

Mark Dion: The Wondrous Museum of Nature
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“Yeah, I love museums. I think the design of museum exhibitions is an art form in and of itself, on par with novels, paintings, sculptures and films. This doesn’t mean that I don’t acknowledge the ideological aspect of the museum as a site of ruling-class values pretending to be public.”
(Mark Dion)

The fascinations of museums—especially natural history collections—for the American artist Mark Dion (*1961) is clearly visible in his work: cabinets and display cases are indispensable fixtures of his well-stocked installations. The stuffed or otherwise conserved creatures that populate his works, as well as the collections of books on natural history, engravings, and scientific instruments, document the artist’s interest in the exhibits and categorizations of natural history museums. This interest is part of a wide-ranging examination of the question of what “nature” means to us and how concepts and representations of nature change in the context of historical, political, and cultural-historical developments.

The Kunstmuseum St. Gallen previously shared the Neo-Classicist building by Johann Christoph Kunkler with the Naturmuseum St. Gallen, which moved to a new building on 11 November 2016. Mark Dion was invited to present an exhibition in the newly empty rooms on the building’s lower level. At Documenta 13 the artist created an exhibition architecture for the Xylothek Schildbach in the Ottoneum, Kassel’s museum of natural history. This wood library (from the Greek word *xylon* for wood) created in the late eighteenth century by Carl Schildbach consists of 530 “books” made of indigenous varieties of trees and shrubs. At the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, Dion will now for the first time ever have the chance to intervene in a (former) museum of natural history with his own works and question the existing exhibition structures as well as the implied scientific categories. With *The Wondrous Museum of Nature*, Mark Dion has realized his own temporary natural history collection—a very particular museum of natural history.

In his engagement with museums of natural history, the artist assumes various roles: he plays with the figure of the collector, curator, and museum director as a master of knowledge and ownership; he works as a taxonomist, arranger, and traveling researcher, but also a chronicler of loss and environmental destruction. He acts as a dilettante in the best sense of the word, as someone who takes great pleasure (*diletto* in Italian) in his work and yet is not a scientist by training. Dion deliberately decided to work as an artist and not as a scientist: “Everything that I like about art would be of no use in science: irony, metaphor, humor. All these aspects are deeply important to me; art’s success normally depends on them. But for science they would be sacrilege. It searches for things beyond social history, for absolute laws.” Indeed, irony and humor have a special significance for the artist, and his precisely conceived and arranged works often have a playful element that invites visitors to admire the diversity of nature and the methods of science, which are interpreted here from the perspective of an artist. The fascination with the beauty and abundance of nature on the one hand and the knowledge of its endangerment in times of increasing environmental degradation and dwindling species diversity on the other hand stand alongside one another as equals.

The Exhibition

Dion's infiltration of the former Naturmuseum St. Gallen largely follows the structures of natural history exhibitions, or their thematic focuses, from birds and indigenous wild animals to the "treasures of the collection." At the beginning of the exhibition, the visitor encounters a selection of paintings—landscapes by Carl Liner (1871–1946) and Johann Gottfried Steffen (1815–1905) as well as two still lifes by Philipp Ferdinand de Hamilton (1664–1750)—which enter into a dialogue with exhibits from the museum of natural history: a salt crystal collection preserved in glass containers and two preserved animals, a vulture and a rabbit.

"The wolf, lynx, and bear return": The exhibition on the lower level begins with a wolf in front of a magnificently stylized view of a landscape, a display from the former museum of natural history. In contrast to museum conventions, the preserved specimen of this once-widespread predator in Europe—also a symbol of demonic forces of nature—is not mounted on a traditional landscape or neutral base. Instead, a trailer serves as a kind of mobile base, "loaded" with a topography of moss-covered rocks. This supposed view of natural scenery is combined with a modern-day vehicle and suggests mobility, as if a natural environment could simply be moved around: behind it lies the idea of transferring the essence of the wild not into the closed environment of the museum, but back to nature. Wildlife management is a specialized area of nature conservation today in which wild animals and their habitats are controlled.

The artist also addresses this theme in the museum's south annex, in the showcase-like presentation of a large bison: *Park: Mobile Wilderness Unit* (2001). Here Dion refers to the traditional dioramas of natural history museums and at the same time creates a break in the illusory space that they aim to produce through naturalistic depiction. In Dion's work there is no elaborate lighting, no artfully rendered sky. The structure of the display case is immediately apparent from the two open sides of the trailer. It becomes obvious that this is an artificial landscape and a dead, preserved animal that faces the viewer with expressionless glass eyes. In the unhitched trailer, the animal appears as a representative of a lost wilderness, the poor copy of which could now be transported from place to place like a fair attraction. The trailer points to the viewing of such specimens as objects that can be shipped like products and are thus part of colonial or post-colonial trade circuits.

