Prague seem even more designed, the heads of deer, ibex

and goats hanging on geometric grids feel wholly curated. In fact, none of Hayes’ images are staged, at least not by her, their incongruities instead fabricated in necessary haste by her camera.

This uncertain ground is the landscape of Hayes’ work. She is drawn to the transience of storeroom objects and the slipperiness of their existence in particular places, at particular times – qualities that are magnified by the curious trespass of her lens.



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¹ Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Act I.

² Walter Benjamin, ‘A Short History of Photography’, *Screen*, Vol. 13, Issue 1, Spring 1972, pp. 5–26, p. 20, (originally published in *The Literarische Welt* of 18.9., 25.9. and 2.10.1931.

³ Ebony Andrews, ‘The animals went in two by two: Shifts in the classification and display of taxidermy in the seen and unseen spaces of public museums’ in Mirjam Brusius and Kavita Singh eds. *Museum Storage and Meaning: Tales from the Crypt* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 190

⁴ Andrews (2017), p.191.

⁵ Donna Haraway, ‘Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936’ *Social Text*, No. 11 (Winter, 1984–1985), pp. 20–64, p. 21.

⁶ Haraway, (1984–1985), pp. 21 and 34.

⁷ Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Act I.

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Document and Location is a new research group developed by academics from Fine Art, Photography and Architecture at The University of The West of England, Bristol, in partnership with Foreground.

The group's research and accompanying public programme of exhibitions, events and publishing that will investigate how our understanding of place is directly formed through how locations are recorded and subsequently narrated by different disciplines.

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