

See Dick Hunt. Hunt Dick Hunt.  
by Jason Young

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<sup>1</sup> I have never killed an elephant.

Had I killed one, this diorama of Africa in the northern apse of the Dundee, Michigan, Cabela's store would certainly transport me back in time to that fateful moment. Had I become a big game hunter, I'd stare into the glassy eyes of the elephant taxidermied and on display and think to myself, it is here that I killed an elephant and felt the enchantment of a perfect garden.<sup>1</sup> Such a communion with nature, had it happened, would deserve its own commemoration, perhaps with a monument such as this one honouring the difficulty we have remembering what it feels like to be as real and alive as we are when we kill such a beautiful and awesome creature as the African elephant.

But I never killed an elephant, and I hope never to kill one. In fact, I have only ever seen "real" elephants in circus acts, at the zoo, and on TV. I have not studied the animal in its natural habitats, and I don't know the first thing about how to track, hunt, or kill elephants. The thought of killing one has never even crossed my mind. Even so, this taxidermied elephant's glassy eyes and visually perplexing skin magnetize me and command my attention.

As I approach the diorama, I meet the charge of the elephant with my gaze. The elephant bull's ears are standing outward. His tusks, forward, offering a close-up view of the risk-reward contract of the hunt. As my gaze arrests the elephant's charge, I notice the position of his trunk and the dimensions of his gait. He is not so much charging as he is walking deliberately, bothered and in an annoyed hurry. The elephant must know that I am here and he is not happy about that. All things being equal, it seems like the elephant could just walk on by me, spare me his wrath, maybe simply scare me off and then return to whatever he had been doing before our meeting. I guess the same could be said for me. Caught up in the moment of the encounter, I wonder why I had to kill him. Couldn't simply experiencing the animal's majesty and awesome beauty have been enough? Or does our communion have everything to do with the inevitability of killing? Am I obliged, now that I am actually face to face with the animal, to pull the trigger?

Just then my hallucinatory trance is broken by a Cabela's Associate who, noticing that I've taken an interest in the taxidermy display, directs my attention towards a small

wooden plaque within the diorama.

As it turns out, Dick Cabela killed this elephant on 1 August 1998 while on safari in Matetsi, Zimbabwe. The small plaque offers this aphoristic historical admission alongside a photograph of Dick standing alone in front of the fallen animal at the site of its death. Dick looks pleased with himself, as well he should be with his manhood so recently confirmed. He might even look slightly relieved. Of course, very few details are given here in the diorama about the circumstances of this kill. This has the effect of leaving me, and the four million other annual visitors to this Cabela's store, to imagine for ourselves how menacing and breathtakingly dangerous the elephant must have been as Dick tracked it through the plains, perhaps from a watering hole of some sort, into the bush.

In the photograph, the elephant lies limp on its side in the dry grass of the savannah. It is still significantly larger than Dick, even as it has been reduced to a breathless, mostly horizontal vestige of itself. The elephant's tusks appear domesticated now that they are parallel to the ground. It is easy to understand the ivory as a commodity in this image, now that its status as tusk has been defeated. It is through the obtuse magic of the photograph, and perhaps the entire diorama, that these props make it easy to imagine the danger those tusks must have presented as they closed in on Dick, his weapon drawn in a frantic moment of fate produced by the hunter and the hunted. Yet, that sense of danger is supplemented by a feeling of distance from any *real* danger in the store. There are plenty of guns

and ammo here, but it is hard to imagine that any will be discharged inside Cabela's. There is a complex sense of imminence—of the kill and of all the danger implicit in killing which plays on the experience of being entertained by that imminence and its simulation.

The animal is down, defeated, and now contained by the image. Dick is the only one upright within the frame of the photograph, standing firm as the elephant lies limp. As the viewer of this image, now in a wooden frame in front of the taxidermied elephant, I assume the position of the one taking the photograph, though I can verify nothing of what lies at my back nor beyond the instant that the image was captured. My attention is divided between this photograph of the elephant, the mesmeric taxidermy in front of me, and the imagination I have for the moment Dick, as a surrogate of who I could have been, triumphs over a menacing, wild nature. For me, viewing the photograph is analogous to taking it. Shooting the animal with a camera is analogous to shooting it with a gun. And the taxidermy has a way of making all of this seem even more vividly possible. By virtue of the *switch logic* within this analogous structure of relationships, I have now killed this elephant. But I know I did not kill it in any real sense.

Still, the power of the encounter with the diorama offers some sort of analogous kill, a virtual kill, or an unleashing of the virtual dimensions of the actual kill to be experienced, now, as a relay or surrogate reality that cancels out the real danger of the hunt while preserving the possibility for real danger. In this sense, the taxidermy here is *impossible*. At the same time, experiencing the diorama is as visceral as the *possibility* of the kill, though in its own analogous way.