Dion's exhibition also features a bear, an animal of cultural-historical significance for the city of St. Gallen: *Grotto of the Sleeping Bear – Revisited* (1998) shows the skeleton of a cave bear in the former museum area entitled "The wolf, lynx, and bear return." However, the bear is not shown in an accurately depicted cave, but crouching on a pile of twigs and dried leaves, between which various objects can be observed, such as a hat, books, a clock, an ax, and an axle. Nature and culture, past and present literally meet here, and the glass display case is the frame that designates the objects as museum exhibits. Dion's bear is surrounded by explanatory panels and specimens from the natural history museum which illustrate the bear's significance and habitat. Bears repeatedly appear in Dion's work as a particularly symbolic animal—for instance, the a cave bear in the 2006 work *Tar Museum*. Dion is particularly interested in bears due to the fact that though real-life bears have largely disappeared from our daily lives, their likenesses are ubiquitous either as symbols of strength and power—as in the coat of arms of St. Gallen—or as something particularly cute such as a teddy bear.

Not only the cave bear from Wildkirchli reappears in Dion's wondrous museum, but also the Nile crocodile of St. Gallen, which moved to the new building as one of the natural history museum's oldest exhibits and main attractions. Dion's arrangement *Alligator Mississippiensis* (2015) in a display case resembles the work with the cave bear. This work also features a skeleton, or part of one: an alligator skull. It sits atop a pile of jewelry and items that one might find at a flea market. Upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that it threatens to sink into a mass of tar. Moreover, Dion's alligator recalls the numerous crocodiles and alligators that have been special showpieces in natural history collections and cabinets of curiosities since the sixteenth century. They seem like reincarnations of mythical dragons and emphasize the role of man as a conqueror of wild nature. In the colonial era, collectors demonstrated their power and influence by their ability to afford to exhibit such a crocodile from faraway lands in their collections.

The 2009 installation *The Tropical Collectors (Wallace, Bates and Spruce)* is dedicated to the discovery and exploration of distant lands and exotic species. Recalling a tropical beach, a mountain of equipment is piled up on a mound of sand, like items that were used on scientific expeditions in the nineteenth century. In the subtitle, the work is dedicated to the three English researchers Alfred Wallace (1823–1913), Henry Walter Bates

(1825–1892), and Richard Spruce (1817–1893), who explored the Amazon together. This is underscored by the nets and cages used to capture insects and other exotic creatures in order to sell them cheaply in England. The irony is apparent here, especially since scientific research at that time meant capturing living creatures, separating them from their natural habitats, and even killing them in order to be able to categorize and preserve them as specimens. Indeed, nature was domesticated through science: an exotic bird in a natural history museum is ultimately a selection of colorful feathers artfully arranged on a model. Beyond this seldom-considered aspect of the museification of nature, Dion is more interested in the methodology—that is, the expedition and its equipment—than the scientific result, which was remarkable indeed in the case of Wallace, Bates, and Spruce. The artist follows a similar approach in *The Marine Biologist's Locker (Cousteau's Cabinet)* (1993/98). The two cabinets filled with scuba diving and fishing equipment are dedicated to the French marine biologist, diver, and environmentalist Jacques Cousteau (1910–97), who became known to a wide audience through his popular documentaries on marine biology in the 1970s.

The aforementioned *Alligator Mississippiensis* lived not in the sea, but in the waters of the southeastern United States. In Dion's idiosyncratic version, its skull at least has found its final resting place on a bed of tar. This industrial material appears repeatedly in the exhibition, including in the work *Emperor Penguin* (2016), a large penguin stuffed animal in a tub filled with tar. In 2006 Dion even dedicated an entire museum to this material in *Tar Museum*. Tar is a brownish-black, viscous mixture consisting of organic compounds produced by thermally processing organic natural substances such as petroleum and was once used in road construction and the wood industry. It can be corrosive, and to Dion it symbolizes a profit-oriented, exploitative approach to nature which ignores ecological relationships. In *The Wondrous Museum of Nature*, the artist has inserted his *Tar Museum* into an artificial topography in which indigenous wild animals—preserved deer, chamois, and foxes—were originally exhibited in front of a stylized landscape panorama. Dion moved the preserved animals themselves to the south annex, where they are protected by a sheet of plastic, as if ready to be shipped off. Tarred geese and ducks now take their place. The works are presented on their respective moving crates, which also provide an elegant and above all efficient solution to the problem of the pedestal. In *Tar Museum* the artist points to the destructive and violent side of the use of nature: "They're not just stuffed animals. They're ... covered with tar. So the symbol of violence is very concrete, and they [the visitors] would not even think of it if they saw the animals in their natural position." This is a way of looking at nature whose consequence illustrates that "what was thought to be observation of life was actually the study of death"—and thus precisely the opposite of what specimens in a museum of natural history should stand for.

