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Sculpting the Dead: Taxidermy in Different Contexts

Exploring people's opinions and attitudes towards taxidermy in various environmental contexts.

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Abstract

This research relies on the main question of whether the audience's responses to taxidermy vary when appearing in different contexts in which it is displayed. It explores people's opinions adjacent to the exhibition of taxidermy mounts in various spaces, asking the participants to categorise images based on their connotations with each context. As the interviewees place their scores and their spaces on the works, their scores were reassessed in a second round, to establish whether the perceived exhibition space changes their opinion on the mount. The results presented characteristics that trended in each space, equating specific queues to each place. Story and narrative were found to have value in the artistic space, along with a manipulation of the animal form, suggesting a need for deeper meaning within artistic objects. The natural history museum exhibited educational tendencies of taxidermy, representing an informative character of the space. The private home was showcased through hunting connotations and decorative capabilities of the medium, showing personal dispositions of individuals towards taxidermy. The general trends in scoring were observed to raise in the art museum, remain consistent in the natural history and dip in the private home. These results mean that the art museum space makes the mounts more valuable in the participants eyes, noticing their capabilities of telling a story and conveying a message. Natural history is framed as museal and representative, acting as a historical depiction of animals' life, consequently remaining as interesting as they were initially. The private home is exhibited by the connotations with hunting and trophies, which resulted in many participants seeing the negative aspects of the work. These were accompanied by the immediate associations that some individuals have with the medium of taxidermy, the perspectives of ordinary materials within the artistic context and the many ethical considerations included in the acquisition of animal materials. The context was found to be significant, through different appearing characteristics represented by faltering scores.

Keywords

Taxidermy, context, exhibition, opinion, culture

Researchers of visual culture know how variables such as class and upbringing are markers for taste in art, music, and literature among others (Bourdieu, 1984). Studies such as the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) or European Statistics on Participation in the Arts and Their International Comparability (O'Hagan, 2017) capture data which allows for the examination of visual culture and its relationship to public opinion. Most of these inquiries have focused on the high arts, such as painting or sculpture, and popular arts, like cinema or amusement parks. Studies that explore how context influences people's experiences with art can go into multiple directions. The investigations range from exploring differences of opinion when facing authentic paintings and reproductions, physical or digital artworks (Pelowski et al. 2017; Grüner et al., 2019), to the analysis of viewing behaviour (Estrada-Gonzalez, 2020). Another type of studies analysing context within art is the exhibition context or changing the physical space in order to see whether it can change people's perception of art pieces (Swaboda, 2019; Szubielska et al., 2021; Gartus et al., 2014; Brieber et al., 2014). These place the same artworks in different spaces, analysing whether that change has an effect on their perception.

With all of these studies in mind, there are art forms and practices that are not used as much and we know less about because of a narrow focus on what is visual art. Taxidermy is one of those areas, seeing as its nature has intrigued certain people for a long time, from museum goers to oddity collectors, which sparks the research idea of whether its setting affects its public opinion. The field of taxidermy does not fit into the categories of high or low art, creating a unique framework for itself, which can help to understand the role on context within art experience. This inability to categorise the medium ties with a specified focus on studying high art expressed through the canon, or the institutional placement of hierarchical value on specific art pieces or styles (Langfeld, 2018). Our understanding of art objects, contexts of their exhibition and opinion is viewed through the lens of the worthiness and value of specific arts, and therefore not wide enough.

The research question that leads this investigation studies *whether the audience's responses to taxidermy vary when appearing in different contexts in which it is displayed, and if so, how?* This question aims to investigate whether the audience responds differently to a piece of taxidermized art when it is showcased in diverse circumstances such as the art museum, the natural history museum or someone's household. The reality of mounted animals, preserved for educational or aesthetic reasons, among many other, can make some viewers uncomfortable. The taxidermized animals can be viewed as pieces between life and

death, usually framed in positions that they once have made throughout their lives. This can be considered as a liminal state that the specimens are in, as liminality can be described as something that is on the brink of change, uncertain and in-between states (Gadoin et al., 2013). This uncertainty can be captivating to some onlookers (Andrews 2012, p. 60), but can have the opposite effect for others. This reaction of viewers prompts the question of how people react and view the taxidermized pieces and what variables can influence that. People's perception of taxidermy is influenced by its context of display, through narratives that it is able to evoke (Poliquin, 2008, p.125). In this case, taxidermized objects have the power to convey their own meaning, through their context and display. The liminality and the power to influence the onlooker leads to the question of how display influences people's experiences with taxidermy (Luanne, 2019, p.101).

The audience's reaction to an art piece, taxidermized or not, is likely to depend on the setting of where it is viewed (Berghman, 2013). A more precise question concerning this topic can be asked to further examine this issue, investigating how the audience's responses to taxidermy vary when appearing in different contexts in which it is displayed. Another way that alters the viewer's experience of taxidermy is its specific display techniques. Certain practises can be implemented to differentiate and colourise the interaction between the piece and the person. The taxidermized piece's nature itself is a very large part of this as well, seeing as "those taxidermic displays which present 'just heads,' are considered to be 'decidedly deader'" (Poliquin 2012, p.151). A better understanding of the public's relationship and opinion on taxidermy can illuminate on variables that shape public perceptions on whether taxidermy is artistic or not.

The research model can provide insights into taste preferences and ways that people categorise and consider cultural objects. Studies that examine the opinions and attitudes of audiences on art have been conducted (Jakesch & Leder 2009; Millis 2001; Russell 2003; Swaboda, 2019; Szubielska et al., 2021; Gartus et al., 2014; Brieber et al., 2014), however, none have explored the topic of taxidermy. Its relation to death and its recent growing popularity in the mainstream art market could be the causes of the gap in research. There are possible explanations to the lack of study not existing, such as ignorance, uninterest, prejudice or general dislike of the practice of taxidermy as a whole. The specific investigation on the changes of opinions in various contexts allows for examining trends within the population on taste and art perception, which in turn provides a greater understanding of visual culture participation.

A cultural object exists within a space and its evaluation by the onlooker is done unintentionally through the lens of that space. In this article I argue that changing contexts of display has the potential to influence someone's opinion on taxidermized art pieces. This research will shine light on the current state of taxidermy as a practice, art technique, educational tool and décor possibility. It is an inductive process, that explores the unknown to find rich details of people's perceptions and opinions on the method. It examined people's dispositions and opinions on the practice and its exhibition circumstances and techniques. The analysis of the gathered data is done in a qualitative manner, to showcase the specificities of the personal responses of the interviewees. The project used the method of photo elicitation (Harper, 2002, p.13) within semi structured interviews to be able to tailor questions to the interviewee and be able to pick out information to be able to dig deeper into it. Taxidermy in general can help inform the greater discussion of context and exhibition spaces, due to its unique circumstances of exploring familiarity and ambiguity.

These findings have value for scholars in fields of art research, psychology and sociology among others, through the investigation within changing context, exhibition, their effects and perception within art fields. This paper contributes to researching cultural objects and their ability to create meaning through different lenses of viewing. The method of research can be utilised within different art styles and mediums to further research opinion shifts based on environment changes. Not many studies explore public perception of taxidermized art (Kempken, 2023, p.2), this work aims to fill that abscess. The research could benefit curatorial practices to examine which characteristics and display practices evoke specific emotions within the viewers. This could be useful to establish exhibition techniques to garner distinct attention of cultural objects. Perceptions and reactions in various contexts gathered in the interviews aid understanding of showing and viewing taxidermy in both art and natural history museums. This investigation illuminates in how cultural contexts, exhibition techniques shape discourses not only among taxidermy but also general art opinions.

Theory and previous research

Bourdieu's Habitus

Habitus is a key term in Bourdieu's body of work which pertains to the system of strong and transferable dispositions that shape how individuals think, function and perceive the social world around them (Bourdieu, 1984, p.562; 1990, pp.54-55; 2013, p.214). Strong and transferable, in this case, means that the behaviours and habits gathered influence people's behaviour in many facets of life. Habitus also is collective for people of the same class, "it could be considered as a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class (Bourdieu, 1990, p.86)." Within the idea of habitus, there is a need or want of distinction within an individual's class, attempting to diversify their consumption of clothing, leisure activities or cultural choices (Bourdieu, 1984, p.170; pp. 174-175).

This concept is incredibly important in this study because the object of the research is based on the idea of the habitus. The person's dispositions are directly influential towards their opinions on everything in their lives. Within the research, the participants' occupations and cultural consumption were inquired on directly, while some other indicators such as frequent travel possibilities or understanding art came within the conversations. These give an idea towards the individuals' class and education, which could result in a pattern between similar habitus. In this research, a person's distinction from others can influence their opinions on the images within the interviews, due to their stance on animal welfare and the practice of taxidermy as a whole.

Lahire's Habitus and dispositions

Building on the concept of habitus, Bernard Lahire (2003) provided several critiques for Bourdieu's theory that could be useful within the research of people's dispositions. He expressed the notion that psychological concepts used by Bourdieu such as mental structures, dispositions or embodiment are not fit to apply to groups of people (Lahire, 2003, pp.331-332). He also distinguishes dispositions to act and dispositions to believe which are said to have the ability to develop independently. Dispositions to act are behaviours and tendencies which are shown in practice and fostered through socialisation. They are also not only automatic reactions, opposing Bourdieu's views (Bourdieu, 1990, p.56) but the ways of reacting to certain situations formed by people's surroundings. Dispositions to believe are an

individual's beliefs, values or convictions that are shaped by institutions like schools, churches but also media or everyday events (Lahire, 2003, pp.336-338). Both types of dispositions are not excluding of each other and do not have to be connected to each other. Some dispositions may also become active only in specific conditions either out of necessity or accident (Lahire, 2003, p.342).

This framework will be useful to contrast with Bourdieu's theory of the habitus, to recognise its disadvantages and be able to further analyse the conversations in the interviews. It is important not to base the analysis on one theory or concept, to recognise the downsides of specific terms. The concept of habitus was developed by Bourdieu in a time where everyday life was quite different, with knowledge and research that is different than what we have now.

Horizontal cultural preferences

The notion of Bourdieu's habitus could also be merged with the idea of horizontal differentiation within cultural participation (Du, 2022, p.2). This methodology could be applied in the way that the horizontalness is separated not only into class division by wealth and cultural capital, but also into the living arrangement of the individual. Someone's living situation, in this case the rural, suburban or urban household could potentially influence someone's reaction to seeing animals. People who live in a more rural setting are likely more used to seeing various animals in their daily lives, while the urban individual is more likely to be in the presence of pets or pests. The individual's reaction to a taxidermized animal is likely to be affected by the horizontal differentiation of the living arrangement.

Questions about occupation and museum visiting habits give an idea towards the participants' living situations and cultural foundations. These key differences in individuals also influence the habitus, as upbringing and changing living situations can have great impact on dispositions and behaviours that are explained within the habitus framework. People's engrained dispositions and behaviours are very likely to influence their opinions on specific subjects. It is possible that a topic such as taxidermy is viewed with a bias that is included within the habitus. This will inform the interview contents within the later analysis and interpretation of the data.

Previous useful studies

A previous study that could inform this research is Jakesch & Leder (2009) that explored people's reactions to paintings with different descriptions. The result of the study was that the ambiguousness within the art field was valued. This showed that mystery and uncertainty within art is appreciated, while objects that people use every day are appreciated for their familiarity (Jakesch & Leder 2009, pp. 2105; 2111). Millis (2001) and Russell (2003) have found conflicting results which found that recognising meaning and understanding art pieces increase appreciation of artworks. Taxidermy has multiple facets that relate to both familiarity and ambiguity that art can show to people, seeing as it is created using animals and portrays animals as they were in life, and yet they are stuck in time, different to how they were.

The liminality of the taxidermized animals applies to the ambiguousness of the art pieces in contrast to the familiarity of the materials used for the mounts. These studies have a potential to clash within this framework of taxidermy, not excluding one another. The ambiguousness of the form and familiarity of the animal is what creates the allure of taxidermy (Aloi, 2018, p.16; Monroe, 2018, pp.1-2) and in turn, allows for the taxidermy object of research to be a valuable interest. Analysing the potential of taxidermy within the art practice through this project allows to examine both of the conclusions found in the studies, through the analysis of context differences. The intricacies of people's dispositions and opinions on taxidermized animals can be analysed through the methodology performed in this study through exploring the detailed reasons of categorising pieces. Putting specific pieces in categories of exhibition context dives deep into the reasoning that an individual has for regarding specific items as artistic. The interest, allure and mystery of taxidermy have the potential to spark internal debates for people to examine their own feelings towards the practice and art as a whole.

There is research which has established that context matters for how people interpret or evaluate art such as paintings or graffiti, which are usually represented in two different spaces with various display techniques. Berghman (2013, p.300) finds that without a given space or context "an artwork would arguably be mute," and its placement grants it an ability to express its value. People are more willing to notice artistic endeavours when finding themselves in a space that pushes them towards recognising art (Berghman, 2013, p.300). For example, a painting that exists in a public space, like the street, is not likely to attract attention because its context does not allow it to become viewed as art (Berghman, 2013, p.300). A

different investigation explored modern art and graffiti in two circumstances and found that modern art was rated higher in the museum context while graffiti stayed consistent (Gartus et al., 2014). The researchers found that context did have an effect on appreciation with contributions of personal preferences (Gartus et al., 2014, p.74).

Szubielska and Imbir (2021, p.1) investigate art that criticises politics and describes social issues by placing them in a gallery and laboratory context. Their conclusions find that the art gallery context had an impact on the enjoyment of the art pieces, raising their scores when comparing it to the lab (Szubielska et al, 2021, p.1). Their choice of possibly controversial art also found that the negative emotions can be calm down through the context of the gallery (Szubielska et al, 2021, p.17). The contentious characteristics expressed by the art are leading for the onlooker when appraising the art and therefore important when considering opinion shifts. Another museum and laboratory study (Brieber et al., 2014) found that artworks found in the museum were more interesting and viewed longer than in the laboratory context, showcasing that it is important (Brieber et al., 2014, p.1). The museum allows for a centred experience, allowing the individuals to focus on the piece of art and consequently frames the visitor's experience as valuable.

