

Re-collecting Natural History: Spoerri in Vienna (2012)

Cecilia Novero

This essay analyses contemporary artist Daniel Spoerri's 2012 retrospective exhibition titled *Ein Inkompetenter Dialog?*¹ held at the Natural History Museum Vienna (NHM). The exhibition comprised a selection of works from Spoerri's oeuvre shown alongside examples of the museum's specimens. I argue that *Ein Inkompetenter Dialog?*, both as a collection of Spoerri's works and as an archive of the artist's career, playfully calls into question the 'nature' of art, the presentation of nature in the Natural History Museum Vienna, and the temporality of the archive and natural history. Much of Spoerri's oeuvre involves the reworking and assemblage of his own collections of found objects. These imaginative assemblages, which merge human and non-human life, present concrete visions of alternative natural histories. Further, they prompt us to rethink natural history from a multispecies perspective, where humans and non-humans function as co-agents, and where history and natural history are fused. In the following pages, I shall suggest that Spoerri's creative exploration of the material archives of natural history presents both an alternative approach to re-collecting the past, and the possibility of writing history with an eye to a non-anthropocentric future. Over the last twenty years or so, natural history museums have increasingly enlisted artists to work and exhibit in their spaces, either by way of artist in residence programs or through commissions. Rather than simply providing another setting, natural history museums encourage artists to interact with their collections and displays as well as with the history and function of the museums themselves. As Bergit Arends, a former curator of the Natural History Museum London, states, the artist's role in this case is "to provoke and challenge the Museum's understanding of itself [...] to disrupt engrained perceptions for the benefit of the Museum, to change its course and to reveal new knowledge in this process."² In turn, the artists have used the institutional settings as alternative spaces of exhibition insofar as the natural history museums stand apart from the institutional and market-oriented art worlds.

1 I thank Daniel Spoerri and Barbara Räderscheidt for providing crucial information about Spoerri's *Inkompetenter Dialog?* My thanks also go to Gautam Ghosh for his precious comments on an earlier version of this essay, as well as to the New Zealand Centre for Human-Animal Studies at the University of Canterbury, in particular to Philip Armstrong. This essay is a revised version of "Art in the Archives of Natural History: The Temporalities of Spoerri's *Ein Inkompetenter Dialog?*" in *seminar* 53/3, 2017, pp. 251-274.

2 Bergit Arends, "Contemporary arts in the Natural History Museum London: symbiosis and disruption", in *Jcom* 8/2, 2009, pp. 1-3, here p. 2.

In recent years, a number of artists have carved a niche by carrying out archival artist projects, mainly site-specific but in some cases process oriented, which have potentially critical and institutive implications.³ The art set in natural history museums is often archival in that the artists work with the museums' collections to reanimate the crowded yet silent exhibition spaces and enliven the typically sedate specimens and displays. For example, for her 2007 exhibition *Little Savages* at the Natural History Museum London, Tessa Farmer constructed displays of taxidermied animals preyed upon by a painstakingly fabricated imaginary species of hybrid parasite-fairies. Drawing on her study of the parasitic lives of Lepidoptera larvae, which feed on the internal organs of caterpillars, Farmer's exhibition served to insert the magical, dark, and in many ways aesthetic themes of symbiosis, ecology, and decay into the display cabinet.⁴

With Mark Dion's 2007 exhibition *Systema Metropolis*, also held at the Natural History Museum London, the visitor could examine, among other things, the outcomes of the collaborative fieldwork of the artist and the museum scientists in the urban natural areas of London, including the graves of Karl Marx, Thomas Huxley, and Emmeline Pankhurst.⁵ Prior to the exhibition, the museum's entomologists, soil experts, and molecular biologists carried out a series of taxonomic experiments around the graves based on the classical morphological observations of Carl Linnaeus and contemporary molecular analysis. The outcomes of these cross-disciplinary experiments were displayed in a multi-media visual format comprising installations, paintings, displays, and object art. Somewhat uncannily, the grave of Charles Darwin's acolyte Huxley turned out to be the most biodiverse. Nonetheless, this too could be explained scientifically, as Huxley's grave lies under an oak, a tree generally regarded as having relatively high numbers of associated species.

Directed at the investigation of nature as discourse and discipline, Dion's art focuses on exposing the pitfalls of 'representation' while moving beyond institutional critique. Instead, his work approaches scientific methodology with an eye to repurposing it or at least refuelling it with alternative strands of imagination by using playfulness to rethink the knotted relations between humans and their environment. Nonetheless, despite its subtle and playful eloquence, in explicitly dealing with the issue of nature, Dion's work remains

3 See the lectures and discussions promoted by the partnership of the *Natural History Museum - Queens Museum*, in particular the talks by Mark Dion, Hans Haacke, and Gavin Grendon at the inauguration of the project on 14 September 2014, URL: <http://thenaturallhistorymuseum.org> [accessed: 04.02.2017], Mark Dion, Hans Haacke, and Gavin Grendon, "Natural History Museum - Queens Museum", *YouTube*, 14 September 2014, URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFqyuCPQwfc> [accessed: 01.02.2017].

4 Giovanni Aloï and Eric Frank, "In Conversation with Tessa Farmer", in *Antennae*, 1/3, 2007, pp. 16-25.

5 Matt Brown, "Mark Dion: Systema Metropolis", in *natura.com*, 15 June 2007, URL: <http://blogs.nature.com/london/2007/06/15/mark-dion-systema-metropolis> [accessed: 02.02.2017].

somewhat blind to the questions of if and how art manifests its own natural-historical temporality.

Notwithstanding their differences, the works of Farmer and Dion share what Hal Foster has called the “archival impulse” or the desire to render present the invisible, lost, or displaced.⁶ Following Foster, these art projects can be said to manifest an intention to partially and personally compile inventories of the vast amounts of material found in natural history museums with the aim of excavating new connections and meanings. Rather than aiming to rescue or conserve the archival artefacts (as natural history museums have done since the nineteenth century), the artists seek to momentarily insert them into new cultural, aesthetic, and scientific contexts. In doing so, the artists probe the museums’ desire to inventory, classify, and display life, whether as art, science, or both. For example, Dion pits the common critique of taxonomic order against the uncontroversial contemporary ecological discourse on biodiversity, highlighting the conundrum that the conservation of biodiversity is dependent on taxonomic work; for her part, Farmer questions the tainted histories of museum conservation and collecting.