Along with the elephant, the diorama in the northern apse contains taxidermy specimens of all of the so-called “dangerous five” considered the pinnacle of big game for the most discerning hunters. The rhino, taken by Dick Cabela on 27 August 1999 from Zululand, South Africa, is here bearing down on a rather small-looking lion, farcically poised to hold its ground through counter-aggression towards the rhino, who looks completely undeterred. A leopard, killed in Rungwa Ikili, Tanzania, is repositioned here on the prowl, high in a tree, swatting and lunging at a couple of baboons who look intent on holding their position on the branch. On the opposite side of the elephant, there is a common eland taxidermied as a carcass—a moment of the taxidermist doubling down—that serves as both a break from the pedagogy of the “big five”

and as a reminder of the cycle of life. The common eland is host to a small flock of scavengers who are sure to be displaced by the approaching hyenas. A young jackal grasps the eland's ear as a suggestion to viewers of what is surely to happen next. Uninvolved and walking away from that ensemble is a cape buffalo, killed as it were by Dick on 31 August 1994 in Fort Ikoma, Tanzania, with the help of famed hunting guide Cotton Gordon. The nonchalance and indifference of this buffalo contrasts the predicament of a second one in the apse, on the verge of succumbing to the tactics of no fewer than three African lions closing in on the beast. There are a total of five lions in the diorama. The proudest looking of all of them is uninvolved in both the downing of the buffalo and the cat play with the rhino. This lion, with its iconic mane, seems to be walking out of the painted scene of the savannah that extends the space of the diorama deeper than its physical dimensions. There is no information on who killed any of the lions. I assume it was probably Dick Cabela, though he often hunted with his wife Mary, and she very well could have taken any of them. All of the animals in the diorama are impressive, both as specimens of the wild and as trophies made with exquisite craftsmanship. While the leopard in the tree establishes one of the edges of the half circle, the lions and their assault on the cape buffalo mark the opposite edge of the apse. Near the geographic centre stands the elephant, who no doubt marks the mythologic centre of the diorama.

None of what I imagine in the gaze of this elephant's glassy eyes can be verified through my experience in Cabela's. Of this much, I am sure. Yet, the virtualities catalyzed by the potency of the objects in this diorama do not aspire to speak to our contemporary culture of scientific verification and statistical validation. Rather, the diorama asserts itself as a desire-machine: one that combines the shifting status of man's self-identity with the virility and vitality of a nature that must be confronted. To this complex mixture, the diorama adds the *production* of permanence that stems from the deployment of trophy-mounted taxidermy. The diorama as desire-machine produces its own time: a *now* set aside from the moment of actual confrontation thus rendering the virtual dimensions of it more potent than the contours of the original moment, now escaped; and a *now*

whose futurity stems from expressing a fundamental vision of a vanishing, threatening scene.<sup>2</sup>

If not the whole of the diorama, then certainly the immortalized elephant is part of what I have termed the “MacroPhenomenal.” A latent yet strong characteristic of post-city conditions of urbanism, the MacroPhenomenal is that quality within things (objects, spaces, and relational assemblies) with which one has definitive experience, even as that experience is predominated by the *dotted lines of escape* that pull away from the thing's quiddity, pushing experience towards the macro conditions that shape and contour its presence. First catalyzed by the vitality of the things themselves, the dimensions of the MacroPhenomenal stem from those moments when experience is released towards the relational systems that delivered the thing to us in the first place. With the taxidermy elephant, everything we cannot know about this potent object intervenes in our understanding of it. We experience the elephant, for sure, but that experience is predominated by the relationality of that which is no longer there.

<sup>2</sup> Self-titled the “World's Foremost Outfitter,” Cabela's is a hunting, camping, and outdoor wear superstore located in the United States. It sells hunting, fishing, camping, archery, boating, and all-terrain vehicle accessories, along with footwear and clothing for these cultural activities. Thus, the company promotes and outfits the lifestyle of the outdoorsman, an elusive identity embedded deep in the imagination Americans have about themselves and their nation. The company got its inauspicious start in 1961 when Dick and his wife Mary began offering five hand-tied flies free to anyone who would send them 25 cents for postage and handling through an advertisement in the magazine *Field and Stream*. While each sale produced a very modest return on Dick's investment in the product, Mary began typing the names and addresses of those interested in this bargain on recipe cards that she filed in a shoebox.<sup>3</sup> This loose aggregation of cards became the first of many data caches that would later drive the wildly successful hunting superstore.

