

Tears of the Taxidermy, Ethics of the Gaze — Ahn Changhong's Critique of Civilization and the Ethos of Mimesis

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1. Taxidermized Life and the Ruins of Desire

At the outskirts of Gyeonggi Province, upon opening the door of a dilapidated factory, artist Ahn Changhong encountered an unforgettable shock. Mangled and broken taxidermized animals were piled haphazardly amid the stench of formalin. A deer crammed into a dark glass case, an ostrich with its eyes fallen out and legs twisted, birds abandoned en masse still bearing labels — these were grotesque self-portraits of a civilization that continues to be consumed even in death.

These taxidermized animals functioned as signs — collective symbols of lives processed and destroyed by capitalist desire. Confronted by this spectacle, Ahn instinctively perceived the traces of violence which human civilization had inflicted on non-human life. What he saw in the discarded taxidermy was not merely dead bodies, but confined souls mercilessly cast aside. In them, he saw another face of humanity. As he put it, if humans abandon their virtues as human beings, they become what these taxidermies represent — projections of their own fallen selves.

Ahn's paintings are always shadowed by death. Through taxidermy, he wished to probe deeper into the question of death. While frequenting junkyards to acquire the occasional taxidermy specimen, he was introduced to a warehouse that stored taxidermies released from closed-down natural history museums and taxidermy factories. As he opened the door of the abandoned factory — its concrete floors cracked and overgrown with waist-high weeds — the overpowering smell of formalin typical of taxidermy filled the air.

His heart sank with the stench. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, what emerged before him was a vision of hell. Taxidermies were either crammed into glass cases, piled like mountains in boxes, or scattered inside display cabinets resembling cupboards. All were treated with brutality — toppled over, heaped together, shoved upside-down — as though witnessing corpses massacred and discarded. Raccoons, hedgehogs, deer, tigers, bears — all were in broken and shattered form. Some boxes contained dozens of identical labeled birds, mass-produced specimens. It was a horrifying sight beyond imagination. The thought struck him with force: can human violence — barbarity in the name of civilization — truly be this ruthless?

For a moment, Ahn Changhong felt as if this was the culmination of everything he had worked on throughout his life. He began photographing the taxidermized animals in the warehouse. In this way, the “photo-painting” technique — a key method throughout his artistic practice — reached its peak in the <Taxidermy> series.

Taxidermies from small private natural history museums that had to shut down during the COVID-19 pandemic, along with unsold specimens, were carelessly crammed into the abandoned factory.

I still remember the shock I felt when I first discovered the ostrich toppled over in that abandoned warehouse where the taxidermies had been left to rot. Maybe because of its size, they tried to move it more easily — its entire body was tightly bound in thick rope, its neck and legs were broken, and its eyes had completely fallen out. How can humans be so cruel? My heart was pounding uncontrollably.

I was overwhelmed with sorrow for the animals that had died three times at the hands of humans — first, a biological death; then, a second death through taxidermy; and finally, a third death when they were discarded once more. My heart ached deeply for them.

Artist Ahn Changhong returned to the abandoned factory with a photographer and began sketching the harrowing scene. Fearing that his powers of depiction might dull the animals’ cries, he resolved to retouch the printed photographs — to preserve and convey their raw pain as vividly as possible.

As if performing a ritual to release their bound bodies from the darkness of the warehouse and let them finally take flight, he painted butterflies for their souls.

Human greed —the relentless exploitation of nature for human ends and the oppression and marginalization of other human groups — has reached its peak under the capitalist system. The belief that humans can manipulate, dominate, and control nature using their knowledge and power has deep historical roots. This belief is often encapsulated in the idea that “humans are the lords of all

creation,” a notion born of anthropocentric thinking that emerged as humanity began to reflect on itself and the world. Its earliest and most explicit expression appears in the Bible, in Genesis 1:26–28.

“And God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness... and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’”

In this passage, humans are described as beings created in the image of God, set above all other creatures. From the very beginning, the Christian theocentric worldview, as seen in the Book of Genesis, contains a certain degree of anthropocentrism.