In the most incisive and provocative cases, art exhibitions in natural history museums seek to either interrupt the world of scientific displays by producing jarring temporal dissonances or by presenting themselves alongside, atop, or against the collections. From a Benjaminian perspective, the works take the form of allegories by incarnating the natural historical processes that the museums wish to interpret and illustrate. According to Walter Benjamin, allegories are manifestations of the traces of an artwork’s natural life (*natürliche Geschichte*) as a dialectical process of singularity and repetition.⁷

Among the most poignant artistic interventions in natural history museums, I argue, are those that interrogate the relations between historical change, the temporal scales of natural history, and the nature of art, by which I mean the persistence through history of definitions of art. In this respect, Daniel Spoerri’s exhibition *Ein Inkompetenter Dialog?*, which launched the art program at the Natural History Museum Vienna in 2012, is a case in point.

Spoerri’s *Ein Inkompetenter Dialog?*, comprising a retrospective of the artist’s work, was displayed in two rooms alongside selected specimens from the museum’s collection. These assemblages were set apart from the museum’s other exhibition spaces, and the two rooms his works occupied were temporarily altered at Spoerri’s request to more closely resemble a ‘neutral’ exhibition space. Nonetheless, as I see it, Spoerri’s assemblages importantly dialogued with the Museum’s exhibits. Indeed, as a curated selection of Spoerri’s own objects,

6 Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse”, in *October* 110, 2004, here pp. 3–22.

7 On the concept of allegory as it relates to natural history in Walter Benjamin, cf. Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin’s Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels*, Berkeley/Los Angeles, c.1998. This is still the definitive book on Benjamin’s notion of natural history.

crucially as a “retrospective”, his works figured here, in the National History Museum Vienna, as “specimens”. The selected specimens of Spoerri’s object art ostensibly served not only as representatives of his oeuvre but also as the key principles guiding his art. The idea of a retrospective, furthermore, temporalized the spatial relationship between Spoerri’s object-based art, the museum’s systematized and taxonomized collection, and ultimately the natural historical processes that undelie them both. The concept of the retrospective itself typically aims to capture the continuities and discontinuities in an artist’s life’s work. Spoerri’s exhibition temporalized the concept further and differently, in that it juxtaposed it against, confronted it with, and comprehended it within the larger evolutionary mechanisms of nature as captured in the museum.

Furthermore, by devising his exhibition as a retrospective, Spoerri was able to effectively focus on the temporality of art. Thus, unlike other site-specific commissioned art such as Dion’s and Farmer’s, Spoerri’s work highlighted the connections (and disconnections) between the life of art and natural history, and the ways artists and natural historians go about both. Unlike Dion and Farmer, who move as artists but also as ‘field researchers’ in the natural history museum, Spoerri came to the Vienna Natural History Museum as a lay naturalist, a keen amateur of natural history, and a passionate collector. As Spoerri has stated in several interviews, he loves collecting and has long purchased used items at flea markets, but not however to simply preserve or order them. Rather, he integrates these old and worn objects into his assemblages, and thereby consigns new life to them. Nonetheless, Spoerri clarifies that he is not attached to the individual items he acquires, and thus does not call himself a true collector.

The “incompetence” of the dialogue to which the title of Spoerri’s exhibition refers appears to ensue from the irreverent yet caring and delightful curiosity and attention to objects that Spoerri associates with “Universaldilettantismus.”⁸ This term also aptly describes Spoerri’s critical approach to object making, in that he always leaves the seams and sprues of the items he fixes, glues, and casts in bronze intact. Moreover, the title, *Inkompetenter Dialog?*, gestures to the fact that *Dilettantismus* originally informed the practices out of which natural history museums were born in the nineteenth century. Ultimately, the question mark at the end of the title, rather than simply instilling doubt, signals that Spoerri’s work begs the questions of competence and dialogue: Is the artist an incompetent archivist? What is competence? Is the work in dialogue with the collection and collecting? Alternatively, as Spoerri’s exhibition brings to the fore, the title raises the question of whether the museum is able to contain the temporal disorder of its specimens, their origins, and their history, and subject them to a univocal order.

8 Heidi Violand-Hobi, *Daniel Spoerri: Biographie und Werk*, Munich, 1998, p. 68.

However, the key factor that distinguishes *Inkompetenter Dialog?* from the art most commonly found in natural history museums is that Spoerri was not commissioned to address museum practices or tainted histories. Rather, as a retrospective of his own work set in the halls of the Natural History Museum, *Inkompetenter Dialog?* focused on folding art into natural history and, above all, folding the contemporary into evolutionary temporalities.⁹ Indeed, through the imaginative juxtaposition of the Natural History Museum's specimens and the specimens of Spoerri's art, the exhibition prompted the viewer to rethink both history and natural history from the perspective of multispecies entanglements, where the human and non-human intertwine and function as co-agents, or, as Donna Haraway puts it, "messmates at the table".¹⁰ As I endeavour to show, by merging human and non-human 'life,' Spoerri's inventive assemblages engendered probable evolutionary variations and variants, thereby transforming that which has been, first, into that which could have been and, then, —through the belatedness of historical returns—into that which could be viewed as a future-oriented horizon of possibilities, such as: "it might become because it could very well have been different". The complex temporalities embedded in and generated by this exhibition, I conclude, call for creative explorations of how the material archives of natural history collect, indeed re-collect, the past and rewrite history—that is, as a history projected toward a future in which all matter speaks its stories.

