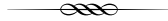


## Three Variations on the Theme of Extinction

Looking Anew at the Art and Science of Mark Dion

*Anne-Sophie Miclo*



In recent decades, many issues related to the Sixth Extinction, including the need to raise awareness of the destruction of ecosystems, the vulnerability of certain species, and the dangers of political inaction, have become important themes in contemporary art. The art practice of Mark Dion is exemplary in this context. Dion had a multidisciplinary education, receiving training from the Hartford Art School and the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program, and also studying biology and ecology at City College in New York. This has enabled him to work across art and science. Since the 1990s, his practice has been geared towards deconstructing the governing logics of scientific institutions and the dominant ideologies that structure our understanding of natural environments and history. His art practice promotes the conservation of natural resources and habitats. Dion's art considers the role of cultural institutions such as museums in the formation of nature as both idea and representation.<sup>1</sup> He explores the implications of different modes of collecting and display, and also examines links between the arts and sciences, and reflects on ways it might be possible to overcome some of the barriers that exist between these fields of knowledge. Dion's interest in museum paradigms, which manifests through a judicious combination of theory and practice, has translated into interventions within the collections and exhibitions of both natural history museums and contemporary art galleries. Our perception of the world around us, and how we interact with it, is significantly influenced by the representations of animals and plants that we encounter

in culture.<sup>2</sup> In museology, studies of display practices have revealed the impact that exhibitions can have on a visitor's understanding of a given subject.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, Dion's art will be analysed through the prism of species extinctions, with particular emphasis given to how the artist disrupts existing museum practices. Extinction as it relates to the museum raises a number of important questions. How can something that is now absent, such as an extinct species, be displayed? And similarly, how can the process be shown by which something came to be extinct? How should extinction be exhibited to the public? From the very beginning, representing extinction involves a number of contradictions and paradoxes. It is certainly possible to put surviving specimens of an extinct species on display. This approach is commonly adopted in natural history museums. The specimens become a kind of witness attesting to their own vanishment. Is this recourse to a phantom figure, to a 'what once was', however, the only means to showcase a creature's extinction? Is it the most effective way for the public to grasp the magnitude of its loss?

Dion's artworks denounce anthropocentrism and critique systems of classification prevalent in Western thinking that can be traced back to Aristotle's ordering of beings – his *Scala Naturae* or Natural Ladder – and to Christian teachings about the hierarchy of life. It is usual for his corpus to be approached either in an overarching way as a unified project or with emphasis given to a single dimension (such as Dion's use of taxidermy).<sup>4</sup> My own reading, which focuses on the theme of extinction, falls somewhere between these modes of analysis. Species extinction (in the past and yet to come) forms a key theme in Dion's efforts to foreground and subvert the pretence of objectivity that characterizes institutional discourses. In studying Dion's works, I have come to realize that Dion's treatment of extinction usually falls into one of three categories: extinct species; critically endangered species; and species (including the human) that might be held responsible for a given extinction.

The three categories are porous, with the same species potentially assuming different roles in the triad, dependent on context. By appropriating the scientific procedures of collecting and classifying, and borrowing and subverting modes of display employing taxidermy such as the diorama, Dion brings notions of scientific objectivity into question. He returns repeatedly to particular strategies to make extinction visible, including isolation, absence and the use of animal skins. In this chapter, I begin with a consideration of institutional modes of exhibition. I then move on to consider my three identified categories (extinct, endangered, culpable), using specific case studies. These case studies have been selected for their complementarity, for their being emblematic of the artist's practice, and fi-

nally, for how well they showcase Dion's strategies for subverting standard approaches to display. The artist's critical interrogation of display practices enables him to address how systems of categorization and classification shape our perception and treatment of species, and to reflect on what kind of changes to such practices might be of benefit.