Likewise, Aristotle, in works such as *Politics* and *Metaphysics*, defines humans as beings endowed with *logos* (reason or speech), and regards them as superior to other natural beings — inanimate objects, plants, and animals. Aristotle’s ontology was later systematized into a God-centered hierarchical order by medieval Scholastic philosophers, especially Thomas Aquinas. This led to the formulation of the “Great Chain of Being,” a concept that arranged existence in a vertical hierarchy: inanimate matter – plants – animals – humans – angels – God.

The core idea in both Christian theology and ancient and medieval philosophy is that humans, as beings possessing a rational soul, represent the most complete form among natural entities. This anthropocentric thinking regarded nature as an object to be conquered and dominated.

In this way, anthropocentric thought — an anthropocentric worldview — has persisted from the Book of Genesis through the modern Industrial Revolution. As a result, nature has finally begun to take its revenge in the form of climate crisis and the destruction of life. The <Taxidermy> series stands as both a testimony to and an indictment of this catastrophe.

From his youth to the present, Ahn Changhong’s paintings have been grounded in such fundamental ontological questions. This is why the shadow of death has always permeated his work. Regardless of the subject matter on the surface, his paintings have consistently carried an underlying ontological reflection on death — and on life as it clings to death.

This reflection on death emerged as early as his teenage years. In works such as *Hospital Room* (1976) and *At the Crematory* (1976), in which the figures are depicted without eyes, Ahn explored the dissolution of the being or subject within the intimate realm of life and death. In the *Post-Human* (1979) series and later in the *Family Portrait* series (1979–1982), the faces of figures are rendered as hollow shells, devoid of subjectivity — resembling masks. This motif of the mask would become a recurring and defining symbol throughout Ahn Changhong’s oeuvre. In *The Scream* (1986), this expressive style was further intensified. These uncanny images, represented through eyeless or mask-like faces, embody the “Verfremdungseffekt” — or alienation effect — formulated by Bertolt Brecht, which blocks the viewer’s emotional identification and instead prompts rational reflection. Through this process,

Ahn expands the suffering and misfortunes rooted in the private sphere — such as those of the Japanese military's use of “comfort women” and forced laborers — into the realm of public history. His work does not remain within the realm of emotional empathy but is elevated into a universal, historical, and social level of rational contemplation.

The technique and style of the *Family Portrait* series can be succinctly described as “photo-painting.” In this method, Ahn uses private or public photographs as the foundational material for his paintings and directly intervenes upon them. Here, he draws on Roland Barthes' concepts of *studium* and *punctum*. Through techniques such as piercing holes in the photograph or letting paint flow across the surface, Ahn transforms the image — originally perceived as a neutral *studium* — into one that establishes a direct relationship between the viewer and the object or figure in the photo, thereby producing emotionally and affectively charged details.

In this way, Ahn's photo-paintings turn neutral, objective records — whether private or public — into a ground where the viewer can project their own sentiments, opening the possibility for emotional identification. Thus, Ahn's photo-paintings operate on two simultaneous and interwoven levels: on one hand, they embody Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), disrupting simple emotional identification to provoke rational reflection; on the other, they evoke Barthes' *punctum*, eliciting personal emotional resonance. The result is a dual and complex form of creation that encompasses both effects.

This technique and format continued to appear in Ahn Changhong's later works, which dealt with consumer capitalist society, the desires it generates, and the ruins left in its wake. Even in the mid-1990s, Ahn carried on the “photo-painting” practice he had begun in the late 1970s and 1980s. This body of work eventually developed into the *Arirang* series in the 2000s. The worldview embedded in these expanded photo-paintings became a means of expressing consolation and mourning for the lives and deaths of the nameless common people sacrificed in the violence and barbarism of Korean history. A recurring image in these “photo-paintings” was the yellow butterfly. Across cultures and throughout history, the butterfly has symbolized the soul and served as a medium between the world of the living and the dead.