In juxtaposing specimens of natural history with specimens of Spoerri's own artistic practice, *Inkompetenter Dialog?* highlighted a natural historical approach to art that can be observed throughout the artist's oeuvre. Specifically, from the archaeological perspective of the *long durée*, Spoerri's art extends beyond the singular cultural-historical moments in which it was produced and, as a result, expands the confines of human agency. In an imagined dialogue with the ancient Latin poet Lucretius Carus, author of the long poem *De Rerum Natura*, Spoerri subscribes to the poem's materialist view of death, insisting, however, on the eternity of the idea. Rather than an ending, death is a permutation of matter into life, of things into memories, of memories into new things, of time into history.¹¹ Similarly, while wittingly subjected to the unavoidable (natural) attrition of time, that is the erosion of meaning and the dissolution of the body, Spoerri's transient art, born of and displayed in the context of

9 From such perspective, one could identify a natural historical approach to contemporary art in *Inkompetenter Dialog?* This exhibition emphasizes the non-anthropocentric aspect in Spoerri's overarching oeuvre, the fact that this art often situates itself within the framework of the *long durée*, minimizing the role humans play on earth. Spoerri states: "The fact that I'm saying that everything would go better without us is already a suicidary [stet] point of view regarding the whole of humanity ..." Quoted in Jill Carrick, "L'Optique Moderne: Daniel Spoerri's 'Optical Readymades'", in *Art History*, 39/4, 2016, here p. 766. When life is mentioned in other words it is less bios that is intended than energy or force.

10 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis/London, 2007, p. 301.

11 Silvia Abbruzzese, "Nil mors est ad nos": "Der Tod betrifft uns nicht": (Un)möglicher Dialog zwischen Daniel Spoerri und Titus Lukretius Carus, Milan, 2014, p. 58.

natural history, also resists it. Rather than alienated and scattered objects, Spoerri's specimens comprise assembled material translations of multifarious anecdotes and ideas that evolve in time and place, and that return as new forms, as new compositions of matter.

Before turning to an analysis of *Inkompetenter Dialog?*, I will briefly illustrate the role of temporality in Spoerri's practice to date. I do so by focusing on select works that, while informed by the key principles underlying Spoerri's art making, also exemplify archival tendencies.

Born in Romania in 1930, Spoerri is a European artist whose career of sixty years has spanned multiple countries, languages, and artistic contexts. However, his favoured medium, the art of assemblage, has remained remarkably congruous. Assemblage is an artistic medium consisting of three-dimensional elements, namely found and used objects. In Spoerri's case, these elements project out of, or from, the substrate. The assemblages included in the retrospective in Vienna comprised what he calls *Trap Pictures* alongside series of *détrompe l'œil*, some collections of objects (which started with *L'Optique moderne* between 1961 and 1962), and other "situations of objects."¹² All of these practices testify to the guiding principles and substance of Spoerri's work, and, in particular, to the theme of chance.

Spoerri uses the term 'trapping' to denote his practice of situating found and/or used objects in chance situations. These trappings generate collective cultural-historical landscapes that are not exempt from the consumption of time; some critics have called them "*still lifes of actions*" (*natures mortes of actions*). Spoerri defines these landscapes or situations, whether individually, in succession, or in juxtaposition to one another, as "Territorium." These territories, which Spoerri marks with found and/or used objects, range in temporal and spatial scale. They include the trapped remains of meals stopped at a seemingly random point in time and fixed onto the tables around which the meals were consumed, his found situations of objects in flea markets, and the spaces of entire cities. For example, his early trap paintings fixed unfinished meals onto horizontal tables that were subsequently hung vertically on walls: first on the walls of his hotel room and then as exhibits on the walls of galleries. In this way, Spoerri transformed the event of the meal into a personal-collective material territory that he could then—belatedly—recognize. Spoerri's trap paintings also came to encompass various series of situations of used objects, which he bought in the arrangements in which he found them at the stalls of various flea markets. In these instances, Spoerri fixed the situations of objects in the exact manner the objects were presented for sale. As Spoerri explains,¹³ these situations by chance re-produce, either 'verbatim' or pictorially, the lyrical and artistic ideas of his forerunners and colleagues of the avant-garde, including

¹² Carrick, 2016 (note 9), pp. 744–771, URL: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12266> [accessed: 26.06.2020].

¹³ *Anekdotomania. Daniel Spoerri über Daniel Spoerri*, exh. cat., Basel, Museum Tinguely, Basel/Ostfildern-Ruit, 2001, p. 98.

Le Comte de Lautréamont, Marcel Duchamp, and Constantin Brancusi, among others.¹⁴

In Spoerri's *Musées sentimentaux* (*Sentimental Museums*), an exhibition concept he devised in the 1970s and presented in cities including Paris, Cologne, Berlin, and Basel, the artist trapped actual territories, including the much wider areas of cities. In this case, the territory of a city was represented through objects selected from local material culture – high and low, past and present.¹⁵ The objects thus selected were displayed in alphabetical order, without any particular historical or semantic connection. At the time, Spoerri was interested in investigating the emotional power of objects, or how some gain the status of a relic or become records of history while others are discarded as worthless. He focused on the museum as a privileged institution endowed with the power to lift the same object from one condition to another. Importantly, Spoerri rooted his archival investigations of the affective territory of cities in the logic of trapping, a practice that, as mentioned, is itself informed by chance. In the *Sentimental Museums*, the visitors were prompted to invest the selections of whimsical and ludicrous objects with personal memories or stories of everyday life. Alternatively, if they were unable to relate to these trappings, and therefore unable to order them, the visitors were so to speak free to consign the objects and the museums to the status of cultural garbage, in their minds only, of course. In short, the prompt was to consider how and why the objects on display could be (come) significant, and to whom, that is, to what person or collective, and to whose history.¹⁶

In the *Sentimental Museums*, chance is established as the internal mechanism of the symbolic order that reigns within museums' collections. In an attempt to manage contingency, whether by obsessively ordering it or keeping it out, museums find it to be the disturbing core of their archives.¹⁷ Contingency, in turn, is revealed as the unrecorded and unrecordable moments that make *history-work* relevant. In the *Sentimental Museums*, the private and collective mnemonic exercise in seeing and apprehending reality is driven by contingency. This exercise counters the mimicking process of placing (as in "putting into place") that is required by the symbolic order of representation (*ein-bilden* rather than *ab-bilden*). In the process, *memory-work* resignifies *history-work* and distances itself from the preserving intent inherent in the drive to reconstruct authenticity. Similarly, when Spoerri collects his objects at flea markets, stores them, and then fixes them in assemblages, in an act that could be regarded as quasi-conservation, he is gathering history only insofar

14 Cecilia Novero, *Antidiets of the Avant-Garde: From Futurist Cooking to Eat Art*, Minneapolis, 2010, p. 154.

15 As Anke Te Heesen points out, these museums' practices of display (once considered experimental) have since become ordinary in cultural historical museums, cf. Te Heesen, *Theorien des Museums: Zur Einführung*, Hamburg, 2015, pp. 149–151.

