

Institution: University of Cumbria
Unit of Assessment: 34 – Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory
Title of case study: <i>nanoq: flat out and bluesome: challenging the role of art in civil society</i>
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>The practice-based research output <i>nanoq: flat out and bluesome, a cultural life of polar bears</i> has had impact on cultural life, civil society and on both artistic practitioners and museum/gallery professionals. These impacts have been created through the interdisciplinary nature of the work, and have challenged engrained approaches to the divide between art and museology, and to fixed perceptions of human interactions with the natural world.</p> <p>Evidence for the cultural impacts and influence on civil society, through provoking consideration of environmental issues on the level of an emotive response to changing values and the consequences of societal norms, is primarily provided through reviews of the outcomes themselves, mainly through arts and science journals, book chapters and testimonials by scholars and practitioners in a variety of fields. Similarly, impact on the approach to professional practice in art curation and, particularly, in museology is similarly documented in the public domain.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p><i>nanoq: flat out and bluesome</i> was a research project carried out as part of a long-standing research and creative partnership between Dr Mark Wilson (Reader in Fine Art; previously Lecturer at Cumbria Institute of Art and Design, one of the legacy institution which formed the University of Cumbria in 2007) and Professor Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir of the University of Gothenburg (Adjunct Professor at the University of Gothenburg in 2004).</p> <p>The research involved surveying specimens of polar bears within public and private collections in the UK and Ireland. Specimens were located and as much detail as possible established regarding provenance: which part of the Arctic they were from, the expedition, the individuals responsible for their capture or killing, date of encounter and the route and narrative concerning passage from the arctic to their current location. The aim was to register the mounts as individuals with unique histories, supplanting their traditional function as generic representatives of a species. The project reconfigured the meanings and significance of taxidermic mounts in their most common contexts, challenging their notional function, privileging singularity and difference over representation. Outputs were an installation of 10 examples of polar bear mounts, a photographic archive exhibition of a selection of the taxidermic bears as found in situ, and a publication detailing the project, in addition to dissemination at a range of academic conferences.</p> <p>The research explored a range of questions, including how prevailing taxonomies and hierarchies in Western thought, as presented in museum and private collections (themselves a legacy of colonial activity) can be productively disrupted. What can the removal of museum contexts and museum didactic signage accomplish in respect of a new collection or assemblage of museum specimens? In the act of representation, who speaks for whom and to what end? What bearing might this have on contemporary approaches; for instance to the Arctic as habitat, as environment and as an indicator of global environmental change? The work explored the relationship between taxidermy and photography, as revealed specifically through the research and dissemination process; for example, how the serial re-situating and site-responsive presentations of <i>nanoq</i> would prompt a cumulative reappraisal of contemporary assumptions regarding taxonomy, polar history, wildness and environment and, indeed, taxidermy.</p> <p>The project was undertaken as Fine Art research, however, it was deliberately socially engaged and in many cases site-specific or site-responsive, drawing upon semiotic thinking, and critiquing modes of display and representation. The work has resonance beyond the discipline and the Fine Art audience, including for animal studies, social anthropology, artistic research and practice, and museology. In accordance with this strategy, the touring photographic targeted zoological and polar museum collection audiences, where its subversive constitution would have the most effective resonance, rather than more specialist contemporary art spaces.</p>
<p>3. References to the research</p> <p>The main output was the <i>nanoq: flat out and bluesome</i> installation at Spike Island, Bristol (28 Feb - 4 April, 2004). This major output in an contemporary art venue comprised 10 examples of taxidermic polar bears mounts presented in individual custom-made vitrines; a custom-built wall with vinyl wall-drawing (map), relating to the origins of all the mounts surveyed, with accompanying text; a video projection <i>nanoq: the journey</i>, documenting the demounting of</p>

specimens from respective museum collections prior to their appearance at Spike Island; and a custom built seating platform to accommodate audience/participants for the concurrent *White Out* conference held at the venue, and multiple other lectures and presentation events during the exhibition. The conference (13 March 2004), was organised by the artists and Gallery Director as part of the exhibition. It included four invited speakers (academics and a non-academic Arctic expert) responding to the installation, and involved participation with a viewing audience.

The project was funded through Spike Island, an international centre for the development of contemporary art and design, which is a vibrant, internationally acclaimed hub for production, presentation and debate; inviting audiences to engage directly with creative practices through participation and discussion. Funding was granted in 2003-4: £24,000 for the installation and photographic exhibition from an Arts Council England Touring Exhibitions Awards; £8,000 from the Henry Moore Foundation Awards to Artists grant fund; and £15,000 match funding (with Click Systems) from Arts and Business, an organisation which encourages and promotes stronger partnerships between business and the arts.