With each order filled, the Cabelas would include a mimeographed catalogue that presented their customers with additional



The elephant's glassy eyes and mesmeric skin.

products on offer. As soon as 1968, Cabela's reached the milestone of \$1 million in annual sales. Its remarkable growth put pressure on the analogue bias of its operation and in 1975, the company invested in the emerging computer systems from which most corporations are now indistinct. In 1995, the corporation supplemented its extensive circulation of printed product catalogues by launching [www.cabelas.com](http://www.cabelas.com), a web-based interface that promised to expand its database operations exponentially. Cabela's webpage, schematically understood, brings a database of some 90,000 products into contact with another vast database of discretionary income and credit card potential. Aware of the theoretically limitless potential of their technological expansion, it may come as no surprise that in 2001, Cabela's expanded its operation, now fully digital, by establishing its own bank. "The World's Foremost Bank" was Cabela's means to gain more control over the totality of its financial environment. If founding their own bank can be seen as the penultimate step in the exponential development of the corporation, the final one was taken in 2004 when it prepared an Initial Public Offering and became publicly traded, joining the New York Stock Exchange.<sup>4</sup>

In the movement from the mimeographed

catalogue, through the development of that medium and the sophistication of telephone and computer networks, and towards the cultural role of the credit card provider and the wide world web and all of its attendant informational infrastructures, we can see Cabela's maturing as a technological company that is both defining its market as it becomes inseparable from it. In a 2006 article, *The Economist* reported that America's 40 million hunters will spend \$4 trillion over their lifetimes on hunting.<sup>5</sup> With this sort of future economy predicted and therefore addressable as potential—informed by statistical analysis and backed by the feedback loops within a digital database of the total hunting market—there is no wonder why companies like Cabela's would invest in performances involving the imminence of the kill that I referred to above. The taxidermy diorama produces a strange inversion of time and remembrance, a futurity that relies on a past you may have never had.

### 3

In an online video featuring Dick and Mary Cabela being interviewed by Wayne LaPierre, the executive vice president of the National Rifle Association (NRA), on the occasion of their corporation's fiftieth anniversary, there is agreement that the most

dangerous of the so-called "Dangerous Five" game to hunt is the African elephant, especially when hunted in the rainforest. In this interview, Mary tells the story of a particularly trying safari in Ethiopia where we learn that Dick was under the duress of a charging elephant, which he ultimately shot and killed from a dramatically close range of five yards.<sup>6</sup> That particular elephant, Dick adds to the end of Mary's narration, is now on permanent display in the Cabela's store built in Sidney, Nebraska in 1991. This store, while not the company's first retail space, can be seen as a prototype for the character and quality of some 32 stores built around the United States since its completion. The presence of an elephant in the store is no less a prototype for Cabela's retail strategy. There are as many as 17 elephants currently sited in the 34 Cabela's stores, each one immortalized by the process of taxidermy.<sup>7</sup>

With the help of their son and author, David Cabela, Dick and Mary have published their hunting stories in a book entitled *Two Hearts, One Passion: Dick and Mary Cabela's Hunting Chronicles*. Written as first-person accounts from the alternating perspectives of Mary and Dick, the book provides narrative context to the now-taxidermied elephant as part of their company's emerging retail strategy. According to the book, Dick and Mary were on safari in Ethiopia from 4 February to 10 March 1989. There were rumours among big game hunters that elephant hunting would be shut down for political reasons, and Dick wanted to kill before it was too late. On the safari, Mary killed first, stopping an elephant bull with modestly sized tusks exactly one day before Dick triumphed over the elephant now on display in Sidney. Of the moments just after he shot the charging bull elephant, Dick writes: "Emotional dissonance bombards your senses at such moments—brief instances in time. It is overwhelming. With the snap of a finger, it can whisk away your mental and physical energy. Allowing your guard to subside in even the least degree can be fatal."<sup>8</sup> His discipline, focus, and control in the face of such charged moments must be among Dick's most redeeming characteristics, but I am only speculating. It is likely something similar to these measures of good character that we conjure in our minds, for the benefit of our own self worth, when we take up Cabela's invitation to engage this particular elephant, frozen as it is now in a completely

artificial, neutered, and denatured simulation inside that Nebraska retail showroom.