## On Display

How can extinction be made visible? What models or paradigms of display should be used? For the last few decades, the boundaries between artworks and their exhibition have become increasingly blurred, with artists giving as much attention to the display of their works as to their production.<sup>5</sup> Dion's practice, for example, pays close heed both to the artwork and to how it is exhibited. Artwork and exhibition are, in fact, often inseparable and indistinguishable from each other. Dion's works combine and disrupt exhibition strategies. They also critically examine forms of classification used in the natural sciences and, concomitantly, in botanical gardens, museums and zoos. As a proponent of institutional critique, one of Dion's major interests is in the storytelling practices adopted by museums and zoos. Through museography (the methods of classification and display used by museums), museums shape the reception of their collections. Their display practices embody specific viewpoints (a reality which is frequently disavowed).<sup>6</sup> Mieke Bal has deftly exposed what might be called the 'ventriloquism' of the museum, the pretence it maintains that it simply shares the truth of things when, in fact, the museum is an institution of power, and the knowledge it communicates is always partial.<sup>7</sup>

Contrary to the museum, which organizes, produces and disseminates knowledge without openly acknowledging the ideological underpinnings those processes, Dion renders ideology visible, the better to unsettle it. To achieve this, he seizes control of aspects of institutional discourse (such as dioramas and forms of classification, including taxonomy) that traditionally produce knowledge, and shape our understanding of the world. These methods of classification and display contribute as much as the knowledge they ostensibly simply vehicle to the production of the broader narrative of science and nature offered by the museum. It is this narrative that is at the heart of Dion's work and that he seeks to disrupt. As Marie Fraser has noted, natural history museums and zoos share the same system of classifying and ordering the world as art galleries, one that is embodied in the collection, how it is catalogued and how it is displayed.<sup>8</sup> It is this shared system that shapes our understanding of both gallery and museum collections. Museums and zoos tend to focus on living animals and their

stories rather than featuring narratives of extinction. The collections of natural history museums, however, usually possess materials related to the five previous mass extinctions, as well as artefacts related to past climate change events.

Zoos are often tasked with the conservation of rare and endangered living species. As John Berger has observed, through enclosing and displaying the living creatures they possess in particular ways, zoos encourage them to be seen in a specific manner and to transform their very nature. Berger suggests that zoos be understood as sites of mourning both for the animals themselves and for animal–human relations. In a sense, Berger observes, the animals form a living monument to their own extinction.<sup>9</sup> Dion's works bring the spectacular instrumentalization of the natural world identified by Berger to the fore. He also encourages us to question the paradoxical discourse articulated by institutions such as zoos. Filipa Ramos emphasizes this paradox when she states:

Zoos juxtapose incompatible states, presenting a sampled, condensed fauna: Bengal tigers and African lions together, Florida bottlenose dolphins and Alaskan bald eagles, South American boa constrictors, and polar bears. Providing an experience of hallucinated observation, zoos offer the illusion of education via entertainment, perpetuating the positivist tradition that to see is to learn with an added twist, for how much can you learn if what you see is an assemblage of simulacra?<sup>10</sup>

As an artist who is not beholden to scientific institutions, Dion is able to manipulate display practices with greater freedom and to critique them more effectively. His relation to science is nuanced: he appreciates its factual dimensions, but his artworks are never uncritical; he always questions the use to which facts are put, and the significance that is accorded to them. In the past, the fields of art and science were closely related, both spiritually and practically. By the seventeenth century, however, they had begun to assert their independence and affirm a relative indifference to each other. Contrary to scientific discourse, which relies on deploying facts to advance 'truths', Dion's work (and, indeed, art in general) has recourse to allegory, humour or irony in relation to a given subject. Such rhetorical modes free narrative from the familiar aims of education and from denunciation regarding biodiversity loss. Through embracing a more critical and disruptive approach, Dion does more than simply state how things are. In a delicate balancing act, he addresses the climate emergency and the collapse of ecosystems, taking his audience to task but refusing to condemn them outright. The exhibition of Dion's works in contemporary art galleries, as often as in natural history museums, contributes significantly to the bridges the artist is able to build between the art and science.