Taxidermy as a medium

Considering the medium as a relevant standpoint within the creation of this paper, taxidermy is a long-standing cultural practice, developed throughout the ages into what it is today (Browne, 2008), however, its use in contemporary art can be considered modern. The main uses for taxidermy are the preservation of animals, for scientific and educational reasons. Art using taxidermized animals can convey numerous messages, like exploring strained relationships between humans and animals, such as the fur and meat trades but also people owning animals as pets. Contemporary arts also use it to express issues such as animal rights activism, consumerism or anthropocentrism (Aloi, 2018, p.16) Taxidermy is polarising, seeing as some individuals feel uncomfortable about its morbid sources and some appreciating the craftsmanship featured within the field (Monroe, 2018, pp.1-2).

Taxidermy has been used to express wealth and the possibility of travel, for example, European High Society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries used trophies from their travels to fill cabinets of curiosities, or Wunderkammers (Yaya, 2008, p.174) which displayed items gathered in their voyages, such as foreign objects, including animals. Hunters or

wildlife enthusiasts can use the technique to preserve their trophies. Pet owners can commission artists to preserve their pets in their original form. Taxidermy is widely used in natural history museums to showcase scientific discoveries and display animals for educational purposes. By presenting animals within their natural environments, it provides a sense of functionality to the onlooker and may even be perceived as reversing the process of the animals' death (Meehitiya, 2019, p.100). Curiosity collectors use taxidermized pieces to decorate their homes, to showcase their interests (O'Key, 2020, p.9). Lastly, taxidermy artists use it to express themselves and their artistic vision. Their uses also go hand in hand with the acquisition of the materials. The available methods of acquisition are hunting for specific animal species, using already deceased animals, for example, accidentally, naturally or human controlled (Andrews, 2013, pp.62-63).

These forms of display and acquisition can possibly influence the interviewee's perception on the showcased images, depending on personal experience with the field. There are possible ethical considerations of taxidermy based on the viewer's feelings towards animals' welfare among other factors. There are instances where people are completely against the use of animals and animal materials within art along with the fact that some are against the killing of animals for the purposes of taxidermy (Anantharaman, 2016, p.32). On the other hand, some individuals are supportive of the use of animals in human lives, both in the sense of usable products and use in art (Anantharaman, 2016, p.32). Historically, the mass attitudes towards animals have changed overall, with a rising awareness of animals' autonomy, especially when it comes to knowledge about animals and their habitats (Anantharaman, 2016, p.32).

This concept is the core of the study, being the object of the research and a tool to measure the public's opinion and dispositions towards art in different spaces. The specific uses and acquisition methods of the technique are useful to inform the future interviews and the possible preconceptions that the interviewees. The acquisition of the presented mounts is not known to the participants, however, it can be assumed and applied to the pieces, shaping their perceived narrative. The taxidermized animals' origins or their circumstances of creation are also unknown but can also be applied by the interviewee. The taxidermy can have many origins, other than its materials. It can be created by the hunter themselves, commissioned through a professional taxidermist, purchased through a broker, new or antique and utilised by an artist for artwork. This knowledge or presumption also may have an effect on the participants. It could invite deeper contemplation into a piece of work, creating further

complexity for the taxidermy mount. The perceived origin could also surface as an ethical consideration added onto the material acquisition, shaping their view of the piece. The researcher's knowledge of the practice is vital within the interview system, when considering the possibility of the interviewees asking questions. Answering questions from the participants may build rapport with the individual which creates a smoother conversation.

Methods and data

Overview of analysis

Before the interviewees were chosen, the potential candidates were questioned on whether they were okay with talking about the subject matter to ensure that the interviewee was comfortable in the interview. Considering that taxidermy can be polarising, it is important to have willing participants who do not stray from the topic at hand. With differing opinions, it is also important not to force images on participants who are not comfortable, as it would not be ethical to do so.

Using the photo elicitation method (Harper, 2002, p.13) the interviews were performed by showing the interviewee images of six distinct taxidermized pieces (Figure 1-9) all at the same time, for them to be able to notice differences right away. Three captions were shown alongside the images which signify belonging to each context: the art museum, the natural history museum and someone's private home, in order to provoke the individual's interpretation of the work. Each of these labels were used by the interviewees as labels to indicate their perceived place of exhibition. This tactic warrants a qualitative approach, analysing the interviewees' responses and opinions on the pieces of art, examining them against each other to determine the possible changes depending on the context that they chose.

This paper's method borrows from the concept known as auto-photography, which can be described as letting the research participants take photos of what they find important or interesting. This is not directly the methodology used here, but the element of participant agency is used within this process (Thomas, 2009). Allowing the interviewees to place the pictures in the categories gives them the power over the images to an extent, as they do not create the pictures, but they have a say in their perceived contexts. This agency could evoke a more thorough thought process when confronted with the pictures, due to the placement in categories. The images were backed up by a statement from the interviewer that there was a small sized project to professionally photograph art pieces from various environments, in order not to arouse suspicion of the experimental nature of the research. For example, in Interview 5, the statement included that the images were found through an initiative which photographed cultural objects for archival purposes, it included paintings, sculptures which were also gathered from personal collections (Interview 5, 01:00).

The watermark on the images (Image 1-9) was removed from the pictures shown to the interviewees. In case of an online interview, the images were cropped to take out the logo

of the source, to upkeep the statement regarding the independent archival project. Questions of what made them think of the various exhibition spaces were asked to analyse their perceptions of the different environments and exhibition techniques. Ideally, the participants would group two pieces per category, however, if they feel strongly about putting more than two images into one category then that was allowed, and questions were asked to justify that placement. The following images were used within the interviews:



Image 1. Whitetail deer fawn taxidermy mount for sale SKU 2714, Sourced from: <https://all-taxidermy.com/product/whitetail-deer-fawn-taxidermy-mount-for-sale-sku-2714/>

The first image is a fawn, posed on a soil-like stand with accessories such as grass, hay and a mushroom showcasing the animal's natural habitat. The animal is posed dynamically, to show its movement and disposition. It can be said that the animal itself does not have to be purely a representation of the animal that it is utilising (Crawford, 2021, p.23). This can lead to the onlooker interpreting the taxidermized piece as more than the animal itself. It is imitating an animal's instincts of curiosity and its clumsy way of moving. The fawn's small frame, young age and pure temperament can be interpreted as a portrayal of

childhood, innocence as well as fragility and vulnerability. These characteristics can influence the onlooker's perception of the work in different ways. The choice to include this image was due to these possible interpretations of the childlike animal, to evoke thought processes of the participants. This small animal became the focus of some participants, seeing its age as a key feature in the object, concentrating only on that aspect.

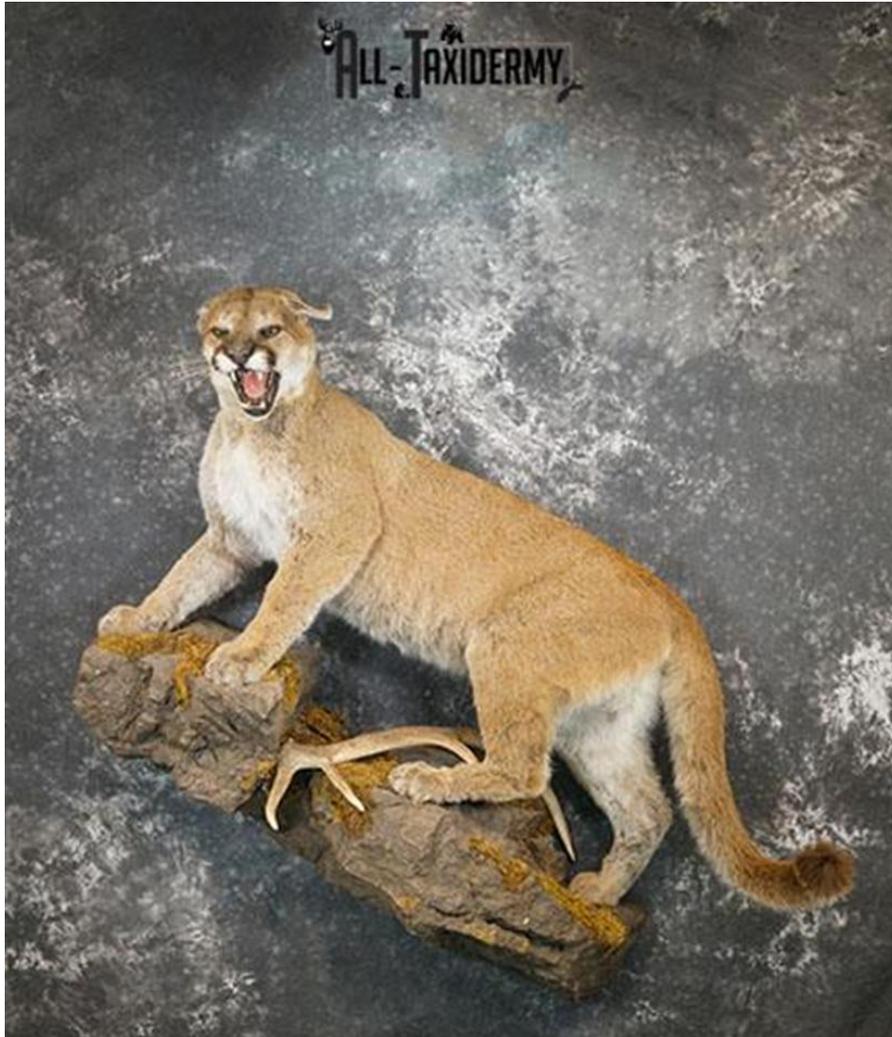


Image 2. Aggressive Mountain Lion taxidermy mount SKU 2288, Sourced from: <https://all-taxidermy.com/product/aggressive-mountain-lion-taxidermy-mount-sku-2288/>

The second featured piece is the mountain lion, or cougar, mounted on a rock posed with an antler, likely from a deer. The position and expression of the big cat is meant to evoke an uneasy and dangerous feeling towards the viewer, considering its imposing stature and features. Considering the fact that this is a predator, it could have various effects on the spectator. Its size and placement can evoke a sense of fright, due to its natural state, or a sense of intrigue because of the loss of real danger, which could come from seeing the real animal.



Image 3. Howling Coyote taxidermy mount for sale SKU 2091, Sourced from: <https://all-taxidermy.com/product/howling-coyote-taxidermy-mount-for-sale-sku-2091/>

The third image included in the interviews is the coyote, which is modelled to sit down and howl. The animal is posed on top of a rock, surrounded by autumn leaves of various colours. The coyote has closed eyes and an open mouth to signify a behaviour that happens within its natural habitat. This image was chosen due to the setting, which uses decorations to embellish the piece of taxidermy. The presence of features like this could evoke different emotions and perceptions in the viewer that may result in diverse categorisations of the image within the interview.



Image 4. Whitetail Deer Shoulder Mount SKU 2968, Sourced from: <https://all-taxidermy.com/product/whitetail-deer-shoulder-mount-sku-2968/>

The fourth included image is of a whitetail deer. It is a shoulder mount, arguably the most different from the other images, considering that it is not a full body piece of taxidermy. This image was chosen to have a distinct contrast from the others, to attempt to get the participant of the interview to analyse the others deeper. This type of taxidermy is considered popular among hunters, considering that it is smaller and less expensive than a full body mount (Brown, 2016). Considering the reputation of shoulder mounts, people may associate this image with hunting, which might prompt them to speak on their feelings towards animal welfare.



Image 5. Mandarin Duck taxidermy mount SKU 2390, Sourced from: <https://all-taxidermy.com/product/mandarin-duck-taxidermy-mount-sku-2390/>

The fifth image represents a mandarin duck, the only bird in the image collection for the interviews, to provide some variety for the interviewees. This is also a wall mounted taxidermy piece, including embellishments and decorations which showcase elements of the animal's natural habitat. This duck is small, but its appearance is striking due to its multicoloured feathers and precise colouring. These characteristics were found to be the focus within the perception, which presented as a bias towards other smaller animals in the group. The differences in size of the included animals are deliberate, to provide the participant with variety of animal species, to avoid a stagnant line of questioning for the interview itself. Differences in mount presentations and animal species are vital to this method of research, to attempt to stimulate the interviewee to think about their relationship to animals in a more general sense.



*Image 6. Full body black rabbit taxidermy mount for sale * SKU 2078, Sourced from: <https://all-taxidermy.com/product/full-body-black-rabbit-taxidermy-mount-for-sale-sku-2078/>*

The last image of the first block included in the interview guide is the full body mount of a black coated rabbit, positioned on a small slab of wood. The rabbit is compactly positioned, almost in a ball shape which also shows the littleness of the animal. Rabbits are commonly considered as a rather adorable animal, which could also contribute to the person's feelings towards the image, potentially changing their outlook on its exhibition. Overall, the images show full body mounts, with one shoulder mount, to attempt to invoke various interpretations of taxidermized animals. Some of the pieces include features of a natural setting, such as leaves, branches or grass, to simulate the original habitat of the animal. Different characteristics featured within the chosen taxidermized pieces could potentially influence the interviewee's dispositions towards each piece, which is why there were six images chosen, to represent different taxidermy techniques and animal species.

Throughout the course of the interviews, three of the six images were swapped out to gather more information through an altered channel. These three were chosen to be switched due to the nature of the animals in the photographs. The fawn (Image 1), mandarin duck (Image 5) and the black rabbit (Image 6) are all small animals that throughout some of the interviews became the focus of the narrative, with characteristics such as cuteness or softness taking the front stage (Interview 1, 18:46; Interview 5, 11:13). The fawn became the controversial piece, pulling attention towards an ethics conversation as well as overall cuteness of a baby animal (Interview 1, 34:16; Interview 6, 09:53). The mandarin duck showcased the perceived beauty of birds and their feathers, garnering attention with the technical aspects of the piece, such as Interviewee 4 mentioning that “birds are very forgiving subjects (...), with their beautiful, often coloured feathers” (Interview 4, 21:05). The black rabbit gained various reactions, with mentions of a pet similarity as well as fluffiness and cuteness (Interview 6, 29:48; Interview 4, 22:53). These characteristics were desired in the original choices of the images, however, they garnered a narrow outlook and focused solely on them.