16 Violand-Hobi, 1998 (note 8), p. 81.

17 Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy*, Cambridge, MA, 2008, pp. 53–54.

as it appears here as the cacophony of the stories lost in and never quite possessed by the objects. He preserves this cacophony (the sentiments enveloping the objects) by adding new stories through situating the objects in new, imaginative contexts. Overall, these remembrance/remembering pieces emerge as agglomerates of shards of reality held together by myriad unverifiable yet authentic anecdotes.¹⁸

Spoerri's trapping practices have recourse to the diverse strategies that the avant-garde had enlisted earlier to shake confidence in the nineteenth-century archives. His trappings have introduced contingency and chance into the archive of art history, presenting the record as a random product of accident, precisely that which the archive produces as the other of itself: the anecdote or story and the discarded object.¹⁹ The materialization of these principles and their function in Spoerri's art are perhaps best illustrated in his recurring works called *Rattenfallen* (rat traps), a multilingual double entendre. Spoerri regularly pokes fun at the transparency of words and their transitivity, most glaringly perhaps in his series of *Word Traps* (1964). There, but elsewhere too, Spoerri enjoys eroding the stable meanings of words, especially through multilingual games of translation. In the case of the *Rattenfallen*, Spoerri translates *Ratte* into the English "rat," which he then reads as an anagram of "art." The German word *Art*, on the other hand, translates as "species" in English. The word *Falle*, "trap," also sounds a lot like the German word *Fall*, which translates in English as "case," in the sense of a legal case. Thus, the case being made here is the fall of art into the species of the rat, which—once caught in the trap upon which rat/art chances—perishes only to generate a multiplicity of diverse life/art forms from its cadaver. Spoerri once recounted what had happened to the corpses of some trapped mice he had left in a meadow to rot:

“Nature immediately set to work on these little mouse corpses under the open sky: Attracted by the smell, the flies came and laid their eggs in the mouse corpses; two days later, they were teeming with worms, and then came the birds to eat them, and the cats ate the birds [...] in an incessant and rapid cycle of production. [...] This death had actually created an abundance of life!”²⁰

Of his assemblages, he equally asserts, “Each element has its own nature, its own essence. As soon as it touches the table and connects with the other elements, it stops simply being what it was and creates a new entity: it ‘emerges’ from these retired, one could say ‘dead,’ objects, as they were given away.”²¹

¹⁸ Abbruzzese, 2014 (note 11), p. 16.

¹⁹ Spieker, 2008 (note 17), p. 6.

²⁰ Abbruzzese, 2014 (note 11), p. 59.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

Rat traps populate an early assemblage, *Le Bonheur de ce monde* (1960–1971), which I consider to be emblematic of the temporal relays in Spoerri’s practice. *Bonheur* comprises a large cabinet containing a number of traps in its individual compartment. In each compartment we find dead mice next to the traps along with elements such as loose printed pages from books, a single empty glass, photographs, nails, staplers, and a cage. Many of these objects testify to the deadly human impulse to trap, whether in photographs or cages, whereas the taxidermied raptor, trapped unawares in its eternal life, is ready to take flight. In many ways, this cabinet can be compared with the series of drawers that Spoerri fixed first as part of a series of trapped tables in 1961 and then individually, as singular works, in the 1980s. Thus, from a natural historical point of view and considered as a “classification” within Spoerri’s series of drawers, *Bonheur* reveals itself as a proto-collection of Spoerri’s own collections. The drawers of *Bonheur*, Spoerri explains, contain a hodgepodge of things that he collected perhaps because of their sentimental value or with the presentiment that he would make use of them again in the future.²² Spoerri collects and stores objects with a view to incorporating them in his assemblages. Thus, the drawers embody the archive of the artist’s disorderly collections of objects. One drawer in which Spoerri found an old photo of himself is tellingly titled *Self Portrait* (1982). *Drawer* (1960), which was displayed at his first solo exhibition at Arturo Schwarz’s Milan gallery the following year, also contains a passport. In short, Spoerri’s many drawers are mini storage containers in which anything can end up, including the artist—an object among objects.

Rats make themselves at home in storage spaces. Schwarz not only exhibited Spoerri’s work in 1961, but also started collecting some of his trap paintings. After discovering that rats had devoured the leftovers on one of these paintings while in storage, Schwarz begged Spoerri to restore the damaged trap painting. However, Spoerri refused on the grounds that to do so would imply that the trap paintings bore the artist’s signature. In contrast, the trap paintings were meant as collective products to be consumed, be that by humans, rats, time, or forces of nature. So, Spoerri decided to change the work’s title by simply adding the words “in collaboration with the rats.”²³

Spoerri has illustrated the ‘art = rat’ equation in multifarious art actions and artworks, not least of all his *détrompe l’œil* work *Rats* (1998). In contrast to *trompe l’œil* (deceive the eye), Spoerri’s *détrompe l’œil* works—works that undeceive the eye—are anti-illusionistic, material assemblages, in which random objects are fixed onto painted idyllic landscapes or onto realistically painted figures or photographs. The juxtaposition of the assorted objects and the realistic ground leads the observer to question the relationship between

²² Violand-Hobi, 1998 (note 8), p. 97.

²³ Novero, 2010 (note 14), p. 165.



1 Daniel Spoerri, *Aviary of the Sleeping Birds*, 1997, Il Giardino, Seggiano, Italy

reality and realism, nature and naturalism. In *Rats* (1998), Spoerri created a physical link between a found painting of two mice gnawing on a piece of cheese and the lived space and time of the viewer by gluing two actual rat tails on the painted mice, which hang down past the frame.