As previously mentioned, anthropocentric thought is clearly manifested in the theocentric worldview of Christianity, which forms one of the foundations of Western civilization. This anthropocentric tendency in Christian thought reaches its pinnacle in the modern scientific revolution, particularly in Newtonian classical mechanics. Newtonian physics conceives of the world as a mathematical machine, and within this framework, humans come to define themselves not merely as beings who perceive nature, but as subjects capable of mathematically calculating, predicting, organizing, and dominating it. Nature is no longer a mysterious entity, but a system that can be explained and predicted according to

laws. After Newton, nature became a world that could be controlled through mathematical calculation. Furthermore, the Enlightenment, building on the Newtonian worldview, extolled the omnipotence of human reason. This was the belief that reason could rationally organize both nature and society. As Max Weber observed, modern physics —particularly Newtonian classical mechanics— led to the disenchantment (Entzauberung) of the world. This refers to the belief that humans can understand and explain the world not by relying on some mysterious or magical forces, but through the framework of rational thought. Such a belief constitutes a core element of the Enlightenment, but it also encapsulates a central tenet of anthropocentrism: the idea that humans are not part of nature, but stand outside it, able to grasp and dominate its laws. This anthropocentric view reaches its apex in the development of capitalism, which is grounded in modern natural science and instrumental rationality. The consequences of this are now manifest in the form of technological domination, the resulting total alienation of human beings, and the ecological crisis exemplified by climate crisis that has surpassed the limits of human control. From this anthropocentric perspective, humanity does not seek coexistence with other forms of life.

Ahn Changhong's *Taxidermy* series is a profound reflection on anthropocentrism, tracing it back to the roots of human civilization. It also represents the culmination of his “photo-painting” practice, which began in the late 1970s. In 2025, Ahn once again summons the lives that human civilization has cast aside. Titled *Taxidermy*, this latest series confronts us with the images of animals —deer, wolves, foxes, sheep—staring directly at the viewer. Yet these are not merely depictions of animals. They represent the other we have turned away from— the dead, the taxidermized, the sacrificed lives, or the repressed underside of human desire. Throughout his life as an artist, Ahn has consistently focused not on the spotlight but the shadows, not on the victors but the victims—those excluded from history's spoils despite being its true agents. As he himself has said, he seeks to view history through the eyes of the nameless victims who vanished amid the barbarity of history. Through his work, he strives to express the pain and suffering of contemporary people. His art is an expression of outrage and resistance against an absurd society, a form of testimony, and a product of the spirit of the times.

If Ahn's earlier works revealed the dark underside —the shadowy gray zones— of Japanese colonial rule, military authoritarianism, and contemporary consumer capitalism, then *Taxidermy* goes a step further: it summons the human through the ‘non-human’, from a space where humanity itself has vanished. Confronted with the countless discarded taxidermized animals in a defunct natural history museum, what Ahn felt was the desolate ruin of desire—desire shaped by human greed.

What Ahn Changhong captures here is the fact that this greed originates in capital. A deep, fundamental anger toward the logic of capital —which stops at nothing in the pursuit of profit— is the emotional and psychological drive behind this series. What he sees is not the neatly displayed taxidermy in the natural history museum, but what lies behind it. For example, the parrot on display is

merely one of many mass-produced specimens churned out by taxidermy factories and sold as commodities to various private and public museums. Before being turned into taxidermy, dozens of parrots were once living beings in nature. Humans indiscriminately captured and killed them, removed their organs, treated them with preservatives, and stored the lifeless bodies in glass cases or boxes. Each specimen is then packaged and shipped as a commodity, depending on demand.