As the account of that particular day in the rainforest draws to a close, Dick offers a circumspect moment of reflection worth citing here. He writes:

Many people cannot understand why someone would want to hunt an elephant. It is not in my power to sufficiently explain. I can say from experience, the dead, soulless existence of city living shields most of us from truly knowing what we are made of. In our daily grind, we have largely forgotten where we come from, ignoring the things which connect us to the land. All I can say is there have been few days in my life where I have felt more alive.<sup>9</sup>

As if Dick was anticipating the magnetic draw of the taxidermy with which he would go on to populate the company's retail stores, his description of a lost connection to the real seems prescient, if not prophetic. What seems less certain is if Dick ever once thought about the MacroPhenomenal nature of the subsequent, fully capitalized experiences that companies like his would proliferate outside the city's "soulless existence" and corrosive "daily grind."

Inside the Sidney, Nebraska store, the full-body trophy is part of a taxidermic monument to that elephant and the thrill of killing it. There is no attempt to recreate the scene of the kill in the small diorama that contains the elephant. Rather, there are just a few sprigs of grass and a few rocks in the sand that is now under the feet of the mighty animal. The elephant's trunk is raised and his ears are standing straight out from his head, making his massive tusks appear threatening. The elephant mount, consistent in posture to the story of the hunt, is on the charge here. But the setting has been completely changed. No longer in the Ethiopian rainforest, nor inside an attempt to replicate that environment, this elephant is now captured within a varnished wooden handrail that both allows visitors to the store to lean in and take in the majesty of the beast at the same time they are held at a safe distance. Although, this distance is closer than that from which Dick shot the animal sometime near Valentine's day in 1989 while on safari with his wife, assisted by an expert hunting guide and his staff of trackers, bearers, and skinners.



Meet the charge with your gaze.



Dick Cabela on 1 August 1998.

As I mentioned above, the 1991 retail store is significant because it served as a prototype for the subsequent retail store expansion undergone by Cabela's from 1998 to the present. The taxidermic pachyderm is but one of a number of educational and entertainment-related interventions in the retail space that make shopping at Cabela's an excursion in its own right. In addition to the display that features this elephant, the store has an artificial mountain landscape adorned with some 40 trophy mounts of North American game. The taxidermy specimens are displayed so as to render the plenitude of the outdoors as real as its average consumer might tolerate given that any actual danger inside the store is less preferable to the simulation of that danger. This comprises one of the many reference points in the store for what is currently not part of the experience. Here, one can imagine the hunt, as well as practice the ritualistic silence and stealthy movements that make it possible to slip into place and ply the crafts of mastery and control.

Supplementing the taxidermic museology of the interior, there are four aquariums, each averaging 2,000 gallons in size, stocked with living game fish and predator fish indigenous to western Nebraska and

eastern Wyoming. These aquariums make explicit the pedagogical mission of the retail store and help accentuate the ways in which stores like Cabela's are now operating as institutions in the post-city landscape. Educational field trips to Cabela's among elementary school students eager to learn about nature and the outdoors can form the basis for many return trips during a child's lifetime, which is marked now with a potentially expansive appetite for outdoors activities like camping, hunting, and fishing. And for those children who might turn their back on such activities, Cabela's can still play a role in their subject-formation by providing the experiences which form that aversion.

There is also a Gun Library set amongst the store's inventory, stocked with antique and collectible firearms, many of which are for sale. The Gun Library provides the customer with a curatorial experience much like that of a museum by helping form the basis for how it is that one looks at the artificial mountain landscape, the taxidermy within it, the specimens in the aquarium, and by extension the products on the store's racks. This blending of allegedly low-culture consumerism and so-called high-culture pedagogical spectatorship is evinced in the

Gun Library at the precise moment a customer buys a 1956 Smith & Wesson Model 29, the .44 magnum gun made famous by Clint Eastwood in the movie *Dirty Harry*. Here, discretionary income and pre-approved credit are the only things standing between the aura of curated artifacts of history and your possession of them.

Generally speaking, the store's organization mimics that of the Cabela's catalogue. Each of the departments is clearly delineated, allowing the possibility for calculated and efficient circulation through an "access copy" of the database of products. While the catalogue uses images and narrative descriptions, the store is able to re-frame products with the promise of a corporeal performance. As you navigate through the store you are able to physically re-enact the catalogue and the itinerary of desire it has facilitated largely in absence of the activities themselves. And this is an important aspect of experiencing the store as well. Like the catalogue and the website, it makes present as a simulation what each customer purportedly yearns for: namely, the feeling of pure freedom and the fresh air of the outdoors. It is just one of the concessions of the experience offered by the store that to satisfy this desire for freedom and fresh air, you have to go indoors, into a retail environment, to get reconnected with the outside world. The work done by the simulation within the interfaces of Cabela's—the website, the catalogue, and the store itself—makes the violence and vividness inherent in activities such as hunting and killing animals somehow more viable as an idea and certainly more attainable as a desire.