The photographic archive toured constantly between 2004 and 2012, under a range of different exhibition titles (e.g. *Great White Bear*, *Hvide Bjørn*, *nanuk*). It is a collection of 33 framed photographs of the polar bear specimens taken in situ in their respective collections, and comprises an edition of 3 (1400 mm x 1200 mm) and an edition of 5 (600 mm x 610 mm). The provenance of each specimen appears integrally as a text below each image, on a brass plate set into the frame (larger edition), or as part of the photographic object (smaller edition). The collection was exhibited at six further venues before the beginning of the assessment period, and at a further eight gallery and museum venues from 2008. These exhibitions were across the UK and Northern Europe (particularly Sweden and Norway), and ranged between three months and a year in duration. By exhibiting at a mix of art and museum spaces, the archive reached a diverse audience. An example of (general public, rather than Fine Art) audience numbers is through the 36,593 visitors to Tromsø Polar Museum in a nine month segment of the year-long exhibition.

The entire photographic archive has, within the last year, been purchased independently by two major international art collections: the Reykjavík Art Museum, Iceland, and the Nevada State Museum of Art, USA. The *nanuq* archive was also exhibited as a video work as part of an installation entitled *Polar Shift* in the international group exhibition *HEAT - Art and Climate Change* (2008) at the RMIT Gallery (Melbourne, Australia), curated by Professor Linda Williams. (*Polar Shift* also involved additional research, locating additional specimens in Australia. In contrast to the UK, many had been shot in the preceding 30 years by contemporary Australian 'adventurers', travelling to the Arctic and securing licenses via the Inuit quota system).

nanuq: flat out and bluesome, A Cultural Life of Polar Bears was published by Black Dog Publishing, London (2006). The full colour, 192 page book documents the research process, installation and touring archive, together with the provenances of specimens and contributions based on the presentations at the *White Out* conference. By 2010 the publication had sold out, and a reprint is currently being discussed, following continued demand for second hand copies.

4. Details of the impact

Through a substantial range of dissemination activities, *nanuq* has reached a wide range of stakeholders, influencing both lay audiences who viewed the work and by stimulating professional discourses outside of art, including in museums, human geography and animal studies, causing significant reappraisals in those fields. Dissemination of the work has been extensive, both through exhibitions across the UK and northern Europe, but also through the referencing and discussion of the work at a range of international conferences (both by the artists and by academics and others across a range of fields), including a number of conferences intended for practitioner and generalist, rather than academic, audiences.

The project has been used as a central or key point of discussion in a wide range of book chapters and articles aimed at practitioner or general public audiences published in the UK, the USA and Australia. Such citations are indicative of acceptance of the work as significant in respect both of its content and its methodologies. Whilst it is difficult to evidence the specific impacts that viewing *nanuq* will have had on audiences, such discussions highlight the types of consideration and influence that the work can engender. Specifically, the questions raised by the work can help individuals to challenge engrained assumptions and attitudes towards environmental issues and

Impact case study (REF3b)

towards the human relationship with animals and physical spaces by approaching from an emotionally provocative and non-scientific visual angle.

The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing (Dr. Rachel Poliquin, 2012, Penn State Press, USA), is a definitive work on the history and contemporary significance of taxidermy. The introductory chapter of this volume (pp. 2–11) is devoted to *nanoq*:

“...The display of ten polar bears is most probably a unique historical occurrence. It would be rare to see ten polar bears—a typically solitary species—together in the wild, and such an assembly would never occur in a natural history museum. Most museums have a solitary bear, having neither the space nor the educational need to display more than one. More than one is unnecessary repetition. Amassed together within the neutral space of an art gallery, disconnected from the didactic trappings of a natural history museum, the polar bears are transfigured by their multitude and setting, together becoming animal-things that are neither fully science nor fully art: mysterious, unsettling, provocative, and overwhelmingly visually magnetic.”

The book’s perspective on the work has reached a wide audience, including professional artists, as shown in the range of online reviews and discussions of the citation, such as on [coolhunting.com](#) (a site about creativity and innovation in design, culture and other areas of modern life) and *The New Enquiry* online cultural discussion space. Poliquin was also interviewed in *Antennae - Journal of Nature in Visual Culture* (Issue #6, Summer 2008) and referenced the implications of the work, bringing the work to a wider audience of practitioners.

Another example is *Silence of the Polar Bears: Performing (Climate) Change in the Theater of Species* (Una Chaudhuri, chapter 4 of *Readings in Performance and Ecology*, 2011, Eds. Arons, W. and May, T.J.: Palgrave and Macmillan, USA), which presents *nanoq* alongside two other art/performance works as a model of how art can bring new challenging insights to human conceptions of ecology and environmental risk. Of *nanoq*:

“These photographs...are exemplary documents of ... the infliction—by humans, on the other animals—of the vicissitudes of displacement...The *presence* in these photographs is not that of the bears but of the *places* they are in and the objects that surround them. Without exception, these places are “elsewheres” for these animals (notwithstanding the frequent attempts at recreating the bears’ original habitats), making this a photographic record of the very principle that made polar bears the poster animals of climate change: the principle of the last resort, the endgame, the final corner: nowhere left to go.”

In 2007, *New Scientist* magazine published a full-page article on *nanoq* entitled *Stuffed and mounted: are polar bears finished in the Arctic?* in response to exhibition in London. Whilst this took place before the beginning of the assessment period, it exhibits the wide reach of the work beyond Fine Art audiences, and is indicative of the stimulation to public discourse and perceptions of the relationship between humans and environment that the work continues to provide.

