

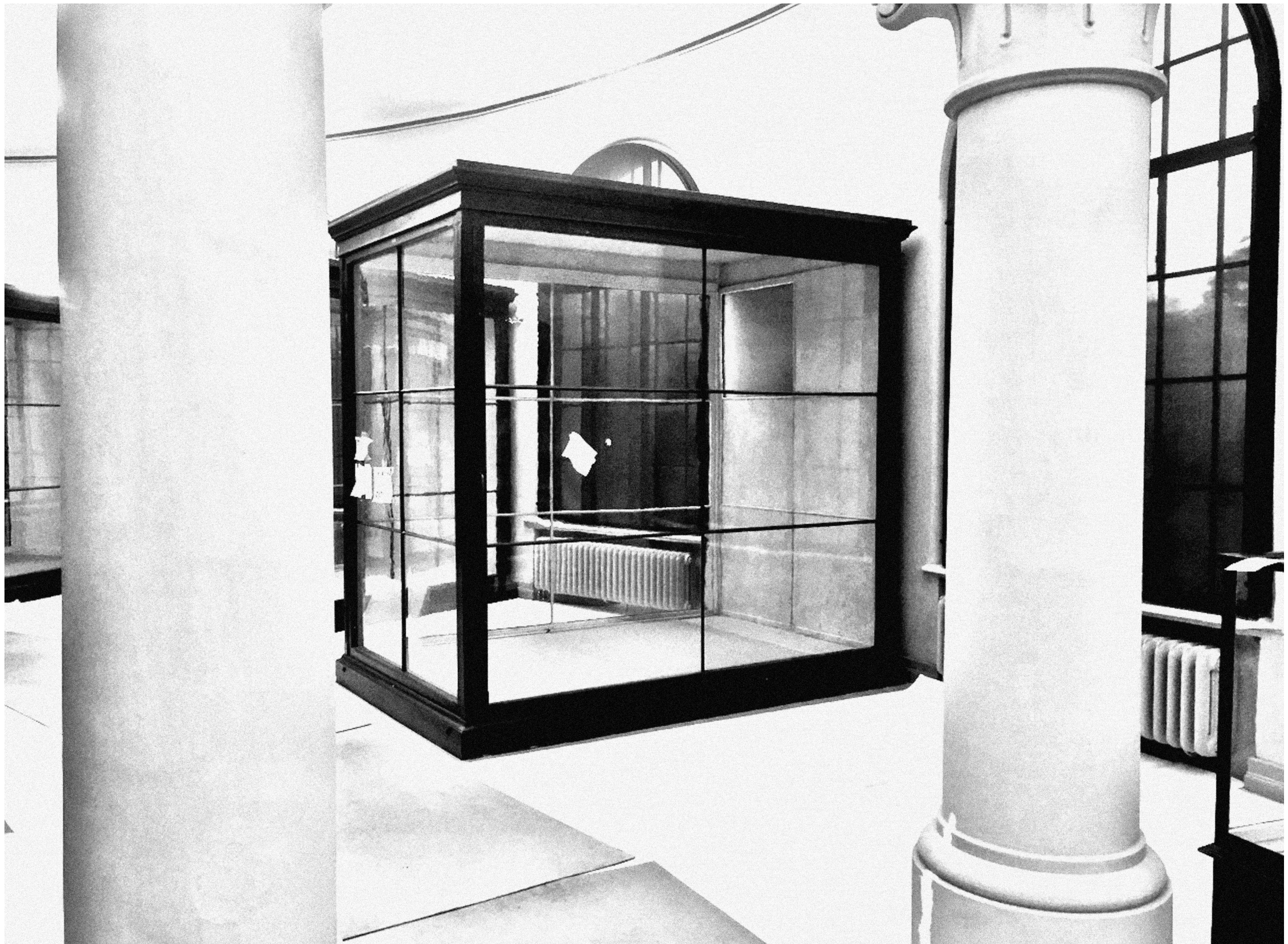
THE WRONG BODIES



THE WRONG BODIES

Andy Lock

A Chrysalis



Absence is a construct (a distinctly anthropocentric one) which typically masks a denial of some or other presence. Whenever we encounter an apparent absence, we should perhaps ask: “here, at this site, who or what is denying the presence of what or whom?”