Ahn Changhong fundamentally draws attention to the brutality of factory-style taxidermy production. No matter how seemingly insignificant, every life possesses inherent dignity. His awareness arises from a critical reflection on anthropocentrism and a deeply rooted philosophy of the sanctity of life. This philosophy is also connected to the Donghak (Eastern Learning) idea of *Innaecheon* (人乃天) — “human is heaven.” Originally, this concept was not meant to deify humanity. In this context, “human” does not refer solely to human beings. *Innaecheon* expresses the sacredness and equality of all life imbued in all things. Ahn’s gaze, which grants dignity not only to nature and animals but even to damaged, discarded objects, aligns with this Donghak worldview. The lives that have been abandoned without names, or even denied the symbolic preservation of taxidermy, represent these sacred lives. Furthermore, this outlook resonates with the Buddhist doctrine of *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination), which teaches that all beings exist in interrelation—each life is both the cause and the result of another. It affirms that all existence, in itself, holds inviolable value. Ahn Changhong’s perspective on broken taxidermies and forsaken lives is thus deeply connected to this Buddhist reverence for life.

However, Ahn Changhong does not only turn his gaze toward taxidermized animals —those stripped of their dignity as living beings and stacked in glass cases or boxes to be sold as commodities. He also focuses on those that were not even used for taxidermy, whose bodies were broken, mutilated, and left in neglect. Dozens of corpses, abandoned in boxes, are mostly fragmented specimens with missing body parts, disfigured into grotesque shapes. These non-human entities are the most marginalized beings, hidden at the lowest level of capitalist society —the excluded others. Ahn captures the essence of their forgotten existence and summons it into his work. His “photo-paintings” call them forth in order to reveal their discarded dignity, buried beneath the ravages of pain and distortion.

This act recalls what Heidegger, in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, describes as the artistic realization in which “the truth of beings sets itself to work” (*Aletheia, Unverborgenheit*). In this sense, Ahn Changhong’s *Taxidermy* series is a manifestation of the truth of beings revealing itself —a presence of the truth of beings.

Ahn Changhong also reads the ruins of desire within the taxidermized lives. Throughout his previous works, he has illuminated the ways in which human beings lose their dignity under the pressures of

capitalist desire in consumer society. In the *Taxidermy* series, this focus expands to non-human beings —especially taxidermized animals. By portraying lives —whether human, animal, or nature— that have been destroyed by modern desire and consumption Ahn’s work becomes an artistic practice that seeks to recover the inherent dignity of life, a dignity obscured by consumer capitalism.

2. Taxidermy: The Posthumous Exploitation of Life

What is taxidermy? Its original purposes include natural history research, education, collecting and exhibition, and commemorative preservation. With the development of modern natural history museums, taxidermy became an essential tool for zoological studies. Because it was necessary to have specimens that preserved the actual size and form of animals in place of living ones, taxidermy served the need for species preservation and morphological observation. During the age of European imperialism in the 18th and 19th centuries, explorers and naturalists collected animals from around the world and preserved them through taxidermy.

Aristocrats and members of the bourgeoisie frequently had their hunted animals taxidermized, using them to assert social prestige or to serve as decorative trophies and commemorative objects. By the late 19th century, taxidermy became a common feature in public museum exhibitions, offering the broader public a visual encounter with wildlife from distant parts of the world. In essence, these displays visualized human control and domination over nature. Yet taxidermy is not merely a “model of a dead animal”; it is a cultural artifact that encodes the prevailing attitudes of its time toward nature, death, memory, and preservation. At the heart of taxidermy lies a profound paradox: the animal’s life is extinguished, yet its form is preserved in a manner that simulates vitality. This is precisely where philosophical and aesthetic reflection on taxidermy becomes necessary.

Historically, taxidermy has been criticized as a legacy of Western imperialism —a site of power where “dead nature” was owned, displayed, and objectified. Hunting and taxidermy, at their very core, represent a violation of animal rights. In response to such critiques, most museums in advanced countries today no longer create new taxidermy specimens from living animals. Instead, they present historical specimens alongside contextual information about their origins and the ethical controversies they entail, inviting critical reflection. In this way, taxidermy museums in the West are striving to move beyond their imperial and collector-driven legacies, repositioning themselves as models of ethical and ecological transformation. Taxidermy is no longer merely a relic of the past; it is being reimagined as a site for critical reexamination of the human–nature relationship.