The *Giardino di Daniel Spoerri: Hic Terminus Haeret*, a sculpture garden located in Seggiano, Italy, is scattered with works by Spoerri and donations from other artists. The Giardino's motto, *Hic terminus haeret*, which Spoerri adapted from Virgil, reminds visitors entering the sculpture garden that this liminal place is suspended, or rather trapped, between life and death.²⁴ Terminus, the Roman god of boundaries, oversees the borders of the garden and the threshold between life and death. By translating the verb *haerere* as "to adhere" or "to glue," Spoerri reconnects the Giardino to his trap pictures such that, in his garden, the border between the living and the dead becomes 'stuck.' The Giardino itself serves as both a vast trap picture of a cemetery, where Spoerri remembers his dead friends through their artwork, and an agricultural field (threshers operate there in the summer). Furthermore, this graveyard includes funereal markers for non-human animals.

One installation in the Giardino (*Aviary of the Sleeping Birds*, 1997, fig. 1) is scattered with numerous bronze bird statuettes created around the turn of the nineteenth century. The symbolism attached to these sculptures is particularly pertinent: they represent the souls of dead newborns caught in limbo. These were and still are sold to heartbroken parents as mementos and as a consolation for their loss, as the birds hold the promise of the children awakening from their sleep. Their origins also matter here because the sculptors who created them were animalists. Accordingly, the silence that surrounds the caged 'sleeping' birds in the garden resounds today as an urgent ecological alarm (and as a memento of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, 1962): what would the world be without song? At the same time, the installation's location within the garden turns the frightening vision of extinction on its head, for it resituates the birds' death within both the mundane and quotidian dynamics of decay and regeneration and within the framework of the *long durée* of natural historical evolution.

All the while, a bronze trap painting in the vicinity of the bird installation is left to slowly deteriorate. The trap painting is a copy made from a mold of the excavated remnants of a trap painting of an elaborate meal Spoerri buried in 1983 with an eye to its future excavation (fig. 2). A team of French archaeologists (INRAP) conducted the excavation in 2010 with the aim of scientifically studying both the durability of modern consumer goods after thirty years of interment and, more facetiously, the social customs of an enclave of members of the art world.

²⁴ Silvia Abbruzzese, *L'Odissea del Giardino: Otto speculazioni*, Vercelli, 2009, p. 81.



- 2 Daniel Spoerri, *Déterrement du Tableau Piège*, bronze cast of a piece from an excavation (by INRAP) of Daniel Spoerri's *Déjeuner sous l'herbe* (1983), 2010, Il Giardino, Seggiano, Italy

Spoerri's art temporarily takes hold of the fleeting present by projecting itself into the present from the perspective of a future from which his art emerges as a leftover, a trace, or an archaeological fact. Spoerri's art, in this sense, participates in all of these temporalities at once without favouring one over another. In interlacing the natural historical with the historical, Spoerri's art is neither melancholic nor fatalistic, neither conservative nor agonistically revolutionary. Art represents a way of playing with time; as Spoerri, in analogy to Gertrude Stein, puts it, "art is art about art about art."²⁵ Although human agency is not retracted or flattened out in Spoerri's natural historical approach, it is rescaled so that 'will' is diffused and becomes 'effect.' In other words, the effects of human and other-than-human forces such as, most prominently, chance and

²⁵ Margit Berner et al., *Daniel Spoerri: At the Museum of Natural History, An Incompetent Dialogue?*, Bielefeld/Berlin, 2012, p. 108.

decay are combined. Quoting the French biologist Jacques Monod on evolution and the emergence of life, Spoerri states, “Pure coincidence, nothing but coincidence, absolute, blind freedom as the foundation of the wonderful edifice of evolution ... neither did the universe bear life, nor did the biosphere bear human beings within it.”²⁶

In *Inkompetenter Dialog?*, Spoerri exhibited his works alongside specimens from the museum’s collection. The museum pieces were displayed in the original vitrines and labelled according to the disciplinary classifications assigned to the museum’s collections; Spoerri’s art, was also classified, albeit by means of differently colored labels.²⁷ The retrospective spanned Spoerri’s career and included some of his older trap paintings; his major assemblages, such as *Carnival of Animals* 1995–1996; Spoerri’s own collections of objects; and some of his more recent works. Among the latter were works from his *Kunsthau*s in Hadersdorf am Kamp, Austria, and others usually on view in the Giardino (the copy of the excavated trap painting).²⁸

By presenting his object art as a personal retrospective within the Natural History Museum in Vienna, Spoerri pushed previous claims made in his work beyond artistic discourse, especially that of originality, and allowed his works to encompass broad existential and epistemological questions. By situating his *chance art* in a natural history museum, he also focused the viewer’s attention on the ephemeral and decaying dead ends, regenerations, and variations engendered by evolution rather than by, for example, the teleology of a natural selection, which has favoured *Homo sapiens*. Overall, Spoerri’s artistic manoeuvres in the Natural History Museum, his incompetent dialogue, served to downplay the privileged role of humans as artists, natural historians, shepherds, and rescuers.

If Spoerri’s retrospective in the Natural History Museum deterritorialized human art by enfolded it in natural history, it also aimed to uncover the aesthetic underpinnings of scientific records, especially and specifically the art in natural history displays.²⁹ The exhibition exposed the knots that tie factuality with fabulation in every human apprehension of the world. Spoerri’s assemblages and collections further suggested that natural life itself is a congealing of biological and imaginative processes, where matter and meaning

²⁶ Ibid., p. 109.

²⁷ For a brief history of the Museum of Natural History in Vienna and its departments, cf. Max Fischer, et al. “Das naturhistorische Museum in Wien und seine Geschichte”, in *Annalen des naturhistorischen Museums in Wien* 80, 1979, here pp. 11–12.

²⁸ Cecilia Novero, “Daniel Spoerri’s Carnival of Animals”, in Joan B. Landes, Paula Young Lee, Paul Youngquist, *Gorgeous Beasts: Animal Bodies in Historical Perspective*, University Park, PA, 2012, pp. 151–166.

²⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, Minneapolis, 1986.



3 Daniel Spoerri, *Darwin's Nudlrabl Collection*, 2009-2010

constitute the fabric of a storied world.³⁰ By bringing the museum's discarded origins in the cabinets of wonders back to the surface and into the present, Spoerri's retrospective also operated as the Natural History Museum's involuntary memory. Spoerri accomplished this by highlighting the continuities and discontinuities between the *naturalia* of the museums and the *artificialia* of his assemblages, which themselves are always assemblages of both, as were the cabinets of wonders. As a retrospective, *Inkompetenter Dialog?* also helps us to see that the same methods have informed Spoerri's art; his work has been devoted to understanding the same evolutionary processes documented in the Natural History Museum, but in a different realm—one that includes mundane practices and different objects and aims.