## Now That They Are Gone

Although of considerable interest, I will not be examining Dion's treatment of past extinctions in depth. I will, however, provide a brief overview of this aspect of the artist's practice. To remind us of vanished animals and plants, Dion uses specimens drawn from museum collections, or produces representations of them. Working across artmaking and curating, Dion has reflected on some major extinctions from the deep past. For example, the 1995 installation *When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth (Toys 'R' U.S.)*, which recreates a child's bedroom, combines a number of real and imagined representations of dinosaurs in different media, including plastic play toys, duvet covers, wallpaper, decals and videos. The work immerses the visitor in how a child's vision of the age of dinosaurs is formed, with dinosaur species of different periods and habitats combined pell-mell. The commodification of dinosaurs is also brought to the fore, as these extinct species are now big business. Some projects make direct reference to extinct species through their titles, such as the 1995 solo exhibition *DODO* held at the Tanya Rumpff gallery in Amsterdam.

In the same spirit, the 2014 installation *Harbingers of the Fifth Season* takes the form of a workroom, a desk and swivel chair shielded from view on one side by a wooden screen. On the desk a box of paints lies open alongside an enamel tray containing a magnifying glass and other items. A number of books, with titles such as *Animal Invaders* and *Pests and Diseases*, are lined up at the back of the desktop. The implication is that this is the desk of a scientific illustrator. It is possible to walk around the installation and view the screen from both sides. On one side, the side facing inwards towards the workspace, a map of the world is tacked to a corkboard, alongside watercolours of animal and plant species adjudged to be invasive (such as ants, ticks and several rodents). The side facing outwards comprises a blackboard on which the names of extinct species, such as the dodo, the passenger pigeon, the pink-headed duck, the quagga and the thylacine, are scrawled in chalk. Although the list looks beyond 'canonical' extinct species, listing lesser-known examples such as Schomburgk's deer and the Indefatigable Galápagos mouse, it is still highly selective. Dion also includes no likenesses of the extinct animals that are referenced.<sup>11</sup> In the work, they are only alluded to in the abstract, their past existence solely attested to by way of their common names. The names would be invisible to anyone seated at the desk, a powerful metaphor for their literal disappearance.