Nevertheless, the essential nature of taxidermy remains unchanged. It is the aestheticization and consumption of dead life. Animals are used and exploited by humans while alive, and even after death, they are processed once more —to be displayed and viewed. In private capitalist taxidermy

museums, taxidermy exemplifies a form of posthumous exploitation, where the commodification of animal life continues beyond death in pursuit of profit. In this process, the inherent uniqueness and subjectivity of life are stripped away, leaving only the external form —reduced to an object that satisfies human desires for possession and display.

Ahn Changhong turns his gaze once again to these discarded taxidermies. What he captures is not merely animal specimens, but the remains of wretched beings —produced and abandoned by capitalism. His *Taxidermy* series bears witness to the cruelty of a civilization that consumes “dead life” only to cast it aside. Paradoxically, at the center of these works lies the “absent human” and a silent cry. This series is not a simple ecological record, but a profound ethical and civilizational indictment of lives exploited and discarded by humans. It is also an act of denunciation —an exposure of the violence of life-extraction driven by the greed of vulgar capitalism.

South Korean society underwent rapid industrialization under what is often referred to as “developmental dictatorship.” In the course of this transformation, Korean capitalism mimicked the forms of Western capitalism, but did so in a more ruthless and crude manner —plundering life and nature with even greater severity. Nature was not regarded as an object of reverence, but solely as a resource to be exploited for development and profit. The taxidermized animals stand as stark symbols of this vulgar capitalism.

In pursuit of larger crowds and quicker profits, animals suffered in life and were further manipulated in death —their forms reshaped for display. And when the museums closed, they were discarded like garbage. Ahn Changhong mourns this tragic fate and, through ritualistic performances, seeks to recover their silenced voices —giving presence to the voiceless through acts of remembrance and lamentation.

3. The Gazing Other, Resentful Tears, and Barbed Wire

Ahn Changhong’s *Taxidermy* series is a form of hybrid painting, created by layering acrylic ink, paint, and medium over photographic panels. The choice of materials is symbolic from the outset. The photograph functions as a device for recording and remembering the dead, while the painting acts as a gesture of breathing life back into what has been lost. Ahn overlays brushstrokes —breaths of color— onto images that capture death. Yet the life depicted here is already taxidermized, frozen in death. Most strikingly, in the original photographs of these taxidermized animals, only their vacant plastic eyes remain. To summon the damaged soul of the animal, Ahn paints tears flowing from those artificial eyes. These are not ordinary tears —they are tears of blood.

Ahn Changhong has long been an artist who merges photography with painting. He is not only a painter but also a photographer who takes his own photographs and has held exhibitions featuring his photographic work. He is equally skilled with the brush and the camera. However, in this *photo-painting* series, he deliberately chose to receive technical support from a professional photographer. This decision stemmed from his intention to preserve the objectivity and factuality of the raw material—to avoid imbuing the original images with his own subjective emotion. On this photographic foundation, printed on paper or canvas, he performs an act of unique artistic creation by applying layers of paint. This layering is an aesthetic ritual—an attempt to breathe life, or perhaps a soul, into the lifeless bodies of taxidermized animals. Only then do tears begin to flow from their plastic eyes.

Of course, animals do not shed tears in the same way humans do. Scientifically speaking, humans are the only species known to cry in response to emotions. While there have been anecdotal reports of whales or elephants displaying tearful behaviors in moments of apparent grief, such interpretations remain highly subjective and open to debate. There is, however, well-documented evidence that animals en route to slaughterhouses exhibit signs of distress—they tremble, resist movement, vocalize in unusual ways, show elevated heart rates, or attempt to escape. These behaviors clearly indicate that animals are capable of experiencing emotions. Yet, it has not been conclusively proven that such emotions are outwardly expressed through tears.

Yet the creativity and foresight of artists reveal that even animals have tears. The tears depicted in art are symbolic signs—revealing that animals, too, are sentient beings capable of suffering and deserving of dignity. In this light, the tears that Ahn Changhong paints into the eyes of taxidermized animals function as **signifiers** of their capacity for emotion and pain, and further, as **signifieds** of their inherent dignity—equal to that of humans. These tears of blood are not merely visual embellishments; they are resonances that rise from the depths of the soul. Ahn seeks to remind us that these beings possess souls, and that the tears flowing from their eyes—red like blood or dark like ink—are expressions of grief upon seeing their own bodies treated as waste. These tears are a powerful indictment—a mourning cry from the earth's living beings against the violent and oppressive machinery of human civilization.

