

MacKenna S. Hanson

Professor Giovanni Aloï

Art History 3652-001: Taxidermy and Contemporary Art

19 April 2023

### Women's Work: Victorian Cool Girls and the Death Dichotomy

The historical artwork which was intended to be described in this essay no longer exists.

It exists ephemerally; that is, we can see examples of it through a few sepia-toned photographs. We can imagine how it would have looked in full color. However, it is impossible to point to one currently existing taxidermy mount and name it “Martha Maxwell’s first stuffed deer,” or “Martha Maxwell’s eleventh stuffed bird of prey.” Henceforth in this essay, the taxidermy mounts which no longer exist shall be known as Lost Art. We have proof of its existence through photos—such as this photograph sourced from the Colorado Women’s Hall of Fame—in which Martha Maxwell, the taxidermist, is leaning on a taxidermy creation:



*Martha Maxwell, Untitled, various taxidermy materials, likely mounted 1863-1876*

I am not myself a taxidermist, so I cannot comment properly upon the quality of the taxidermy itself. To my untrained eyes, it appears competently stuffed and carries an uncanny resemblance to life—which was the goal of most, if not all, Victorian-era taxidermy. The Lost Art of Martha Maxwell can be presumed to have been created sometime between 1863-1876, for

in 1868 “she opened a museum in Boulder and later showed her stuffed mammals and birds at the Colorado Agricultural Society Fair in Denver and the American Centennial Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia.”<sup>1</sup>

Martha Maxwell’s Lost Art suffers from the same ethical quandaries which plague other mounts created (mostly by white, wealthy men) at the time: The humanist impulse to capture the Other and gaze at it for eternity, thereby fulfilling the urge to capture the sublime, thereby robbing the animal of its agency, thereby...and it goes on.<sup>2</sup> The point of this writing is not to discuss the problems that the Lost Art carries within itself, for more educated scholars have already done that far better than this author could. The point is to discuss how it is a complication of feminism itself that we can even have discourse over the ethical quandaries of Maxwell’s Lost Art.

Martha Maxwell was an American taxidermist, author, hunter, and vegetarian. Born on July 21, 1831, she moved to Colorado in 1860, when financial devastation caused her and her husband to head west in search of fortune. There, she fell in love with the beauty of Colorado’s nature, and began hunting and stuffing dozens of animals. When she found success and opened up a museum to display her Lost Art, she was met with disbelief. The public at the time struggled to understand that it was possible for a woman to have created such fine taxidermy. On the heels of this disbelief, Maxwell grew irritated and hung up a sign indicating that all of the Lost Art was “Woman’s Work.”<sup>3</sup>

From there, over the decades, Maxwell’s reputation as a feminist grew. Although she died in 1881 and was not part of the initial suffrage movement, Maxwell is now lauded as an early feminist icon by organizations such as the National Cowboy Museum, the United Taxidermy Association, and the Colorado Women’s Hall of Fame. In particular, Allis Markham’s 2019 United Taxidermy Association article cements this idealization: “Martha may have died in 1881

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘Martha Maxwell’. [n.d.]. *Colorado Women’s Hall of Fame*  
<<https://www.cogreatwomen.org/project/martha-maxwell/>> [accessed 13 April 2023]

<sup>2</sup> Aloï, Giovanni. 2018. *Speculative Taxidermy Natural History, Animal Surfaces, and Art in the Anthropocene* (Columbia University Press)

<sup>3</sup> “‘Did She Kill 'Em All?’ Martha Maxwell, Colorado Huntress’. [n.d.]. *National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum*  
<<https://nationalcowboymuseum.org/explore/kill-em-martha-maxwell-colorado-huntress/>> [accessed 13 April 2023]

but her spirit is something we can all connect with today. She gave women someone to point to and say ‘I want to be like her.’ Her. Not him. I can see myself doing it because she did it. That’s an important distinction to make for a young woman.”<sup>4</sup>

Something about this labeling of Maxwell as a feminist, even as she quite literally was a proto-feminist in life, bothered me. It did not bother me in that I was disturbed to see Maxwell finally gain recognition for her accomplishments. It was the nature of the accomplishments, and the lack of depth assigned to her legacy, that disturbed me. The Lost Art is seen as precious and fame-worthy because it was equal in quality to that of a man’s made at the time. To gain this long-awaited respect far after her death, the Lost Art had to follow in the same problematic footsteps as men like taxidermist and hunter Carl Akeley. Or perhaps, Maxwell succeeded in following Carl Akeley where Carl Akeley’s own wife, Mary Jobe, failed to follow: Unlike Jobe, she was an accomplished taxidermist herself, and successfully coded her artwork as male according to the tenets of the Teddy Bear Patriarchy: “Nature, Youth, Manhood, the State.”<sup>5</sup>