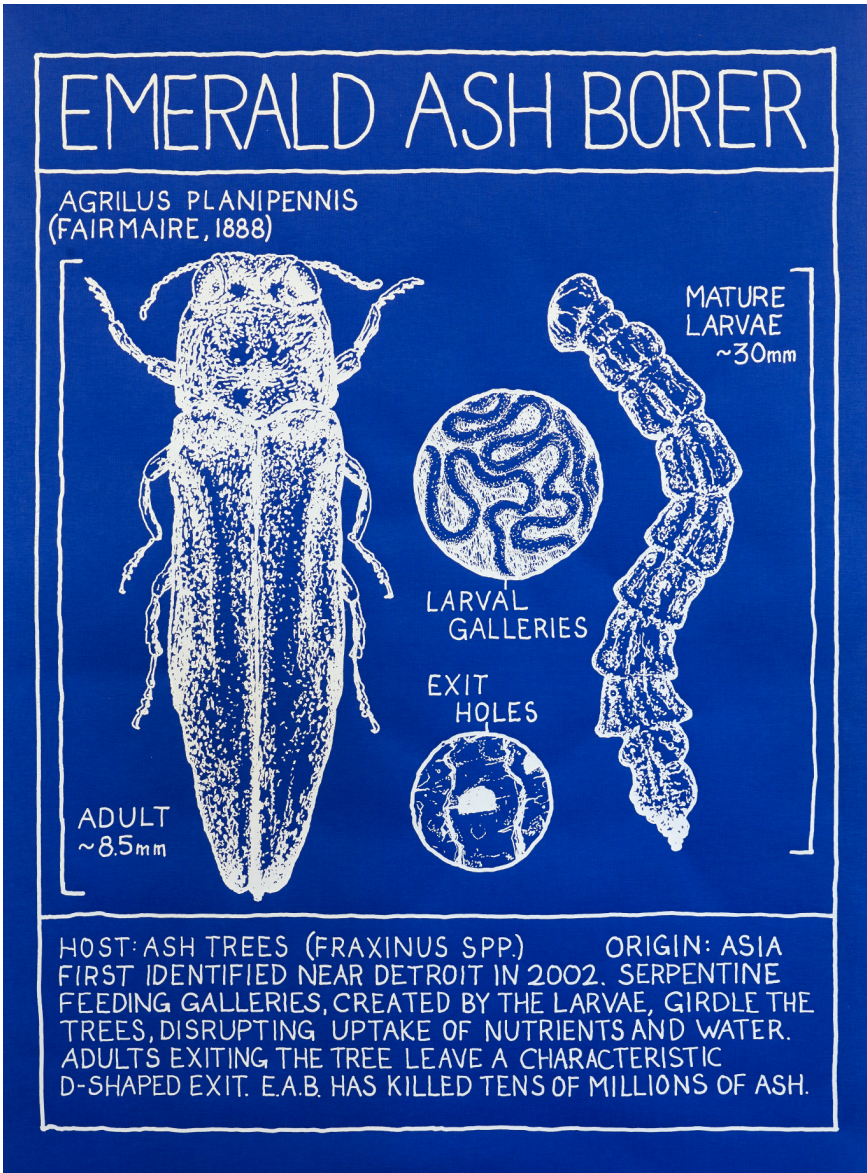
Through a work such as *Harbingers of the Fifth Season*, Dion therefore exploits the power dynamics of exhibition practices linked to the representation and understanding of species for critical purposes. The work refuses

to simply serve as a memorial, commemorating extinct species and listing the extinct and/or endangered. Rather, Dion's installation encourages visitors to reflect on the potential interrelationships that exist between the extinct and the invasive species referenced on opposing sides of the screen, drawing links between them. The empty chair in the workshop might be read as standing for the artist/scientist. He has created what we see, but takes his leave to enable us to draw our own connections. The work can be read as a commentary on extinction and on how it might responsibly be represented.

### They Are the Last

In 2019, *The Life of a Dead Tree* was exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Toronto. For this temporary work, Dion drew on scientific approaches to tackle the issue of endangered species. *The Life of a Dead Tree* is hybrid in nature. It included a scientific laboratory, scientific photographs and dioramas. These might all feature in a science museum but here they appeared in a museum of contemporary art. In the exhibition space, a dead ash tree was displayed on its side. It was substantial, monumental in scale. A post-mortem of the tree revealed that it had formed the habitat for a whole host of different species, including fungi and invertebrates. These lived on and in its roots and bark. One of these species, the emerald ash borer (*Agrilus planipennis*) caused its death. It is a small beetle. The ash tree therefore dwarfed the insect, bringing home the reality that great size is no protector against affliction. The beetle gets its name from its colouring, as its exoskeleton has an emerald green metallic sheen. The smaragdine aspect of the shell of the insect, its bejewelled appearance, renders it aesthetically appealing. It conforms to commonly held notions of beauty. This shocked some visitors, as they found themselves admiring the very insect that killed the tree. The reality that such a small creature could destroy such a giant tree also piqued their curiosity. The borer therefore embodied a double-bind, both attracting and repelling.