The original set of photographs was used in interviews 1 through 7, which prompted a reflection that a comparison could be made. Interviews 8 through 12 were conducted with a second set of images, to create a point of contrast, which is utilised in the final analysis. The animals that were chosen to swap with the previously mentioned images are larger, attempting to subvert the discrepancies in size of the original group. The newly added images feature a chocolate bear (Image 7), a Himalayan pheasant (Image 8) and a mountain goat (Image 9) in order to add variety but still preserve the original diversity of included animals. The newly added taxidermy mounts also incorporate decorative aspects such as leaves and platforms, as well as dynamic poses which suggest movement and life.

The second group of chosen objects includes more predators, switching the fawn with the bear image, changing it from two to three animals considered as predators. The other two added pictures, the pheasant and mountain goat, aim to be similar to the original six. The Himalayan pheasant (Image 8) replaces the mandarin duck, because of the bird family connection and intricate colours of the feathers. This animal is not common in Europe and its unfamiliarity can result in major, different reactions from the interviewees. The previously mentioned studies, which investigated the effects of familiarity and ambiguity on art pieces (Jakesch & Leder, 2009; Millis, 2001; Russell, 2003), are informative in the context of an enjoyment of an artwork and can result in the two factors developing different directions of

opinions. Similarly to the pheasant, the mountain goat (Image 9) is not hugely familiar to most of Europe, with their natural environments being remote and tough to access, their unfamiliarity and uniqueness can result in intrigue or distance.

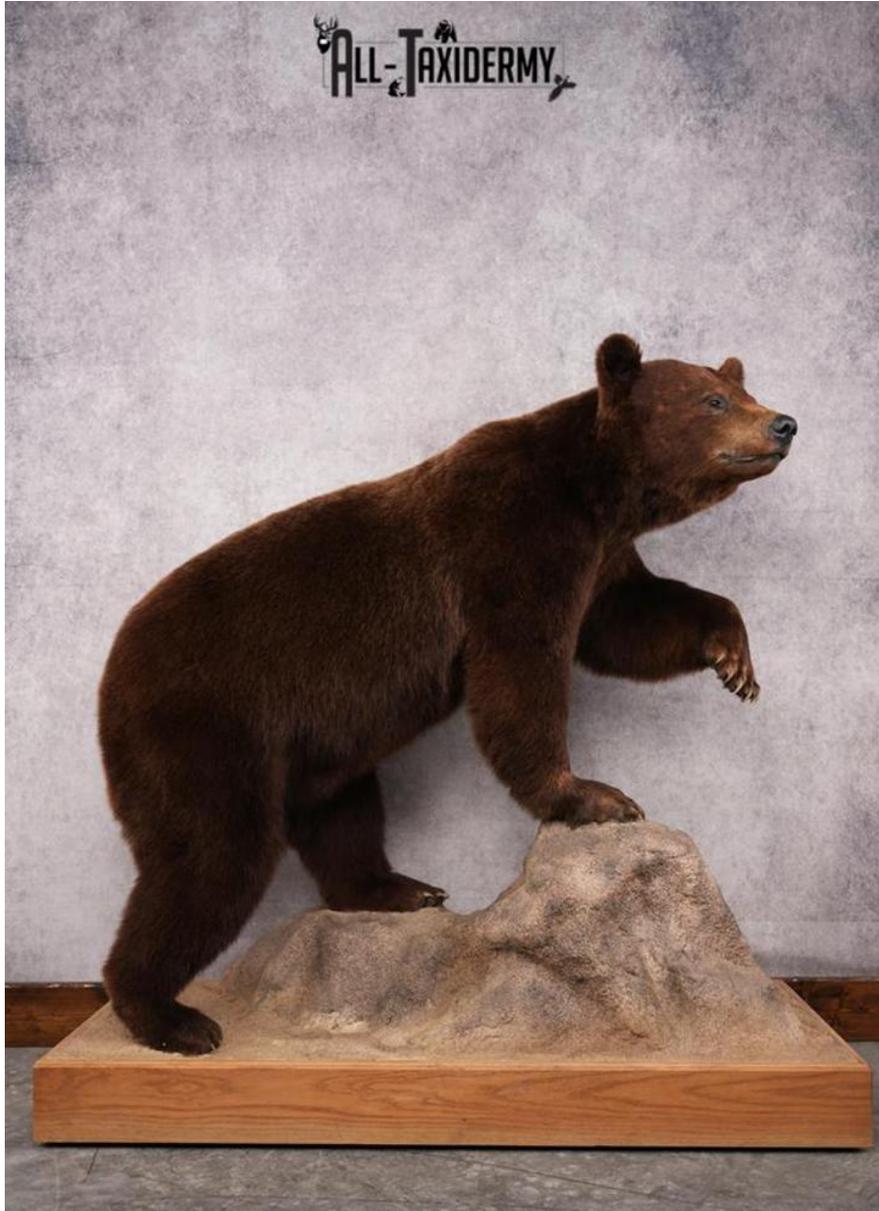


Image 7. Chocolate Black Bear Taxidermy mount SKU 2895. Sourced from: <https://all-taxidermy.com/product/chocolate-black-bear-taxidermy-mount-sku-2895/?srsltid=AfmBOoqG7SXIqptTSjL0qGIPCjeAk4sucSoIurUoteWIW6rTEpmdWLTl>.

This chocolate bear is large and majestic and is framed in a way that simulates climbing, capturing the animal's movement. The large animal is showcased in its entirety, displaying the bear's size and a gentler disposition rather than, for example, the mountain lion, which has a threatening expression. These specific images also contradict one another,

exhibiting the various presentations of dangerous animals that range from a display of grandiosity to power.



Image 8. Himalayan Impeyan Pheasant SKU 2951. Sourced from: <https://all-taxidermy.com/product/himalayan-impeyan-pheasant-sku-2951/?srslid=AfmBOoo0yGytuNpRJc3PuTm-eynr2P4T6TvV0pSqdhsXpNjqkVIcyX4o>.

The image of the Himalayan pheasant is meant to connect to the previously used mandarin duck (Image 5). Both of the mounts represent bird species of an intricate colouring and a display of decorative elements like leaves and moss. The pheasant is more geographically distant than the duck, considering that the mandarin duck was introduced in northern and western Europe (Majoor, 2010). This type of bird is likely to be less familiar to a European audience and in turn has the potential to intrigue or distance itself from the viewer. It also continues the legacy of the duck in its vibrant colours and interesting form.



Image 9. Mountain Goat Taxidermy Mount SKU 2904. Sourced from: <https://all-taxidermy.com/product/mountain-goat-taxidermy-mount-sku-2904/>.

The last image featured in the interviews is the mountain goat perched up on a rock, meant to signify the natural state of the animal. It is a large creature, showcased in its entirety through the taxidermy mount including its usual environment. Despite its large frame, this animal could be interpreted as a peaceful creature, with an interviewee pointing out its friendly look (Interview 9, 08:23). This animal replaces the image of the black rabbit (Image 6) in the course of the interviews. Despite their obvious size discrepancy, they both have a natural position and soft-looking fur, aiming to appeal to the viewer.

The interview consisted of questions that ask about the person's opinions on each piece in terms of artistic appeal, how much meaning they evoke, aesthetic preferences, informational capabilities and decorative proficiencies. The Jakesch & Leder (2009) study partially informed the method of data collection, with the interestingness scale implemented to determine whether the individual finds the pieces engaging and alluring. Each shown image was ranked on a scale from 1 (not interesting) to 9 (very interesting), to visualise the individual's general perception and interest within the pieces. This had a numerical ranking accompanied by questions detailing their exact thoughts on why their interest or disinterest lies within the specific pieces. After the pictures were shown, the previously mentioned interview structure was performed. The interviews ran for an average of 37 minutes and provide rich details for analysis.

The pieces of taxidermized art were photographed in the same way (Image 1-9). It was stated that the pieces were taken out of their exhibition spaces to take the images, not to confuse the interviewee with the same photograph space. This method of collection and interviewing matches the questions of how the audience's response to taxidermy vary when appearing in different contexts in which it is displayed because of the individual approach with each interviewee. This approach allows for the ability to gather a large quantity of information from each person about the specific pieces of art. The frequency of museum visits, both art and natural history, were assessed to see whether the differences between participants influence their decisions.

The placement of the images in different contexts by the participants allows for documenting the possibility in shifting dispositions towards taxidermy. This process also allows for tweaking the interview guide and approach along the interview progress. As the interviews came along, and data was gathered and coded in the process, insights and realisations can be implemented into the further interviews. If a participant talked about their emotional responses to the images, supporting questions were brought up in order to gain more data from each participant. After the initial part of the interview was done, the interviewees were asked to rate how interesting they found the photo first, and then again at the end, to see whether the participants' choices influenced their opinions on the pieces. Their reasoning for the possible changes were asked about in order to uphold their opinions.

Throughout the process of interviewing, coding of the data in Atlas.ti was done to find themes emerging in the interviews within each group of interviewees and categories of questions. After the interviews were concluded, the final coding was performed to finalise the

data for applying the theory and finding overall themes. As mentioned before, the interestingness scale, borrowed from the Jakesch & Leder (2009) study, had a numerical ranking to inform the overall curiosity that the participant has for the pieces. The concept of habitus as well as Lahire's (2003) theoretical considerations were visible within the interviews through the individual responses, words used, numerical ratings and contrasting the groups of the interviewees to showcase the possible changes in dispositions. The sample of participants concluded with twelve people, and it was due to convenience. The sample was found within known acquaintances, as well as, reaching out to people who the earlier participants knew. The personal connections to some interviewees were not acknowledged within the process of the interview, but beforehand. This was to make sure that the conversation is carried out on a semi-professional level, without delving into shared experiences and to maintain truthful answers.

Some of the interviews were performed online, considering the convenience and familiarity of online conversation throughout the COVID period, especially among students. This also allowed for people from other places to participate, which ended in the fact that some of the interviews were performed in Polish, due to the researcher's proficiency in the language. Atlas.ti was used to code the data from the interviews. It helped to group the data into categories to streamline the interpretation of the results as well as notice trends and differences between the interviewees. The major analysis of the interviews was done through discourse analysis to explore the participant's language use, knowledge of discourses around the medium and changes in scoring when talking about context.

Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis (DA) has many facets and forms and can be an incredibly useful tool when investigating speech patterns, topics and underlying influences in conversation. In this sense, DA can be partly defined as language analysis (Jones, 2024, p.2). The conglomerates that sentences make, including conversations and text can be analysed through their place in the social sense (Jones, 2024, p.2). Overall, the practice can be encapsulated by three main points, the first one including things that are beyond the sentence itself, counting underlying meanings (Tannen, 2015, p.1). Another one is general language use, the choices of words and social practices that are not limited to pure speech (Tannen, 2015, p.1). The use of DA in visual media is broad, but can stem from auteur theory, or the understanding that a

picture's most important quality is what the author had in mind when creating it (Rose, 2001, pp.22-23). This notion has now been overturned, with people such as Roland Barthes (1977, pp.145-6) stating that the author is not the crucial part, but the broader social and visual context is critical for an image's meaning (Rose, 2001, p.23). This context is also accompanied by the audience's interpretations of visual media, allowing for multiple meanings to be taken from one item (Rose, 2001, p.23). In the case of this investigation, the social context as well as the audience's reactions and interpretations are what create the images' truth that are individual to the person.

Discourse analysis focuses on delving deep into the structure of conversations, how identity in dialog is constructed but also how text can be used by people to express themselves socially (Jones, 2024, pp.35-6). An offshoot of DA is known as interactional sociolinguistics which investigates subtle ways that people communicate (Jones, 2024, p.22) and how meaning is created through the embedding of words within social relationships, histories and values presented by people (Jones, 2024, p.27). This can be used to dissect language use with the visual aid of images, to see how individuals use language to create shared understanding and to manage identities in conversation (Jones, 2024, p.191). There are two ways to use interactional sociolinguistics within this project which are framing and positioning. Framing can be described as how the participants use language to create the individual frames to separate each context into specific groups (Jones, 2024, p.191). This can be used to analyse how the interviewees potentially change or categorise language used that they deem to be in a specific context, so the artistic space, the educational frame or a decorative feel. Positioning refers to how the individual positions themselves in a conversation, including their personal stance on a topic (Jones, 2024, p.191). In this case, positioning can be utilised by analysing how language is chosen when posed with their outlook on the medium. Different perspectives, that sometimes blend together, displayed within the context categorising can be compared within and between interviews.

Framing and positioning go hand in hand with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which is a process of analysis that aims to discover the underlying ideologies within discourse along with how different versions of reality are created through language (Jones, 2024, p.173). The concept of the interview aims to analyse how the individual versions of reality are created in terms of art and its placement in various contexts. CDA analyses how discourses, such as scientific, artistic or ethical, are brought up and described by the interviewees when describing taxidermy in different places. As previously mentioned, an image or an art piece

gain meaning through its interaction with an audience and their interpretations. These interpretations and created realities allow for taxidermy to be analysed not only through the traditional and historical standpoint (Crawford, 2021, p.55). The placement of the context on a piece of artwork can shape conversations around it as a specific trope that is given to it within the context, such as a trophy, a specimen or an artwork (Poliquin, 2008, p.127). Different ways of using discourse analysis are crucial in this project, allowing to investigate, compare and contrast the language used when speaking about the featured images and their placements.

The research aims to explore the relationship between art and the context of exhibition using the medium of taxidermy as an unapproached point of view. The usage of the medium as an analysis for the exhibition context of cultural objects can be beneficial to illustrate people's perception. Taxidermy itself can evoke various emotions within the onlookers that are shown differently than within high and low art. The distinct category of taxidermy, which is not included in both categories, provides another layer to the analysis. The photo elicitation method allows for the personal motivation to shine through when analysing the images through the interview process. This paper can also potentially give taxidermy a spotlight and shine within popular culture, provoking people to think more on the issues that it is used to highlight, such as human and animal relationships, the Anthropocene or the fur and meat trades. This study has the potential to familiarise the general public with the practice, its techniques and its capabilities. This research design allows for digging into the mechanisms behind people's dispositions and opinions on the practice. The placement of context onto the images allows to investigate whether exhibition spaces can influence people's predispositions towards pieces of taxidermy.