A visit to Bergen’s Natural History Museum, in Spring 2018, reveals a building that is, in insect terms, a chrysalis. During the extended hiatus created by its closure and renovation, the Museum has become a cloistered site of transition; a “pupa”. Closed to visitors and having experienced the removal of almost its entire collection, the first impression is one of a site in parenthesis; apparently characterised by absence; left to display room after room of unoccupied vitrines, creating a spectacle of emptiness.

However, if the gaps that first suggested themselves were the ones created by the disappearance of the Museum’s visitors and specimens, a further, more intriguing lacuna has since emerged, in the form of an institutional silence surrounding the all-but invisible ecosystem of organisms, the infestations, which inhabit the Museum’s buildings and indeed some of its specimens.

At the Natural History Museum, it is the body itself that emerges as the unspoken object of institutional silence.

Here at the Museum, silence is the disavowal which surrounds the presence of those illegitimate bodies, which the institution acknowledges only in so far as is necessary for their identification and eradication.

The Wrong Bodies



Bodies without provenance,

We inhabited the museum's gaps.

Consuming matter, erasing data,

Condemned as pests.

An illegitimate ecosystem,

Acknowledged only by attempts to eradicate our presence.

Fixed not in amber, but in glue.

We are the wrong bodies,

Captured and catalogued,

We become specimens.

A shadow collection.

Dermestidae

1110

Ctesias Steph.

MOY: Os Sæltli
14-2-2019
10.03.21
leg. G.A. Halvorsen

29. VII. 1967
 J. Schneider
 3. Ausgabe
 21. des 98

7-10-1987
100-661,997

100-661,997

100-661,997

JORDALAND

io L.

Anthrenus

/ESTFO

AG

A

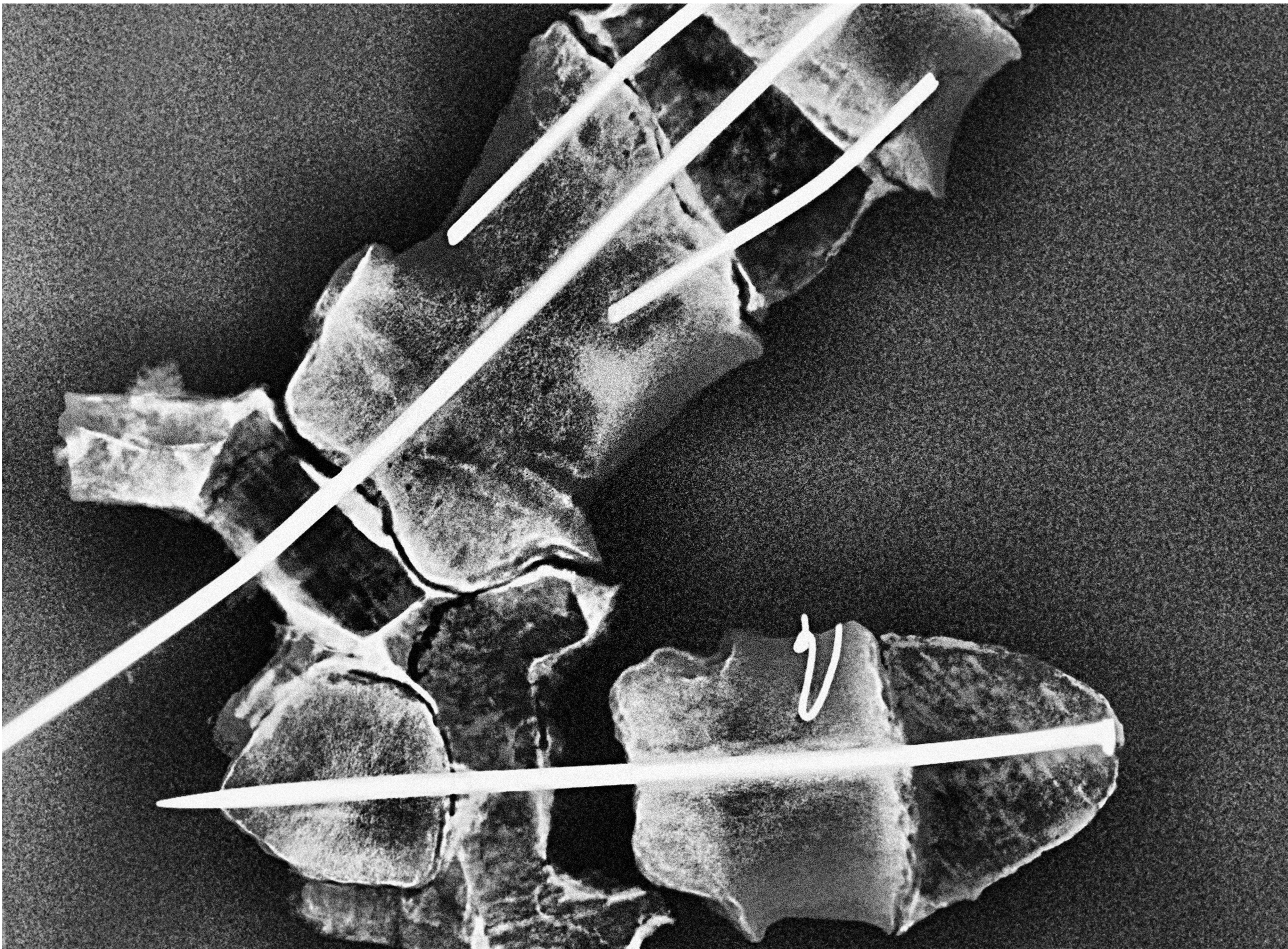
MANITOWA H&B.