Organisms such as insects are usually unwelcomed in galleries, posing a threat to the art on display. Dion's work, however, deliberately introduced them into the gallery space. Among the display panels, there were macroscopic photographs and diagrams providing information about the insects (Illustration 18.1). There was also a film about the how the tree was sourced, and a mock science laboratory. A scientist, Alexandra Ntoukas, was sometimes present conducting research, contributing to the ongoing development of the work. Her participation physically served to break down any simple opposition between art and science. The exhibition involved collat-



**Illustration 18.1** Mark Dion, *The Life of a Dead Tree – Emerald Ash Borer*, 2019. Illustration by Matthew Wells. Silkscreen on paper. 24 × 18 inches. Photo: Tom Arban. Courtesy the artist, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles.

ing data that was shared with both the Royal Ontario Museum and the University of Toronto's Faculty of Forestry. Sample-taking occurred under the watchful eye of visitors. Some of the more inquisitive among them could approach Ntoukas as she worked, seeing what she did and asking questions. Dion therefore encouraged a sense of science being accessible.

Species of ash tree first appeared 50 million years ago, but the genus is now in danger of disappearing from the Western world because of the emerald ash borer. The beetle is viewed as invasive and highly destructive. Female borers lay their eggs beneath the bark of trees or in crevices in the bark. Once the eggs hatch, the larvae burrow to where the bark meets the wood and feed there, blocking the tree's circulation of nutrients. The borer is already responsible for the deaths of millions of North American trees, ravaging the forests of Canada and the United States.<sup>12</sup> A species native to East Asia, the borer is common in countries such as China, Japan and Mongolia. It was first noted in the United States in May 2002 in south-east Michigan, but has since spread through much of the North American continent. Dion's work drew attention to the impact of the borer not just on the ash tree but on the other organisms for which it provides a habitat. Through the accompanying photographs, *The Life of a Dead Tree* catalogued the various invertebrates and fungi that shelter in the ash. In viewing the exhibition, visitors come to realize that the death of the ash is just the first step in a chain of events that impact many different species.

Another way of displaying critically endangered or endangered species is to focus on an individual animal from a herd as a means to monitor the effects of population decline. In his 2001 work *Park (Mobile Wilderness Unit)*, Dion features a taxidermy mount of a bison (*Bison bison*) enclosed in a narrow glass case, the base of which is covered in earth, stones, twigs and broken branches so as to resemble a forest floor. The case is mounted on wheels, so in some ways it resembles a goods wagon. The resemblance to a form of railway transport provides a visual reminder of the devastating impact of the Transcontinental Railroad on bison in the United States. The cramped confines of the case give a strong sense of encroachment. The display also connotes dioramas of the kind found in natural history museums, and the situation of living bison today, many of which are held in captivity, unable to roam freely. A species that is now massively reduced in numbers compared to the early nineteenth century, corralled in national parks, continues to embody an image of wilderness in the popular imagination. Dion exploits this fantasy of the bison, subverting the notion of the wild through rendering it the subject of his artwork. The stuffed bison in its artificial habitat is shown to be a product of culture rather than nature. In fact, as Rachel Poliquin observes of such mounts: 'As dead and mounted animals, [they] are thoroughly cultural objects: yet as pieces of nature, [they] are



thoroughly beyond culture. Animal or object? Animal and object? This is the irresolvable tension that defines taxidermy.<sup>13</sup>

Dion's critique is articulated through a number of aspects of the artwork: the isolation of the taxidermy mount, its objectification, its constriction, the painted background and the addition of wheels rendering the display mobile. Above all, the work references the diorama, a mode of display that supposedly grants the museum visitor access to an animal's natural environment. As he often does when employing museum display methods, Dion engages in a practice of demystification, here revealing the shaky foundations of the diorama's claim to offer a realistic portrayal of nature. Usually, the epistemological and rhetorical dimensions in operation within a given diorama are veiled.<sup>14</sup> Dion, however, exposes and problematizes them, such that, as Giovanni Aloï explains, the diorama becomes 'a tool through which this very rhetoric can be dismantled and appraised'.<sup>15</sup> This appraisal includes noting how 'the specimen also is a deterritorialized animal body that has acquired the status of species representative through a state of isolation and preservation in the scientific cabinet'.<sup>16</sup> Beyond using a solitary animal to showcase a highly social species, deterritorialization is also suggested by way of the wheels, which indicate a willingness to displace this symbolism of the bison, traditionally an icon of wilderness. The artwork reflects the human footprint that shapes both environment and species.