Interview guide

The control questions included asking for the participants' name, age and occupation, to record background data in order to see the context of the answers. This lead more into the body of the interview, establishing whether the participant is a frequent museum visitor. Both art and natural history were inquired upon, to establish the person's knowledge and familiarity with the settings that were described later in the interview. These factors were analysed against each other to show whether the interviewee's knowledge possibly influences their opinions and placing of the taxidermized pieces.

Next, general thoughts and feelings towards the medium were established in order to launch the thought process towards taxidermy. This was also linked with a question of encounters with the medium, whether in childhood or recently, to establish the deeper feelings that the person can have towards the medium. This question revealed the innate dispositions which can shape the narrative within the interviewee's mind. Further, the person was asked whether they own any pieces of taxidermy, to determine whether the person has an interest within the field and whether they are fascinated by exploring the topic further. If the participant owns taxidermized pieces, questions were asked that dived into establishing the personal significance of the object to the person. If the interviewee does not own any objects related to taxidermy, the question of if they would like to own any taxidermy was asked and then followed with why or why not. These sentiments were reviewed more toward the end of the interview, to see whether the performed thought processes changed anything in this disposition.

After the general line of questioning concerning the medium as a whole and the person's individual relationships towards it, a more detailed opinion of the given images was assessed. Questions about first impressions and a favourite among the six were established to gauge overall feelings about the image pool. These questions lead into the body of the interview, inquiring about the numerical ranking on a scale of one to nine, assessing the interestingness of each piece, as well as the reasoning for each score given. If the interview allowed for it, emotions that concern the images for the interviewee were inquired about. Examining dispositions through an internal mechanism by asking to verbalise emotions can potentially encourage the interviewee to open up.

Subsequently the initial ranking is established, the participant was asked to put each image into the context they think it belonged best in, along with their reasoning. Probing questions were asked, when deemed necessary, to gather more detailed information, such as specifically asking about the characteristics that signal a specific context. Depending on what topics are mentioned, for example, ethical concerns or personal qualms, more individual dispositions can be discerned about the medium through the eyes of the participant. The last major step within the interview consisted of asking the individual to rank the objects again. The first three interviews did not include this step, as they informed me about what needed to be done in order to gain more meaningful data for the later analysis.

The second round of reviewing was accompanied by questions of self-reflection that concern the ratings possible changes. Analysing the details and motivations that change these

numerical values can help the researcher determine the root causes of these specific differences. These reflections of the participants can determine their own reasonings for the changes and aid in the later analysis. The interviews were closed off with general questions about last sentiments, anecdotes or thoughts concerning what was talked about during the conversation or the medium in general. This can result in more memories or internal debates to be brought to the surface.

In the end, the interview process yielded twelve interviews ranging from twenty-five (Interview 2) and fifty-five minutes (Interview 4). The large time difference between the lowest and highest time is mostly due to the change in interview guide and adding the second round of ranking. Another reason for the time discrepancies observed in the lengths of the interviews is due to the personal comfort in speaking and the willingness to share information. Some of the interviewees were less eager to speak in longer sentences, answering questions quite plainly (Interview 3). Some of the other interviews that were shorter stemmed from a faster speech pattern, allowing the individual to express lots of information in a shorter time (Interview 2; Interview 12).

Overall, the interview process changed twice, firstly the second ranking of the images was added to the interview guide, after the first three conversations. Secondly, three images were changed for the last four interviews, excluding smaller animals in order to focus more on the medium than the animal. This resulted in three general types of interviews performed within the twelve overall, some with no second ranking and some with three different images. For the purposes of the analysis, pseudonyms were given to the participants, based on the first letters of their real names, in order to streamline the interview process for the researcher. Interviewees 1 (Nora), 2 (Zelda) and 3 (Molly) were interviewed using the first set of images and the first draft of the interview guide, resulting in less critical information gathered. Interviewees 4 (Monica), 5 (Kiara), 6 (Aaron) and 7 (Max) were given questions regarding the first set of images, including the second ranking added within the second draft of the interview guide, allowing for more comparable information to be collected. The last group of interviewees, numbers 8 (Kevin), 9 (Valerie), 10 (Nancy), 11 (Leanne) and 12 (Miranda) featured the second set of images, including the bear (Image 7), the Himalayan pheasant (Image 8) and the mountain goat (Image 9), while also utilising the second draft of the interview guide. This grouping was not intentional, throughout the process it became apparent that more information needs to be gathered within each interview as well as more variety needed to be introduced to include more comparable data within the analysis process.

Results

Details of the experiments

The coding process resulted in 58 preliminary codes which were split into six main categories, context related codes, feeling related codes, physical descriptors of taxidermized pieces, as well as organisational groups related to mentions of the images and the interviewees' background with the medium. After consideration, the codes themselves were slightly slimmed to 52 codes and five groups, which is still a large quantity of codes that can result in an oversaturated document. This project tackles personal feelings and opinions that are precise to the person, which is a partial reason for the quantity of codes.

There are themes which are shared between interviews and participants, however, total generalisations required for flattening the coding process were not fully possible. If simplified further, the data would lose details to a major degree, which would result in an impaired analysis. There is a sense of balance of detail and simplicity that needed to be upheld in order not to overcomplicate or oversimplify. Retracing steps within the lengthy transcriptions is made easier when having specific coding that enables looking for precise quotations. The simplification of the codes is done through the distinction of main and side groups. The two most important categories to the analysis itself are the context and feeling related groups, which have overlap, and overall have 29 distinct codes. The other categories will act as supporting codes for the main analysis, especially for establishing the participants' motivations for their answers. The large quantity of codes has been found due to the quantity of data collected in the interviews.

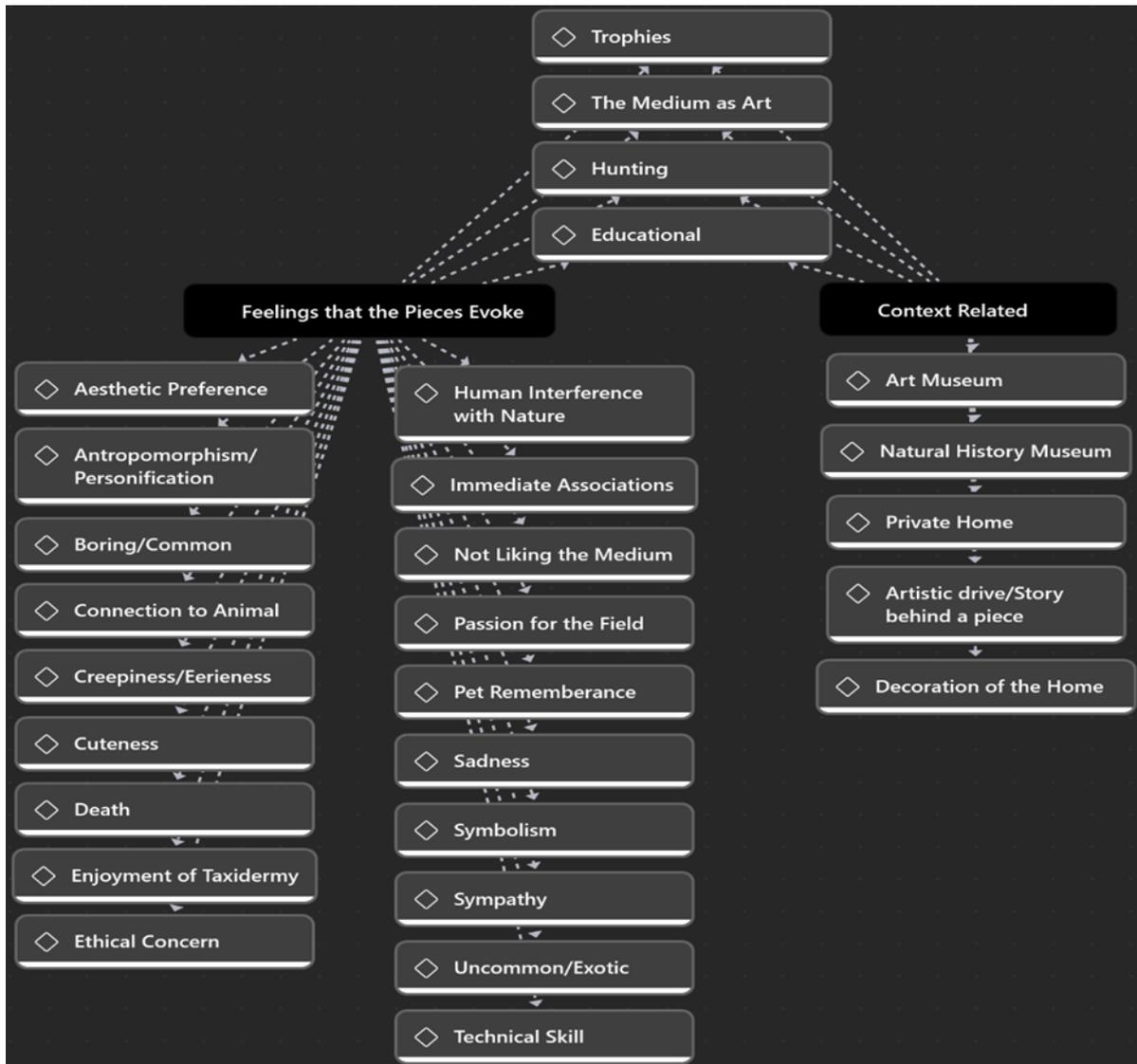


Figure 1. Core code map made in Atlas.ti.

The core coding tree (Figure 1) represents the two main categories used in the analysis of the data, while the complete code map (Figure 2) is included in Appendix B. The naming convention of the codes is simplistic to streamline the coding and mapping itself. The coding resulted in finding the preliminary subjects within the figures.

There are multiple prominent themes found within the found data. Common ones include feelings of sadness within the objects (Interview 11, 06:40), a sense of being watched (Interview 10, 05:26) and the sensation of unsettlement, for example, mentioning of the “uncanny valley” (Interview 11, 25:33), which refers to a graph created by Masahiro Mori, a roboticist which describes the valley as a feeling of eeriness exhibited by objects that have a near perfect human likeness (Kendall, 2025). In this sense, a near perfect likeness of an animal created within a taxidermy sculpture is at fault for the uncertainty or uncanniness

when looking at the artwork. The familiarity and ambiguity of the animals can create the sense of instability in their perception, showcasing the possibilities of various dispositions towards taxidermized work. The phenomenon of the uncanny valley can be an underlying descriptor of why some individuals are apprehensive towards the practice. The preservation of the moment of death can captivate the onlooker due to its realism and devotion to the animal (Interview 4, 11:54; Interview 6, 20:55).

Themes found in the interviews concern feelings towards the medium such as a fascination and admiration for the craft itself, for its realism (Interview 4, 19:12) and technical skill (Interview 2, 02:52). The animals' poses were the most intriguing details, for example, concerning the dynamic feeling of the mountain lion (Interview 8, 10:42) or the still, captured moment of the animal's life (Interview 8, 11:38). A commonly mentioned theme is the ethical standpoint of taxidermy itself and sourcing the materials necessary for the creation of the pieces (Interview 1; 2; 3; 5; 6; 8; 9; 10; 12). Over half of the participants mentioned the ethics of sourcing animal materials or expressed disapproval of killing animals for the practice. The participants who expressed an appreciation of the craft of taxidermy (Interview 2; 3; 4; 5; 7; 8; 10; 11; 12) are largely shared with those who mentioned their ethical stances on the practice. The theme of ethical concerns and standpoints was the most prevalent within the interview process.

Specific individual themes can be found within the feeling category that explore the participant's personal views of the taxidermy mounts. There is a large quantity of sympathy towards the animal that is present within the interviews, for example, Monica explaining that she thinks that the fawn would prefer to be alive and frolicking around a forest (Interview 4, 43:26). The fawn had similar sentiments from various participants, expressing a sadness over its young age and early loss of life. Kevin recognises the power that these taxidermized objects hold, expressing the fact that these animals are now preserved in this way means that they had to pass away (Interview 8, 37:50). These sentiments express that the animals exude a general sadness sometimes expressed through their eyes or expressions but also by their reality of mounted skin.

The theme of sympathy ties to a sense of connection with the observed animals, either through a feeling of sadness or through a direct feeling of acquaintance. Aaron expressed that the deer shoulder mount seems like a "cool guy" and that he would "rock some sunglasses too" (Interview 6, 08:21). Another animal which was described as pleasant was the mountain goat. Valerie said that the goat looks friendly, noticing its demeanour and expression

(Interview 9, 08:23). Nancy talked about how her imagination leads her to believe that she could have a nice conversation with the deer (Image 4) (Interview 10, 10:32). This conversation would be pleasant and yet introspective, specifying that the deer could talk to her about pain, in both human and animal lives, vulnerability and strength (Interview 10, 24:36). She believed that this could be a reason why people have mounts like these in their homes.

Nancy's perceived conversations with the deer link to the concepts of connection and anthropomorphism. The possibility of that conversation is involved due to Nancy giving the deer human characteristics. She feels as if taxidermy mounts are capable of conveying something to her, as if they are talking to her from beyond the dead (Interviewee 10, 05:26). Leanne talks about how the coyote exudes a sense of longing, not sadness, but a nostalgic element (Interview 11, 16:49). These elements found in the interviews suggest a possibility of the participants to see beyond the skin of the animal, whether in perceived conversation or conveying an emotion.

The themes under the context distinction relate to the presence of a characteristic given by the participants to a specific space. The characteristics that are applied most commonly to the context of the art museum are a need for an artistic narrative and a manipulation of the animal form. Leanne talked about her impressions of *real art*, stating that in her opinion, art has to have a deeper meaning or evoke emotions (Interviewee 11, 20:40). She specifies that there need to be a certain amount of intent behind a taxidermized work for it to have artistic value. The realism and technical skill that are exhibited by some of the taxidermized animals, for Leanne it is the coyote, but not enough for some to consider as artistic. Max specifies that in his view, art is something done perfectly or something that represents reality in more of an abstract way (Interviewee 7, 34:13). He references poetry as an unideal representation of the world, saying that it is not a retelling of reality but an individual interpretation of it. Both of the interviewees are adamant that art usually has more to it than a pure picture of reality.