OSTFOLD

Fr. h. u. i.
 m. l. o. c. i.
 2. 5.

Maintaining order, a natural history collection polices the boundaries of its archive, but despite assiduously working to protect the integrity of its collection, “foreign bodies” continue to penetrate and proliferate within the Museum’s walls.

These infestations seem determined to re-establish within the body of the archive, those ecosystems that exist beyond its boundaries and whose component parts, Natural History’s taxonomic ordering works so diligently to separate and isolate.



In place since the nineteenth-century, the Natural History Museum's whale skeletons appear almost to have become a part of the fabric of the Museum itself; cathedrals of bone, suspended above the visitor's head in the building's Whale Hall, but despite their longevity, they are not inert objects. They remain corporeal things, a source of food and shelter; ripe for colonisation by other bodies, which have found their way illicitly into the Museum... the bodies of creatures such as Dermestid or Skin Beetles, for example.



Tiny, unobtrusive, but brilliantly adapted to live on dried animal carcasses, Dermestid Beetles continue to do so within the Museum, devouring whatever organic material they encounter. Reducing smaller specimens to dust; discreetly inhabiting larger hosts, more substantial corpora; spaces such as the one offered by the skull of the Museum's Blue Whale specimen.

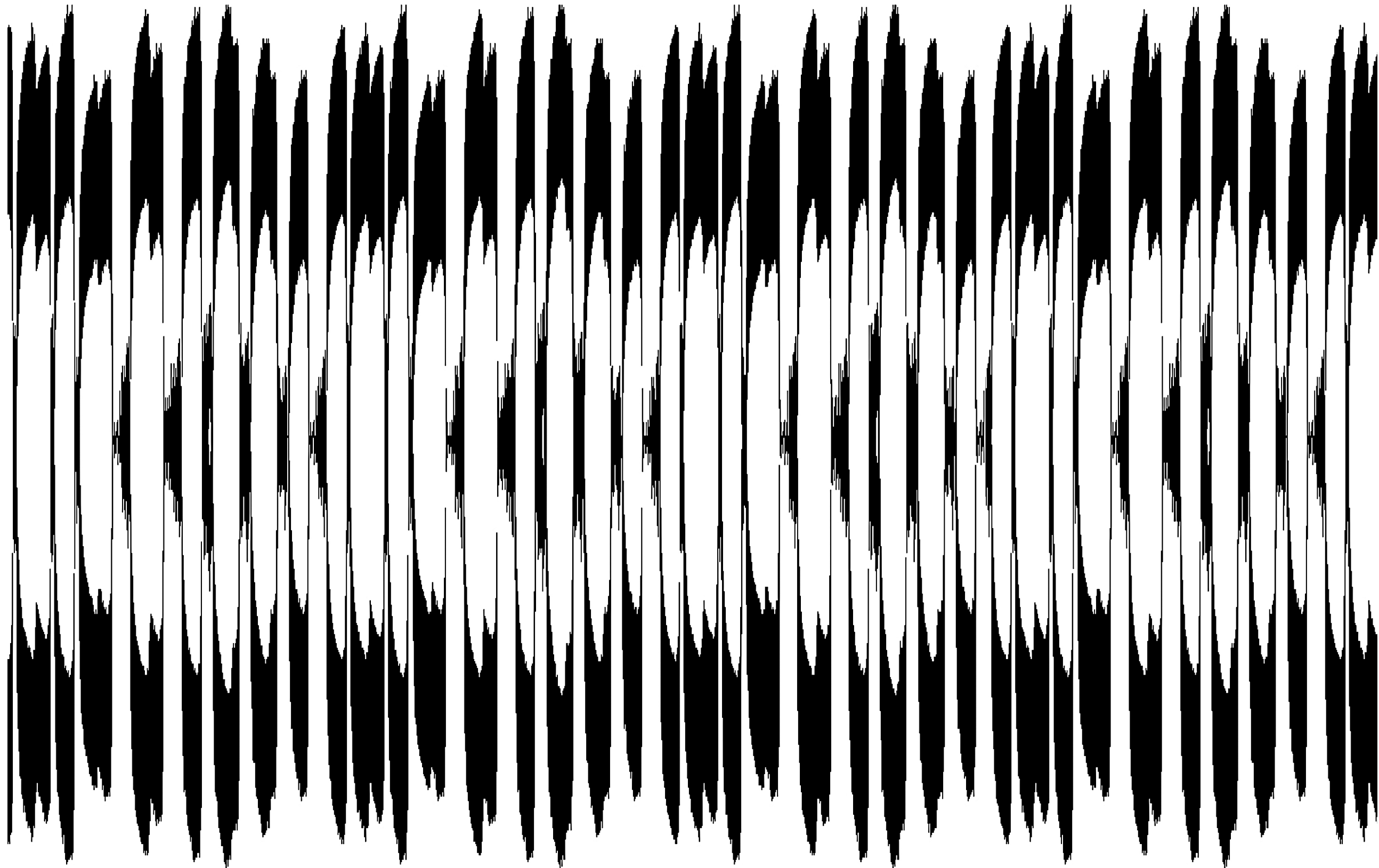


Small as they are – only a few millimetres in length – a specimen infested with Dermestid Beetles, might still be identified as such by sightings of the beetles themselves or of the “frass” or mess, which they leave behind.



However, beetles also create a sonic signature. To a sensitive enough microphone, even their unseen presence may be betrayed by the eerie sound of their stridulation, the noise an insect makes by rubbing its legs or other body-parts together.





Reviled as intruders for attacking their collections, Dermestid Beetles are nonetheless systematically collected by museums, simultaneously becoming specimens in the very institutions which they infest as pests. Indeed, paradoxically, so efficient are certain species of Skin Beetles at consuming the decaying matter of other dead animals, that several natural history museums use them to strip-clean the carcasses they wish to display as skeletons.

The status of individual bodies in relation to the archive is then often highly contingent.

In consuming matter, infestations also have the potential to erase data: the DNA contained in an animal specimen itself, for example, or the words borne by a paper-label, which describe that specimen's history and identity. By erasing a specimen's provenance in this way, an infestation that does so, leaves that specimen unmoored from the time and place of its origin and sets it adrift in the archive, tipping that archive minutely toward entropy and transforming the individual specimen once again into an anonymous body, stripped of its place in the order of things, which Natural History has created.

In the Natural History Collection, bodies become specimens, but specimens can also become bodies.

