

Rhapsody in blue

Sam Stead

nanoq: flat out and bluesome A Cultural Life of Polar Bears (2006)

Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson

Black Dog Publishing, London

Belfast; Peter stands by the door, a bemused, half-blind expression upon his face.

Edinburgh; Jim sits on the floor; arms flung back with head reared, mouth open in a plaintive howl.

Bristol; Nina looks exhausted, her tongue lolling as she seems to be dragging her heavy paws forward as she stands mid-stride.

Sheffield; Queenie stands poised on a small rock-like promontory, curiously looking off to one side as the ice floes behind her seem to stand still.

In this way we encounter the stuffed polar bears in photographs taken by artists Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson in the recent publication of their research project *nanoq: flat out and bluesome*. This was a two-part project, undertaken over five years, that consisted of photographing as many stuffed polar bears that could be found in British collections followed by the exhibition of some of the bears at Spike Island.

In a recent article for *The Observer*, Simon Garfield looked at how the image of the polar bear has been used in recent times to further the cause of disparate groups such as Greenpeace and Coca-Cola. This sleek, cute-looking yet formidable and dangerous predator benefits from a strong and positive public image; 'There is no such thing as an ugly polar bear, and even the less handsome ones appear to have learnt to conceal their claws as they leap the ice floes. Like panting Labradors, they always appear to be smiling.'¹

The high recognition factor associated with these bears has enabled them to become more than just another mammal that populates the more northerly parts of the earth. They stand as signifiers of the north, of icy desolation and more recently the identifiable victims of an increase in global temperature. Occupying such a place in the popular imagination means that the polar bear can stand for more than itself and engage a wide variety of people on many levels.

In this way, the choice of the polar bear as the focus of study by Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson was not a haphazard one² as the resulting artwork could readily be expanded to include a wide variety of topics all from the simple premise of finding, photographing and exhibiting the stuffed exemplars of this iconic mammal present in British collections.

¹ Simon Garfield, 'Living on thin ice', *The Observer*, Sunday 4 March 2007.

² *Snæbjörnsdóttir* can be translated as snow bear's daughter.

These different yet essentially linked processes provide an illuminating example of how artists can engage with a subject and the specialities that surround it, use and potentially transcend them in order to address issues that are inherent to those areas in a novel and enlightening manner.

Research in any field is often reduced to a series of questions rather than providing any specific answers and the ways in which the artists have presented the outcomes of this five-year project allow the viewer to freely engage with all manner of questions that the exhibitions and publication pose.

Whilst the pertinent issues of collection, hunting, death and the photograph are addressed in the essays contained within the publication (written in response to the conference that took place alongside the Spike Island exhibition), there is the wider question of the milieu in which the study took place.

The museum is the ultimate manifestation of mankind's desire to collect, organise, display and interpret artefacts, thus supposedly increasing our knowledge of the world in which we live. Within the walls of this hallowed institution, the narrative of history is presented to us, departmentalised and neatly classified in glass cases with dates and descriptions of the objects that have been sourced from all over the world.

Parodied by Flaubert through his titular protagonists Bouvard and Pécuchet, the project established by museums in the Nineteenth Century and maintained until the present day was 'to give by the ordered display of selected artefacts a total representation of human reality and history.'³ Whilst Flaubert's clerks failed in their attempt to master every subject of human knowledge and resorted to amassing everything and anything, the heterogeneous nature of their collection resulted in little more than chaos.

In his study of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, Eugenio Donato argues 'museums are taken to exist only inasmuch as they can erase the heterogeneity of the objects contained within their cases, and it is only the hypothesis of the possibility of homogenizing [sic] the diversity of various artefacts which makes them possible in the first place.'⁴

This homogenisation occurs on two levels in *nanoq*; there is the cataloguing and display of the museum, whose efficacy is revealed by the bric-a-brac and curios nature of the photographs taken of bears in storage or in private hands; and there is the use of the photograph itself. The latter device is one most notably used by André Malraux in his *Museum Without Walls*⁵ in which he champions the potential of photographic reproduction to contain the entirety of art and its history as freed from the physical confines of the museum building.

In using photographs to document the situation of the stuffed polar bear, the context of the museum also becomes the subject of the study. In this way, the display of the images in a gallery or within the publication homogenises the individual museums and reduces them to signifiers of the museum in a manner similar to the way that Garry Marvin has identified the polar bears as mere suggestions of their species.

³ Eugenio Donato, 'The Museum's Furnace', in J. V. Harari, *Textual strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 221.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ André Malraux, *The Voices of Silence* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1954).

‘... it is difficult to respond to the animals on exhibition in a museum in any other way than scientific natural history. Each animal becomes a type, a token, rather than a unique individual.’⁶

The combination of photographs and the provenances of the bears recall the images and text by Louise Lawler that accompany Douglas Crimp’s essay ‘On the Museum’s Ruins’.⁷ In photographing artworks in private homes, galleries and museums (including works in transit and storage), Lawler also reduces the artworks and the contexts in which they were found to simple signifiers of collection and display.

In his examination of collecting Walter Benjamin observed that the museum at the turn of the twentieth century represented the ‘less objectionable’ and ‘more useful academically’ public collection as opposed to the private nature of the original displays of such spoils. Such collections however, in Benjamin’s view, could not fulfil the useful application of educating a wider public as to their situation politically and therefore ‘sought only to *stimulate*, to *offer variety*, to *arouse interest*. History was shaken up, to relieve monotony; the result was *cultural history*.’⁸

This sense of *divertissement*, an impulse to entertain rather than educate is a common theme within the photographs of *nanoq: flat out and bluesome*. The fixed and, by necessity, artificial nature of the poses combined with the recreated ice-floes and icy tundra all in front of two-dimensional dioramas lend a curiously comical air to the taxidermic mount of the polar bear portrayed.

When this contextualising material is removed, as it was by the re-location of ten of the bears into the contemporary art space of Spike Island, the specimens could exist on their own terms within the imagination of the viewer. In setting up what was in effect a very simple experiment (carried out without any specific result in mind), Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson used the exhibition - a tool that sets artists apart from researchers in other research disciplines - to free the specimens from their constricted existence within the museum and release them into an environment where they were open to re-interpretation.

The first stage of *nanoq* can be seen as being typical of a certain artistic strategy; of research into a subject for the purposes of making and exhibiting artwork that illustrates an aspect of a specific field of study. In extending the project through the Spike Island exhibition and bringing in other audiences and information sources through the conference and publication, Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson have managed to participate actively in the examination and dissemination of specialist knowledge.

In being able to successfully achieve a useful and informative research project which still principally exists as compelling artworks, *nanoq* demonstrates the ways in which artistic researchers can use their specific tools, resources and strategies in order to engage with other disciplines and, far from adopting their methods, enable a challenging questioning of established modes of public knowledge transmission.

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⁶ G. Marvin, ‘Perpetuating Polar bears: The Cultural life of dead animals’ in *nanoq: flat out and bluesome: A Cultural Life of Polar Bears* (London: Black Dog, 2006), p. 163.

⁷ Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum’s Ruins* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997).

⁸ Walter Benjamin, ‘Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian’ (1939) in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Kingsley Shorter (London: New Left Books, 1979), p. 355-6.

