
Mark Dion

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It became clear to me that nature is one of the most sophisticated arenas for the production of ideology. Once I realised that, the walls between my two worlds (art and science) dissolved¹

Mark Dion explores the roots of epistemological discourse through the representation of nature and culture by looking at the classification systems that govern them. This interest in the objective and subjective, rational and irrational, has seen him create a large body of work that seems him straddle the divide between the Sciences and the Humanities. In looking at a select range of his work, I will try and position him as working in a new area of discourse. This discourse begins with understanding the hidden power structures behind seemingly invisible systems, but working with these systems to improve them, not destroy them. By bridging these two cultures, he is part of a new group of intellectuals and artists who are shaping discourse today.

The space between the Sciences and the Humanities had, from the time of the Enlightenment up to and including the 20th century, widened as a result of the increasing specialisation of the disciplines in the academies. This was highlighted in 1959 when CP Snow described what he saw as a dangerous split between the sciences and the humanities in his lecture and following book titled *The Two Cultures*.² Whether or not the popularity of his work increased the divide is another argument, but it sought to highlight the divisions that had been growing. Snow argued that too much influence was placed on the humanities and the idea that an 'intellectual' only applied to those engaged in literature.

Once or twice I have been provoked and have asked the company how many of them could describe the Second Law of Thermodynamics. The response was cold: it was also negative. Yet I was asking something which is the scientific equivalent of: have you read a work of Shakespeare's?³

Snow ultimately saw the rift as negative because it disparaged people from entering into the sciences as a vocation, and thus letting the Western world slip behind in technological prowess. This firmly plants the

1. Dion, Mark and Lisa Graziose. 'Interview' *Mark Dion*. (London, Phaidon Press, 1997) p9

2. Snow, Charles Percy. *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1959)

3. *ibid* p13

document within the Cold War period, but the need to bridge the rift is no more important now. This rift widened even further during the recent Culture/Science Wars of the 80s and 90s, in which the whole of Science came to be seen as merely a discourse, as an ideology in which its “truth claims” could be contested like any other.⁴

Recently a new group of intellectuals have approached the idea of a Third Culture, ignoring the divide in the creation of a new type of intellectual. I will argue that Dion’s work belongs in this category, despite his predication against such classifications. While all of his works could be said to share a similar aesthetic – formal or otherwise – he has covered many different subjects in his exploration of epistemology. Having undertaken the Whitney Independent Study Program course, Dion studied with a generation of artists interested in the idea of institutional critique, attempting to dismantle teleological notions of truth. He first became interested in what would become the driving force behind his work when he “tried to imagine an expanded documentary practice,” in looking at the tools that institutions used to convey knowledge.⁵ When he discovered the writings of the evolutionary biologist and science historian Stephen Jay Gould he realised his writings were dealing with “Foucaultian problems in the reception of evolutionary biology” (p9).⁶ It was through this realisation that his critique could work in the arena of nature and science. From his earlier works exploring ecological issues to his later works looking at cultural detritus and his more recent public art investigations, all are situated within this expanded view.

To begin looking at Dion’s work we need to understand where it sits in history. The first examples of anything that resemble modern day museums is the Wunderkammer. These were private collections held by aristocratic and wealthy bourgeoisie showing off their exploits and travels from around the world. These large collections of idiosyncratic objects and curiosities from the natural and man-made world, arranged according to the will of the creator, allowed for interesting juxtapositions to delight and amaze the viewer. The owners rearranged

4. Johnson, Steven. *Everything Bad is Good for You* (Camberwell, Penguin Books, 2005) p207

5. Brockman, John. Edge, ‘The Third Culture’, http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/ accessed 16/4/10

6. Dion *op. cit.*, p9

them at will, affording them to change as the collection grew. This lack of order reflected nature as they saw it; god did not impose order over nature so neither did they.

Carl Linnaeus laid out in his *Systema Natura* a new way of looking at the natural world and the Linnaean taxonomical system changed mans relationship to nature by imposing order over chaos. Specimens were now labelled, catalogued, named and explained according to their Genus and Species. No longer could artefacts be seen in one contiguous space but divided up according to systems of classification. The collection changed in character from a group of obscure natural curiosities to a comprehensive collection. The new classification systems were used to organise and explain the world around them. This Enlightenment mode of presentation lead to a rational view of the world, giving rise to the museum and the birth of the specialisation of academic departments. While the museum and its particular representation of the world was uncontested for a long time, it came under attack from two sides in the latter part of the twentieth century. One side was neo-liberal government reform, resulting in museum funds being drastically cut. Museums needed to partake in the market if they were to survive. This saw the increase of gift shops, restaurants, cafes, and in Melbourne's case an Imax theatre. On the other side was Postmodern deconstruction which sought to tear down Western notions of progress, viewing it as imposing an ideological narrative onto the public. This ideological narrative underpins Dion's critique of knowledge systems:

Taxonomy, the classification of the natural world, is a theory of order imposed by man, not an objective reflection of what is present in nature. The categories are actively imposed and contain the assumption, values and associations of human society⁷

No longer could the curators of museums have legitimate means of providing supposedly universal systems and outlooks on nature. The authority of the Enlightenment authors were deemed to be steeped in outmoded "narratives about civilisation and progress, science and art, empire, nation, race and class."⁸ Museums responded to these critiques and attempted to reflect the changing values of the day, shifting away

7. Dion, Mark 'Taxonomy of Non-endangered Species, 1990' *Mark Dion* (London, Phaidon Press, 1997) P112

8. Ross, Max. 'Interpreting the New Museology' *Museum and Society*, (vol.5 2007) P85

from the focus on collections and towards a more visitor-centred ethos. This in turn saw a shift away from the collection of the museum towards local communities in an attempt to be more culturally inclusive; away from acting as a ‘legislator’ of knowledge towards an ‘interpreter’ of histories.⁹ But the changes did not come from the curatorial staff but from new employees of the museum, departments which had not traditionally been part of museums: marketers. As governments ceased to be the main funding body and the market began to be seen as the only viable way to keep museums alive, the museum visitor ceased to be seen as a citizen and was increasingly seen as a consumer or customer. This resulted in new methods in the display of knowledge. Instead of rigid displays and permanent collections, more focus was put on temporary exhibitions with heavy uses of multimedia and interactive displays. The *New Museology* has been the dominant trend since the opening of San Francisco’s *Exploratorium* in 1969.¹⁰ This shift towards spectacle as a way to entice viewers provides Dion with ample space in which to work:

Rather than a place where one might go to explore some complex questions, the museum now simplifies the questions and gives you reductive answers for them. It does all the work, so the viewer is always passive. A museum should provoke questions, not spoon-feed answers and experiences¹¹

The Science Museum in London is one of the few to acknowledge this spoon feeding. While many of its displays do place an emphasis on the overtly interactive, the *Making the Modern World* permanent exhibition embraces the curiosity embedded in objects and their arrangement. The centre of the hall contains grand objects normally associated with an exhibition of this kind: rockets, Model T Fords, large scale models of Industrial era machines. Yet the five glass cabinet displays to the side provide a more interesting reflection on the way mankind has created organising systems. Each cabinet in the *Technology and Everyday Life* is dictated by its own logic relevant to the time period the objects belong to. Whether it takes its system from Diderot’s *Encyclopedie* (1751-80), the Festival of Britain (1939-1968) or *The Next Whole Earth*

9. *ibid* p94

10. Endt, Marion. ‘Beyond institutional critique : Mark Dion’s surrealist wunderkammer at the Manchester Museum’ *Museum and Society*, (VOL 5 2007) p5

11. Dion *op. cit.*, p17

Catalog (1980-Present), the curators understand and display the power of classification. The same could be said for the King James Library in the British Museum, where they have displayed the objects according to Enlightenment era systems, at the same time as commenting on it as an ideological system.

So while Dion was critiquing institutional bias, the institutions themselves are aware of the need for reform. Viewing himself as a “museum conservative” he does not wish to overthrow the museum, but to improve it¹²:

I think the politics of representation as it involves the museum has always been part of my practice. As I see it, artists doing institutional critiques of museums tend to fall into two different camps. There are those who see the museum as an irredeemable reservoir of class ideology - the very notion of the museum is corrupt to them. Then there are those who are critical of the museum not because they want to blow it up but because they want to make it a more interesting and effective institution¹³

Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* seems to be a useful tool in which to look at Dions particular brand of critique. By situating himself within the very organisations that he is exploring he resolves the issue other artists have in being exposed and becoming part of that which they seek to attack. This *tactic* of working inside the structure of the museum allows him to insinuate himself “*into the others place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety.*”¹⁴

The Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy (2005-2008) now on permanent display at the Manchester Museum is a clear example of Dion's desire to improve the state of museums, not ‘blow it up’. Situated behind a locked door sits an array of obscure miscellaneum of objects selected from the museum's collection. A display cabinets with natural irregularities such as a six-legged guinea pig, dried plant specimens, poorly taxidermied birds. A desk overflowing with papers. A hanger filled with unlabelled keys. Closed drawers showing no inclina-

12. *ibid*

13. *ibid* p12

14. de Certeau, Michel. ‘Trajectories, tactics and rhetorics’ *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans Steven F Rendall (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984) pXIX

tion as to what is inside them. A desk overflowing with papers. A desk lamp left on. All suggest to the viewer that whoever works here has just left and should be returning soon. The locked door forced the viewer to probe the artwork from a distance, imagining the relevance of certain placements and objects. All imbue a sense of curiosity in the observer; provoking questions not providing answers.