Let us set that aside for the moment and move forward by nearly two centuries. Much has been written and discussed about the plight of the fairer sex, oppressed as we are, and one of the many hundreds if not thousands of artistic responses to this discussion was the 2009 founding of European feminist art duo NEOZOON. They, like Maxwell, create art concerning animals; unlike Maxwell, they engage with post-human ideas such as the Anthropocene, which was impossible for Maxwell to engage with as the concept of the Anthropocene did not exist at the time—although the Anthropocene itself most certainly did.<sup>6</sup> However, NEOZOON’s art also focuses on a different subject Maxwell shied away from: Gender.

NEOZOON’s 2014 found footage work “MY BBY 8L3W” explicitly concerns itself with womanhood. “MY BBY 8L3W” features women who, initially, are simply declaring how much they love their puppies. It becomes unsettling when one realizes that they are repeating the same

---

<sup>4</sup> Markham, Allis. 2019. “Martha Maxwell - Women in Taxidermy.” United Taxidermist Association. November 18, 2019. <https://unitedtaxidermyassociation.com/women-in-taxidermy/f/womens-work---martha-maxwell>.

<sup>5</sup> Haraway, Donna. 1984. “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936.” *Social Text*, no. 11: 20. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466593>.

<sup>6</sup> Aloï, Giovanni. 2023. Lectures presented at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's MacLean Center, Lecture. Chicago, Illinois.

phrases—”fur babies,” “say hi!,” etc. The work culminates by showing us these (young, mostly white though not all, seemingly financially comfortable for they can care for a pet and have Internet connection) women literally breastfeeding their non-human pets.<sup>7</sup>

Contradictions thus arise between Maxwell’s *Lost Art* and NEOZOON’s “MY BBY 8L3W”. Maxwell killed animals, “MY BBY 8L3W”’s subjects are nourishing animals. The *Lost Art* was created in the American Victorian era with Victorian-era technology. “MY BBY 8L3W” was created in 2014 with contemporary technology and was sourced internationally. Maxwell’s *Lost Art* catered to a general public of Americans fresh off the heels of the Civil War. “MY BBY 8L3W” caters to a decidedly more diverse and international audience of scholars and artists concerned with animal ethics. The only through line is this: Both artists are female.

The arbitrary circumstance of being female has an indelible impact on both artist’s work. “MY BBY 8L3W” confronts the world’s tumultuous relationship with femininity with humor and sharp satire, such as when multiple videos of women saying the same words like “love” are edited together. This humor is undercut with implicit social commentary—commentary about motherhood, the push to become mothers on young women, and how one can escape the trap of motherhood if they adopt a “fur baby” and retain independent status while being able to label themselves as mothers; albeit, not mothers to human children. Maxwell was doing everything possible to avoid such implications in her work, which in itself is a contradiction. Although she wanted her work to be known as woman-made, she tried to make it indistinguishable from male-created taxidermy. Here we come upon another complication between NEOZOON’s found footage artwork and Martha’s *Lost Art*.

In Dr. Giovanni Aloï’s essay “Power, Realism, and Decorum,”<sup>8</sup> he explains the concept of veridicality; the idea of truthfulness, and the degree to which something can possess or reveal the truth. Looking at gender and taxidermy through the lens of veridicality quickly complicates both concepts. Taxidermy is distinguishable from most arts in that it uses the literal components of its subject to create the art rather than represent it; Aloï uses Western classical art as his example. Where classical art is concerned with perfect representation, taxidermy is concerned

---

<sup>7</sup> NEOZOON. 2014. “MY BBY 8L3W - Wwww.neozoon.org.” Wwww.neozoon.org. 2014. <https://www.neozoon.org/MY-BBY-8L3W>.

<sup>8</sup> Aloï, Giovanni. 2018. *Speculative Taxidermy Natural History, Animal Surfaces, and Art in the Anthropocene*. Columbia University Press.

with perfect lifelike realism. Taxidermy has an advantage over classical art in veridicality because taxidermy is quite literally manipulating the physical material of the artist's chosen subject. Found footage also has an element of veridicality which eludes classical mediums such as painting and sculpture. Because found footage is both the medium of NEOZOON's work and the message itself, untouched by the artist except through editing (as the taxidermist edits the animal's skin), both taxidermy and found footage possess a veridicality classical art could never achieve.