The Falling Birds



Moments of transition or crisis have periodically compelled the Museum to publicly acknowledge the presence of the “wrong bodies” in its midst

In 1979, hydrogen cyanide gas was released into the Museum building, in a dramatic attempt to preserve the institution’s collection of specimens from a potentially catastrophic infestation of beetles.

Although official records of these extraordinary events are hard to find, they nonetheless continue to live-on as part of the unofficial history of the institution – part of the folklore that surrounds it.

By piecing-together eye-witness descriptions and anecdotal retellings, it is possible to create an account of this particular episode from the institution’s past and in so doing, to establish a further position from which to contemplate the Museum’s relationship to those bodies about which it ordinarily remains silent.

I . SKADEDYR

‘skadedyr’ .

‘Skadedyr’: What is that?
Small animals doing harm.

They were having an infestation of Museum Beetles

American Vepse-bol-klanner .

It says here in the newspaper,
they’re going to exterminate the
‘American’... and there is a name of
this “wasp”

American Vepse-bol-klanner .

Small beetles that eat up all the organic tissue on
museum specimens

You have to be very careful not to get these beetles
inside your collection and if you do, you have to be very
quick to eradicate them.

II. A COAT MADE OF PLASTIC

They made a coat of plastic,

Imagine what it took.

They made a coat of plastic for the
whole house.

That was the first time I saw something
like that.

And I couldn't believe what I saw.

I couldn't believe my own eyes.

It was very neatly done too, as these
things are.

I don't know how they did it, but it
was beautifully done.

And it looked so ridiculous and we laughed.

At one point, it was decided that to get rid of these
Museum Beetles, they had to wrap up the Museum and
fumigate the place.

III. BLÅSYRE

They used this Blåsyre, which I think is
Zyklon B

They wrapped the Museum in plastic and put boxes of this
gas - which I think must have been in some kind of powder
form - in every room in the Museum...

And it said in the newspaper, “the work has
been going well”. The work has been going well
and “they have been using Blåsyre”.

They wrapped the Museum in plastic, opened the boxes and
let the gas come out, naturally.

Why did they do this packing up? because that
was the most that we could see and the answer
was... Where have I got this from? I don't
know... so that the poison should stay inside
the building. It should not go outside the
building. In order to function better,

but I never thought...

When the fumigation had run its course

The idea never occurred to me...

When the fumigation had run its course and supposedly all
the beetles were dead...

It never occurred to me that it could be
poisonous for people going outside as well.

When the fumigation had run its course and supposedly all
the beetles were dead, they had to slowly start unwrapping
the Museum

This is an old building.
There is presumably a lot of leakages
in such an old building.

And from what I've been told as soon as they started
unwrapping the building...

It's a hundred and fifty years old,
So we can imagine holes here and there...

As they started unwrapping the building, a lot of the gas
that was still remnant in the building came out

And so I'm sure if there was a very
dangerous poison inside ...

A lot of the gas that was still remnant in the building came
out and apparently,
birds
fell from the sky.

They really needed to take care.

Birds that were flying over the Museum fell from the sky,
because of the gas that was still escaping

They made a coat of plastic for the
whole house. And it looked so ridiculous
and we laughed.

The birds ...

And I couldn't believe what I saw.

The birds
fell
from the sky.

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NOTES

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IMAGE DETAILS

Front cover: Infestation-damaged insect specimens, University of Bergen Natural History Collection. Image © Andy Lock 2019.

Unoccupied vitrine, 2018, University of Bergen Natural History Collection. Image © Andy Lock 2018.

Sticky traps containing the bodies of infestations, University of Bergen Natural History Collection. Image © Andy Lock 2019.

Insect display case, containing Dermestid Beetle specimens, at University of Bergen Natural History Collection. Image © Andy Lock 2019.

X-rays: details of whale skeletons from the whale hall at the University of Bergen Natural History Collection. Images © University Museum of Bergen, University of Bergen.

Waveforms created by the sounds of Dermestid Beetle stridulation. Recorded by the Natural History Museum, London. With sincere thanks to Natural History Museum, London and Tring, for their help.

Magpie corpses: image courtesy of Sarah Burhouse.

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