The manipulation of the animal form shows itself within the interviews in various ways, for example, a preference in taxidermy style or a previous experience with it in an art museum context. The second interviewee talks about her enjoyment of very personified, modified mounts, like "mices on stripper poles" (Interview 2, 04:41) and a melted ball of chicks (Interview 2, 01:23). Zelda mentions that the manipulation the mounts presented throughout the interview do not strictly align with her interpretation of artistic taxidermy. In her view, manipulation places the animal mounts in the artistic space, with the unnatural

feeling aiding its storytelling capabilities (Interviewee 2, 23:04). Another participant talked about his experience in an art exhibition that framed animal taxidermy as actually dead. The birds looked as if they fell from the sky, the mammals were laying on the floor with their eyes closed. Kevin felt uncomfortable by them, as they are a contradiction to what traditional taxidermy is, which presents the animals as alive. Another example of a similar type is Valerie recounting her experience at her previous job which had hybrid sculptures with animals' heads, wearing human clothes. She stresses that the featured taxidermy would be placed in an art museum if it was in relation to these manipulated objects, as a comparison (Interview 9, 17:43).

There is a significant trend of the mention of educational capabilities of the taxidermy mounts within a natural history museum (Interview 1; 2; 3; 4; 6; 7; 8; 9; 10; 11; 12). The natural posing and embellishments within some of the taxidermy pieces are included within the educational role that taxidermy can serve, mentioned alongside one another in order to specify the characteristics of educational mounts. Molly specified that certain mounts show details of the animals' natural habitats, to educate on their original spaces of living (Interviewee 3, 14:38). Monica wondered whether the taxidermized mounts she placed in the context of the natural history museum would show the animals' kingdoms, orders or families (Interview 4, 34:24).

The private home is usually associated with hunting and trophies, but also a decorative aspect for taxidermy enthusiasts. Several interviewees mention current or future ownership of taxidermy pieces, indicating an interest within the practice (Interview 1; 5; 6; 10; 11). The prevalent characteristics found within this context are trophies and decorations in the home. Valerie and Nancy specified that someone who has an interest in hunting would likely have taxidermy mounts of their own kills (Interview 9, 18:52; Interview 10, 19:30). Some of the mounts are describes as more decorative than representative. Kiara talks about how they see the mandarin duck as more of a decoration than a hunting trophy, due to its beauty in contrast to the deer shoulder which is framed as a traditional trophy (Interview 5, 23:19). Other participants talk about spaces they have visited, like eateries, mountaineer hotels or historical buildings that use taxidermy as decoration or a stylisation as a historic space (Interviewee 8, 03:42; Interviewee 4, 06:37).

These specifications were made to distinguish commonly found themes within the interviews. In the next section, the interviews were analysed as a conglomerate to further specify and detail the themes and particulars that emerged from the individual analyses in

more detail than the current section. Some themes are connected through the different parts of the analysis, as they emerge throughout the interviewee's conversations. Theoretical aspects taken from literature were intertwined within these processes, to attempt to give reasoning to people's outlooks on the medium. As all the details about taxidermy were established, more general conclusions about the relationships between context and art were derived from the analysis performed on the collected data.

Interpretation of the data

Participant histories and dispositions

Participant histories are varied between the interviewees, however, there are similarities between certain people. Monica, Max, Valerie, Nancy and Miranda talk about their early life experiences with the medium, either in the home or the natural history museum. These experiences shape their perceptions of the medium as they have an image of the practice in their mind. Other participants expressed that they have visited various museums within their lives, including natural history, which are also formative in their perceptions, placing these mounts in spaces they encountered them in, while differentiating from cultural objects in artistic spaces. Individual habitus, dispositions and beliefs lead the participants to place these objects in their perceived spaces and result in the scoring strategies.

The differentiation between spaces of the art and natural history museum, including the absence of the physical experience of taxidermy in the home, creates a perception of animal mounts, making the interviewee reluctant to see them beyond their known contexts. For example, Miranda expresses that she has visited art and natural history spaces, and her childhood experiences made her feel strongly against seeing taxidermy in a private setting, reminding her of hunting. She places most of the mounts in the natural history museum, except the deer shoulder which to her belongs in a private home (Interview 12, 17:23). Miranda mirrors her life experience with the medium within the context assignment, recounting her dispositions to act, fostered through her upbringing (Lahire, 2003, pp.336-337). These dispositions are also reflected in her scoring strategy, which does not change much, showcasing the placement of these contexts on the objects directly. Miranda shows her past experiences through her alignment with the contexts and scoring, shown through her past and present.

Another instance of disposition surfacing is Nancy's experiences. She is a young professional, working in a corporate environment of a human resources department. Nancy is a keen museum goer, both art and natural history. The individual also expresses a great enjoyment of the medium, stating that she has small taxidermized items in her possession with future wants of more specimens in her collection. These declarations place her as an avid cultural consumer and due to the nature of her job, it is highly likely she lives in a densely populated urban area. She also is an animal owner, which is partly included in her enjoyment of the medium, as it is able to preserve their elegance (Interview 10, 07:13). Her perceptions

of taxidermy and art are formed through her horizontal cultural dispositions, like life experiences of living in a city, focusing on the pet aspect of animals, and avid cultural consumption, manifesting itself in her frequent visits to various museums. Nancy sees the animal mounts through her aesthetic preferences and previous life events. The deer showcased in the images is one of her favourite animals, creating a bias in terms of opinion and outlook on taxidermy. This is not a sole reasoning for her context placements and score choices, it is a complex process which involves her choices of a favourite animal and perceived personal connection with the mounts. These dispositions formed by her past, however, also have a say in the formations of those preferences.

Nancy's preferences and feelings towards animals are mirrored by her use of language, for example, framing the deer as a tortured thinker, the lion as a child's opportunity to learn and the bear as a poaching trophy. The participant's scores in the second-round change drastically for the pieces placed in a private setting because of her expressed dislike of hunting. Her scores for the lion and goat do not change due to her enjoyment of natural history museums, directly framing the context as a reason for the lack of change. Nancy's feelings towards the works placed in the art museum are reliant on the added cultural context. Her enjoyment and fondness of the artistic space including with the perceived narrative behind the art piece is what make the taxidermy garner better scores for Nancy. These placements and scores show her likes and dislikes within her life experiences.

Feelings and context

Certain participants expressed their enjoyment of the medium (Interview 2; 5; 10), while others specified that they do not have any negative connotations towards it, replying to their known perceptions of the medium in the mainstream (Interview 7; 12). For one of the participants, Kiara, the enjoyment is accompanied by the ownership of bones but also a fascination of *strange* happenings, such as hybrid mounts, mummification, bog bodies or sokushinbutsu, also known as "living mummies" (Michiaki, 2022). This previous knowledge and interest of fields related to death and preservation make this individual gain a specific perspective acquired through their disposition. They position themselves as a knowledgeable individual, who is a reliable source of information that also doubles as more of a quirky fun fact. Kiara uses all of this retold information as a way to display their previous dispositions to format their strategies of context alignment and scoring strategy.

The strength of the participants' opinions suggests a distinctly formed habitus. These past experiences in terms of the field and strong formed dispositions possibly resulted in the interviewee not to change their scores in a drastic way. The participant has expressed their strong preferences as the reason for the non-faltering scores, as well as immediate associations with the medium according to their past experiences. The context for the taxidermy mounts is explicitly connected with the object itself, according to this interviewee, possibly due to the associations that a frequent natural history museum visitor would have. The scoring is not changed by the context, because it is formed by it.

Feelings that are exposed by some of the interviews record a certain connection between the participants and the represented animals (Interview 1; 2; 6; 10). This connection can manifest itself through the anthropomorphising of the mounts, by giving them human characteristics. It can also be represented by a sympathetic outlook on the animals and their deaths. These are also related to one another, as they can coexist or even interact. The first instance of connection is shown through the first interviewee, who expresses this connection by a love for animals. Nora has greatly expressed their discomfort in the visual sense, however, she also specifies their disdain for the current treatment that a lot of animals garner from people, such as animal testing in the cosmetic industry (Interview 1, 25:22) or using animals for food (Interview 1, 27:26). She specifies that if she could, she would be vegan, but due to some health complications, she is not able to fully commit. Her stance of animal welfare is clear from her speaking about taxidermy. There was a comparison made to the animal testing industry, she specified that, if possible, she would like for the two fields to be abolished.

She is incredibly against hunting and killing animals for sport or entertainment, stating that if the animal was slaughtered specifically for taxidermy, that she does not want to associate with it. Nora goes as far as to say that people who taxidermize their trophies are "psychopaths" (Interview 1, 27:26). These statements and sentiments frame the respondent as an animal lover and protector, a person who is incredibly against killing animals. Nora focuses on discourses that tackle human and animal relations in relation to taxidermy. This illustrates the conflict between life and death, existence and decomposition, which is challenged by taxidermy, seeing as dead animals are shown to be almost alive. This liminality is controversial to the interviewee, expressing discomfort with the idea of the dead brought to life in this way (Meehitiya, 2019, 98). Decay and the life cycle is the most natural way for an

animal to pass away and the decision to preserve a being in this way is opposing this participant's world view.

The first interviewee focused on the fact that she would not like to see the taxidermized pieces anywhere besides the natural history museum. She believes that animals that are mounted in this way should only be used for educational purposes, because if people have them in their homes, then they are normalising the killing of animals (Interview 1, 20:46). In this interview, the ethical concerns and strong opinions on animal welfare clouded the person's judgement, not allowing her to consider any other options. Her views on taxidermy are intertwined with her views on hunting and killing animals. These strong connections and opinions about animals and, in turn, the medium show in her scoring and in the contextualisation. Her high scores, despite the dislike of taxidermy, showcase her love for animals and the connection including her sympathy towards their lives. She places all of the mounts in the natural history museum, adamantly saying that the other contexts are inappropriate and unfitting. Her connection to the animal world is what drives her to only consider them worthy when they are educational in nature. Nora's dispositions show within her interview greatly, allowing for her beliefs to be reflected within the conversation.

The most differing understanding of a connection between the interviewee and the taxidermy mount is Nancy's understanding of the animals. Her enjoyment of the pieces is based on a certain connection with the portrayed animals, specifying how the thread of understanding is what makes the deer shoulder her favourite. She attributes this connection to the popularity of this type of taxidermy in people's homes. Nancy's aesthetic preferences are based on her emotional inclinations towards the animal species, specifying that bears, mountain lions and wolves are scary while birds are not her favourite animal family. The deer showcased in the images is one of her favourite animals, creating a bias in terms of opinion and outlook on taxidermy. Her emotional connection with the deer can be seen as framing herself as an empathetic and intelligent person. Nancy thinks that her conversation with the deer would be rather superficial but caring and that it would seem like small talk with a classmate, showing her imagination and connection she has found within the piece.

This participant puts her emotions, aesthetics and preferences above all else when scoring the taxidermized pieces. Some of her placements are reliant on her overfamiliarity with certain animals as well as her previously mentioned dislikes. There are discrepancies in her strategy, choosing decently high scores for the mountain lion and pheasant, due to the lion's posing and the bird's colours. She is however adamant about a lack of connection with

most of the animals, believing that the pheasant would be too pompous for a nice conversation. The deer shoulder is her greatest connection within the showcased animals, imagining a conversation she could have with the mount. She sees the potential that the deer has to convey wisdom about pain in human and animal life (Interview 10, 24:36). Nancy talks about naivety and innocence showcased through expression. The deer's presentation is able to tell Nancy about the animal's nature of tranquillity and peace, fostered through the connection and sympathy but also her dispositions towards her favourite animal (Interviewee 10, 25:37).

Context and scoring are explored through this connection through the changes in numbers. Natural history museum placements remained with the same scores, attributed to her previous knowledge of the space and the representative nature that she saw within the mounts. The coyote placed in the art museum context was raised within score, the deer staid with a high score because of favouritism. The private home animals were halved in their interestingness, due to the hunting connotations of the interviewee. The placement of context on the mounts creates a stronger association than she already had with her immediate associations. This thought process, deepened by the alignment of space, made her change the strength of disposition included within the scoring process.

These connections, sympathies and feelings could connect to Szubielska and Imbir's (2021) work on potentially controversial art and its exhibition space. They found that the art gallery saw more enjoyment for the artwork, over the laboratory (Szubielska et al, 2021, p.1). They also describe controversial nature of the images which made the participants tone down their reactions to topics they found to be against their worldviews (Szubielska et al, 2021, p.17). The inherent nature of taxidermy can be viewed as controversial, even to its enjoyers, based on its acquisition and sourcing. In this instance, the polarising features of the medium are reflected by the connection the participants have towards animals, echoed through their scores. Some interviewees expressed their feeling that animals should not be scored too low, as they are still animals (Interview 1; 10). The frequent mention of hunting, disliked among many people (Interview 1; 5; 6; 8; 10; 12), is mentioned as the controversy and sometimes utilised within the scoring strategy. Despite the dislike of trophies and hunting, people still did not choose to give the animals very low scores, with some exceptions. This could be attributed to the connections that people have with animals, observed through their scoring strategies. Interviewees frame certain mounts as hunting trophies but still they give them neutral or positive scores, as they may be toning down their scores, because of their personal connection to animals.

Characteristics of context in the art museum

The context of the art museum is most commonly talked about within the interviews in the presence of an artistic drive. Other given descriptors used for this exhibition space is the manipulation of animal materials and the use of ordinary object in the space. The most prevalent characteristic given towards the artistic space is the inclusion of a narrative in an art museum (Interview 2; 3; 5; 7; 8; 9; 10; 11; 12). This relates to the piece of work having some kind of story needed to be worthy in the context. Kevin said that the shown type of taxidermy is not necessarily suited for the art museum, he believes that objects need context to make sense within an artistic space. He recalls an experience when he saw taxidermized animals in an artistic sense. The idea behind the exhibition was that the animals preserved were posed in a way that made them look truly dead. He saw birds that looked like they fell from the sky and bigger animals on the floor, truthfully and seemingly dead. The choice from the artist to position them like that and give them a narrative of a second death is what creates the interesting dichotomy, showing the artistic narrative. This experience is likely what discouraged him from placing these items in the context of the art museum, seeing as these animals are made to be truly alive, showcasing the other side of the narrative.