³⁰ Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, "Stories Come to Matter", in id., *Material Ecocriticism*, Bloomington, 2014, pp. 1-20, here p. 5.

For example, since the 1960s, Spoerri has collected simple kitchen utensils (potato peelers, meat grinders, knives, and noodle cutters), which assist us in banal everyday practices and come in myriad shapes and colours. Two collections of these utensils, namely noodle cutters and knives, feature in *Inkompetenter Dialog?* For instance, *Darwin's Nudlrndl* (2009–2010), which comprises a collection of found, used noodle cutters, is explicitly dedicated to Darwin (fig. 3). In this array of quotidian and banal objects, Spoerri finds a translation of Darwin's concept of chance variation in evolution: the slightest variations among the same practical tools are seen as evidence of evolution's incessant drive to change. He qualifies the process of evolution as one that "trie[s] again, question[s] itself, improve[s] and express[es] itself anew".³¹ Accordingly, Spoerri compares this collection to a drawer in a natural history museum containing multiple varieties of the same genus of bird (namely the *Piranga*, belonging to the cardinal family).

With a nod to the tricks that evolution plays on humans (particularly scholars)—for it is almost impossible to fathom let alone account for the immense variety of species living and extinct—Spoerri compares his collection of knives with an ancient pocketknife found during the archaeological excavations at Hallstatt. He then half-jokingly comments, "Here is the proof that a clever 'Austrian' had already invented the jack-knife 2500 years ago!"³² In Spoerri's words, he collects "Variations of objects"; in this sense, the signs of wear and tear that his collected kitchen tools bear, the unique changes brought upon them by time, add to their differences.³³ The used tools present themselves as 'individuals' within a species, with each tool comprising a visible repository of stories. These anecdotally (culturally) acquired stories are reinvented in the process, even though they cannot possibly be preserved intact and objectively passed on from generation to generation as genes are. Spoerri declares, "I buy all that which captivates me and then I eavesdrop on the stories of the used things that by chance 'end up' in the flea markets"³⁴ He adds:

"When something [an object at the flea market] piques my interest, I ask about its story. In all these years, I've heard a lot of stories and imagined many more! [...] I enjoy buying them, putting them together, and allowing them to become something new; each individual object, however, retains its own story, while the new composition yields new stories."³⁵

³¹ Berner, 2012 (note 25), p. 158.

³² Ibid., p. 170.

³³ Abbruzzese, 2014 (note 11), p. 21.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 15–16.



4 Daniel Spoerri, *Circle of the Unicorns / Navel of the World / Omphalos*, 1991,
9 Bronze elements. Il Giardino. Seggiano, Italy

Another installation in *Inkompetenter Dialog?*, the one hundred meters long *Genetic Chain of the Flea Market* (2000), is an accumulation—or trap, in Spoerri's sense of the word—of used, abandoned, and found objects, which further testifies to his obsession as he calls it, with collecting, storing, and trapping. This genetic chain can be interpreted as a facetious rendition of Spoerri's artistic DNA as well as a comparison of the human genome to what he considers the equally important life of things. In an irreverent move against both the theological image of the Great Chain of Being and Darwin's concept of natural selection, Spoerri's *Genetic Chain of the Flea Market* is an assemblage of non-hierarchically ordered elements that reflects the non-deterministic connections among all living creatures and non-living entities. By inextricably entwining the intersecting scales of evolutionary time, the installation highlighted, in the museum especially, the temporalities of the stories, lives, and histories of objects and people, and the recurrent mutations and permutations that have occurred throughout evolution.

In Spoerri's assemblages, the random constellations of objects illuminate the lives of quotidian and/or discarded things and their stories as the unfulfilled prophecies of bygone eras. His art thus claims its place in the natural history museum as an awkward compound of the asynchronous temporalities of decay and as the emergence of new constellations or contexts. A key example of a return of the past as the future in the present can be found in some of the mythological unicorn figures that were included in *Inkompetenter Dialog*³⁶

36 *La stanza dell'unicorno: Daniel Spoerri ai Musei Civici*, Ilaria Pulini and Cristina Stefani (eds.), exh. cat., Modena, Museo Civico Archeologico Etnologico and Museo Civico d'Arte, Modena, 2008.



5 Daniel Spoerri, *Circle of the Unicorns*, 1991, Detail, Il Giardino, Seggiano, Italy

These figures form the centrepiece of his Giardino (fig. 4-5) and their form and material vary slightly, from one exhibition space to another. The ‘unicorns’ however generally consist of an equine skull to which the ‘tusk’ of a narwhal, a unicorn-like species of whale with a large protruding tooth, is attached; in the Giardino, a cast of a gloved human hand is attached to the tusk as though it were holding it. In Vienna, the unicorns were accompanied by another natural wonder: the skull of a two-toothed narwhal that Spoerri found in storage at the museum. With this find, Spoerri restored the wonder once held by the unicorn before it was deemed a myth and cast out of natural history by the discovery of the narwhal.

Spoerri’s assemblages are the unpredictable outcomes of ongoing temporal dialectics between natural history and history, science and art. Their presence in the museum is uncanny: the museum seems like their natural home and yet it is a home they render unnatural in the way they simultaneously merge and contrast with the specimens on view as revenant oddities and anomalies. Situated in the Natural History Museum, Spoerri’s assemblages emerged as concrete manifestations of the multifarious forms and itineraries that could have ramified out of the past or been the outcome of alternative evolutions. The evolutionary trajectories that Spoerri’s assemblages made credible and actualized in the context of the museum were reinforced through his reorganization of the distinct disciplinary categories and departments that order the Natural History Museum Vienna, such as botany, mineralogy, palaeontology, anthropology, prehistory, geology, zoology, and their respective subdisciplines. By displaying and classifying his exhibition according to those disciplines, Spoerri brought his own specimens into dialogue with the museum displays. However, rather than imposing the museum’s disciplinary order on his works, Spoerri’s assemblages subtly challenged disciplinary expertise. Notably, the cross-disciplinary connections between his ‘undisciplined’ works and the museum’s collection allowed for the reconstruction of the natural and cultural contexts from which his specimens stem. Initially, Spoerri’s practice appeared to coincide with the museum’s scientific methodology. As the curators of the retrospective at the Natural History Museum Vienna, Margit Berner and Reinhard Golebiowski, write,

“Particularly in the biological sciences, the process of acquiring findings takes place on the basis of concrete objects. Objects removed from their original natural context are analyzed in the museum and placed in a new systematic context; thereby, they become epistemic things, cognitive things.”³⁷

³⁷ Berner, 2012 (note 25), p. 17.