The work *Extinction Series: Black Rhino with Head* (1989) provides another example of a work that examines a single endangered species: the black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*). It features a wooden shipping crate with the lid removed so as to reveal a rhino head in profile emerging from a bed of straw packing. The scene is reminiscent of how artworks are transported. Dion is exploring legacies of colonialism such as animal trafficking. Rhinoceros horns are sometimes used as an expensive ingredient in traditional Asian medicine, and this has greatly encouraged poaching. The work connotes traffic of this kind, and also the traffic in ideas that leads to such practices. Nearby, further crates, this time sealed, are stacked on a pallet. They are suggestive of fragility and of far-off places. These additional crates display images, a map of Africa in Pan-African colours, and photographs portraying the rhinoceros's natural habitat and the perils it faces. Dion draws on taxidermy here to explore ideas about endangerment and extinction. The taxidermy he employs differs from that employed in natural history museums, which follow long-standing conventions and which idealize animals. Museum taxidermy occurs at the intersection of concerns about aesthetics, science and education. Specimens are often shown frozen in action or at rest, but seldom suffering or dying. In Dion's artwork, the rhino head seems serene, despite the absence of its body. The context,

however, changes the reception of the taxidermy mount. It connotes the slaughter and trafficking that the species is subject to.

In a departure from other artworks where Dion presents his viewers with a specimen (such as a taxidermy mount) or foregrounds its absence, the artist also sometimes examines the popular representation of certain species (using drawings or soft toys). In the work *Survival of the Cutest (Who gets on the Ark?)*, which formed part of the ‘Wheelbarrows of Progress’ series that Dion produced in collaboration with William Schefferine, the duo used humour to explore the issue of the Sixth Extinction. Exploiting the freedom of expression that art allows, Dion and Schefferine employ cutting irony to playfully transgress conventions. Contemporary art provides a conduit to think critically about conservation issues. Through its title, the work refers mockingly to Noah’s Ark, and draws attention to the criteria behind decision-making about conservation and the saving of wildlife. It features soft toys in a wheelbarrow, including an elephant, a panda and a polar bear, that have been singled out for saving because of their perceived charisma or cuteness. As well as critiquing the reification of certain species of animal above others, the display condemns the way species are classified and the role of human decision-making in the management and conservation of biodiversity. As Aloï has noted, the use of the wheelbarrow is key, as it helps to foreground Western attitudes towards the natural world, in which nature is viewed as a resource to be managed and exploited.<sup>17</sup> Discussing this work with Miwon Kwon, Dion highlights the issue of charismatic megafauna:

Generally, in order to raise money for the protection of endangered ecosystems, conservation organizations draw isolated attention to extremely attractive and photogenic animals – tigers, whales, pandas. These are not keystone species, so the system won’t collapse if they are taken out. Of course, all members of an ecosystem are important, but these animals are often the least critical ones, usually peripheral animals at the top of the food chain. They’re not like the beaver or corals, which produce systems that support other animals.<sup>18</sup>

The use of soft toys of animals that are iconic and widely appreciated (other animals that appear in the wheelbarrow include a killer whale, a moose and a zebra) powerfully brings home the idea of cuteness. As Vincent Lavoie has examined, however, far from being a means of escape from life’s horrors, the fascination with cuteness may bind us to it more forcefully.<sup>19</sup> Through *Survival of the Cutest (Who gets on the ark?)*, the discourse used to raise our awareness regarding endangered wildlife – in which cuteness is a key criterion and tool – is critically questioned and ironized.