Having established the similar degrees of veridicality in "MY BBY 8L3W" and Maxwell's Lost Art, one can begin to explore the impact of veridicality upon gendered readings of both the art and the artists. In her landmark 1971 essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," Linda Nochlin touches upon common sexist tropes that Virginia Woolf also dissected in her essay "A Room Of One's Own"—a mere 42 years before Nochlin. Namely, the idea that those assigned female at birth create art with an inherently delicate touch; that "women artists are more inward-looking"<sup>9</sup> and that it is possible to tell the difference between male and female artworks. This notion fed into the idea of there being no "great women artists" or writers. In our time, we know this is the case because women throughout history have not had access to the same level of education and institutions that men have had, exemplified by Woolf's hypothetical conception of Shakespeare's genius sister who fell prey to prostitution and poverty in the Elizabethan London acting scene.<sup>10</sup> Yet the stereotype still stands, showing that it is nearly impossible to extricate an understanding of women-made artwork from gender norms.

However, both Woolf and Nochlin were responding to two arts: the language arts, and the classical visual arts (Nochlin referenced famous male artists from Caravaggio to Warhol, both painters [though of a very different type], and Woolf, of course, famously uses Shakespeare as her image of the perfect author). Neither of them referenced taxidermy or found footage as mediums. This is understandable given the time periods both of them were operating in. I would like to make a case regarding veridicality, invisible gender, and the archetypal mother.

---

<sup>9</sup> Nochlin, Linda. 2015. "From 1971: Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" ARTnews.com. May 30, 2015. <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists-4201/>.

<sup>10</sup> Woolf, Virginia. 1929. *A Room of One's Own*. London: Hogarth Press.

The veridicality inherent to taxidermy and found footage is what creates the divide between NEOZOON's approach to their art and Maxwell's approach. Irregardless of the toxic myth that one can tell the gender of the artist simply by observing the art, even if one believed in that myth, it would be impossible for the believer to determine the gender of the Lost Art's creator through simple observation. Both a Victorian male taxidermist and a Victorian female taxidermist work with the same veridical material and the same goal in mind; create a lifelike resurrection of the animal using its corpse. Any mistakes made would be equally shared between both genders.

Such an invisibility of gender would be possible with found footage as well, were it not for NEOZOON's intentional feminist messaging. Where Maxwell tried to hide her gender under the neutral, truthful surface of taxidermy, NEOZOON takes a non-gendered object (found footage) and purposely picks clips that show only women, speak only words typically associated with femininity ("cute," "love", "baby") and name their project "MY BBY 8L3W", using those same gender-loaded words. Where NEOZOON openly embraces the female aspects of their work, and indeed does everything possible to engineer the art towards femininity, Maxwell both shies away from her gender while becoming frustrated with people regarding her art as male-created—as male was the baseline, the true neutral; is always the baseline and the true neutral. That is the trap NEOZOON avoided by making their art so explicitly gendered.

This naturally leads us to wonder at the contradiction inherent in Maxwell's work. If she cared so deeply about her taxidermy being seen as made by a woman, why did she chose a medium like taxidermy, where the artist's touch is significantly more subtle than that of something like painting, and why did she try so hard to have her work regarded as both reaching the level of a male artist yet made by a female? Once again, we turn to Nochlin for answers. Lack of institutional access for women would have made painting near-impossible for Maxwell, as her family lost their fortune. Even if she had been inclined towards the classical arts, she presumably would not be able to afford a private tutor or studio. As for her inclination towards taxidermy rather than another medium which possesses enough veridicality to allow her gender to be socially invisible like photography, we can only speculate. Her second goal, that of her work being regarded with both masculine qualities and women-made, is one marred by the flaws of her time; some of which haunt us today. I like to call it the Victorian Cool Girl syndrome,

named for the character Amy Dunne's famous monologue in the book *Gone Girl*.<sup>11</sup> To dissect this archetype, we must revisit Carl Akeley and Mary Jobe.

Mary Jobe serves as the perfect example of a Victorian Cool Girl. Her actions are all centered around her husband. She is clever, but only clever insofar as she can aid her husband's work. She is brave, but only regarding her ability to "valiantly [mount] a rescue party in the middle of the night against the wishes of her guides" to save Akeley. When the object of her work—Carl Akeley—died, "her purpose was no longer to raise money and tell stories to other hunters, but to promote conservation and fulfill her life's purpose—accomplishing her husband's life work."<sup>12</sup> From these examples, it can seem like Mary Jobe only lived for Carl Akeley; which is in and of itself a misogynistic trope. This is where the multifaceted nature of the Victorian Cool Girl comes into play.