Furthermore, the animal's tears are, in fact, human tears—projected onto the animal. They are the traces left behind by human desire and violence, and they stand as an accusation against the viewer who cannot bear those traces and turns away. In other words, deer do not cry. Wolves do not shed tears. Yet in this series, every animal gazes directly forward, weeping. We look at the animals—but Ahn Changhong's animals confront us with the gaze. According to Lacan, I see from a certain point through my eye, through my visual perspective, but in my existence, I am always being *gazed* at from all sides. If the eye and sight represent the subject's point of view, then the gaze belongs to the Other—it is the point from which the subject is seen.

To become aware that one is being *gazed at* is to enter into a paradoxical structure of self-objectification —where the subject becomes the Other who looks back upon oneself. Here, the image we positioned as an object reclaims the place of the subject and turns its gaze upon us. This gaze is not a mere exchange of looks. It is a reversal of visual power —an ethical rupture that dismantles the authority of the viewing subject.

We can no longer place the Other —whether human or non-human life— into the passive position of the object, to be observed, controlled, or dominated. Ahn Changhong reveals that we can no longer remain in the secure position of the sovereign subject. The eyes of the taxidermized animal, filled with tears, staring through the wire fence —those eyes *gaze* at us. We can no longer safely observe from a distance. We are drawn into the image as those who are being *gazed at*.

The brushstrokes applied to these taxidermized forms make them appear almost alive. Yet in truth, they are nothing more than images —no longer reducible to life itself. Through this paradoxical visual structure, Ahn Changhong exposes the core tensions at the heart of his work: the blurred threshold between life and death, the clash between nature and human civilization, and the reversal of the gaze —where the observer becomes the observed.

Another key symbol in this series is the wire fence. The fence is a frame. The animals are positioned behind it —or they peer through its mesh. Some fences appear bent and distorted, while others remain taut and unyielding. The wire fence serves as a boundary that confines the animals. Yet it is more than a physical barrier; it is the frame of civilization, the limit of ethics, and the silhouette of desire. This image of the fence can also be read as a metaphor for contemporary border politics: the zoo, the prison, the border wall, the refugee camp. It becomes a visual metaphor for the countless boundaries, laws, institutions, norms, and divisions that humans construct to separate the self from the Other. Although such fences are often justified in the name of protection, they are, in reality, structures of exclusion and control.

Through the image of the wire fence, the artist seeks to dismantle the binary opposition between “human” and “nature.” The fence is not only a device for containing the wild, but also a symbol of the civilizational desire to eliminate the Other in the name of self-preservation. Thus, this series goes beyond a simple ecological message; it raises biopolitical and ontological questions —questions such as: *Who do we include within the category of the human, and whom do we cast outside of it?*

4. The Unremembered, Mimesis, and Paintings of Mourning and Ritual

In *Drawing, the Ancient Future*, the nameless figures Ahn Changhong depicts —faces with hollow eyes and mouths— are beings without names, beings consigned to oblivion. And yet, paradoxically, they reside in the deepest strata of memory. The same is true in the *Taxidermy* series. The animals that appear here are not identified by any specific species. They may resemble deer, wolves, or foxes, but these are mere outer forms. Each figure is a symbolic being —what they truly represent is a *composite embodiment* of countless lives that have been abandoned, erased, or concealed by human civilization. They once existed, but were never welcomed. They died, yet were never mourned. These beings are the result —and the residue— of a kind of collective abandonment.