Similarly, Spoerri estranges objects from their familiar contexts and relocates them to new situations. However, unlike science, Spoerri's assemblages come to foreground the epistemic (that is, knowable) nature of things because they are always part of a context that cannot be entirely or innocently systematized in either time or space. In contrast to Marcel Duchamp's singular objects, Spoerri's own work, as he sees it, provides the onlooker with a constellation of objects; these constellations are 'contaminated' by the objects' stories and the actions that have left their traces on them.³⁸ Thus, rather than placing his objects in taxonomic order, the museum context contaminated Spoerri's art with associative meanings, histories, and connections and vice versa.

In *Inkompetenter Dialog?*, the most pronounced mutations of the taxonomic organization of the Natural History Museum Vienna occurred in Spoerri's 'palaeontology' and 'zoology' displays. For example, the assemblage *Coral Brain* (2011), comprised a human skull endowed with an oversized brain made of coral. Rather than simply conflating two different animal species—namely, human and coral—this assemblage knotted together the vastly distant temporal scales of humans, plants, and minerals, yet it did not reconcile them. Until the eighteenth century, corals were classified as plants that were believed to petrify if touched. Today, corals are classified as polyps that live in symbiosis with algae—in other words, plants. Each thin, soft-bodied polyp secretes a hard outer skeleton of limestone (calcium carbonate), which attaches either to rock or to the dead skeletons of other polyps. The product of an ongoing collaboration between animals and plants that spans approximately 25 million years, corals compose the largest structures of biological origin on earth. Spoerri's *Coral Brain* not only represents the difficulty human brains have in grasping such temporal scales. It also strongly suggests, simultaneously and explicitly, that humans must be viewed, on the one hand, in the framework of the symbiotic collaboration among species and, on the other hand, in the framework of the long temporalities involved in such collaborations. By situating his post-human *Coral Brain* assemblage in the mineralogy and palaeontology section of his exhibition, Spoerri also allowed the 'mistaken' pre-modern classification of corals to inform the present, suggesting that it is precisely human touch, or what is currently called the "human footprint," that is killing and 'petrifying' the coral reefs and thereby endangering life on earth.

The second instructive work in Spoerri's mineralogy and palaeontology section is the *Tatzelwurm* (2012). In alpine folklore, the *Tatzelwurm* is a small, lizard-like creature that resembles a cat with no hind legs and a snake-like tail. Spoerri's very different *Tatzelwurm* in *Inkompetenter Dialog?* accomplishes several things: first, it fossilizes the myth, turning legend into

³⁸ Exh. cat., Basel/Ostfildern-Ruit, 2001 (note 13), p. 97.

‘reality’; second, itre-fictionalizes the legend; and third, it turns the new hybrid into a time travelling cyborg. The *Tatzelwurm* Spoerri displayed in the Natural History Museum is indeed a fossil, but not that of the legendary creature; rather, it is an odd admixture of a fish skeleton with a taxidermied bird between its teeth. This sui generis *Tatzelwurm*, while introduced as an all-too-real fossil, is simultaneously presented as more alive than the seemingly live—though effectively dead—bird caught in its mouth, for the *Tatzelwurm* perpetually feeds on the bird. Like the horn had functioned for the unicorn, and as a material reminder of the natural history museum’s own origins in the cabinet of wonders, this fictionalized fossil embodied the potential origin of a hybrid species that, in one sense, was presented as submerged in the past but, in another, as re-emerging in the present, thus allowing the viewer to imagine a multispecies future.

Myths of origin return in transfigured form in Spoerri’s zoological assemblages. During one of his visits to the storage rooms at the Natural History Museum Vienna, Spoerri found the beheaded skeleton of an Indian python. He was granted permission to use the python for one of his assemblages—the only one in the exhibition composed entirely of specimens from the museum. The resulting *Tiger-Python* assemblage (2012) combines the snake’s skeleton with the skull of a Bengal tiger that, like the *Tatzelwurm*, appears to have been caught in the act of devouring a taxidermied bird.

This work is best interpreted through the lens of the unicorns in the Giardino, whose title, *The World’s Omphalos*, refers to Delphi, the Greek home of Pythia, the Oracle of Delphi. The god Apollo, who is associated with music and poetry, had to slay Python, the carnivorous monster serpent that Gaea, goddess of the earth, had used to guard Mount Parnassus. After the feat, Apollo usurped Gaea’s place and named his oracle Pythia, after Python. From this perspective, Spoerri’s *Tiger-Python*, a reincarnation of the mythical serpent, restores to the earth her monstrous creativity, namely her fertility, and with it the power that resides in the cycles of life and death over which the earth presides.

In another visit to the museum’s storage space, Spoerri encountered a number of tortoise shells that had been skilfully reattached to their cleaned skeletons so as to allow the carapaces to open and close like coffers, granting scientists access to the interiors of the animals. The surgical care required for such a reconstructive operation struck Spoerri, reminding him of Georges Auguste Escoffier’s detailed instructions on how to behead a tortoise in a recipe for tortoise soup, a recipe Spoerri quickly renamed “Rezept für einen Mord” (Recipe for a murder).³⁹ In the assemblage shown in *Inkompetenter Dialog*² entitled *Letter XI*, a hand-painted carapace of a tortoise was adorned with two mighty horns, an exotic mask for a head, and a stone lion’s paw (fig. 6).

³⁹ Berner, 2012 (note 25), p. 141.