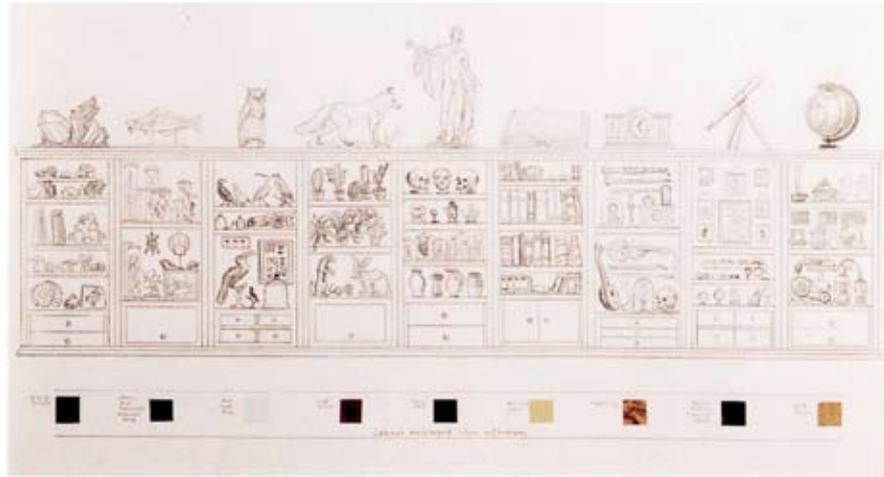


COLLECTORS COLLECTED MUSEO CIVICO DI ZOOLOGIA, ROME 1997
VITRINES, VARIOUS OBJECTS

In *Collecting the Collectors* (1997) Dion sought to turn the focus of Rome Museum of Zoology's collection on to the very people who had created the collection at the museum. Behind glass cabinets he displayed the clothing, microscopes, charts, cages, traps and camping equipment of the naturalists, zoologists and explorers who had worked for the museum. In doing so he portrays the assumptions of the times through their tools. In another cabinet he arranged the boxes and specimen labels used in the cataloguing of the collection, revealing the process and manner in which science is organised.

I'm excited by the tension between entertainment and education, in the idea of the marvellous, especially in pre-Enlightenment collections like curiosity cabinets and wunderkammers¹⁵

15. Graziöse, Lisa 'Survey' *Mark Dion* (London, Phaidon Press, 1997) p80



CURIOSITY CABINET FOR THE WEXNER CENTER FOR THE ARTS 1996
COLLAGE AND COLOURED PENCIL ON PAPER

This same tension can be seen in the classification decisions he made for *Cabinet of Curiosity for the Wexner Center for the Arts* (1996). Situated in a semi-circle rotunda sits nine glass cabinets displayed according to the Aristotelian division between *Naturalia* and *Artificialia*. Each of these cabinets have their own logic, positioning a museum within a museum. These nine cabinets were divided into *The Underworld*, *The Sea*, *The Air*, *The Earth*, *Humans*, *Knowledge*, *Time*, *Vision* and *History*. The contents of each of these contained curios selected from the museums archives, were arranged to elicit intrigue and delight from the viewer. However there was a barrier preventing the audience from coming with five feet of the display, creating tension by making it difficult to discern the contents. By arranging the objects into these nine distinct categories, Dion is highlighting the barriers between departments and exposing the problem that suffocates “the possibility of developing a fluid, interconnected concept of knowledge”.¹⁶ As with *The Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacy*, this tactic forces the viewer to search for meaning, instead of providing easy answers. By using pre-Enlightenment forms of classification, Dion is referring to a time before rationalisation created distinctions between the two cultures. The formal composition of each cabinet has a mixture of artistic works and man made creations, creating wonder by seeing the similarities between them. That each of these collections come from different collections shows the lack of shared experiences and information, with no desire for consilience.