## Hung Out to Die

Lastly, to foster critical reflection regarding vanishing wildlife, Dion discusses issues of guilt. This topic is difficult to address, even through art. Dion does so in ways that are both nuanced and ambivalent, thereby signalling something of the complexity surrounding the issue. Like other similar works, such as *Killer Killed* (1994–2007), *Tar and Feathers* (1996) and *Monument to the Birds of Puffin Island* (2006), in *Monument to the Birds of Guam* (2005) Dion introduces species that, from an anthropocentric perspective, are viewed as ‘guilty’ of the extinction of others (Illustration 18.2). This guilt is announced as much through the titles of the works as their content. In each of the works, the pest species hangs from trees (in scenes reminiscent of lynching) or are covered in tar (and sometimes feathers). Tarring and feathering was a form of public punishment enacted in Early Modern Europe and later in North America.

*Monument to the Birds of Guam* calls to mind the fact that on the island of Guam (a territory of the United States), the brown tree snake (*Boiga irregularis*) has caused the disappearance of a number of native species of bird. Guam possesses considerable biodiversity, including small mammals, reptiles and numerous bird species. Snakes, however, have no stakeholding in this broad variety of animal life. The snake was inadvertently introduced



**Illustration 18.2** Mark Dion, *Monument to the Birds of Guam*, 2005. 250 × 350 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles. (TBG 20104)

to Guam shortly after the Second World War by naval vessels that visited the island. It is native to Australia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. The snake's population increased exponentially, and it came to imperil the island's biodiversity because it preys on the nests of birds. It has had a devastating impact on Guam's native wildlife, particularly its avifauna including the Guam rail (*Hypotaenidia owstoni*) and the Guam flycatcher (*Myiagra freycineti*), but also on small mammals such as the Guam Mariana fruit bat (*Pteropus mariannus mariannus*) and reptiles like geckos and skinks.

As collateral damage, a war between humans therefore caused a fight for survival between other species in which the brown tree snake has been the victor. The United States Congress officially recognized the threat posed by the snake in the Aquatic Nuisance Prevention and Control Act of 1990, which aimed to prevent the introduction of non-indigenous aquatic nuisance species to American waters and to limit the spread of those already present. This was followed in 2004 by the Brown Tree Snake Control and Eradication Act. Any 'guilt' attributed to the snake is, however, relative. The snake may indeed be the cause of the disappearance of indigenous birdlife, yet human actions brought the reptile to the island. As it had no predators, the species then multiplied until its population was so great as to critically upset the ecosystem. The snake has caused the extinction of eight endemic species of bird, leading Guam to become an avian wasteland.<sup>20</sup> Among those species that are not extinct, some are held in captivity pending a potential future reintroduction to the wild if the snake can be eradicated. *Monument to the Birds of Guam* was inspired by this process of eradication. Made of wood, rubber, metal, string and tar, the work takes the form of a tree of death with snakes hanging by their 'necks' from its branches. The leafless tree, an improvised gallows, seems rooted in a pool of tar shaped like Guam. Because the entire tree appears to be coated in tar (connoting the practice of tarring and feathering) and the snakes seem to have been strung up, the work establishes a link between the idea of 'justice' and the process of eradication currently underway in Guam. It could be read as embodying the notion of 'lex talionis', of an eye for an eye. The snakes have caused extinctions and will in their turn be extirpated. Any thought of justice is, however, complicated by the kind of punishment that is displayed. Depending on the historical context and on your point of view, practices such as hanging or tarring and feathering can be viewed as forms of injustice.

This dimension to the work gives it an added critical force. The work's title, *Monument to the Birds of Guam*, suggests it commemorates the birds that have become extinct. The snakes have been held accountable for their 'unjust' actions. Monuments, however, usually ennoble or solemnify their subject. Dion's monument – a tree of death that acts as a scaffold – does