Kiara puts weight on the physicality and the story behind the object, sometimes disregarding the realism of taxidermized pieces, expressing that even the truly bad ones also have a story to them. This presents a conflict or discrepancy, where it is not the general exhibition context that really changes the scoring but the individual visuality and inherent narrative that the piece exudes are the main factors in its perception. Poliquin (2008, p.125) talks about the possibility of taxidermy to evoke its own story and meaning, as well as mounts being understood beyond fur and skin. The mountain lion mount is framed as a dangerous and ferocious predator, which in this case, is seen as intriguing and “cool” by Kiara. The animal is described as lifelike and alive by Kiara and is seen as past just animal material, it is seen as the story that it presents.

Most of Miranda’s alignments of context go to the natural history museum, with open option to some pieces. The pheasant is placed in the natural history museum, but Miranda says that there is potential for seeing in in an artistic space. This possibility is related to the quality of the mount, not about a general artistic vision for the piece. Her perception is that the mounts represent animal species that are meant to educate the onlooker about them and their

natural environment. She does not see these mounts in an artistic sense, due to her past experiences of learning about a Polish artist that created art pieces using taxidermy, most notably the Pyramid of Animals by Katarzyna Kozyra (Kozyra, 1993).

This artwork consists of four animals stacked together in a pyramid formation along with a video of the death and preparation of the horse, meant to criticise modern consumerism and hypocrisy of people. This piece is conceptual, manipulated and has a given context intended by the artist, and so the featured taxidermy mounts are interpreted as simple and representative, rather than exploratory. This educational background that features professional taxidermy art is formative to her opinions on these pieces, as she sees them as more educational due to their realism. Her reluctance to change her score on the deer shoulder is likely due to her previous associations with this type of work. Her immediate associations with hunting and childhood dislikes were a direct relation to her lower score of this particular piece. Miranda puts this taxidermized animal in a scenario where her view of it does not change because this scenario is set in stone. The context in this sense does not change the score, because it was always placed upon the piece.

Valerie's feelings towards taxidermy rely on the belonging in a certain context, focusing on the environment that they exude. The taxidermy mounts, except the deer shoulder, are representative of the animals' natural environments based on their positioning as well as the embellishments included in the pieces. She finds that her favourite mounts are related to the familiarity with taxidermizing birds, for the pheasant, and the pleasant feeling she derives from the mountain goat, in contrast to the mountain lion. Valerie does not enjoy the lion's presentation, preferring if it would be in a more neutral setting, comparing it to the bear, which also is a predator but is framed in an impartial way. Her personality, connection to museums and dispositions towards taxidermy make her position the pieces mostly in the natural history context. All of the taxidermized animals, except for the deer shoulder and bear, are placed in the natural history museum. She explains her reluctance to place these objects in an artistic context due to her experiences with taxidermy in art museums, talking about how her previous place of work displays taxidermized pieces which are heavily manipulated, including human clothing and anthropomorphised framing. This is her norm of seeing animal materials within a museum space and so it makes it less possible for traditional taxidermy to be displayed.

Valerie places an importance on the story behind a piece of art, needing a reason to see taxidermized works in a museum. She believes that a story is necessary for a piece to make

sense, exploring the narratives given to a work by the artist. She is capable of seeing animals within the cultural and artistic sense, however, she values the narrative context beyond the animal material. The showcased taxidermy is positioned by Valerie as more educational and representative of species, not allowing her to see them beyond this. Her background features both art and natural museums, positioning herself as a well-educated and culturally aware person, which makes her a qualified individual to speak on these topics.

If the intentionality of the expression is taken into account, then Leanne feels as if the score should be raised, making her enjoy the piece more if given a story or narrative. The largest change in score throughout the entire process of twelve interviews is Leanne's score of the mountain goat, raising the points from one to six in the art museum context. The feeling of eeriness and the uncanny valley made her give the mount a low score at the beginning, however, the added context of the artistic space and the perceived intentionality of this creepiness factor made her intrigued. Despite her disliking the goat on an aesthetic level, this discomfort and repulse make it stimulating and valuable as an art piece, if the artist made it with the purpose in mind. The narrative need expressed by a large quantity of the participants showcases the perception of the art museum by the individuals, framing the space as a set of specific characteristics.

Manipulation of the animal form within the artistic context (Interview 2; 7; 8; 9;12) can be observed in some of the interviews as well. Zelda specifies her preference of "wacky taxidermy" (Interview 2, 04:41), representing animals that are far from natural, showing anthropomorphised animals doing human activities or unnatural conglomerates. She frames artistic taxidermy as different, unnatural looking and strange. It either has a story behind it, a narrative, or a creative endeavour by an artist. In the seventh interview, Max talks about his perception of art, as something either perfectly representative of reality, or something that includes pieces of it but interpreted by a person. He mentioned the fawn, that if it had been propped up on a branch in a tree it would have more artistic connotations, showcasing characteristics unlikely to make on its own, but manipulated by the person. Max talks about a skewed reality that still is representative to a degree. The animal's form is distorted, which could result in the perceived artist attempting to say something through that distortion.

Kevin and Valerie describe their previous experiences with taxidermy in the artistic context. The eighth interviewee detailed his experience at an exhibition which made taxidermized animals look as if they were dead. Larger animals were laying on their side, and birds were splatted on the floor, giving them a look of sudden death. He felt uncomfortable by

the mounts, expressing that it made him think about the origin of the materials. The animal skins being used to create something that is visually also dead was the reason for the artist to make their work. The dichotomy and liminality observed within the exhibition staid within him when looking at the mounts during the interview. Kevin says that the second death created by the artist is likely what made him reluctant to place the mounts in the art museum. These dispositions gained through experiencing this exhibition is what created his image of artistic taxidermy, and his previous natural history museum visits add onto this sentiment.

Valerie's professional background and direct contact with manipulated taxidermized work, describing sculptures that feature animal parts, like heads, including human clothing, posed to be semi-human. When asked, she placed objects like these, next to the more traditional taxidermy, like the types shown in the interview. She specified that they could be placed next to each other as a comparison. Valerie believes that this comparison is what may be needed for her to acknowledge taxidermy in this art context. Her scoring does not change much, showcasing her strong associations of taxidermy in specific contexts. Valerie's immediate links based on her educational background are seen through her placements and scoring, with the majority being attributed to the natural history museum and non-faltering scoring.

Miranda, in the twelfth interview talks about artists using animal materials to represent anthropomorphic animals, shown to do human activities, similarly to some previous participants. She mentions an artist, showing kittens to be drinking tea and this human adjacency is what allows her to see it in the artistic context. The irony and dichotomy represented by the animals in her remembered artworks creates the artistic story. Manipulating the animal skin allows for showcasing different topics, other than representing the animal species. Overall, manipulation of the materials has the possibility of signifying something more to the onlooker, either a perceived message from the author, or something to be seen by the viewer. This manifestation of the artistic context lies within some of the participants, showing their habitus of cultural consumers and knowledgeable individuals.

A small trend observed within the interviews was reflected by two participants, who mentioned the use of ordinary or everyday objects within artistic spaces (Interview 3; 9), which they compared to the use of taxidermy in said spaces. Molly places taxidermy in the discourse of artistic value, comparing it so the artwork named *Comedian* by Maurizio Cattelan, which is a banana taped to the wall (Cohen, 2024). She references the usage of ordinary objects within art museums, connecting the potential use of animal materials in an

artistic context as well. This is also related to a possibility of acquiring context through viewer interpretation or a specific artistic narration that can be put onto taxidermized pieces. The perception of the *Comedian* relates to the idea that the author is no longer truly important, but the social context that an artwork gains by its showcasing in public space (Rose, 2001, p.23). Her truth concerning the taxidermized pieces relates to the social context she has applied to the medium and perceived context.

Another way to apply the common object to the artistic space is through adding new narratives to existing cultural items. Valerie has gathered educational experiences with undervalued art mediums being placed in contemporary art museums, in this case crafts and textiles. She creates a parallel between textiles and taxidermy which are seen by society as documentary or decorative but now have the potential to be seen as an artform if curated in a specific way. The textiles that she is investigating are shown with the context of the people behind their creations which explore the skills that go into making them. With this in mind, she believes that a taxidermized piece of work need that curatorial background and cannot be randomly placed in an artistic space. This disposition and professional experience make her frame the field in multiple ways, distinguishing the educational position and taxidermy's own meaning making. These interviewees showed a new perspective on animal materials in the artistic space, allowing for the context to exist separately from the showcased images.

Education in natural history

The natural history is shown through its educational capabilities, using the posing of the animals, the decorations used within the mounts as well as personal opinions projected onto the animals through the interviewees. Max's first impressions of the included images range from the educational role, showcasing the animals' natural habitat, a hunting trophy but also the beauty of the animal, like the duck and rabbit. Max recognises the fact that there is a harmful stigma around the medium, specifying that he does not have any negative connotations towards it. His explanation of the enjoyment is comparative to a herbarium, or a book used to preserve and learn about plant life. This underlines the inherent connotations that the participant has with the medium, seeing it as a way to learn about animal species face-to-face. Within the dispositions of the participant, the most prominent is the educational view, however, due to the precious experiences with the medium, the participant has established aesthetic preferences. Max mentions quality and realism within the shown mounts,

recognising the technical aspects of the medium, like fur and feather preparation (Interview 7, 15:52).

In the eighth interview, when it came to the two rounds of scoring, most of the objects did not change or changed very minimally. Kevin explained it through a lens of the natural history museum and the possibility of looking at animals which he has not seen before. This educational framing of these objects showcases these animals purely as they are, without added weight or context. He expresses that these objects, when viewed through the prism of natural history, are similar to a historical object within a traditional museum. They are a way to preserve history, showcase a species of animal and educate the public.

Leanne's associations with the context of the natural history museum are based on the species' size as well as the natural environment that they seem to be conveying. Her choice to include the bear, lion and coyote within the natural history museum are partly based on their educational capabilities. The objects that were framed by Leanne in the natural history museum were seen in this context immediately, with their natural environment and educational role in mind. The animal becomes a representative of a species which makes the personal aesthetic less important than this educational and representative role, not changing the score for Leanne.

Molly's previous history and encounter with them medium connect to the focus on quality, seeing as Molly has seen this medium before in real life, and has a point of reference. The first three images were categorised as belonging to a natural history museum due to their embellishments showcasing their natural environments. Molly expresses her past within the medium through a natural history museum, talking about taxidermy as educational in this context, also focusing on the physical and immersive presence of the object.

Miranda believes that education or the preservation of animal species are more of a noble cause than having animal mounts in the home as decoration. She speaks about the respect that is given to the animal through the preservation, with the artist attempting to contribute to science or giving the animal a second life. The participants recognise the taxidermy's realism and its showcase of the natural environment. The embellishments used within the mount like the mountain lion or the coyote, position these objects as representative of their natural habitat, framing them as educational to the onlooker. Their past experiences with natural history museums they have visited shaped their dispositions to act and believe in the context of the interview. Technical skill and presentation of the animals make the

participants believe of their representational nature, allowing them to be symbols of a species or part of a larger exhibit showcasing an animal family. These characteristics unveil the individual's truth about each specimen, placing them in a specific context.

Trophy and décor in private home

The context of the private space is characterised by two different types of mounts appointed by the participants (Interview 1; 3; 4; 6; 7; 8; 9; 10; 11). The most common animal mounts that were placed in this exhibition space were the deer shoulder (Image 4) and the black rabbit (Image 6), made apparent by their physical characteristics. The deer was commonly associated with hunting and the trophy killing of animals, frequently placed in the stereotypical image of a wall of heads. This presentation of the shoulder mount also is mentioned by interviewees in the context of size. It is less common to have proper space in the home to display a larger animal, so a partial mount is more frequently seen. Zelda talks about the size of the shoulder mount, that she does not see this type of taxidermy in an art or natural history museum, as it is not representative of the species. A natural history museum would have the responsibility to the animal to showcase it in the most truthful way possible, according to this participant (Interview 2, 11:45).

Monica has similar sentiments, stating that a deer would likely be presented in its entirety if it was in a natural history department. The private home gives the owner a way to preserve their killing or hobby with a reasonable price and space. It is a reminder of a great time that the hunter had, showing it to visitors of the home (Interview 4, 30:46). Max talks about the private home as an immediate association with the whitetail deer shoulder, also as a hunting trophy. It is a representational fragment of the animal, depicting the desired characteristic of a kill, in this case, the antlers. This participant uses his previous family experiences of a hunter grandfather to decipher the mount's quality and wanted descriptors (Interview 7, 21:31). His associations also go together with the stereotypical image of the hunting trophy room, full of antlers, heads and mounts, frequently found in Poland and Germany. Leanne also speaks on the image of a cabin, with a deer head placed on the wall as a space she sees the deer shoulder mount (Interview 11, 21:54). This idea is shared among other participants, with Molly referring to *Beauty and the Beast* as a representation (Interview 3, 07:43).

A different participant, Valerie, speaks on the fact that if some of the animals were actually in the home, the individual who was housing them would have to be very dedicated. The size and might of the animal, such as the bear, shows an element of pride that a hunter would have. It is also a large conversation topic, acting as the *elephant in the room* or something that you cannot ignore due to its grand nature (Interview 9, 23:04). Nancy also speaks on the bear taxidermy, concluding that she felt as if hunters or poachers would display their kills, to preserve their beauty and position they envision them to be in (Interview 10, 19:30). The person who commissions the work has control over its placement in their home but also its creation. This control is another version of the act of the hunt. The control over both situations, the kill and the staging, allow the person to feel in charge of the life of an animal. Nancy feels as if the hunter showcases their human triumph over nature, using the animal as a symbol of their strength.

The second set of characteristics attributed to the private home is the decorative versions of taxidermy. This is less common than the hunting perspective, however, it is present enough to gain significance. Kiara thought that the mandarin duck seems as if it was purchased by a collector or an enthusiast, not hunted. The physical characteristics of the duck, including its colourful feathers and beautiful presentation, come before the animal skin in this case, presenting the mount as something to be displayed. It is urged to be displayed because of its beauty, not the hunted frame of the bird. Monica has similar thoughts about the black rabbit, stating that it is a fluffy, little thing that a person could have in their home, as a representation of a human enjoyment. She speaks of a collector who would love to have a mount like this on a shelf, perhaps because of her own intrigue with the animal (Interview 4, 29:12).