“Rethinking our attitude toward displaying [bear specimens]...could help counter public indifference to the plight of living bears: if we are ashamed to display these dead bears today, imagine how we will feel if the entire species is gone tomorrow.”

In the art world magazine *Modern Painters* (*The Right Stuff*, pp.58-63, March 2009), Steven Connor wrote of *nanoq*:

“Unlike other artists, for whom the stuffed animal is always a bodily witness, however dismal, or damaged, of an animal life that has been lived...Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson aim to show the irreversible “eclipse” of the “real” animal’ and its entry into a second ‘Cultural Life’”.

The influence on arts practice and education is demonstrated by the use of the project as an exemplar of artistic research at the 10th Biennial Conference of the European League of Institutes of Art (ELIA), October 2008. Images from the installation and archive were featured in the web-based and printed publicity material, including delegate packs. The main conference hall exhibited the larger framed works. Delegates included arts students, journalists and practitioners including architects, conservators, and professional artists.

Museological impact has best been demonstrated by the declaration by the Director of the Hunterian Museum (London), Dr Sam Alberti, at the *Cultures of Preservation* conference at the Natural History Museum, London (April 2011) that *nanoq*, with its radical focus on the individual

Impact case study (REF3b)

specimen and its provenance, had led him and many other UK Zoological museum curators to reappraise their approach to the collections in their charge.

This is also reflected in a review of the *nanoq* archive at the Manchester Metropolitan Museum (2010), which quoted Stephen Booth (the museum's Curator of temporary and touring exhibitions) as saying "the show is a thought-provoking insight into the relationship between man and bear. This exhibition challenges perceptions we have about our relationship with nature," and "it highlights the cause and effect of human behaviour, and makes us think about the legacy of our actions". In 2013 a publication by the Museum entitled *New Light on Old Bones* itself devoted to the contemporary reappraisal of zoological collections acknowledges the shift in interpretation of natural objects precipitated by the work:

"For museum specimens, the notion of an afterlife has become a particularly popular way of acknowledging that natural objects (in particular those that were once alive) acquire their own biographical histories in which their meanings and values may vary...[A] particularly early example of research into the afterlives of animals [is] 'nanoq – flat out and bluesome'".

In 2012 for a Canadian publication entitled *Museums: Marginality and the Mainstream*, Helen Gregory wrote:

"...In the exhibition *nanoq: flat out and bluesome*, the confrontation between the body of the viewer and the body of the polar bear creates an almost palpable physical and spiritual relationship. It connects the viewer to both the hunter and the hunted and elicits a visceral response that supersedes that of an interactive museum experience that privileges representations over authentic objects". [and]

"By situating the polar bears inside sleek glass cubes, Snaebjornsdottir and Wilson mimic both the trope of the Victorian glass vitrine, as well as the glass window of the diorama. While dioramas mimetically simulate the appearance of realism and require viewers to accept a prescribed narrative of nature, these polar bears are stripped of artifice, severing all illusions of naturalism. The inclusion of photography showing the polar bears in their usual "habitats," as well as their "biographical" information, forces the viewer to renounce any fictional narratives they had previously accepted."

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Available on request:

- Evidence of *nanoq* at the 10th Biennial Conference of ELIA, October 2008.
- Poliquin, R. (2012) *The Breathless Zoo*. Penn State Press. pp. 2-11
- Chaudhuri, U. (2011) *Silence of the Polar Bears: Performing (Climate) Change in the Theater of Species* in 'Readings in Performance and Ecology', Chapter 4, pages 45-59.

Available online:

- *nanoq: flat out and bluesome*, *Cultural Life of Polar Bears*, review. Ruby Russell, 2009 <http://www.foto8.com/live/nanoq-flat-out-and-bluesome-a-cultural-life-of-polar-bears/>
- Antennae Journal of Visual Culture interview with Poliquin, R. citing *nanoq*. Issue 6, 2008 pp.11-12 <http://www.antennae.org.uk/ANTENNAE%20ISSUE%206.doc.pdf>
- Gregory, H. (2012) *The Souvenir And The Collection: Taxidermy, Photography, And The Archetype Of The Colonial Hunter in the exhibition nanoq: flat out and bluesome* for 'Museums: Marginality and the Mainstream' (pp. 33-48) <http://issuu.com/myuglyswearer/docs/mmm>

Contacts to corroborate the evidence:

- Curator of Contemporary Art at the Natural History Museum, London (2005-13) (corroborating impacts on the field and on curatorship).
- Editor-in-chief of Antennae, the Journal of Nature in Visual Culture (corroborating influence on Animal Studies and stimulating debate on environmental issues).
- Associate Professor of Art, Environment and Cultural Studies, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (corroborating impact of the work in Australia).
- Professor and Chair of English, University of New England (corroborating the effect of *nanoq* in developing creative model and gaining creative responses to environmental issues and relationships with nature).
- Prominent US artist (corroborating impact on practitioners and stimulation of reflection).