MONOTREMES TO THE LEFT

A Response to David Hoffos' The Lost Minutes: Shadow of the Platypus

Letch Kinloch
A hoax cannot exist within a vacuum.

In 1799, the rogue beak of the newly-discovered platypus pushed itself into the accepted understanding of the world, dislocating reality. Perceptions flickered, opening a crack. Not believing the dangerous possibility of something not already understood, naturalist George Shaw famously pored over the dessicated skin around the platypus bill, searching vainly for the trick's big reveal—the telltale sutures of a prop hemmed awkwardly onto reality.

A hoax requires a collective concept of truth to push up against—to be inserted within—to act in relation to and negotiate with. Additions to our story of the world appear from time to time—interrupting and unsettling the cultural narrative—regarded with suspicion and treated to an intensive weighing of veracity through tests of logic and rationality. Proof is the way we hold tightly to the agreed-upon world view; certainty comforts from fear, that yawning abyss of unknown. We want to know the magic behind the trick.

The process of entering David Hoffos' *The Lost Minutes: Shadow of the Platypus* obfuscates your senses. The momentary envelope of blackness resets, vulnerability opening up the possibility of wonder. As images begin to return to your blinking eyes within this fixed viewing area, the familiar Voice of God, that trusted old documentary device, narrates the life cycle of the platypus. Across the way, other visitors shuffle through, performing museum behaviour: snapping shots, pointing and moving on. A sign declares that monotremes can be found to the left and reptiles to the right. These devices of orientation act as anchors, securing your understanding of the trusted space of a museum; a hint of the comfort of the grounded encyclopedic proof of the entirety of the world just around the corner.

In between, a light-based diorama suspends moving images, shifting perspective from the abstract exterior view of our home planet amidst the stars to the equally intangible interior embryonic view to the rotating skeleton of a platypus. The Voice of God warbles and distorts. We know what we know; we trust what we can see...right?

The platypus occupies an in-between space. Its existence is uncomfortable. Classified within an amazing range of taxa, its audacious existence defies categorization, subverting the ability to taxonimize the seemingly unimpeachable ordered system of the relationships between organisms. This one point within a spectrum of classification electrified the world and continues to shift meaning.

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Truth is a matter of the imagination.
- Ursula K. Le Guin

I like the duck-billed platypus
Because it is anomalous.
I like the way it raises its family,
Partly birdly, partly mammaly.
I like its independent attitude.
Let no one call it a duck-billed platitude.
- Ogden Nash
Hoffos' tableau conjures the magic of the existence of an illogical and unclassifiable creature as a sleight of hand. We are not propelled forward through the artist’s narrative, but rather asked to stop and consider and re-read our own. This moment, unfolding through eons, resists finality. By making the real seem illusory, ungraspable, it flickers in a new light, reigniting a sense of awe through which we re-evaluate, changing the possibilities for what we might weigh the unbelievable against. The beaked creature becomes like “the laughter that shattered... all the familiar landmarks of my thought — our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography — breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other.”

Fixed within this moment, inside Hoffos’ illusory embryonic space, the museum visitors looping around us, the layers of images crowded together before us, the beach ball world spinning, the perforated tinfoil starfield gliding past, Hoffos posits reality as mythical. We regain wonder through this negotiation, and the possibilities open up, more Borgesian Chinese Encyclopedia than museum chronology or Latin taxonomy. Museum dioramas can be divided into: (a) belonging to the director, (b) rotating on a turntable, (c) made of light, (d) originating in the artist’s mind, (e) responding to your trembling, (f) fabulous, (g) hinting at existence through the casting of a shadow, (h) unconvincing, (i) et cetera, (j) a conspiracy, (k) existing only in this moment in space and time.

A hoax is a possibility, provoking an examination on what is wondrous and what is banal, what is lost and how we follow this track to seek it out when it is right in front of us. It is a new perspective; an opportunity to view the world. In these in between spaces, where the imagined elbows up against what we know, between when we discover and when we prove, reality mingles with illusion and blurs.

Letch Kinloch

(1) Michel Foucault, The Order of Things (New York: Pantheon, 1970) xv
David Hoffos was born in Montréal and grew up in a string of cities in Ontario, Alberta, and Australia. He began making experimental films at the age of 10. Hoffos attended the Department of Art at the University of Lethbridge in 1990 where he received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1994. Since 1992 Hoffos has maintained an active practice with over 50 group shows, hundreds of screenings, dozens of school and community collaborations, a few works for the stage and over 40 solo exhibitions, including a recent survey at the National Gallery of Canada. In 2010 his touring 5-year installation series, Scenes from the House Dream, was showcased at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax, ACAD, and the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto. In 2014 Hoffos completed permanent public sculpture projects in Grande Prairie and Lethbridge. He has received awards including the Images Grand Prize, 2007, and a Sobey Art Award (2nd prize), 2002. Hoffos has been invited to many international residencies, including three at the Banff Centre and most recently in Detroit, Michigan. David Hoffos is represented by Trépanier Baer Gallery, Calgary.

Letch Kinloch, founder of Also As Well Too Artist Book Library & Shop, originally hails from Saskatoon.

Collin Zipp is a multidisciplinary artist and programmer/curator who is based in Winnipeg, MB. His visual practice includes video, photo, sculpture, painting and installation and is interested in exploring ideas of institutional critique and viewer expectation and experience. Zipp currently operates and programs the nomadic artist-run centre ONE NIGHT STAND. He has a BFA from the University of Manitoba and an MFA from the University of Lethbridge.

EXHIBITION  
11 September - 24 October 2015

OPENING RECEPTION  
Friday 11 September | 8 PM

ARTIST TALK  
Sunday 27 September | 4 PM

EXHIBITION | David Hoffos

WRITTEN RESPONSE | Letch Kinloch

CURATOR | Collin Zipp

IMAGE | David Hoffos, The Lost Minutes: Shadow of the Platypus, 3-channel video, audio and mixed media installation, detail, 2013. Courtesy the artist and Trépanier Baer

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