6 Daniel Spoerri, *Letter XI: Assemblage* from the series *Histoires de Boîtes à Lettres*, 1998-2004

Dressed in ferns, the tortoise is positioned on a bed of seashells scattered with movable wooden letters originally used for letterset printing. Regarding his use of abecedaries in his work, Spoerri states,

“With these letters you could write all the world’s letters. Again these are the background, so to speak the canvas or the backdrop in the theater, on which these letters would be written and in the foreground are the implied dramas, which are only hinted at, which however everyone has to tell to himself.”⁴⁰

Thus, the random letters in this work suggest that there are stories behind this tortoise-goddess and messages she could weave and re-assemble.

The significance of the tortoises’ murder harkens back beyond their actual death and dismemberment in the museum all the way to the origins of Apollo’s musical instrument, the lyre. As the myth goes, after stealing from Apollo’s herd and sacrificing part of his spoils to the gods, the god Hermes found the door to his room blocked by a tortoise. Hermes killed the tortoise and, after emptying its shell, turned it into the very first lyre. When Apollo approached Hermes to reclaim his stolen animals, he was seduced by the lyre. Hermes then exchanged the lyre for the oxen and, in the barter, also received his caduceus (the staff surmounted by wings and entwined by two serpents, which came to symbolize Hermes). In *Letter XI*, the re-assembled animal body parts that were arranged on a bedrock of letters, especially the tortoise’s carapace with the ox horns, rewrote this tortoise myth. The novel totem animal, a composite of tortoise and ox, conveys the memory of the injury suffered by its mythological ancestors and the prepared specimens, whether in the name of artistic or scientific endeavours.

Horns and antlers appear in a number of Spoerri’s assemblages and installations, several of which were included in *Inkompetenter Dialog?* These works take issue with the practice of trophy hunting, albeit in an ostensibly whimsical manner. In *Krickerl, Kümmerlinge, Kümmerer* (Deer antlers, scallywags, and runts), the vitrines displayed examples of abnormal antlers, some retouched in ludicrous, indecent, irreverent, and, for the most part, carnivalesque ways. These embellished specimens offered a burlesque mockery of both the great trophies and the small antler deformities that end up as rarities in precious collections. Spoerri’s various other antler assemblages in *Inkompetenter Dialog?* referenced the extensive collection of massive antlers in the Natural History Museum in Vienna. Arranged in a room with an antler armchair, Spoerri’s antlers appeared to specifically target Archduke Franz Ferdinand’s excessive passion

⁴⁰ Daniel Spoerri, *Daniel Spoerri beschreibt 54 Werke*, Basel, 2001, p. 104. See translation at: http://www.danielspoerri.org/web_daniel/englisch_ds/werk_einzel/38_histoires.htm [accessed 26.06.2020].



7 Daniel Spoerri, *Galvanized Deer* from a series of galvanized animals for an installation, 2009

for trophy hunting, while highlighting the origins of this practice in the big taxidermy collections in natural history museums in general.

A final zoological example involving taxidermy and museum displays are Spoerri's galvanized animals. I argue that, although they do not quite fit the description, these taxidermied animals represent a case of what Steve Baker has named *botched taxidermy*. As Giovanni Aloï notes, botched taxidermy summons "an abrasive and uncomfortable presence."⁴¹ The galvanized animals that were displayed in *Inkompetenter Dialog?* at first appeared as examples of aestheticized taxidermy. However, in contrast to other taxidermied specimens in museums, Spoerri's galvanized figures stand out as personalities in their own right, as if declaring "I am not a specimen." On closer inspection, the shine of these emboldened figures appears to reveal traces of injury. The figure of a galvanized deer, for example, faced the viewer with nails stuck in its muzzle, thus exposing the tools used to construct the taxidermied deer as weapons—the weapons that kill every time a life is captured (fig. 7).

⁴¹ Giovanni Aloï, *Art and Animals*, London, 2011, p. 41.

Finally, Spoerri's taxidermied and galvanized animals do not belong among the species that are normally shown in natural history museums. Museums typically display specimens closely associated with big game trophies or exotic animals captured in the wild. Although familiar local faunas are also often taxidermied for regional displays and to demonstrate biological groups, the *pièces de résistance* in natural history museums have always been the bears, buffalos, rhinos, and elephants.⁴² In contrast to these displays, there is a sense of 'wrong placeness' to Spoerri's taxidermied specimens, which are either familiar animals or domestic companions. Spoerri galvanizes not just cute Bambi-like deer but also birds, rats, and domestic cats. With this recycled taxidermy, he mummifies death rather than creating the illusion of life.⁴³ Moreover, this sense of 'wrong placeness' points to the salience of Spoerri's relocation of his art in the Natural History Museum—a relocation that is, as I have shown, also a re-collection.

Spoerri's art does not have a mission and does not have to have one, regardless of whether it is exhibited in art galleries, gardens, or natural history museums. For Spoerri, art does not add anything to life; it is part of the game of living—one way to be. By wedging itself into natural history, Spoerri's art leaves traces for others, including rats, to find and follow. In this regard, his art sets itself apart from other art projects in natural history museums that are explicitly oriented toward visualizing specific ethical-political issues, such as conservation and biodiversity.

I have argued that Spoerri's art intervention in the Natural History Museum in Vienna is unique owing to the complex temporality of its dialogic approach to natural history—an approach that allows us to revisit and recast, both critically and with hope, human relations with the non-human. In particular, the juxtaposition of—or “incompetent dialogue” between—Spoerri's constellations of objects and the Natural History Museum's expert displays of specimens highlights the overlapping dynamics that inform both. At the same time, the overlap of the impulses and principles that inform the practices of both artist and museum indicates their divergent stances on the objects and their histories and interpretation. As the title *Inkompetenter Dialog?* suggests, Spoerri's delightful, amateurish intervention in and dialogue with the Natural History Museum in Vienna was an example of how art can interrogate the disciplinary and discursive orders of knowledge from the perspective of the temporal scales of natural history.

⁴² Susanne Köstering, *Natur zum Anschauen: Das Naturkundemuseum des deutschen Kaiserreichs*, Cologne, 2003, p. 116.

⁴³ Abbruzzese, 2014 (note 11), p. 51.