In this series, Ahn Changhong exercises restraint in his use of color. Most of the canvases are shrouded in darkness —darkness as the background of memory, the color of silence. And yet, the animals glow with an uncanny fluorescence. The greenish-yellow light they emit seems to carry the warmth of life. But it is not natural light; rather, it resembles the sterile glow of fluorescent lamps in dissection rooms or taxidermy labs —a light that exists outside the realm of ordinary reality. This light simultaneously evokes life and foreshadows its end. More importantly, it reflects back on the viewer, posing a silent question. It becomes a trigger for the ethical sense that lies dormant within us. Here, color does not function as a painterly form, but as an ethical form. In this light, a question is asked: *Will you choose to see this being —or will you turn away once again?*

The *Taxidermy* series marks both an evolution and a return in Ahn Changhong's artistic journey. He has returned to the medium of painting —but this time, with fewer words, greater intensity, and a more harrowing voice. For him, the medium itself is not essential; what matters is the truth it can reveal. Through traditional, two-dimensional painting, he exposes the reality in which human reason has been transformed into total barbarism, where Enlightenment rationality has degenerated into instrumental reason. He reveals the hidden face of a capitalist civilization that, in pursuit of profit maximization, oppresses, exploits, abandons, and disposes of non-human life. This work not only aligns with the thinking of deep ecology —urging serious consideration of ecological and environmental ethics— but also goes further, offering a profound reflection on the very foundations of modern civilization.

Ahn Changhong's painting is now an act of indictment. It denounces the hypocrisy of the world humans have created, the violence of anthropocentrism, and the indifference masked as aesthetic contemplation. Standing before his *Taxidermy* series, we feel discomfort —we feel pain. And this pain, this discomfort, is precisely the ethical site of the painting. Ahn Changhong's *Taxidermy* asks: *Can you turn away from this gaze? Are you prepared to respond to that cry?*

This is Ahn Changhong's first act of mourning. He confronts —head-on— the extremity of human desire that enacts violence not only upon fellow humans but also upon innocent, harmless lives. And having rendered this truth in paint, he turns to us and says: *Do not look away. Become the one who gazes back*. Thus, the mourning will continue. He paints yellow butterflies and tiny yellow droplets into his works —as if performing a ritual within the canvas— offering mourning and remembrance to the victims felled by human desire, to the taxidermized animals left in its wake.

The history of human civilization —a history in which objects, the world of things, and all non-human beings have been dominated, classified, and controlled for human purposes— is, as Adorno argues, the history of *conceptual thinking*. Conceptual thinking seeks to identify the laws and principles governing the world of objects and to interpret reality based on such structures. It is this mode of thinking that has enabled the development of human civilization and scientific knowledge. Yet conceptual thinking is also a history of systematic repression and exclusion —of the *non-identical* (*Nichtidentisches*), that which cannot be subsumed under the logic of sameness or universality. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno posits a *mimetic attitude* —a mimetic mode of comportment— as a corrective to conceptual domination. For Adorno, mimesis is not merely imitation in the Platonic sense, nor is it confined to representation as in Aristotle. Rather, it is a mode of engagement in which the subject seeks affinity with the object —a gesture toward becoming one with the other.

This mimetic attitude, this mimetic comportment, is what gives art its ethical potential: the possibility of overcoming a violent civilization through a non-coercive relation to what lies outside the self. Ahn Changhong seeks to establish such a mimetic relation with taxidermized animals —and more broadly, with all non-human beings. Through this, the animals that come alive again in his work are not merely artistic motifs; they are aesthetic invocations of the unremembered, and signs of ethical responsibility toward the forgotten. Thus, the mimetic attitude moves beyond the modern rationality of control and domination, advancing instead toward an aesthetic rationality of reflection and responsiveness —and ultimately, toward an ecological rationality.

Thus, the mimetic attitude moves beyond the modern rationality of control and domination, advancing instead toward an aesthetic rationality of reflection and responsiveness —and ultimately, toward an ecological rationality. Yet Ahn Changhong's *Taxidermy* series cannot be reduced to mere sentimentality toward animals or to a simplistic ecological message. It is, rather, an aesthetic indictment that compels us to confront human violence through the gaze of the taxidermized being. It reveals the truth of existence behind the façade of civilization, and it performs an ethical mourning for all those who have been oppressed, excluded, and rendered alienated.