There is a significant gap between the experience of killing something and the entertaining ambulation through the apparel section of Cabela's, with its 60 different patterns of camouflage. And, it is fair to assert that the ideological and nationalistic narratives surrounding access to nature and the weapons needed to keep it under personal control rely on this mediation for their potency as much as anything. These are among the "dotted lines of escape" that make up the MacroPhenomenal experience of the Cabela's stores.

4 At the time this essay was being written, Cabela's had just launched a television advertisement campaign that featured the tagline, "It's in your nature." The campaign, called "the Cabela's Anthem," has a 60-second commercial spot featuring a series of beautiful landscape scenes shown in sequence, one after another, nine in all, that were filmed across the United States.<sup>10</sup> Within each distinct setting there is the awesome landscape, the implication of a technological product that subdues and instrumentalizes that landscape into a discreet experience that everyone with a similar gizmo could have, and the superimposition of a short statement that occupies the TV screen itself. The statements play a particularly important narrative role, as each begins with, "It's in your," and ends, variably, with terms like, "family tree," "unspoken friendships," "traditions," "forever," "second language," "goosebumps," and finally, "nature." These statements build upon one another as they work with the landscape scenes and the depictions within of Americans fishing, hunting, cooking on an outdoor fire, riding in a pickup truck, etc. The statements also play an interesting, and perhaps unintended structural role, as the text on the screen has the effect of making the work of the screen itself explicit. The TV screen is the cultural device that both allows for the imaginative occupation of the scenes within the commercial, and blocks the viewer from the actual experience of the outdoors. Participation in the campfire, for example, is both promoted by the screen and also disallowed. This advertisement renders the paradoxical nature of the television viewer, even if we admit that the commercial is designed more to foment desire for the landscape experience than it is to actually get the viewer outside.

All the scenes in the commercial are filmed either just at sunrise or sunset, which lend an amazing, amber glow to each scene, imbuing them with the sepia tone of things old, fading and distant, but also lasting. To my eye, everything is perfect and imperfect in these scenes. Things are rustic and simple. Idealized, and thus rendered more real than the reality of those activities. My favourite scene within the advertisement occurs when an older man and his hunting dog are riding off from the field, after an afternoon hunt, in a Chevy pickup truck. The camera is positioned in order to give

us a view from outside the passenger window looking into the truck, across the bench seat and towards the driver. The dog is sitting close to the hunter as he drives and rubs the dog behind the ear. The dog's eyes are fixed on the country road ahead. The only sound in this scene is the noise of the truck slowly creaking along the road. As the scene nears its end, the words, "It's in your unspoken friendships," appear on the screen. I "get"

this scene. The old truck, the old man, the rough roadway, the companion hunting dog, the rubbing of his ears, the silence between them. Like the taxidermied elephants inside the Cabela's stores, this scene is powerful in its effect of capturing an intangible something beyond words that purportedly lurks deep in the excessive mythologies of being American.✕

#### Endnotes

- 1 Much of how I've unpacked my experience at the Cabela's store has been inspired by Donna Haraway's powerful essay entitled, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936," *Social Text* 11 (Winter 1984-1985): 20-64. For example, on page 25, she uses the phrase "the enchantment of a perfect garden" to describe the site and event of the taxidermist Carl Akeley's first gorilla kill. She speaks also of "communion with nature" through killing, and of the relationship between hunting with guns and cameras, all of which have impacted my writing in important ways.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 37. The notion of "a vanishing, threatening scene" is a direct citation.
- 3 This historical narrative of the company is drawn from the book written by David Cabela, *Cabela's: World's Foremost Outfitter: A History* (Forest Dale: Paul S. Eriksson, 2001), 13.

- 4 "Cabela's Inc., IPO," NASDAQ, <http://www.nasdaq.com/markets/ipos/company/cabelas-inc-600278-38467>.
- 5 "Hunting, Shooting and...Shopping," *The Economist*, 19 December 2006, 79.
- 6 "The Cabela's Discuss Their Lives, Passions, and Pursuits, Parts I," YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KOhqZsXKNE>.
- 7 The number of taxidermied elephants within Cabela's holdings is estimated from research I've done on the company's website, [www.cabelas.com](http://www.cabelas.com). It is not a scientific survey, but rather based on the information they reveal about each store for the purposes of retail tourism.
- 8 David Cabela, *Two Hearts, One Passion: Dick and Mary Cabela's Hunting Chronicles* (Sidney, NE: Cabela Publishing LLC, 2005), 176.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 178.
- 10 The various versions of this advertisement campaign can be viewed at <http://www.cabelas.com/assets/collections/I1YN/itsinyournature.html>.

#### Bio

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