The other side of the decorative taxidermy use is mentioned by Kevin, who speaks on the idea that buildings that style themselves as historical recreations of interiors could use taxidermy for its own benefit. These spaces would use mounts in an almost museal format, but primarily as a part of an established, coherent space. For example, a hotel that frames itself as historical and fancy could have an animal mount that would fit in with the time frame it is trying to emit (Interview 8, 03:42). This form of taxidermy use takes it out of the common theme of the animal material, but now it refers to the idea of the medium as uncommon yet wealthy decoration.

The private home setting showcased the associations that people have with the medium, prominently featuring hunting. The nature of an animal trophy is most expressed by

the deer shoulder, getting mentioned many times in the context of the private home. It also has the lowest average scores, 5 points in the initial round and 5.5 points in the second round, which mirrors the many individuals' dislike or condemnation of hunting. Considering that this context is associated with hunting, and hunting is disliked, it may influence the individual to rank the piece in a lower manner. This does not apply to the decorative characteristics applied to some of the mounts by a couple individuals. Those are ranked as pieces of décor, therefore less likely to change score drastically.

Relationships between context, taxidermy and art

To simplify the results and average answers between the interviews, a table of all scores, alignments and averages (Figure 3) has been made in Appendix 2. A separated scoring chart has been made to separate the two blocks of interviews (Figure 5). The piece that is rated the highest in the first and second round is the mandarin duck (Image 5) for the first block of participants. The second block of interviews concluded with the mountain goat (Image 9) having the highest scores in both rounds. Overall, the image that reached the highest scores was the mandarin duck with averages of 7.4 and 8 in both scoring rounds. The most commonly talked about topics within all the interviews are the aesthetic personal preferences, the educational role of taxidermy, hunting connections and the creepiness factor. These are common feelings also expressed by the general public towards the medium (Andres, 2021, 47-48).

There is a specific image that the taxidermy field has in the media, where sometimes creating taxidermized mounts are portrayed as strange and as an indication of deviancy (Monroe, 2018, 10-11). These negative images can have an inherent or unseen effect on people, however, the field itself deals with controversial topics like death and decay. The participants in the interviews have all mentioned hunting and its relation to the field in some way. Some of the contributors, such as Monica or Max, view it in a neutral light, as part of reality without negative connotations. Other interviewees, like Nora or Aaron, have very strong positions towards killing animals, framing themselves as very protective and considerate towards animals. These dispositions, backgrounds and connections that the participants have with the medium have a great effect on their opinions about the pieces.

The overall scoring tactic was due to the participants' individual standards, such as realistic representations, natural conventions or personal preferences, either in presentation or

animal species. Personal feelings and aesthetics are very important in the first round of scoring, considering the fact that the scale is based on the objects' interestingness. The participants own dispositions and opinions on the objects' posing, the animal species, the embellishments of the mounts among other characteristics are the sole focus of the first round of scoring. Throughout the interview process certain themes emerged that placed specific characteristics on the taxidermized pieces which influenced their placements. Certain descriptors are common within the conversations, such as educational, sad, cute, are placed on the pieces. The interviewees describe their feelings of sadness, discomfort, sympathy, intrigue or disinterest when talking about their scoring reasons. These personal backgrounds, influenced by their dispositions and their habitus, are what make them see each piece differently. Each individual places their own interpretations of these characteristics, which position them in different spaces in their mind. For example, sadness and discomfort are sometimes placed within the artistic context, as emotion and feeling were connected to a narrative that is sometimes present in the museum. For Leanne and Nancy, the perceived sadness that the mounts evoke place it in an artistic context while for Kevin and Monica that emotion makes them consider the ethics of the practice.

A prominent context related reason of a scoring change was explicitly observed within interviews with Kiara, Max, Leanne and Miranda. There is an immediate perception that some of the interviewees found themselves putting on specific items, that cannot be separated easily in their mind. For example, Leanne talked about already seeing some of the taxidermized pieces through a prism of this educative and naturalistic role. These immediately were found to be in the context of a natural history museum, while those that did not fall under those characteristics were more open to interpretation for the participant. Even before being asked to place these objects in a place of exhibition, the interviewee already sees them somewhere through a lens of their own past life experiences. Max conveyed how individualistic characteristics of the taxidermized pieces made him position it in a certain space immediately. There is a constructed impression that the viewer achieves through their habitus, experiences, dispositions which make them place the objects in an exhibition space. Seeing an object's certain characteristics through the individual dispositions and backgrounds makes the viewer use their life circumstances to place in a specific situation. The interviews showed some trends of educational and natural embellishments being tied to natural history, manipulation of animal materials in an artistic space or hunting being a symbol of the private space. A cultural

object is viewed through an individualistic lens and each viewer has a life history and personal background that allows them to visualise different characteristics in different ways.

Interviewee Kevin found a conclusion within himself that expressed his belief that an object, in this case the deer shoulder mount, raised in score during the second round because of its shock value in a private space. His general opinion on the mount was low with a score of three but in the second round it rose to a six. This drastic change highlights the intrigue and shock that he expressed at the possibility of seeing a piece of work like the one in the images. The cultural and ethical weight of an object such as this positions it as more important when placed in someone's home, as it carries a conversation, like the one mentioned by Valerie in terms of a bear being placed in a private space. For this, the bigger object is not a bigger conversation but the individual use in the private space is what carries the weight and intrigue of a cultural item. A specific space carries weight within it, for example, an artistic space conveys an intellectual heft, expressed by silence and seriousness. An object seen within a space that is viewed and experienced in one way gathers that perspective and adapts to it in the eyes of the viewer. A simple object, like the banana taped to a wall mentioned in interview three, collects the perspective of the space around it. This prestige of an art museum, in this case, frames the importance of an item allowing it to take space in a different way than usual.

One issue that is crucial when it comes to taxidermy is the fact that it is made out of animal materials. Interviewee Aaron expressed that his changes in scores between the rounds were due to the fact that he let go of his moral compass during the second round of numbers. At the beginning he felt compelled to recognise the pieces as once living beings, however, throughout placing them in the exhibition categories, he found himself looking at the physical and visual aspect, rather than the animal itself. The mental change within the imagined context of the piece of taxidermized art changes the perception and opinion on the piece. The mentality tied to the status of a dead animal switches to the purely aesthetic stance, encompassed by the image that art has in a museum.

On the other hand, within interview five with Kiara, a new perspective emerged. This participant put their main focus on the narrative that the object is evoking with their visual aspects. The realism, often mentioned by the interviewees, is put aside in the case of Kiara, showcasing their care towards the physicality of the object rather than the animal material. For this interviewee, who has an incredibly established opinion on the field, context almost did not change their scores, and they explained it as purely their individuality. The main factor in the object's perception is the inherent narrative and individual perspective. Taxidermy has

the capability to produce its own meaning and signify something beyond the skin and fur (Poliquin, 2008, 125). For the previously mentioned bad and old taxidermy, Patchett and Foster (2008, 100) share Kiara's belief that despite being imperfect, the pieces are visible and meaning making. The included images showcase their individual perspective which, for example, frames the mountain lion as cool, rather than the dangerous and destructive force it is meant to convey. It is more than animal material but the story it evokes in the onlooker. Barthes' (1977, 145-6) death of the artist allows for the viewer of the art piece to make their own meaning with it, independently of the space it is exhibited in.

Characteristics given to each context by the interviewees are important to establish among the interviews in order to find trends, to better recognise reasons for the placement of said descriptors. Narrative and manipulation in the art museum represent the frequent associations of meaning in an artistic context. An object in a art space is more satisfying when it means more, either to the artist or the viewer, than just the materials. Education and realism in the natural history represent the informative responsibility of the space, applying previous experience to their alignments within the interviews. Trophy and decoration connotations in the private home rely on public perception of taxidermy as well as the perceived beauty of the objects. These characteristics are revealed in the scoring trends of the interviewees.

Art museum mounts are usually scored highly, but a trend observed in those in the artistic space usually rise. The initial rounds of scoring see various scores, with some not changing at all and some garnering great changes, such as the mountain goat having a 5-point difference between scoring rounds. There are two significant patterns in the scores for this context. It either presents in a high, non-faltering score or a low score with a sharp rise. The first type indicates that the viewer enjoys the mount initially, with the space of the art museum found to be correct to the onlooker. It can also be represented by an initial admiration for the quality of the piece, and the belief that beauty should be presented as art, like the black rabbit for Max. The other trend, showcased by the coyote in interview 10 and the mountain goat in interview 11, can be viewed as the artistic space adding to the mounts. In these cases, the score rise manifested itself by a perceived added narrative or symbolism, attributed to the sadness or creepiness of the animal sculptures. This space added onto the mounts, giving them a prestige or value, due to the important place they are put in by the interviewees.

The natural history museum is consistent, exhibiting non-faltering scoring or smaller changes. The initial perception of the taxidermy, which is later placed in this context, results in a hesitation to change the score in the second round. The educational context that the

mounts are placed in by the interviewees either does not add to the interestingness factor, or for some it decreases the score. The interestingness of the taxidermy is individual, however, the space of the natural history museum uses these objects as representations of animal species. This takes the object's agency away as it becomes a piece in a diorama of their own environment or species. This flattening results in the score staggering, seemingly being forgotten by the participant, in some cases.

The context of the private home can be shown as the most confused of the three, showing increases, decreases and non-falters consistently across the board. This seems to be the most individual category, with the score trends becoming steady only within each interview. In interview 4, Monica slightly decreases scores for mounts she placed in the private home, while Nancy, in interview 10, halves her scores within this context. These changes are based on the dispositions that consider hunting. Monica sees the taxidermy through the lens of her earlier life and these objects are not her own decorative style, while Nancy talks about hunting in great detail, in context of her picks. These are personal dispositions that are noticed within the individual interviews that result in scoring changes. The private home is personal to each participant which is represented through each strategy.

Overall, there are trends in scoring observed in each context which are visualised by the characteristics given to the exhibition spaces. As each individual gave their scores, showed their alignment and provided their scores again, they revealed their framing and positioning of each space and taxidermy's place within them. Score shifts reveal the image that the individuals have of each context as they give their own interpretations to the taxidermized mounts. These perceived characteristics, like expressing a storyline or narrative, give these objects a perceived alignment, for example, the mountain goat in Leanne's interview. Considering that certain themes were consistent within the twelve conversations, these perceived characteristics are found to be important, in terms of context.

Individual characteristics, observed through the habitus and disposition, also give significant reasoning for score choices. Combining these views with the established characteristics shows the reasoning for the changes observed in the scores. The trends within the scoring strategies of the interviewees are strong indicators of context being significant when it comes to opinion on cultural objects, showing alternating patterns for each.

Conclusion

This paper asks the question of whether the audience's responses to taxidermy vary when appearing in different contexts in which it is displayed, and if so, how. This was tested through the inclusion of photo elicitation within twelve interviews. The conversations took place face-to-face or online and included many perspectives of age, profession and perspective. Museal background was established to gauge the familiarity with each setting. The strategy to answer the research question was performed by asking the participants to give a numerical score of the images on a scale of interestingness. After the individual has expressed their opinion on each piece of taxidermy, they were asked to categorise each piece in one of the three given contexts of exhibition, the art museum, the natural history museum and the private home. After each space of exhibition is established, a second round of scores is performed, but for the belonging and sensibility in the given context. Each step of each picture was rounded up with individual reasoning. Following questions are asked depending on the discourses raised within each conversation to allow the participant to think on their perspectives and backgrounds.

The audience's responses based on the context, for the most part within the interviews, changed in the numerical and substantive sense (Figure 3). The average scores overall were raised within the second round, except the chocolate bear and the Himalayan pheasant. This could mean that these pieces were less interesting than the others, shown throughout the interview. The changes in the average scores are not very large, but substantial enough to provide insight into the main research question. This experiment focuses on the personal and individual perspectives on the brought-up questions, which are sometimes not directly reflected in the averages. The overall trends visible in the scoring and alignment reflect general tendencies of the participants towards context leaning. The scoring trend found within the images placed in the natural history museum are of none or small changes which go up in score. This signifies that the context of the natural history museum is immediately seen within the pieces and given to the taxidermized pieces.

This inherent perspective given to the objects seen in the naturalistic sense is what places them in a secure place, in the sense of a personal opinion. The context of a space that educates, that is meant to be for people of all ages including families places a sense of stability within the objects, pushing them to exist without a critical place in the observers' minds. People feel as if the natural history museum is appropriate for taxidermy, presenting the animals as a symbol of their species. The private home is the most mixed category,

establishing decreased, stable and risen scores all across the board. This context was mostly connected to the idea of a hunter preserving his trophies, which to some participants evoked negative perspectives. The private perspective manifest itself negatively, as hunting conquers and overtakes nature, which most of the interviewees do not support.

Even though these ethical concerns were brought up by the interviewees, the inclusion of a decoration with such weight attached to it made some people more intrigued. The shock and difference of an object in a private space, along with the cultural standpoint in the media make it interesting to some. The previously mentioned context, the art museum, was found to mostly garner increased scores within the second round.

The art museum is considered as a place that holds a specific image by the interviewees, their answers reflect the idea that in order to be placed there, an object has to have enough narrative value. The ability of the object to tell a story makes it analogous with art than the animal preserved to be in an educational environment. The artistic drive and story behind an object have to be seen by the individual in order for the piece to be worthy of a museum. Various emotions that are sensed by the onlookers make an object, like the mountain goat for Leanne, deserving to be in a special space.

The project faced some issues at different moments of progression, firstly with the interview guide. The first three interviews were done with a different set of questions than the rest. This provides a small challenge within the analysis process, as those interviews focus more on the personal aspects of the taxidermy feel without the second round of the scoring. The main six image choices invited a conversation which turned into a shock value, especially due to the fawn mount (Image 1). The interviewees focused on the animal's age and lost life even more than the other taxidermized objects. This led to a change in the included images, to still contain diverse animal species and presentations, but to format the sizes of the animals, to exclude the answers focused on the cuteness and fluffiness of the animals.