Encrustations (2014) is another work located between the poles of culture and nature, fiction and fact. It is a collection of objects or artifacts that have supposedly been reclaimed by nature. As the title suggests, the small-scale objects created in cooperation with Dana Sherwood (*1977) are reminiscent of encrustations of everyday items: spoons, scissors, bottles, oil cans, telephones ... The artists became researchers of a "fantastic archeology," in Mark Dion's words. Everyday objects appear encrusted underwater, as if recovered from a civilization that long ago sank into the sea. By breaking down the boundaries between the fictional and the factual, the work is essentially directed at the viewer's imagination, which ultimately also plays a role in the interpretation of archaeological finds, and offers an account of a different time or culture. *Encrustations* will be exhibited in the display cases that were previously used for preserved animals—amphibians and freshwater fish.

The exhibition area previously devoted to microbiology is now darkened and dedicated to Dion's fluorescent works: *The Phantasmal Cabinet* (2015), *The Natural Sciences* (2015), and *The Lodge of Breathless Birds* (2016). The first is an open cabinet with numerous fantastic creatures. In addition to well-known animals, it also features monsters such as dragons. On the left and right of the cabinet, skulls are laid out on pedestals. These objects were created partly based on historical depictions from cabinets of curiosities, such as *Ole Worm's Museum Wormianum* (Leiden, 1655), which Dion repeatedly refers to. These miniature monsters were realized with a two-component epoxy resin painted with fluorescent paint. Once again, the traditional museum of natural history is reinterpreted, from an institution of education and research into a place of theatrical displays—in this case, dramatically arranged and illumined exhibits. Amazement and delight in the wondrous, but also the uncanny, are meant to provide a means of understanding nature. This connection is evident in the series *The Natural Sciences* (2015), which was realized using state-of-the-art 3D technology: sixteen objects, each of which stands for a certain taxonomic category, are arranged on a table.

One example of Mark Dion's intensive engagement with the question of taxonomies and systematizations, which are always also representative of their respective time and shifting ideologies, is *Scala Naturae* (1994). Like Aristotle and Plato's principle of the "great chain of being," the model of a "scale of nature" shown here was based on the notion that God created the entire world with all living creatures in a single act and that this world is unchangeable. The scale of nature was infinite, but hierarchically organized: At the bottom were the lower animals and plants, and at the top human beings and above them God. This idea of a constant order of nature was greatly influential within the history of philosophy and the life sciences before Darwin. Only with the works of Carl von Linné, who published his *Systema Naturae* in 1735, which he had planned as a thorough revision of all previously existing systems of classification, and at the latest since the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859, did the relationships and systematizations of nature begin to be discussed and influence the exhibits in museums of natural history.

The presentation of *Scala Naturae* also alludes to the theme of collecting as an ordering of realities: *artificialia*, *naturalia*, and *scientifica* were treated as equals in the cabinets of curiosities that developed in Europe beginning in the late fourteenth century. Various organizing criteria were tested in these cabinets, in which the respective interests of the collectors played a major role. Since the late eighteenth century, and especially in the nineteenth century, many of these collections gave rise to public museums of natural history as well as technical and art museums, which were founded around this time in large numbers and were meant to educate broad groups of the population in the wake of the Enlightenment. In the museums of natural history that have since been founded, the principles according to which showcase collections as well as archives are organized have changed—and they continue to do so today. New scientific insights in evolutionary biology, for instance, bring about new taxonomical systems that sooner or later are brought to bear in museums.

The Wondrous Museum of Nature is a kind of retrospective of Mark Dion's oeuvre, with a focus on his works that deal with museums of natural history and the history of collecting. At the same time, it is an epitaph for a museum that has disappeared, the Naturmuseum St. Gallen, which was established in the nineteenth century and no longer exists in its original form, but now, after its move to a new building, is a very contemporary museum indeed. *The Wondrous Museum of Nature*, by contrast, is a temporary museum, a kind of museum of the museum that asks the question of what we consider "nature" or "art" from a wide variety of perspectives.

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