Mary Jobe was at once a Victorian Cool Girl—a woman who upheld patriarchal, racist standards—and an oppressed figure. In the annals of history, she has not been allowed her own story; her and Carl Akeley are "one flesh," as Eve sprung from Adam's rib, and their stories "blend imperceptibly."<sup>13</sup> The only way Mary Jobe was ever going to gain recognition for her own considerable talent in hunting was by attaching herself to one of history's Great Men—a Great Man being a person, always male, who was born a genius and destined for world-changing success. This conclusion shifts the contemporary reader's perspective from falling into the prejudiced idea that Mary Jobe was a simpering, doting spouse to understanding that she was aware of her lack of agency under the systems of power (systems that believed in the Great Man Theory), so she hijacked those systems in order to secure her legacy. This is not to be understood as a "girl power" moment. This is to be understood as a tragedy, wherein the only way an oppressed person felt she could secure her own personhood was by submitting to a Great Man and engaging in the same systems of bigotry which oppressed her.

Maxwell serves as a mirror image of Mary Jobe. She did not need to attach herself to a Great Man, yet she still upheld the insidious nature of the Teddy Bear Patriarchy by garnering

---

<sup>11</sup> Flynn, Gillian. 2012. *Gone Girl*. New York: Broadway Books.

<sup>12</sup> Haraway, Donna. 1984. "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936." *Social Text*, no. 11: 20. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466593>.

<sup>13</sup> Haraway, Donna. 1984. "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936." *Social Text*, no. 11: 20. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466593>.

her fame and acclaim from hunting—an act which, at the time, was nearly exclusively reserved for men. And to not hunt for sustenance only, but to hunt in the name of taxidermy? That was an act nearly exclusively reserved for *powerful, white* men, which further elevated Maxwell's status even as it lowered that of taxidermy's—as Donna Haraway elegantly points out, a woman demonstrating success in a male-dominated field suggests to men that perhaps that field is not as difficult or worthy of respect as previously thought.

This dissection of the Victorian Cool Girl brings us back to contemporary times and “MY BBY 8L3W”. The Victorian Cool Girl has morphed into the current Cool Girl. The Cool Girl, much like the Victorian Cool Girl, is aware of the limitations impressed upon her by the patriarchy. But instead of needing to find herself a Great Man, the contemporary Cool Girl has the freedom to live independently; she can now vote, own her own credit card and land, and can get an education (hampered though that education might be by institutional bias). Yet the structures of the Teddy Bear Patriarchy have not collapsed in the nearly 200 years since Martha Maxwell's birth. Rather, they have shifted into more subtle social pressures. These social pressures become blindingly obvious in “MY BBY 8L3W”. Namely, the social pressure of motherhood.

Motherhood is a specter which looms over all young women. We are told it is our biological duty to further the human race. Motherhood is the highest social rank a female can achieve. We are warned constantly to not allow ourselves to become pregnant before we are married, for that would eternally connect us with a man who will never care about us (the possibility of the man being a father is never raised). We are warned that to become a mother will destroy our careers, our life, unless we are ready to give up our lives—our very bodies—in service to other people until the day we die. The possibility of balancing a career and motherhood is never discussed. If it is, it is mentioned in hypotheticals and is always seen as nearly impossible to achieve. This leaves people assigned female at birth with a difficult, unavoidable choice. Do we become mothers and earn the admiration of society, or do we do everything possible to avoid it, keep our freedom, and earn a different sort of admiration—one marred by comments such as “You would have been a great mother” or “Having children was the best decision I ever made”?

“MY BBY 8L3W” offers an alternative to these fates. Instead of having children, we can have pets. Puppies, in particular. The puppy is an animal which symbolizes cuteness, purity, and



innocence, yet is of a male-coded species (unlike kittens)—all qualities we admire in human children as well. Innocence and maleness. By using a puppy as a child stand-in, the young women featured in “MY BBY 8L3W” get to express to the world via the Internet that they are indeed fit mothers; they are nurturing and kind as females ought to be; yet they are also Cool Girls in possession of freedom from both men and human babies. This is taken to rather disturbing extremes as the video progresses. The image of puppies suckling at a human woman’s breast is not one easily forgotten, and it is worth remembering that this is a found footage artwork, meaning that all of these women decided to speak their lines about “fur babies” and suckle their puppies without prior collusion. Clearly, there is a larger force at play—the previously explored societal forces of the Teddy Bear Patriarchy.