The experiment itself is hypothetical, which only allows for the participants to imagine themselves in the situations I am asking them about. The physicality of taxidermy is sometimes the characteristic that is the strongest for the viewer, which is impossible in this scenario. The researcher is relying on the individuals to imagine themselves in situations that are abstract. The abstract contexts rely on the interviewee to imagine the objects through a lens of their experience in the given spaces. It requires the participant to imagine an art museum or a natural history museum, which cannot be accounted for in the design of the

experiment. The design of the experiment is realistically not possible, unless the researcher actually owned these objects and had access to the spaces in question. The intentionality of the questions relies on the same object to be considered in each context, which would not allow for similar items to be questioned.

If I had a larger quantity of time and more resources to continue on with this project, it would ideally be carried out in person, with the mounts travelling from context to context, to be able to gauge physical reactions as well. This would result in a double layered data set, with the conversation between interviewer and participant but also notes on the body language and in-person reactions to the animal skins. More people could be interviewed to establish more concrete patterns and data which would benefit the analysis. An updated interview guide could include more questions about the person's life and circumstances, to invite possible clear comparison bases. The consequent analysis resulted in specific characteristics seen throughout each context but could be researched further. A framework could be established to tackle the mention of these specific descriptors, to inquire further about each space.

The three contexts talked about in the paper each have their own characteristics which make objects belong. The natural history museum invites the idea of education and natural splendour, the private home showcases the decorative and sentimental function while the art museum evokes the emotional and narrative sense of a piece of work. A person's life experiences, dispositions and personal background have a great impact on their opinions which also play into the relationship between the exhibition contexts. These things are factors in forming opinions on art, however, the exhibition context changes the focus for said dispositions, allowing for a difference in outcome. Overall, the interviews resulted in the answer to the question that the context matters in opinion formation. The same object framed in a different exhibition space carries different weight and meaning.

The materials that are used when creating something make meaning on their own, however, they evoke that meaning differently in various spaces. The taxidermy mount represents an animal, but gains meaning through its display in a space that has specific connotations. Each exhibition place suggests another outlook on the presented art piece, acting as a prism of for the viewer to express and interpret on their own. Considering the question of whether the audience's responses to taxidermy vary when appearing in different contexts in which it is displayed, each exhibition space presented different results.

Overall, I believe that context does have an effect, reflected by the shifting scores observed in the interviews. There are, however, other factors that contribute to the interestingness of the works, which are based on personal dispositions. Exhibition space is significant enough to have an effect on the scoring, which indicates that the question is partly confirmed, with the acknowledgements of individual characteristics. The habitus (Bourdieu, 1984, p.562; 1990, pp.54-55; 2013, p.214) and horizontal preferences (Du, 2022, p.2) were used to showcase these characteristics and they play a significant role within the results. The studies of context on opinion (Swaboda, 2019; Szubielska et al., 2021; Gartus et al., 2014; Brieber et al., 2014) found similar results, that the museum contexts resulted in the art being more enjoyable. This research found varying and inconsistent degrees of enjoyment but specified the descriptors of art pieces in each inquired context. These factors found in each exhibition space are the affective force for opinion shifts and reasonings. Since they are homogeneous with the context, it makes the context significant in their opinion changes.

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Appendix A

Complete interview guide:

First draft – used for interviews 1-3

Hello! My name is Maja, and we will be talking today about taxidermy as a medium and your opinions on it.

Just to make sure that everything is in order, you have signed the informed consent form, and you know what topics we will be discussing today, correct?

First, all of the images were sourced from an initiative that photographed cultural objects for archival purposes, sometimes obtaining pieces from personal collections. Some taxidermized pieces were found within the collected objects, but they were a small number within the photographed pieces.

Alright, let's start off by looking at the images (Image 1-6).

1. What is your name, age and occupation?
2. Have you ever encountered taxidermy before? If so, how?
3. Could you first tell me your initial thoughts about the images in general?
 - a. What do you think about when looking at the pieces?
4. Do you like any of them more than others? If so, why?
5. Can you rank each piece on a scale of 1 (not interesting) to 9 (very interesting)?
 - b. What specifically makes them boring, neutral or interesting?
6. Next, here are three possible exhibition contexts that these taxidermized pieces can be viewed in:
 - c. Can you put the images in the categories based on where you think they belong?
7. Why did you make these specific choices?
 - d. What are the characteristics of the taxidermy in the images that made you put into specific categories?
8. Why do you think (chosen image) belongs in an art museum?
 - e. Is there anything that stands out to you about the piece that makes it belong in the art museum?
9. Why do you think (chosen image) belongs in a natural history museum?

- f. Is there anything that stands out to you about the piece that makes it belong in a natural history museum?
10. Why do you think (chosen image) belongs in someone's home?
- g. Is there anything that stands out to you about the piece that makes it belong in someone's private home?
11. Are there any images that you think do not belong in any of the categories?
12. Is there anything else that you would like to speak about?

Thank you for participating!

Second draft – used for interviews 4-12

Hello! My name is Maja, and we will be talking today about taxidermy as a medium and your opinions on it.

Just to make sure that everything is in order, you have signed the informed consent form, and you know what topics we will be discussing today, correct?

First, all of the images were sourced from an initiative that photographed cultural objects for archival purposes, sometimes obtaining pieces from personal collections. Some taxidermized pieces were found within the collected objects, but they were a small number within the photographed pieces.

Alright, let's start off by looking at the images (Image 1-6).

1. What is your name, age and occupation?
2. Do you go to art or natural history museums? If yes, how often?
3. What do you think about when you first hear the word taxidermy?
4. Have you ever encountered taxidermy before? If so, how?
5. Do you have any pieces of taxidermy (mounts, bones, wet specimens, etc.)?
 - a. If so, what would you like to own and why?
 - b. If not, why specifically?
6. Could you first tell me your initial thoughts about the images in general?
 - a. What do you think about when looking at the pieces?
7. Do you like any of them more than others? If so, why?

8. Can you rank each piece on a scale of 1 (not interesting) to 9 (very interesting)?
 - a. What specifically makes them boring, neutral or interesting?
 - b. What emotions do you feel when looking at each object?

Next, here are three possible exhibition contexts that these pieces can be viewed in:

9. Can you put the images in the categories based on where you think they belong?
 - a. Why did you make these specific choices?
10. What are the characteristics of the taxidermy in the images that made you put into specific categories?
11. Why do you think (chosen image) belongs in an art museum?
 - a. Is there anything that stands out to you about the piece that makes it belong in the art museum?
12. Why do you think (chosen image) belongs in a natural history museum?
 - a. Is there anything that stands out to you about the piece that makes it belong in a natural history museum?
13. Why do you think (chosen image) belongs in someone's home?
 - a. Is there anything that stands out to you about the piece that makes it belong in someone's private home?
14. Could you rank the taxidermy pieces again? (1 to 9 interestingness)
 - a. Why do you think your ranking has changed/has not changed?
15. Are there any images that you think do not belong in any of the categories?
16. Is there anything else that you would like to speak about?

Thank you for participating!

Appendix B

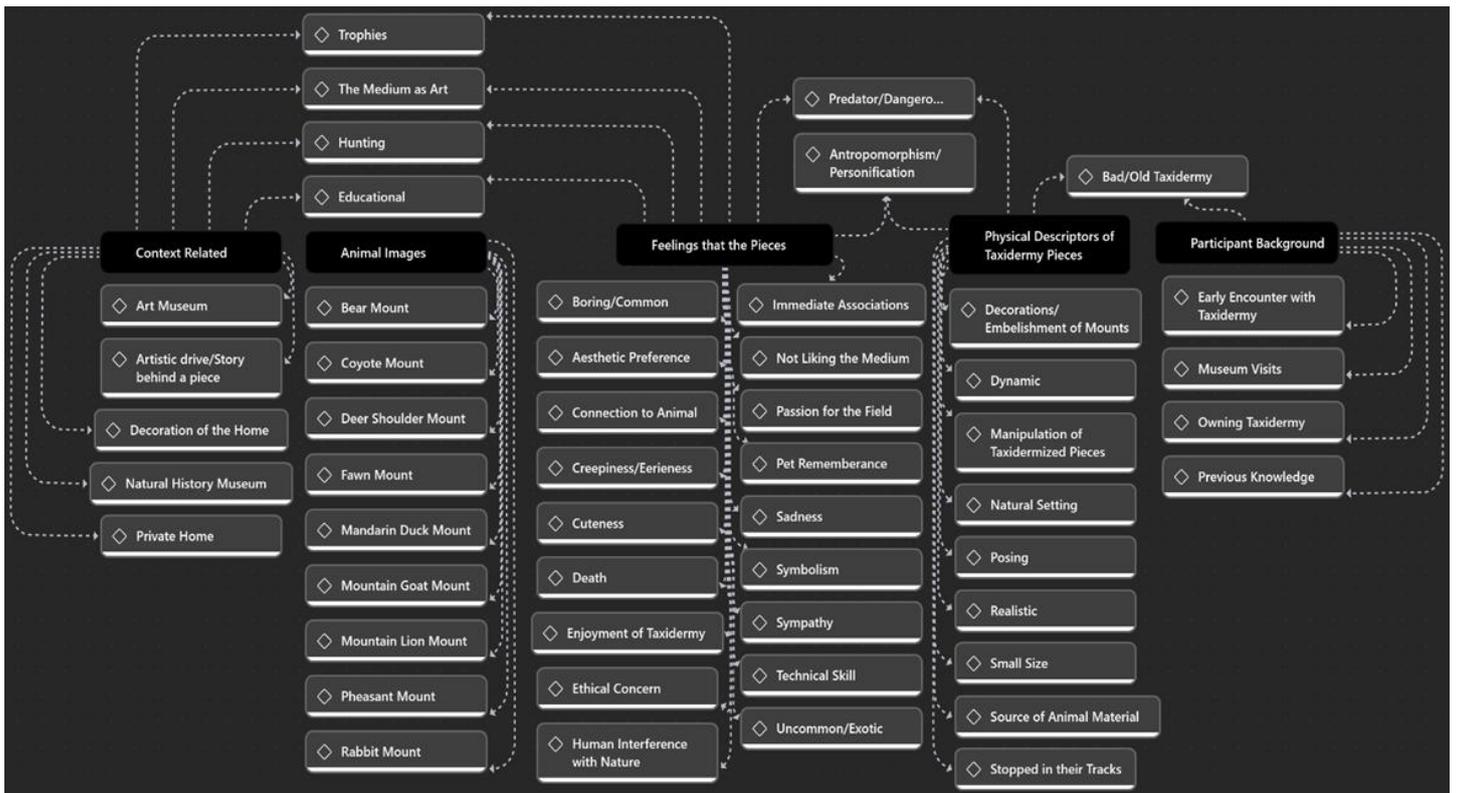


Figure 2. Full code map.

		Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4	Interview 5	Interview 6	Interview 7	Interview 8	Interview 9	Interview 10	Interview 11	Interview 12	Average score
Score before		9	9	8	6	8.5	3	5	\	\	\	\	\	6.9
Alignment	Picture 1 (deer fawn)	NHM	NHM	NHM	AM/NHM	AM	NHM	NHM	\	\	\	\	\	NHM
Score after		\	\	\	4	9	7	6	\	\	\	\	\	6.5
Score before		6	7.50	9	5	9	4	7	9	2	8	3	6.5	6.3
Alignment	Picture 2 (mountain lion)	NHM	NHM/PH	NHM	NHM	NHM/PH	NHM	NHM	NHM	NHM	NHM	NHM	NHM	NHM
Score after		\	\	\	6	9	6	7	9	1	8	3	9	6.4
Score before		7	7	8	9	6	7	7	7	6	3	8	7	6.8
Alignment	Picture 3 (coyote)	NHM	AM	NHM	NHM	NHM								
Score after		\	\	\	9	6	7	7	7	6	5	7	7.5	6.8
Score before		3	6	6	8	4.5	8	5	3	1	8	4	4	5.0
Alignment	Picture 4 (deer shoulder)	NHM	PH	AM	PH/AM	PH	PH							
Score after		\	\	\	7	4.5	8	6	6	1	8	5	4	5.5
Score before		8	8	6	8	8	5	9	\	\	\	\	\	7.4
Alignment	Picture 5 (mandarin duck)	NHM	AM	AM	NHM	PH	AM	AM	\	\	\	\	\	AM
Score after		\	\	\	7	8	8	9	\	\	\	\	\	8
Score before		7	7	6	9	6	7	9	\	\	\	\	\	7.3
Alignment	Picture 6 (black rabbit)	NHM	PH	PH	PH	AM	PH	AM	\	\	\	\	\	PH
Score after		\	\	\	7	5.5	8	9	\	\	\	\	\	7.4
Score before		\	\	\	\	\	\	\	7	5	4	4	8	5.6
Alignment	Picture 7 (chocolate bear)	\	\	\	\	\	\	\	NHM	NHM/PH	PH	NHM	NHM	NHM
Score after		\	\	\	\	\	\	\	8	5	2	4	8	5.4
Score before		\	\	\	\	\	\	\	6	3	6	6	8	5.8
Alignment	Picture 8 (pheasant)	\	\	\	\	\	\	\	NHM	NHM	PH	PH	NHM/AM	NHM
Score after		\	\	\	\	\	\	\	6	3	3	7	8.5	5.5
Score before		\	\	\	\	\	\	\	8.5	5	9	1	8	6.3
Alignment	Picture 9 (mountain goat)	\	\	\	\	\	\	\	NHM	NHM	NHM	AM	NHM	NHM
Score after		\	\	\	\	\	\	\	8	5	9	6	8	7.2

Figure 3. Score and alignment chart.

Legend:	
AM	Art. Mueum
NHM	Natural History Museum
PH	Private Home
\	Not applicable

Figure 4. Legend for score and alignment chart.

	B1 Average	B2 Average
Picture 2 (mountain lion)	6.8 NHM 7	5.7 NHM 6
Picture 3 (coyote)	7.3 NHM 7.3	6.2 NHM 6.5
Picture 4 (deer shoulder)	5.8 PH 6.4	4 PH 4.8

Figure 5. Average and alignment scores separated into blocks.