16. Sheehy, Colleen, Bill Horrigan and E Bruce Robertson. *Cabinet of curiosities: Mark Dion and the University as Installation*. (Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 2006) p58

In *Cabinets of Curiosities* (2001) Dion was invited to work at the Weisman Art Museum in Minnesota. By exploring the collection of the University of Minnesota he produced a cabinet that attempted to display the world of the University in miniature. This was his most collaborative project at the time and included eight students from a class set up for the purposes of this exhibition - *The Making of Collections, Museums, and Knowledge*. It involved taking students on field trips to science departments they had not been to; opening up the disciplines and seeing what each side can learn from each other. Working on the same classifying structure he employed at the Wexner, students were then given the chance to curate a cabinet. Many found this a daunting but rewarding process, fulfilling childhood fascinations with the museum vernacular as well as articulating their own way of working. This process of working with other disciplines and collections allowed the wider community to become involved.



CABINET OF CURIOSITIES
(DETAIL, CABINETS OF THE SEA, THE AIR AND THE TERRESTRIAL REALM)
FREDERICK R. WEISMAN ART MUSEUM, MINNEAPOLIS 2001

Dion sees his works as situating in the broader context of the local community, from the students, to the curators, the museum staff, and then the general public. All parties arrive to the exhibition at different stages allowing for different experiences and perspectives. Dion sees this process of engagement and research as just as important as the final display, telling the students of the class “our exhibit will be an artifact of our experience.”¹⁷ By working with the local community, museum and university, *Cabinets of Curiosities* is situated within a particular strain of site-specific works. The cultural and geographic landscape that these particular institutions exist in are relevant to Minnesota, with each collection consisting of curios from that locale's history. By using pre-Enlightenment systems of classification but by assigning each area to a student, the work allows for a multitude of histories and narratives to be questioned.

The dilettante is a much more interesting character historically than the expert. Some of the greatest contributions in art and science have come from dilettantes rather than professionals¹⁸

Dion has constantly described himself as an amateur or dilettante, as he moves from one scientific discipline to the next. Both terms imply a similar mode of working, one that is consistent with Dion's. The dilettante is able to look at many different fields at the same time, in opposition to burrowing down into a specific area of expertise. The idea of the amateur has been viewed with scorn in recent times, but being an amateur implies passion and curiosity for a given project.



COSTUME BUREAU TANYA BONAKDAR GALLERY, NEW YORK 2006

MIXED MEDIA

17. *ibid* p11

18. Dion *op. cit.*, p19

Perhaps though the term polymath would be a far more suitable term for his work. Through his love of the sciences, his work has included various disciplines, giving him an outlook that many scientists do not: the ability to see how they all connect. While his knowledge is too generalised for any scientist working today, his deep appreciation for research and research based works has given him an extremely broad knowledge base from which to look at a project.

The process is hard to get a grip on because I'm not acting, I'm not a character, I'm not pretending to be someone else¹⁹

As I mentioned before, his earlier works focused on ecological issues, he now sees them as “overly didactic”.²⁰ Upon realising that his works were about shadowing a methodology, the performative aspect of his career was able to change costumes, while continuing in his fieldwork model. This model mirrors changes in the sciences as well. Science used to be conducted in the laboratory, controlling the chaos of nature in a hermetic environment. With the innovation of field scientists, the act of doing research was more about understanding nature in its own context, and the diverse sets of relations and ecologies.

Neukom Vivarium (2006) is a public work in the San Francisco Museum Sculpture Park, exploring the process of decay in nature. Situated within a custom built green house is an 80 foot Hemlock Nurse tree kept on “life support”.²¹ The tree once lived in an old growth forest, but since falling down ten years earlier it has allowed new life to grow on it, in effect creating a mini ecosystem. In this work, Dion moves away from using Cabinets of Curiosities as the model of the world towards nature as a model unto itself. This model world is the centre piece of the exhibit. While the tree acts as the charismatic focus of the piece, it is really about the process of nature. The tree is kept alive by a large system of artificial systems – irrigation, cooling, water catchments, glass replicating the colour spectrum and panels to control the light levels

19. digs interview 36

20. Dion *op. cit.*, p10

21. Dion, Mark. Art:21 'Neukom Vivarium' <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/dion/clip1.html> accessed 14/5/10

– all to highlight the difficulty of the vast and complex processes that nature operates.