But what does this have to do with our Victorian Cool Girls? Given the time period they were alive, it is natural to assume they were mothers or took care of children in some fashion, despite information about their personal lives being rather thin on the ground. Yet they are not remembered for motherhood—they are both remembered for their accomplishments in taxidermy, and/or their proximity to Great Men in the field. There is a dichotomy present between the Victorian Cool Girl and the contemporary Cool Girl. I call it the “Death Dichotomy.”

Both the Victorian Cool Girl and the Cool Girl are women. It is inextricable from their social identities. Yet the Victorian Cool Girl gains status through her engagement in hunting and taxidermy—she kills to nurture. Her taxidermy becomes her children; she harnesses the innate nurturing power of a mother, the same power that gives women’s art a delicate touch, to bring her taxidermy to as close to life as possible. (The man, of course, achieves quality taxidermy based on his own skills and hard work, not an innate feminine power). She marries a man, preferably one who also hunts, because to be married is to continue to engage in femininity and it gives her enough economic and social leeway so that if someone questions her engaging in the traditionally male act of hunting, she can point to her husband and say she is still a woman. The Victorian Cool Girl kills so she can demonstrate her skill as a life-bringer. A mother.

The Cool Girl is of a more enlightened time than the Victorian Cool Girl, and does not hunt. She is a strong, independent woman who has not attached herself to a man like the Victorian Cool Girl. In this modern age, she does not need a man, and indeed, to have a husband would be a black mark on her identity as a Cool Girl. The Cool Girl is always available yet

permanently untouchable—if she became pregnant, she would cease to be Cool and would instead enter dreaded Motherhood. Yet how can she possibly lay claim to the identity of a woman if she is unmarried and not a mother? Everyone knows those are the only two ways a woman can be a woman. To maintain her social femininity, instead of killing animals to achieve patriarchal acclaim while demonstrating a nurturing quality, the Cool Girl adopts animals—she wins her acclaim by engaging in the traditionally masculine act of living independently, while maintaining her femininity through proving that she would be a good mother by raising pets.

For the Victorian Cool Girl, death is an essential element of maintaining femininity while proving herself masculine enough to deserve respect. The Cool Girl does not kill so literally. Instead, she metaphorically kills any chance of having a human baby—she kills the option of traditional motherhood so that she may maintain her hard-won independent life; a life she feels she owes her ancestors because they fought so hard to give her the right to vote and the right to own land and all the other rights Victorian Cool Girls had to do without. By engaging in the act of killing, both Cool Girls and Victorian Cool Girls prove themselves worthy of the regard of men.

They need the regard of men to maintain their tenuous freedom. Taxidermy, hunting, killing, raising animals; they must perform these actions or risk losing all that they have gained. They do not garner respect on their own terms. Their respect must be strictly policed and constantly maintained. Whether they are Civil War-era taxidermists, hunters at the dawn of the 20th century, or young women raising puppies, they must use the tools given to them by the Teddy Bear Patriarchy, and they must step on those weaker than themselves in pursuit of an impossible goal—to become equal to Man.

## Bibliography

- Aloi, Giovanni. 2018. *Speculative Taxidermy Natural History, Animal Surfaces, and Art in the Anthropocene*. Columbia University Press.
- Aloi, Giovanni. 2023. Lectures presented at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's MacLean Center, Lecture. Chicago, Illinois.
- Flynn, Gillian. 2012. *Gone Girl*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Haraway, Donna. 1984. "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936." *Social Text*, no. 11: 20. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466593>.
- Markham, Allis. 2019. "Martha Maxwell - Women in Taxidermy." United Taxidermist Association. November 18, 2019.  
<https://unitedtaxidermyassociation.com/women-in-taxidermy/f/womens-work---martha-maxwell>.
- "Martha Maxwell." n.d. Colorado Women's Hall of Fame. Accessed April 13, 2023.  
<https://www.cogreatwomen.org/project/martha-maxwell/>.
- NEOZOON. 2014. "MY BBY 8L3W - Wwww.neozoon.org." Wwww.neozoon.org. 2014.  
<https://www.neozoon.org/MY-BBY-8L3W>.
- Nochlin, Linda. 2015. "From 1971: Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" ARTnews.com. May 30, 2015.  
<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists-4201/>.
- "Did She Kill 'Em All?" Martha Maxwell, Colorado Huntress." n.d. National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum. Accessed April 13, 2023.  
<https://nationalcowboymuseum.org/explore/kill-em-martha-maxwell-colorado-huntress/>.
- Woolf, Virginia. 1929. *A Room of One's Own*. London: Hogarth Press.