not conform to conventions of the genre. It provides a bleak vision of loss, the arboreal snakes put to death in the branches of a tree they might otherwise call home. No birds are visible in this blackened tree. The monument to their extinction is a cycle of further destruction. Through its showing the tarred snakes, the work provides a nuanced perspective on the situation in Guam. Visitors feel empathy for the reptiles in the face of the fate that awaits them. The monument figures the legislation passed by Congress that sanctioned the extermination of the brown tree snake. The artwork therefore foregrounds the complex reality of the situation in Guam, the intertwined fates of the birds and snakes, and the important role played by human action in it. The snakes fall victim to their own adaptability but also to the human activities that brought them there in the first place. It is human action that is at the centre of these major disruptions to the Guamanian ecosystem. This is why, in works such as *Monument to the Birds of Guam*, human intervention always lurks in the background, acting like a watermark which becomes visible when the work is viewed in a certain light. Humans are not shown but, through the snakes hung out to dry, it is their actions that are indexed.

### A Conclusion of Sorts

In the everyday, it is not always possible to grasp the scale of the Sixth Extinction that is currently unfolding. Dion's artworks and display practices raise awareness of the extinction, documenting and critically examining it. He reminds them that scientific discourse does not have a monopoly regarding how nature is thought about or understood. Dion tirelessly questions the roles and responsibilities of traditional institutions of knowledge, such as museums. Museums are customarily sites where existing knowledge is preserved and communicated. Dion asks in what ways they are able to describe and engage with contemporary concerns. Is there a willingness, for example, to question the taxonomic system, which positions humans at the apex of the natural world, separate from and superior to all other forms of life? Will scientific institutions go out on a limb and cut the topmost branch of the tree of life that splits the human from the animal?

Through my engagement with Dion's work, I have drawn attention to the important role that contemporary art has to play in critically and effectively addressing the topic of extinction. Dion's works of the 1990s are marked by humour and the use of irony. His more recent projects, however, strike a more serious tone, acting as calls to action through their invitation to critical reflection. Climate change and the accelerating rate of extinction have led Dion to insist on the urgency of doing something tangible. He

has observed: 'I am increasingly pessimistic about the future. In each area I care about, I see nothing but discouraging developments. My work in general is right now more fuelled by anger than by hope'.<sup>21</sup> This pessimism is reflected in the increasingly serious tenor of his more recent works. The works are not devoid of humour but appear more sober than his early projects. A different, more caustic, jesting has emerged, a biting satire that accompanies the portrayals of the tragic events that he shares with his audience. Before not too long, Dion seems to be saying, humankind will be joining the long list of extinct species.

*Translated by Nicholas Chare.*

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## Notes

1. Dion and Thompson, 'Interview with Mark Dion', 53.
2. See Berger, *About Looking*; Berger, *Why Look at Animals?*; and Aloï, *Why Look at Plants?*
3. Thorsen, Rader and Dodd, *Animals on Display*.
4. For a generalist approach to Dion's work, see Graziose, Kwon and Norman, *Mark Dion*. For a specific consideration of the role of taxidermy, see Aloï, *Speculative Taxidermy*.
5. See, for instance, Fraser, 'L'exposition à la puissance deux'.
6. See Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*.
7. Bal, *Double Exposures*.
8. Fraser, *Zoo*, 55.
9. Berger, *Why Look at Animals?*, 52.
10. Ramos, 'Looking at Animals', 87–89.
11. The Indefatigable Galápagos mouse (*Nesoryzomys indefessus*) even suffered the ignominy of having its name misspelled as 'Glapagos'.
12. These ravages have symbolic as well as ecological impact, because in Norse mythology the ash tree, *Yggdrasil*, was sacred and revered as the centre of the known world.
13. Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo*, 5.
14. Bal, *Double Exposures*.

15. Aloi, *Speculative Taxidermy*, 105.
16. Aloi, *Art and Animals*, 35.
17. *Ibid.*, 103.
18. Kwon, 'Miwon Kwon in Conversation with Mark Dion', 18.
19. Lavoie, *Trop mignon!*
20. Fritts and Rodda, 'The Role of Introduced Species'.
21. Aloi, *Art and Animals*, 150.

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