This project is an abomination. We're taking a tree that is an ecosystem – a dead tree, but a living system – and we're re-contextualizing it and taking it to another site²²

By taking the tree out of its natural context Dion is critiquing the Enlightenment mode of collecting, of studying nature within the hermetic confines of the built environment. In a small room before entering the large green house he has provided information about the tree,



NEUKOM VIVARIUM - OLYMPIC SCULPTURE PARK, SEATTLE 2006
MIXED-MEDIA INSTALLATION, HEMLOCK NURSE, GREENHOUSE STRUCTURE

the smaller life forms that exist because of it, the forest it was taken from and the approach they've taken in keeping it alive. But while this is in a sculpture park, its scientific depth questions its role as an artwork. Dion "doesn't really care if people call it art or not" but whether he is "making a contribution to visual culture that's engaging and brings up questions".²³ The act of responding to this question is symbolic that his practice is moving away from working within the system trying to fix it towards working with the system to educate the public through his extensive field of knowledge and interests.

It was very much like being a child let in the sweet shop – but they told you can work with anything in here except the sweets²⁴

In coming full circle, Dion was asked to organise an exhibition at the Natural History Museum in London to celebrate the 300th anniversary

22. *ibid*

23. *ibid*

24. Lewis, Caroline. Culture24 'Systema Metropolis - Mark Dion At The Natural History Museum' <http://www.culture24.org.uk/science+%2526+nature/art48174> accessed 10/5/10

of the birth of Carl Linnaeus, the father of taxonomy. *Systema Metropolis* (2007) is a play on the title of his work on taxonomy *Systema Natura* and looks at how it is relevant to present day London. The exhibit contains an introduction to Linnaeus, and four labs in which scientists and Dion worked in view of the general public. Each of these labs were the result of fieldwork gathering samples from four different sites around London. One team drove the length of the A40 motorway with a sticky screen on the roof and butterfly nets reaching out the window collecting insect samples. The samples they brought back were then fed through a molecular genetic sequencer, exposing the differences and tension between new classification techniques and human methods of identification. Another exhibit looked at cultural and biodiversity by collecting samples from underwater intake filters of a power plant. What they collected was a random assortment of cultural detritus: bottle caps, rub-



SYSTEMA METROPOLIS FIELDWORK 1 - NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM LONDON
MIXED MEDIA

ber balls, ceramic shards, soft drink cans as well as the expected plant and animal specimens including the second seahorse recorded in the area. The next exhibit went to the gravestones of three important individuals: Karl Marx, Thomas Huxley and Emmaline Pankhurst. At each of these they came across different bugs and took them back to the lab at the museum to be identified. These specimens were displayed in a grid on the wall behind the lab, the grid referencing an ordered logic, despite making no claims to the procedure being systematic. The last

laboratory compared the diversity of two different grass samples: a patch taken from a sports field containing two species and from a patch of wild grass which had 25 different species. This seems like a return to his earlier ecological explorations, critiquing man's desire to impose order over nature. The introductory room showing the work and life of Linnaeus was displayed in a manner consistent with *Collecting the Collectors*. His tools, books and specimen sheets were analysed to uncover the thoughts and ideas of the man who contributed so much to Dion's work as well as to the ordering of human knowledge and understanding. While this would be standard fare for any museum exhibition; Dion uses it to show how the methods and tools used are able to influence the epistemological roots of rational understanding and desire.

The third culture consists of those scientists and other thinkers in the empirical world who, through their work and expository writing, are taking the place of the traditional intellectual in rendering visible the deeper meanings of our lives, redefining who and what we are²⁵

By using the vernacular of science, Dion poses questions about the authority that is placed on it. Yet Dion does not seek to ignore the great strides that have been made, he is constantly professing his admiration for the scientists that his work references. By tactically working within the institutions of science, he is attempting to highlight both its problems and its possibilities. Through exposing the systems of classification as constructions made by humankind, the idea of the split of the two cultures becomes redundant. In referring back to the idea of the wunderkammer, Dion creates a sense of wonder at the similarities between this artificial split. Yet he does not look back in search for answers, he is always looking forward. The idea of a third culture is one in which both sides learn from each other. What good is it when "art critics know nothing about visual perception, "social constructionist" literary critics uninterested in human universals documented by anthropologists".²⁶ While the ideas of deconstruction "that our sys-

25. Brockman, John. Edge, 'The Third Culture', http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/ accessed 16/4/10

26. *ibid*

tems of thought are fundamentally shaped and limited by the structure of language” reflects much discoveries occurring in the neurosciences and evolutionary linguistics.²⁷ The idea of consilience doesn’t attempt to annex the humanities, but to incorporate it into the wider domain of human knowledge. Dions aim, through questioning not answering, is to work in this wider domain.

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